

IFDF BLOG SERIES
FUNERAL PROFESSION 2022 – PERSPECTIVES
AND INFLUENCERS – DR. TANYA SCOTECE



DR. TANYA SCOTECE



COLETTE KEMP

FAMILIES SERVING FAMILIES

The Independent Funeral Directors of Florida's mission is to promote, enhance and perpetuate independently owned and operated funeral homes, crematory, and cemetery firms in the state of Florida.

Each month for our blog, **Colette Kemp**, IFDF Communications Committee Co-Chair, interviews people from our profession's best of the best.

Ms. Kemp recently caught up with **Dr. Tanya Scotece** for this month's interview.

Ms. Scotece is a Professor of Funeral Service Education at Miami Dade College. She believes in leading by example and teaching through experience. She combines marketing, training, development, and strategies to facilitate learning in the highest delivery and quality of customer service excellence.

Colette Kemp:

Dr. Tanya Scotece, thank you for agreeing to this interview; we are grateful for your insights and for taking the time to meet with us. I'd like to open with you telling us a little about yourself and how you got started in the funeral profession.

Dr. Tanya Scotece:

It all started with a chandelier. I went to my first wake visitation back in Hartford, Connecticut, when I was 12 years old. It was for the wake of my mother's friend's mom, who was a person that I did not know in life. I was picked up from seventh grade and brought to a funeral home.

Upon entering the funeral home, I was greeted by the men in black, and all I saw above me were these beautiful chandeliers. I was just mesmerized.

It's funny because my trademark even today is usually wearing chandelier earrings. It's a little tribute as that moment when I went to that first funeral stuck with me.

I was fascinated by seeing the woman in the casket, beautifully dressed with her makeup.

I remember distinctly walking up to her and kneeling in front of her casket. I had this desire that I wanted to touch her. I asked my mom, can I touch her? And she said, no, just say a prayer instead. So, I said a prayer, and then I sat back in my seat and realized another visitation or wake was happening with a man's name at the other side of the funeral home.

I decided to ask my mom if I could visit him? And my mother said, you're supposed to know the people and not just barge in on someone's wake, but I did. I paid my respects to that family, and I knew better than to ask anybody if I could touch the man.

I said the prayer like I was taught and again sat back in my seat.

That moment defined me as far as wanting to be in this profession. But sometimes, life puts us on a detour, and I landed a job while I was in high school, which was in a medical office. I went on to work in cardiovascular nuclear medicine stress testing, and I worked my way up from file clerk, receptionist, medical, coding, billing, all the way up.

But I had this calling. I ended up in a completely different field, but there are a lot of parallels with medical and mortuary. And at the age of 35, I decided to investigate by this one phone call to the funeral home and the NFDA. And that afternoon, I was signed up at a mortuary school, and it was a two-year program. I managed to complete it in two years, from 2003 to 2005.

I started my internship and then stayed with the same firm, Farley Funeral Homes and Crematory, in Venice, Florida.

Colette Kemp:

How did you make the transition into teaching?

Dr. Tanya Scotece:

I was 35 when I started mortuary school and completed it when I was 37. At that time, I was a single mom. After all those years I finally got the hang of school. School was not my thing right out of the gate of high school. I tried it once or twice; it just wasn't my thing. When I finally found the field that I liked. It was straightforward once I got into the mortuary curriculum that I enjoyed.

Even though I started at the funeral home, did my internship, went on to be a director, embalmer, and meeting with families and into management. I continued to stay in school. I completed my bachelor's, and then my master's, and did my doctorate. So finally, in December of 2015, I graduated with my Ph.D. from the University of South

Florida, and my degree was in curriculum and instruction for adult education. To teach adults how to learn. That program was six years of investment in teaching students, AKA adults, how to learn.

When I completed school in December 2015, I stayed on with the funeral home for almost three years. And I landed a job at Miami-Dade College as a full-time professor, which was a three-hour drive. I had to physically relocate to the east coast of Florida from the west coast. And that's where I've been ever since. Currently, I am a full-time professor teaching funeral services. But I'm grateful to Michelle and John Williams and Joanne and David Farley because without having that platform with them, I would not be able to teach. In order to teach, it's excellent to have real-world experience. It's different than just teaching out of a textbook.

