



From Funeral Service to the Army to the Pentagon and Back Again

A conversation with
Jack E. Lechner Jr.,
the new president of
Cincinnati College
of Mortuary Science.

BY EDWARD J. DEFORT



Jack E. Lechner Jr., new president of Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science (CCMS), is a U.S. Army colonel (he retired from the Army in 2011 after serving 29 years on active duty) who was assigned to Arlington National Cemetery in 2010 as part of the new leadership team given the mission to restore the trust of the American public in the face of a major scandal. He served as executive officer, cemetery administrator and deputy superintendent. His five-year tenure culminated in serving as superintendent until August 2015.

His funeral service roots trace back to the mid-1970s when he earned a mortuary science certificate of proficiency from

Mercer County Community College. His long association with CCMS began in 1990 when he earned his bachelor's degree in mortuary science, graduating summa cum laude. He earned licensure as a funeral director and embalmer in Ohio, Virginia and New Jersey. Lechner is a certified funeral service practitioner (CFSP) by the Academy of Professional Funeral Service Practice and is certified in thanatology by the Association for Death Education and Counseling.

Lechner talks about his background in funeral service and shares some of his thoughts and plans for his new position at CCMS.

FIRST, JACK, CONGRATULATIONS ON THE NEW POSITION. WE SPOKE SHORTLY AFTER YOU HAD TAKEN YOUR PREVIOUS POSITION AT THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY AT THE PENTAGON AND YOU MENTIONED THAT YOU HOPED YOU WOULD BE ABLE TO RETURN TO FUNERAL SERVICE. WHEN DID ALL OF THIS HAPPEN?

I signed a contract with CCMS and assumed the duties of president January 21. Gene Kramer preceded me as president of CCMS. Gene had a long career in higher education and a strong business background in college operations. He came from the University of Cincinnati to transform CCMS to the semester system used by the majority of colleges and put CCMS on strong financial footing. He accomplished his mission with distinction.

JACK, PLEASE TALK ABOUT YOUR FUNERAL SERVICE HISTORY A BIT. WHAT INITIALLY DREW YOU INTO THE PROFESSION?

I had a friend who was a registered trainee at a local funeral home when I was in high school. Because I expressed an interest, he invited me to accompany him on a hospital removal and, as they say, the rest is history. When I graduated from high school, I became a registered trainee and that fall enrolled in Mercer County Community College because it was starting the first mortuary science education program in New Jersey. I subsequently graduated from Mercer County Community College's first mortuary science class with an associate degree and a certificate of proficiency in mortuary science.

Shortly after graduating, I became a licensed practitioner of mortuary science in the state of New Jersey. I worked as a licensee at a local funeral home and enjoyed the work. I was active in the community: past president of the Rotary club, officer in the Masonic lodge, a volunteer fireman, and soon I began to realize that I had a passion for funeral service and helping others. I performed more than 100 eye enucleations and instructed the practical portion of the training to enucleate eyes for the Delaware Valley Eye Bank. I incorporated with two friends and started a trade/shipping service that

began to thrive. I earned my CFSP designation and developed a desire for continued learning.

WHEN DID YOU BEGIN YOUR CAREER WITH THE MILITARY?

After 10 years of working as a funeral director in the same area, I became restless. I wanted to travel and see more of the world. I sold my interest in the firm to the partners (it's still active today) and enlisted in the U.S. Army infantry. I always missed funeral service, though, and maintained my professional licensure. I fully intended to return to the deathcare profession.

HOW DID YOU BEGIN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CCMS?

Because I was in the Army and had been selected to become an officer, I needed to earn a bachelor's degree. The quickest route to that degree for me was to attend an accredited mortuary college that could award a bachelor's degree. So I selected CCMS and graduated summa cum laude in 1990, earning a bachelor of mortuary science (BMS) degree, and it changed my life. Because I earned a BMS from CCMS, I have had many opportunities open to me during my career.

The Army subsequently sent me to earn two graduate degrees in logistics, which would have been impossible without the BMS. It created the opportunity for me to be promoted from private to colonel in the U.S. Army. I was afforded the op-

portunity to train and command soldiers in peacetime and in combat.

THIS BRINGS UP AN INTERESTING POINT. YOU FIRST ENTERED FUNERAL SERVICE WITH AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE BUT LATER EARNED A BACHELOR'S DEGREE. THAT HAS BEEN AN ONGOING DEBATE IN FUNERAL SERVICE FOR YEARS – TWO YEARS VERSUS FOUR YEARS. GIVEN YOUR PERSPECTIVE, WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS QUESTION?

I believe it is each state board's prerogative to determine the level of education required for licensure. But if you were to ask me what some of the advantages are of earning a bachelor of mortuary science degree, I would simply say that "education equals opportunity."

Because I earned the BMS degree, I was afforded the opportunity to earn graduate degrees; I was afforded the opportunity to advance in the profession of arms, for which a bachelor's degree was required; and I am now able to draw on my 40 years of varied experiences – from grassroots to executive level – to give back to the deathcare profession.

Students who earn the BMS will enter the deathcare profession better prepared



for the future. The curriculum is longer than the curriculum specified by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE).

For example, the longer program provides more hands-on opportunity to develop embalming skills under the watchful eye of skilled instructors in a modern lab stocked with a variety of chemicals from multiple manufacturers. That is extraordinary.

Restorative art and cosmetic skills are developed in a setting that affords them an opportunity to make a mistake and learn to develop their own techniques under the constant mentorship of a professionally licensed and accomplished faculty member. Because we embalm all of the remains for a major university anatomical donor program, there is always an abundance of hands-on opportunities for our students.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR CHANGES YOU'VE SEEN IN THE FUNERAL PROFESSION OVER YOUR CAREER?

