

The American Exchange Programme September 2019



It was over a year ago when I was sitting in front of my laptop figuring out what to write in my letter of application for the exchange. Then following an interview with members of the Company of Fellows, and a representative from the Dodge Company (which felt like being put up in front of the board!), I later found I was chosen as the successful candidate. I never thought I would now be sitting here again figuring how to write an article about my once-in-a-lifetime experience.

But what an amazing experience it was!! And where do I start?? I guess it needs to be from the beginning...

I landed at Cincinnati Airport late on the Friday evening to be greeted by Craig Caldwell, who would be guiding me for the week, and what a jam-packed week it was to be. Saturday was spent relaxing, taking in the sights and sounds of Cincinnati accompanied by our Master Fellow David Kaye. This included a visit to the Zoo, which is rated one of the top in the US.

Sunday we were joined by other members of the Institute, who had flown in on Saturday. We had brunch onboard an old paddle steamer, followed by a cruise down the Ohio river. I can now actually state that I have eaten fried chicken in Kentucky (no sign of the colonel though!). That evening we were invited to dinner by the North American Divisional Chairman, Sean Sweatman, and we enjoyed a great night of conversation and glorious portions of food, as the US is known for.



Monday was the real start of the programme, with the NAD AGM and professional enrichment conference to be held over the next two days. This included an early drive to the Ferno Factory Washington, where our President Dr Phil Gore, members of the NAD and myself were given a presentation on the company and its history from start to global success. We also had a tour of their production line and testing areas (photography was not allowed). This was an opportunity to demonstrate their new fully automated stretcher, which required no lifting by the handler (nice if you have a fat bank balance!). It was also good to see that it was still a family-owned

Next stop was Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science (CCMS). It was here the AGM meeting was held. Our National President said a few words and I was introduced by our Master Fellow David Kaye as the Exchange candidate to the members. Talks were given. The first by Lelli McMorrough, about teaching Millennials and changes that need to happen to suit young students methods of learning. The other led by Jack Letchner, President of the college, who talked about its educational program.





We were then taken on a tour of the college. It really is a fantastic facility, linked with the Medical Science Donation Program, where they undertake the embalming for medical colleges. Students at CCMS get a good hands on experience from day one. Embalming started in the usual way, then 24 hours later a second injection of phenol is given to the deceased, who is then passed in to the care of the Medical Science College. After the medical college have finished with the cadaver, it is returned to CCMS, where students in their 4th semester are able to complete full dissection to really get an understanding of all the structures and landmarks. Literately an in-depth understanding of anatomy. They also get many local Funeral Directors who may have a difficult case calling them to say "I have a great educational one for you".

The college have a lecture hall, a mock service chapel and reconstruction room, where by using photos of celebrities for reference create model faces of them. The embalming room has every make of embalming machine you can think of, and every chemical from every company too. The students really do have access to anything they would desire, including an excellent library, with thousands of books all regarding death care. There are plans and funding in place for a whole new building, which will hold their new cremator and will be able to do their own in-house cremations and training.

Each student leaves the college with their degree, fully prepared to go out into the death care profession, with the skills to run their own business once they have gained their licence from the State they wish to work in.

Tuesday was part two of the professional enrichment conference, with a day packed of presentations, including my own. It started with Jack Letchner this time talking about the importance of the organ donation program, speaking closely from the heart with his own experience of his son requiring and waiting for a lung transplant in order to live a healthy prosperous life. His son had made an emotional film of his journey. This was then followed then by Sean Sweatman, who gave a talk on Oedema, and ways to treat cases.

Next was myself. I gave an insight into the 150-year history of Stibbards Funeral Directors, whom I have the pleasure of working for, and then English traditions in funerals, focusing on the delays in embalming in England and Wales due to our legislations. They couldn't quite believe that we can have delay of 14 days or more before embalming can take place. I also discussed the issues an embalmer in England and Wales has to face on a day to day basis. I was quite relieved to look around the lecture room to not see anyone asleep, so I took that as a good sign about the content of my presentation. It was then left to Dr Phil Gore, our National President, to talk about his experiences of embalming in Ghana, which I'm sure some of you may have experienced already. Craig Caldwell then went on to procedures around the world, and gave an insight into licencing laws and the different practices around the globe. To finish the day, Dodge went through cosmetics and different methods of application before the conference was brought to a close. It was a very informative day for members and students.



