

ONES TO WATCH

Teresa "Tess" Payton

Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science

The seeds of interest in funeral service were planted for Teresa "Tess" Payton when she was a child, experiencing her uncle's traumatic death and its impact on her family.

"I was 9, a pivotal age for such a formidable experience," Payton said. "He was a victim of a homicide, and one of the things I remember the most was the honor and privilege I was provided to be a part of the funeral. Some people may think a funeral isn't a place for a child, but for me, to be able to come to the funeral was so important as a child."

One of the things Payton remembers about her uncle's 1994 death occurred as the family was trying to make arrangements. "It was a very distressing time, and one of the things my family was fixated on was my uncle's long red hair. It was a big part of his personality and identity; his nickname was even 'Hunts' (from the ketchup of the same name)," she said.



"Because of what happened, they had to shave his hair ... it was a huge part of who he was, and it was lost," Payton said. "Another thing the family fixated on was the gold hoop earring he always wore. They were trying to figure what to do with the

earring. And only as a 9-year-old could do, I asked, 'Why doesn't he just wear it?' It just seemed to me to be the most obvious solution."

After a few minutes, the family's response was, "Let's do it." "I felt validated; they listened to what I said. I felt included," Payton said. "As I reflect back, it was my way to advocate for the person he was and to represent him faithfully in death."

Still, the 35-year-old Louisville resident didn't immediately gravitate to funeral service. Instead, Payton headed off to the University of Louisville where she earned both a Bachelor of Arts in humanities and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

Payton would go on to work in various fields, including teaching, where she developed a broad spectrum of experiences that taught her valuable interpersonal and customer service skills.

"As an admissions counselor for the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts' Governor's School for the Arts, Tess was required to help teens and their families navigate a rigorous application process – including the stress and emotions such a process creates," read the nomination signed by members of Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science, including President Jack E. Lechner Jr. "(Tess) exhibits a calm, warm demeanor, which would have put those families at ease, in the same way she will undoubtedly comfort bereaved families in the future."

While she enjoyed being a teacher and later working as a nonprofit administrator, Payton reached a point where she had achieved everything she wanted to achieve. She began looking for her next career – and found her way to CCMS.

Payton admitted she was a bit nervous about returning to school, but she need not have worried.

"From the time she arrived at CCMS, Tess has been a quiet leader – displaying empathy for others and encouraging peers to have an open mind," Lechner wrote. "She is bright, mature and committed to her pursuit of this profession."

"She asks thought-provoking questions and seeks to immerse herself in all things death, dying and bereavement to become a better servant leader within her community and funeral home," Lechner added.

Payton, who graduated last month, said she was fortunate to be able to both attend school and work at a funeral home in Ohio at the same time. "It was difficult, but at the same time it was important to blend my academic study with real-world experience," she said. "To be able to learn about something in school and then take it to the funeral home and put it into practice has been a truly wonderful experience."

The kind of funeral director she wants to be is one who is caring and compassionate, who listens to what families are saying – and not saying – to do her best each and every time so no family leaves a funeral service feeling something was lacking.

Lechner would also add forward thinking.

"Tess is progressive in her thinking about meeting the needs of today's families, revealing genuine interest in green burial and other nontraditional options," Lechner pointed out.

Payton has accepted an offer at a Kentucky funeral home to begin her career as a licensed funeral director. "My goal is that people get to know me as a valued community member that they can turn to in their time of need," she said. "I think that I would love to, one day, move into leadership, perhaps managing or owning a funeral home.

"Most importantly, though, I want families to know that I am going to treat their loved one as I would treat my own loved one," she added. "People deserve dignity in life ... and death."