

# Education

By Patti Martin Bartsche

# Honoring the Past ... and Looking to the Future

Sometimes the best ideas are born out of casual conversations.

**T**ake the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science's recently established Hall of Fame as an example.

It was last year that Jack E. Lechner Jr., CCMS president and CEO, was talking to Ken Cahall, a 1974 CCMS alumnus and the incoming president of the National Funeral Directors Association.

The school was holding its 2017 CCMS Gala in November, and would be honoring Cahall during the event.

"Ken is an exemplar death-care professional," Lechner explained. "His community, church and professional service sets a benchmark for every graduate from CCMS to strive to achieve."

Cahall, Lechner pointed out, has been an active leader in funeral service, church and community for over three decades, including serving as past president of the Ohio Funeral Directors Association. And when he was installed as the 2017-18 NFDA president Nov. 1, Cahall became the 11th NFDA president to hail from Ohio – and graduate from CCMS.

And that got Lechner thinking. "We are proud of our students and the history of demonstrated leadership they have written within the death-care profession," he said.

But what to do?

"We wanted to find a way to honor the extraordinary people who have come through our doors," Lechner said. "We wanted a way to hold these individuals up to our students of today (and tomorrow) about all they could achieve."

Established in 1882, CCMS is the oldest mortuary science college in the United States. "I like to think we are the best," Lechner said. "And part of that being the best are the students who have come through our doors, who have become exemplars in the profession. Their success is something that we wanted to shine a light on."

Why not, Lechner thought, establish a Hall of Fame as a way honor those successes?

Lechner brought the idea to the school's board of trustees, which voted unanimously to establish the Alumni Hall of Fame at the

Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science.

The selection process for the inaugural class was easy, Lechner acknowledged.

"All four are alumni who have spent their entire professional lives setting an example for generations of death-care professionals. They have given of their talents selflessly to their church and community as well as their district, state and national funeral directors associations," he explained. "These Hall of Fame inductees serve as an example for those who strive to be the best death-care professional; supporting the profession and their alma mater with time, money, and leadership at the local and national levels. They represent the best in funeral service."

The decision was made to keep the news of the Hall of Fame under wraps until the school's November gala.

"No one had a clue," Lechner chuckled. "They thought they were coming for one thing, but we had a little surprise in store."

On the evening prior to the Nov.



CCMS president and CEO Jack E. Lechner Jr. (third from left) and Frank Rosenacker (far right) congratulate Hall of Fame inductees (from left) Robert L. Shank Sr., Ken Cahall and Dwayne Spence. (Photo courtesy of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science)

18 gala honoring NFDA President Cahall at the Cincinnati Bengals' Paul Brown Stadium – East Lounge, the college hosted a continuing education opportunity. Presented by funeral historian Todd Van Beck, the three-hour presentation merged funeral history with the history of the college.

Following the presentation, attendees were asked to exit through one particular auditorium door, Lechner explained. As they walked in the hallway, attendees were greeted with a draped section of wall. Following a short speech, Lechner unveiled the portraits of the inaugural class:

- Cahall, 2017-18 NFDA president, and member of the CCMS Class of 1974.
- Robert L. Shank Sr., 1990-91 NFDA president, and member of the CCMS Class of 1956.

- Dwayne Spence, 2002-2003 NFDA president, and member of the CCMS Class of 1966.
- William C. Wappner, 2009-2010 NFDA president, and member of the CCMS Class of 1975.

Shank, the oldest of the four inductees, was shocked.

"I didn't expect it, not the least little bit," the 83-year-old Perryville, Ohio, resident said. "I was going to the gala because I've been friends with Ken for a number of years, and since I haven't heard Todd speak in a while and have always enjoyed him, I decided to go to the session as well."

That he was being recognized as a Hall of Famer was "unbelievable," Shank said. "I didn't even know they had even been talking about a Hall of Fame," he said. "And there I was ... and I didn't have a suit and tie on."

It's always an honor to be remem-

bered for your accomplishments, Wappner said, "Especially when my work starting at the state level until I finished my national chairs was 20 years of my career."

Cahall said that while he knew he would be honored at the CCMS gala, he had no idea that it was to become a night he would never forget.

"When I discovered that I was being inducted into the inaugural class of the CCMS Hall of Fame, I was completely overcome with many emotions. Surprise, honored, humbled, proud, teary eyed, and I thought – why me?" Cahall said. "There have been thousands of graduates from CCMS since its doors were opened in 1882. There had to be someone more worthy than me in the past 135 years to graduate from CCMS. The pride in being in the first class of inductees along with Robert Shank, Dwayne Spence and William



**CCMS president and CEO Jack E. Lechner Jr. and his wife, Debbie. (Photo courtesy of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science)**

Wappner was simply overwhelming. I couldn't have been any prouder, honored and humbled than to receive this great honor along with this great group of funeral directors."

An equally surprised Spence said CCMS has been an integral part of his life.

"I didn't look at any other schools, because I received the Ohio Funeral Directors Scholarship in 1965," Spence explained. "And many years before that, at the age of 10, I asked for – and received – a booklet from the school about the courses I needed to take, and they responded to a 10-year-old with the information I was seeking. That impressed me about the type of people that were there at the school."

Shank said that his CCMS education provided the foundation for a funeral service career that has taken him beyond anything he could have imagined. "I have enjoyed and loved being a funeral director ... and that all started at CCMS," he said. "If you really care for people, it is

one of the most fulfilling careers you could have."