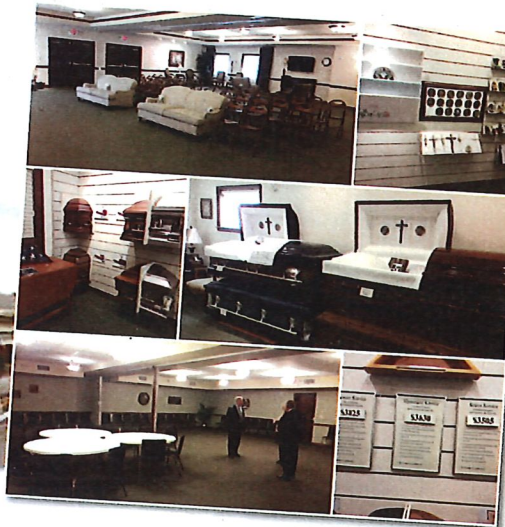
THE EMBALMER

Wednesday saw me returning to the college, where I spent the day with the 1st semester students with a morning of lectures. Then in the afternoon, getting my hands dirty in the embalming room with them. For some of the students it was their first time. I found it inspiring to see the enthusiasm in the students and how keen they were to learn. It was also amazing to see how young they were only to have already decided that this was the career for them. In America it seems that the death care profession, as they prefer to call it over there, is seen as a highly-rated and educated profession. Where as in England, from my experience, it can sometimes be a career move later in life, with only family members from an established firm entering into the profession at an early age. As I said previously, the facility they have there is amazing. I almost wanted to sign up just to go through it all again, taking advantage of the excellent resources that are available to them. Perhaps one day when the industry eventually becomes regulated in the UK we can take a leaf from their book.



Thursday was a day of visiting Funeral Homes in Cincinnati, where owners opened their doors for me to have a personal tour of their facilities. The first was Mueller Funeral Home, which has been trading for 20 years. Jack Mueller, the owner, saw a niche in the market with the growing population of Muslim and Buddhist faiths, and tailored his Funeral Home to meet their needs. It has proved

successful, growing in numbers over the years to just over 200 funerals a year, which is deemed as a good number for one premises.



Next on the agenda was a visit to one of the five Walker Funeral Homes, who do about 2000 funerals a year. This was an impressive premises, so big I could not get it all in one photo. It boasts three floors. The top floor, consisting of the offices, a middle floor containing two large service chapels and large function rooms, and the lower level, which held the arranging rooms and the casket display area, which holds 30 full size caskets and displays. Then there

were the prep and embalming rooms, where I met the happiest embalmer I've ever seen. She was on the last suture of a complete bone donation, where she had spent the last three hours embalming, forming and reconstructing bones ready for visitation the next day. The deceased had only passed away three days prior, so the speed of the system over there is amazing, given the process the deceased had been through to get to that point. I also had a chat with the cosmetics guy, who at the time was disguising trauma from a gun shot wound to the head on a young 24 year old, which is sadly becoming more and more common.



I am really grateful to both Jack Mueller and Herb Walker for taking a great amount of time from their busy days to welcome me to their homes, and the hospitality they gave. I feel we all benefitted from it, as they were just as interested in our ways and methods. Also, Herb and Jack, and indeed members of the North American Division, still keep in contact with me with stories and situations which they feel may be of interest. I've gained great contacts and have taken away some fantastic ideas, which I intend to input into the business in the near future.



On Friday I was in for another early start and a two-hour drive to Indiana to visit the Batesville Casket Company. Batesville is an industry town and practically everyone who lives there works for the company in one form or another.

It was in 1884 the Batesville Coffin Company was established, and then in 1906, John A. Hillenbrand purchased the company, and changed the name to Batesville Casket Company.

He had a vision to become an industry-leader in North American funeral products, and over the years they have expanded their products and solutions to meet the evolving needs of families and licensed funeral professionals. They also have a mortuary and medical side-line to the company, and 100 years or more later they are still recognised as a leader in the death care industry.

