

CR 825 (Santa Cruz) - M RP 2/16/91 p. 1

Women find a place in changing funeral business

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

Wearing pumps and sharp, brightly colored suits — and scheduling meetings and appointments around carpooling the kids to and from school — Claudia Crosetti is a lot like many other businesswoman of the 1990s. But she doesn't have just any job; she is a funeral director.

Crosetti runs Mehl's Colonial Chapel, the Watsonville mortuary that her grandfather started in 1929.

Talking about her career as an undertaker at parties, she said, is "either a real conversation-starter or a conversation-stopper." One of the reasons for the dropped-jaw response is that people just aren't used to women being in the funeral business beyond the receptionist's desk.

The National Foundation for Funeral Service in Evanston, Ill., estimates that only 10 percent of all the licensed funeral directors and embalmers in the

country are women. Even in Santa Cruz County, women directors are far and few between, with Crosetti easily qualifying as the most high-profile.

Insiders say the funeral business has been more resistant to women employees than many industries, partly because of its conservative, image-conscious nature.

"In a small town like Watsonville or Santa Cruz, funeral directors might not want to be the first one to hire a lady embalmer," Vince Azzaro, a funeral director at Norman's Family Chapel in Soquel, said.

There is also a deeply rooted perception that women can't handle as many aspects of the work in a mortuary, said Douglas Martine, director of Santa Cruz Memorial Park and a third-generation mortician. That has led to the view, he said, that having women funeral directors on staff was "almost a luxury."

And maybe because of the Addams Family stereotype — the perception that the busi-

ness, dealing with bodies, is languid or creepy — women rarely chose to go into the field in the past unless they happened to marry into it.

All of that is changing, local, state and national sources say, as women begin to recognize that the funeral business is one of intense emotional nurturing — and as funeral home owners begin to see that women are good at it.

"It's a job that's made to order for women," Crosetti said. "Clients see a woman there and subconsciously feel that maternal 'everything is going to be OK.'"

As evidence that the appeal of the job is growing to women, Jacquie Taylor, the president of the San Francisco Mortuary College, said the school's female enrollment averaged 15 percent to 20 percent in the late 1980s — up from 1 percent to 2 percent in the 1970s.

"The funeral business is finding its place as a 'caretaker' in-



Kurt Ellison

Claudia Crosetti is a third-generation Watsonville funeral director.

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Watsonville Colonial Chapel

the deceased so that they can enter the funeral home during those first few days after death. The funeral home is a place where the deceased is cared for and the family is supported. The funeral home is a place where the deceased is cared for and the family is supported. The funeral home is a place where the deceased is cared for and the family is supported.

Funeral business a 'caretaker' in

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dustry, linking up with clergy, therapists, counselors and hospices," she said. "It has always been perceived as a casket product business, but we have to let people know that what we do is take care of the survivors of the dead."

Santa Cruz Memorial's Martine has also noted the trend.

"When my grandfather started (White's Chapel in Santa

three days that people are just not capable of handling at that time. I've seen so many competent, sharp people who just can't function then."

Barbara Davis, who was actively involved for 15 years at Davis Memorial Chapel, which she and her husband, Norman, own, liked the job for the same reason.

"People at a time like that are so vulnerable, so open, and they really need a good shoulder to cry on and a big ear," she said.

'All hell could be breaking loose, and if that phone rang, we got the "death stare" — everybody had to be quiet because it was a funeral call.'

— Claudia Crosetti

Cruz) in the 1930s, he was a very compassionate man — but services were so much the same," he said. "It was, 'What color casket do you want and when do you want to do the service?'"

The fact is, many people in the business said, embalming a body doesn't take that long. The bulk of the job is making phone calls, arranging details for funeral services that are often highly personalized and dealing with people who come from a huge variety of religions and cultures; and counseling the grief-stricken.

Family business

Crosetti, 41, who is married to Joe Crosetti Jr., co-owner of Norcal-Crosetti Foods, took over running Mehl's Chapel in 1985, when her father, Jim Mehl, died.

She had never imagined that she would do it, she said. But the family decided that it couldn't just let go of the business. Crosetti's brother, Ed Mehl, is a strawberry grower, and her sister, Dianne Collins, lives in San Diego. That left her.

Crosetti took the test necessary to become a director — mostly dealing with insurance questions, she said. (She doesn't do the embalming, which requires technical training and a separate license.) The rest she learned on the job.

The big surprise? She liked it.

What has kept her going, she said, is that she feels like she is really contributing to helping grieving families.

"Most people don't know what to say or do when there's a death in the family," she said. "I know that I'm doing something. I'm getting what they want across, in terms of the service or the newspapers. I'm taking some of the load off, taking care of the details during those first

"There was the feeling that you really could make a difference."

Davis said she may become more active in the business again now that her daughter is grown, but she took what was going to be a year's leave some time ago when her daughter was small. Then, her mother had a stroke and a few months later her father died. On top of all that, she said, "After so many years in this town, we were starting to bury people we knew."

Burn-out potential

She realized that she was drained, Davis said, and that the funeral business requires almost a calling. Many family funeral home directors are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Davis said.

"If someone dies on your weekend off, you go," she said. "After many years of that, you're bound to feel resentful. Then you feel terrible, because you're thinking, *somebody lost someone*."

Crosetti said she was aware of the burn-out potential when she went into the business, and so far in most cases has managed to separate herself — "standing off without being stand-offish," as she puts it.

It is harder to deal with clients whom you know, she agreed, and with the deaths of babies and children, or even young people.

"You have to stay really concentrated and centered, and only ask the questions you're supposed to," she said. "Otherwise you get sucked into the grief."

When grieving families bring children with them into the quiet, dimly lit offices, Crosetti said, the children can never resist peeking around. Sometimes teenagers pretend they know the deceased so that they can

come into the chapel and see what it's like while there's a service or a viewing time in process.

"I think it's just a natural morbid curiosity," Crosetti said.

While she was growing up, Crosetti and her brother and sister would play hide-and-seek in the casket display room. Before it had plexiglass stands, she said, it had heavy ornate stands that made great hiding places.

"I didn't make it a point to go see things, but I wasn't scared if I did see somebody rolled by or something," she said.

During off-hours, calls to the funeral home came directly to the Mehl household.

"All hell could be breaking loose, and if that phone rang, we got the 'death stare' — everybody had to be quiet because it was a funeral call," she said. "We didn't think it was strange, though. We didn't have anything to compare it to."

But even though she and her family, after three generations of funeral direction, are not afraid of seeing death, it is not any easier when there is a death in their own family.

"It's just the same. We are just as confused," Crosetti said. "I thought we would be more together, but we very quickly go back to being on the other side of the desk."

Does she feel more prepared for her own death?

"No — but being in the business, it keeps me very aware of how fragile life is," she said. "You stay very humble and grateful."

Corporate ladder

More and more family-run fu-

While many in the business cringe at the thought of mortuaries, others point to increasing opportunities are creating for women and minorities in the field.

neral homes are selling out to the one or two large funeral corporations that exist, industry sources say. While many in the business cringe at the thought of corporate mortuaries, others point to the increasing opportunities that they are creating for women and minorities in the field.

One thing it has done is to establish middle management.

"Now (a mortician) can climb a corporate ladder, just like at IBM or McDonalds," Taylor of the mortuary college said.

It is also helping tear down the three common barriers to entering the funeral

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e's a huge demand in
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 who would have refused
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