Over the years, Shank said, he has repeatedly said that as an officer in the OFDA and NFDA, he has learned more than he ever contributed. "You really learn a lot by just sitting down and talking to other funeral professionals," he said. "That's an opportunity you really only get when you get really involved in funeral service."

"When I went to CCMS, my brother had just been there three years prior, and he had a great experience – and my grandfather attended an early embalming course under the founder, Joseph Clarke, in the early 1900s," Wappner said. "Plus, it was the only mortuary school in Ohio, (and) I really didn't consider going anywhere else."

For several of the honorees, attending CCMS was following a family tradition.

Cahall said he chose CCMS as a young man because his father was a graduate from there and it was close

to home. "I was married, working full time at the funeral home in Georgetown, Ohio, and commuted back and forth the 100-mile trip every day," he said. "Since then, my son and all of our other funeral directors on staff (Cahall Funeral Homes) are also CCMS graduates."

Lechner, himself a 1990 CCMS graduate, believes that it is incumbent on mortuary colleges to make themselves relevant to students of today – and tomorrow.

"The death-care profession is never going to go away, but if you stand still, you are going to be left behind," Lechner pointed out. "We've been evolving for 135 years, and we will continue to evolve for the next 135 years."

Part of that evolution was discussed during the gala: CCMS laid out plans for construction and installation of a state-of-the-art educational cremation center on campus.

"It wasn't all that long ago the national cremation rate was 5.69 percent. In 2016, it hit 50 percent – and it is expected to peak at 78.8 percent in 2035," Lechner pointed out. "How many funeral colleges have a crematory on-premises? How many are teaching hands-on cremation? This is the future ... we need to prepare our students for what families want – and what they want is cremation. And we have to educate students about cremation so they can educate their families on the variety of cremation options and the importance of service."

Cahall agreed.

"The CCMS board of trustees and the president, Jack Lechner, have committed their energy and resources to continue to make CCMS the leading mortuary college in this country, and they are to be commended for their futuristic vision in funeral service education," he said. "Constructing a state-of-the-art educational cremation center on campus is only the latest project. They are always looking to the future to better prepare the students

to become funeral directors with the ability and experience in the real world after graduation."

That future, Lechner said, includes alkaline hydrolysis.

"The board of trustees has tasked me to add alkaline hydrolysis to an enhanced pet loss curriculum so that our students will understand the science of alkaline hydrolysis," Lechner explained. "Currently, alkaline hydrolysis is approved in 15 states, so it is just a matter of time until it proliferates."

"Of the 124 past presidents of the NFDA, 11 that I am aware of are Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science alumni," Lechner said. "That is a lot of local, state and national-level leadership emanating from the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science."

For Cahall and the other Hall of Fame inductees, supporting their alma mater is key.

"It is extremely important that alumni support their alma mater," Cahall said. "Without the support of the alumni, the vision into the future of mortuary science education would not be possible. Our profession is changing very quickly, and it does take extra support to help our schools teach the newest techniques and procedures in funeral service."

Cahall also referenced a favorite quote from Steve Nash: "I am a huge believer in giving back and helping out in the community and the world. Think globally, act locally I suppose. I believe that the measure of a person's life is the affect they have on others."

"Every school graduate is – and should be – proud of the education and firm foundation they received, to go out into the unknown world, be successful, productive and make a difference in people's lives," Spence said. "That's why it is vitally important to support, in whatever way possible, CCMS and their programs, to continue the great history and heritage of this institution and provide the necessary support to future generations of funeral service professionals." •

## A Brief History of CCMS

As embalming developed into a respected trade during the Civil War, it became necessary to standardize the embalming process and train embalmers in a school setting.

In 1882, Joseph Clarke founded The Clarke School of Embalming, opening modestly with seven students. During the following eight years, Clarke conducted touring schools throughout the United States. The on-the-road courses lasted anywhere from two to seven days, according to funeral historian Todd Van Beck.

The last session of the old Clarke School of Embalming took place at the Chicago Coffin Co. on April 26, 1898. In 1899, Clarke would re-establish the school as a permanent educational institution and changed the name to the Cincinnati College of Embalming. To this day, according to Van Beck, the institution is still the earliest permanently based mortuary college in the world.

Upon Clarke's retirement in 1909, Charles O. Dhonau purchased the college. In the 1920s, Dhonau was a pioneer in developing an expanded curriculum and was instrumental in the organization of the American Board of Funeral Service Education, which was established to evaluate mortuary science programs. In 1933, with an expanding curriculum, the college moved into an independent, remodeled building at 3200 Reading Road in Cincinnati, where it remained for 46 years.

After developing a cooperative academic program together with the University of Cincinnati in 1966, Dhonau subsequently renamed the college Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. The Cincinnati Foundation for Mortuary Education, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization to support the college, was established, which to this day functions as the college's financial foundation.

In 1977, the college established two- and four-year programs, partnering with Edgecliff College and relocating onto its campus at 2220 Victory Parkway. In 1987, Edgecliff consolidated with Xavier University, and CCMS was moved into Xavier's A.B. Cohen Center, where it remained until 1995, when 16 acres of land was purchased in Finneytown, Ohio, and a new, modern building was constructed at 645 W. Northbend Road.

In 1980, CCMS received authorization from the Ohio Regents to award the Associate of Applied Science degree, and in 1982 it received accreditation of that degree by the Higher Learning Commission, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

In 1986, CCMS became the first private college of mortuary science in the nation to be authorized to award the Bachelor of Mortuary Science degree. In 1987, CCMS was accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, North Central Association, and by the American Board of Funeral Service Education at the bachelor's degree level.