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CAREERS IN FUNERAL SERVICE A 'CALLING'

'Progressive' funeral homes provide work-life balance

LINDA WHITE

Ask a funeral director why they chose their career, and they'll likely tell you it was "a calling."

While helping families cope with the loss of a loved one isn't easy, it's incredibly rewarding, they assure. "It's one of those careers that people don't immediately think about, especially when you're younger and trying to figure out what you want to be," says Leslie Kobayashi, vice-president of human resources at Arbor Memorial.

"A career in funeral service may seem unconventional and be a bit of a mystery to many people but as those who work in the industry know, it's about supporting families through some of the toughest moments of their lives, which can be personally fulfilling," she says.

Many people employed in the bereavement sector were motivated by their own experiences of loss or by hearing about the career's rewards through family and friends who work in the industry, Kobayashi reports. The industry offers a variety of positions, such as funeral director assistants, administration, sales, groundskeeping, information technology, project management, finance and marketing, she adds.

Being a funeral director requires a level of maturity that's not necessarily defined by age, says Jeff Caldwell, professor of Funeral Service Education Programs at Humber College in Toronto. Its programs draw many second career students, especially during difficult economic times because the profession is seen as recession proof.

Students take science courses like anatomy, microbiology and pathology, as well as practical skills like embalming, cosmetic application, basic hairstyling and restorative art. They learn general business and communication skills to prepare them to manage or own a funeral home and examine the ethical and legal components of the funeral industry.

"The intention of our regulator is that a graduate of our program, once



Students learn how merchandise is manufactured and how to present it to families in this merchandise selection room. **HUMBER COLLEGE**



Leslie Kobayashi of Arbor Memorial



Jeff Caldwell of Humber College

they obtain their licence, should be able to open up a funeral home in their community if that's what they wish to do. Certainly, we have had students who have done that within weeks or months of completing their schooling and writing their licensing," says Caldwell.

He also works part-time for a funeral home and manages the North American team of a global emergency response team organization that deals primarily with airline disasters. He travelled to Ethiopia in 2019 to lend his skills to the Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 recovery operation.

"We have courses in ethics and psychology of grief," Caldwell says of Humber's funeral director programs, now offered in a hybrid model. "While a funeral director in Ontario is not a licensed grief counsellor or licensed grief therapist, a lot of peo-

ple see a funeral director as a death care professional and that includes grief. We make sure our students are what I call little 'c' counsellors and know what that entails and where the scope of practice ends."

Caldwell reports a shortage of funeral directors across many parts of Canada and says that's due to several factors that include workplace expectations. In a bid to provide work-life balance and reduce the risk of career burnout, a growing number of funeral homes have changed workplace hours so funeral directors work traditional full-time hours.

As the industry continues to evolve, funeral directors remain committed to their calling. "They feel they have been given a mandate to give back to society and for them, that that means helping out somebody at what could be the darkest time in their life," he says.

"That's about making that loss of a

Profession requires personal licence

The first step to becoming a funeral director in Ontario is to earn a Funeral Director Class 1 embalming diploma or a Funeral Director Class 2 non-embalming diploma, the latter of which meets the needs of those with religious or ethnic objections to embalming.

Just two schools in Ontario provide the educational requirements required to become a funeral director. Humber College offers the only English-speaking program and Collège Boréal in Sudbury offers a French-speaking program.

Following second semester, students complete a full-time paid work placement in a licensed funeral home while completing their full-time learning. They then write the entry-to-practice exam administered by the Bereavement Authority of Ontario (BAO).

Established in 2016 to administer the Funeral, Burial and Cremation Services Act, 2002 for the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery, the BAO is responsible for the licensing and enforcement of cemetery, crematorium, funeral establishments, funeral directors, funeral pre-planners, transfer service operators and transfer service sales representatives.

loved one a little bit less of a sting and ensuring that individual or family has an opportunity to do whatever they feel is necessary to say goodbye, to celebrate their life and to begin moving forward in a life without that person. That is terribly rewarding."

Humber also offers the only Transfer Service Sales Representative program in Ontario, an online program that prepares students for careers serving families wanting minimal services for deceased loved ones, and the province's only Funeral Pre-Planner certificate program. It prepares students to work with people wanting to plan their funeral in advance.

Debt overwhelms workers

LINDA WHITE

Forty-five per cent of Canadian workers feel overwhelmed by debt, according to the latest Mental Health Index from Telus Health (formerly LifeWorks).

Of those, 61 per cent haven't reached out for financial advice or debt coaching, with 21 per cent blaming embarrassment. Just four per cent of those who've reached out for help have done so through their employee and family assistance program.

Forty per cent believe automatic savings/investment plans would be valuable if offered by their employer, while 13 per cent say personal financial advice would be the most valuable, followed by 12 per cent who'd prefer a hardship or emergency fund. Finally, 36 per cent would leave their employer for another if they offered a guaranteed income pension plan.

"Employers can adapt by making financial savings and investment plans available, as well as consultation services to help educate and empower their employees," says Telus Health chief growth officer Juggy Sihota.

Workers 'very happy'

Forty-six per cent of working Canadians feel 'very happy' with their current role and responsibilities, the ADP Canada Happiness@Work Index finds.

Boomers are the happiest with a score of 7.3 out of 10, followed by Gen Z, Millennials and Gen-X at 6.6. Happiness varies according to region, with Quebec workers the happiest with a score of seven, followed by B.C., Alberta, Atlantic Canada and Saskatchewan/Manitoba. Workers in Ontario trail at 6.5.

Work-life balance and recognition top secondary drivers of workers' happiness, beating out recognition and support, and opportunities for career advancement.