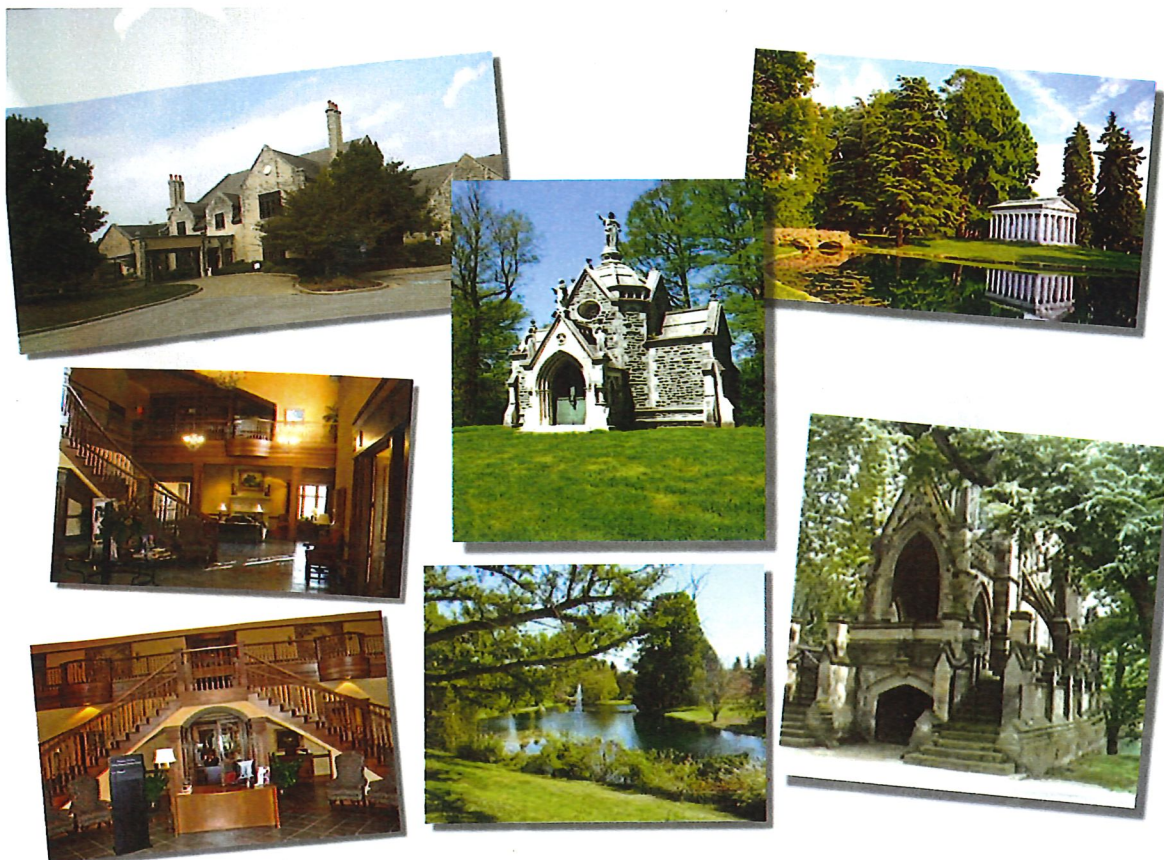
The tour started with a video showing the giant presses that form the metal panels, and due to the noise we were not allowed to enter that section. However we were allowed to have a tour of the production line. As we went through it was like a giant roller coaster of tracks and conveyer belts, with all these caskets traveling around on their own. Our tour guide went through the different processes of welding, fabricating, and then the personalisation side of things with regards to the interiors and embroidery. It was amazing to see a casket move around the plant and travel with it all the way through from start to packing and shipping out.



After Batesville we returned back to Ohio to pay a visit to Spring Grove Cemetery. There are public tours given on the site, which involves a little road train with a recorded tour guide, but we were fortunate enough to be given a private tour by Gerry Wantz, the Vice President and Chief Executive of Operations.

Spring Grove was opened on September 1, 1845 and is one of the largest cemeteries in the United States, and the most beautiful. There are 733 acres, of which approximately 450 acres are developed. It has 44 miles of paved roads and contains 15 Lakes, and is the largest "rural" cemetery in the country with 320,000 people buried there. Its first burial was of two-year old Julia Brisbane.

Spring Grove is the oldest operating crematory in the United States, it also has ten mausoleums, two huge chapels, an historic office, large office complex and a funeral home on site. One of the things that Spring Grove is famous for is its lawn plan. The lawn plan was started by Strauch and considered unconventional at the time. Later, the lawn plan was accepted as a model for many other cemeteries. Strauch believed in developing the landscape to harmonise with nature. He re-routed roads to follow the natural shapes of Spring Grove's hills and valleys. He built lakes, islands, footbridges, protected woodland areas, and brought hundreds of trees and plants from other parts of the world. He asked lot owners to remove the fences and hedgerows they had built around grave sites. The vista is amazing and the memorial works around were jaw-dropping. It reminded me of Highgate cemetery (if you have ever been there) but on steroids. As an accolade, in 2007 Spring Grove was awarded National Historic Landmark Status.



These are just a few photos from around the Cemetery. I could fill the whole of this magazine with them, but if you are ever in Cincinnati, then I really do recommend you visit this amazing cemetery for yourself.

This really brought the week to a close, which was too quick. We ended the day with a great meal at one of the best steak houses I have ever been to, meaning that when I got back to the UK my scrubs were a little tighter than normal!! Other than increasing my waistline, I have also brought back with me some ideas and new methods learnt on my exchange. I found it an eye-opener on how such a legislated state can have such an easy and almost laid back approach to the death processes. Also it was interesting how differently we look at embalming. Their main focus is on preservation way beyond the funeral date, which is normally four to five days after death, then presentation. I felt like they over embalmed slightly, but that is how they do it and I am not there to judge. I will never forget my experiences across the pond. I have gained some new contacts and friends and increased my embalming family even more.

I would like sincerely thank the Company of Fellows for giving me this opportunity, and to Craig Caldwell from Dodge UK, not only for the sponsorship, but also his company, assistance and hospitality throughout the week. Last but not least, to our Master Fellow, David Kaye, for coming out in his own time to support me (or keep me in check I'm not sure which).

The hospitality received, from both the members of the Institute and the places I visited in America was amazing, I hope that we welcome the successful American candidate for 2020 as well as I have been equally well. I also hope this exchange programme continues to go on, after a brief pause in the program.

I cannot recommend it enough to all who meet the criteria to apply for the 2021 Exchange. When the opportunity arises, please do so, you will not regret it. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for you to experience such differences and diversity within our trade, and also witness the large scale of how things are done. You'll soon realise how reserved we still are back home in the UK.

If you ever see me about, ask me about "Sponge Bob Square Pants" it's a long story and too long for print !!

I look forward to seeing you all in the future.