Colette Kemp:

As a professor of mortuary science, what advice would you have for people interested in pursuing a funeral services career?

Dr. Tanya Scotece:

I would say for somebody that is thinking about it, maybe talk to people who either teach it or work in the profession

It's good to remember people's perspective is only people's perspective. So, if you interview one person and they say, don't do it, I'm not saying that I would be discouraged. Just find out a little bit about the reality of the day-to-day funeral practices.

As I share with all my students, if funeral service has touched their heart, soul, or mind, then funeral service will find a way for them to stay in it if they choose.

Colette Kemp:

What is the best way for mortuary students to find internships?

Dr. Tanya Scotece:

Students are currently synchronously online via the colleges' Blackboard Collaborate format in their respective box in their respective environments. It's a live class, and we come together as a group.

SCI has been great as far as coming into the classes every semester. They'll usually come into all my classes; currently, I'm teaching seven of them. They will share with the

students where to find the jobs, what type of jobs they can get, where to go, how to find postings, and even meet with the recruiter directly.

NorthStar Memorial Group does the same thing. They've come in. They've educated our students, and they've given us direct contacts.

We have only one independent owner that is in constant contact with me to provide that service for students.

As educators, we reach out to industry to help with internship opportunities.

I think I would like to close that gap somewhat to have more collaboration with industry. The most frequent statement that I hear is that mortuary schools are not producing quality graduates.

We are dedicated to teaching curriculum, having them pass their boards and pass their exams. We are doing our part on our end from the academic perspective; support from employers is also a key component of the student's success.

I have phenomenal students. They're looking for jobs. They're eager to find employment.

They're in class for a short amount of time, but we always aim to inspire them. I like to encourage folks about the field, and I want them to think literally beyond the box.

Colette Kemp:

How can local funeral homes support the mortuary programs in the state? You talked about closing that gap. What do you think can be done?

Dr. Tanya Scotece:

Currently in the state of Florida, there are three mortuary schools. There's one here at Miami Dade College, one in St. Petersburg, and then a Jacksonville college. I personally don't want to speak on behalf of the other two. So I'll just share from my perspective at Miami Dade College.

I would like to regularly see more interaction, more thoughtful conversation, and intentional conversations with funeral home directors. Not just once a year popping into a class, but maybe every semester. Our program goes year-round. We have fall semester, spring semester, summer semester. If the funeral home directors and owners could invite the students to have, for example, lunch and learn at their firm, or possibly breakfast or maybe even just pizza, this would be a way to have the conversation of what they're looking for to cultivate.

Some firms that I'm aware of do a great job in getting interns, cultivating them, and keeping them on board.

It's a great symbiotic relationship between the student and the funeral home.

However, not many funeral homes have that thought about that process. They're looking for somebody to be turnkey.

The school can only teach so much, and I believe we go above and beyond what is requested and required, but I think we could get more support from local funeral homes.

The students may not have the 30-years of experience, but they're bringing a different perspective to the table. I think if people would sit back and listen to the new upcoming generation, instead of just having this resistant mentality, the field probably could do much bigger and better things for the future.

Colette Kemp:

Are there any trends you see coming down the pipeline in the profession?

Dr. Tanya Scotece:

Historically in Florida, there used to be only a combo license, meaning that a licensed funeral director and embalmer are under one number provided by the state of Florida. And that's how the field had operated for many years. A few years back, Florida transitioned into a funeral director certificate, meaning that somebody coming in with a two-year degree or higher in another area could come to mortuary school in Florida and be a funeral director only. Meaning they're not going for any of the sciences. They don't have to do anything with embalming. They still have to do the one-year internship for Florida, which is required. So if somebody is going for the combo license, it's a one-year internship or a funeral director; it's still a one-year internship. So the internship is still one year for either one.

I would say that for the demographics of students, we have three different categories.

- My first section of students are usually there because of family, somebody in their family has a business, and they're looking to get licensed to work in the business.
- The second is going to be people looking to help other people. I have a lot of students that are second and third careers, looking to help people in a different way. I have people coming out of education, people coming out of EMS, paramedics, firefighters, police officers, different components wanting to learn more about our field.
- The third group will be those interested in caring for the deceased and being solely in the prep room.

To propel the future students forward, it would be good to have more variety of areas that they can grow into. For example, marketing companies and chemical companies could come into the classroom because they need people to offer their products. So why not cultivate the students? I think the students are where it's happening. That's

where the fire is, and that's where somebody can get the spark to say, wow, this student can work with us and be our future.

Colette Kemp:

Has anything changed through COVID? Are people more aware of the profession, would you say?

Dr. Tanya Scotece:

The state has changed that certificate-only program, as I mentioned. I have a lot of students interested in other areas. For example, CANA has offered us a student discount to get certified for cremation. I would like to see more with the InSight Institute with Glenda Stansbury to perhaps train the students to be certified celebrants while they're in school. The profession can be viewed as such a "dark field" in that sometimes people may not know where to go or how to navigate.

I love LinkedIn. I always encourage a student to get a LinkedIn account to start seeing beyond the funeral home. I think with a lot more online activity, COVID did create a lot of changes.

The field is changing because consumers are more educated and now have access to things like webcasting. It's almost like in previous times with travel agents, you couldn't make your own travel plans. You needed a travel agent.

Well, you also couldn't make your own funeral arrangements. You needed a funeral director, but that is shifting slowly. Funeral home owners may not like to hear that. I think we have to become more creative because it's not that people aren't going to die, and it's not that people don't want to celebrate their life even though things may be changing.

Perhaps that shift where a celebration of life and the traditional may be coming together is one area that has evolved now through COVID. We're doing it live, webcasting via Zoom or other services; perhaps there's even more that we can do as a profession.

Colette Kemp:

What advice would you give funeral home owners to help students succeed once they start working as they hire and train them?

Dr. Tanya Scotece:

Consistency with what the expectation is. I will share with you an example. When I was with Farley Funeral Homes, we created a form that anybody new to us, whether they were a seasoned funeral director, an intern, or an attendant, would be able to have a form given to them. It would be like a checklist. They would go on three transfers at the

hospital, three transfers at a nursing home, three transfers from the medical examiner, three transfers from a home removal. They would also sit in on arrangements with different directors. They would actually go to various services and the cemetery, and it was a sign-off sheet. So, we could gauge where the student or intern or attendant, or even the new director was at. Because somebody has been a director for 30 years, they're new to us, right?

It's a matter of minimizing the gap between what they already know and our expectations. In my experience, I have many students currently working in funeral homes. It's very up and down, from who's washing cars to who's sitting in the lounge and who's active during the day.

In school, we have a curriculum, we have tests, and we have projects. And it's very outlined. Anybody that went to mortuary school has experienced some facet of that. I think we all need to remember that they don't know what is expected of them when newly hired? What do you want them to do? It could be an industry list that everybody has for an intern, and funeral homes could adapt a list to their needs as there will be variations during internships.

Not all funeral homes are alike. Some are very formal, and some are not.

If you are reading this and you have time, I encourage you to come into the class; you can ask questions. You're going to be amazed at what you hear.

The students can provide feedback on their experiences. Some say they go to work and sit on their phone until they're told what to do. Others are asking, can I help you? And the directors are saying, no, I don't have time for you. Once in a while, someone says, come under my wing, and I will help you.

Colette Kemp:

Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share and how can people get in touch with you?

Dr. Tanya Scotece:

Because I've expressed that we have this disconnect, I would encourage anybody to collaborate with me. I'm on LinkedIn. I would encourage anybody that maybe has known me from my tenure, with the funeral home, or has never heard me before or wants to connect definitely get in touch with me. I would love the opportunity to connect with industry people or even non-industry people.

People who are maybe interested in coming into the profession. I would hope that if somebody is reading this blog, Colette, they can just say, you know what? I never thought of it in this light.

How can I help? When somebody thinks of a crisis, we all come together to say, what can I do to help? Well, there's been a lot of changes. So any collaboration we can do now will allow us to succeed in the future. At Miami-Dade College, we are a direct connection to the students. And if somebody wants to come in and talk to our students. We're virtual, it's effortless to send a link, and they can come in.