The most obvious is the significant rise in cremation. When I entered the profession in 1973, the annual national cremation percentage was 5.69 percent. The statistics for 2014 reported that the cremation rate was 46.7 percent nationally! I can remember a time when, if a family expressed interest in cremation, it was not uncommon to hear many funeral directors say, "...It's only a cremation." Fortunately, today we understand that the method of disposition doesn't have to keep us as funeral service professionals from ensuring that every family's needs are met regardless of the method of disposition selected.

Another major change has been the addition of women to the profession during my career. When I graduated from mortuary school in 1976, there were only two women in my class of 19, just over 10 percent. Today, funeral service is much more gender integrated. Women routinely make up more than 60 percent of most graduating classes and have contributed immeasurably to the advancement of our profession.

But most significantly, and I feel most importantly, the deathcare profession is becoming more diverse. In 1973, when I entered the profession, there were very hard religious and racial lines. Roman Catholics worked for and were served by

Roman Catholics. Caucasians worked for and were served by Caucasians, and African Americans worked for and were served by African Americans. Today, it is not unusual to see gender, racial and religious diversity reflected by a firm's staff and by the families they serve.

FOR STUDENTS TODAY, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TOUGHEST CHALLENGES THEY MIGHT FACE COMING OUT OF A PROGRAM THAT PERHAPS WEREN'T CONSIDERED 20 YEARS AGO?

The statistics show that a substantial number of graduates will leave the funeral profession. The BMS degree is transferable nationally because, in addition to being accredited by ABFSE, Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science is also accredited by the Higher Learning Commission.

If students enter and subsequently leave the funeral profession after earning a BMS degree, they have a degree that will allow them to pursue graduate degrees or move into another field that simply requires a bachelor's degree. If they choose to stay in funeral service, they are poised to pursue graduate educational opportunities that will complement the profession, such as business programs, MBA programs or sociology, just to name a few.

WHAT DO YOU FEEL ARE THE STRENGTHS YOU WILL BRING TO THE TABLE IN THIS POSITION?

One is diversified experience in the deathcare profession at various levels, including the senior executive level and 29 years of professional military education and experience. I spent 10 years working as a licensee in a funeral home, established and owned a shipping/trade service, supervised mortuary affairs collection points in combat and, during my five years at Arlington National Cemetery (ANC), I was responsible for over 8,000 funerals per year. The incredibly large volume of funerals allowed me to gain a tremendous amount of funeral experience in a short period of time.

I was also in a position to sharpen my powers of observation. I met and resolved problems for numerous grieving families and worked to turn around a national shrine. So one of my strengths comes from being able to draw on such a

vast amount of experience.

For example, at ANC, I realized I had to establish a training program to help our staff work with grieving families. I turned to CCMS for assistance in developing a program for ANC personnel. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding about death, dying and bereavement studies myself, I spent three years studying to become certified in thanatology from the Association of Death Education and Counseling. I think this is another strength I bring to the table – appreciation for a lifetime of learning and knowing how to reach out for expert assistance.

SOMETIMES IT SEEMS THAT THE LESSONS ABOUT THE VALUE OF GRIEF, MEMORIALIZATION AND EVEN THE FUNERAL ARE BEING ERODED IN THE EYES OF THE PUBLIC. IT SEEMS DEATH IS BECOMING TOO DISPOSABLE.

I've learned that grief is natural emotion and not a medical diagnosis. I believe that assisting the families we serve is an affair of the heart. It is about us taking the time to listen rather than treating grief like a medical diagnosis that needs to be resolved by a prescriptive list of steps to be followed. I believe that is how we, as deathcare professionals, distinguish ourselves and become truly helpful to the families we serve. Conveying these sentiments and beliefs to the next generation of deathcare professionals is important to their success. I also bring that passion and commitment to the table at CCMS.

I also learned that the value of the funeral is not determined by the cost of the casket or whether disposition is by cremation or casketed burial. The value of the funeral is found in the celebration of a life that has been lived, where ceremony is used to facilitate bringing grieving individuals together to mourn their loss. We add value to the funeral by being the experts at designing personalized and custom ceremonies that speak louder than words to honor our loved ones who have died.

I believe that understanding the need of grieving individuals to come together with family and friends at a safe place to mourn together, facilitated by ceremony, is critically important to the funeral director of the future. Especially now as many families are becoming less reli-

gious, the "usual" routine doesn't satisfy the needs of many mourners. Being able to design and customize ceremonies for the families we serve must become the new norm.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK FUNERAL
SERVICE PRACTITIONERS CAN DO TO
RE-EMPHASIZE THE VALUE OF THE
FUNERAL?**

Our challenge as deathcare professionals is to be certain that we include all of the elements in the celebration of life that will help those mourners begin their grief journey in a meaningful way, one that will facilitate a transition from a relationship of presence to a relationship of memory. Our role is critical, and I bring with me that understanding gained through 40-plus years of experience.

My educational background and varied experiences will serve me well at CCMS. As an Army officer, I taught, coached and mentored young Americans as they entered, advanced and departed the Army. I prepared them to fight alongside me. I believe that CCMS offers me the opportunity to continue to teach,

coach and mentor the next generation of funeral service professionals. Today's students will be serving next to us as our colleagues in the profession in just a few short months.

I bring high expectations for this next generation of funeral service professionals. They will have to overcome the limitations caused by letting others – 24-hour news cycles, bad press, public perceptions, government, etc. – define who we are as funeral directors. But they have the opportunity to define themselves by becoming the best generation of funeral service professionals the country has ever known.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER TO A
PROSPECTIVE MORTUARY STUDENT?**

Earning a degree or certificate in mortuary science is different from attending a general education college program. From day one, the student is on a comprehensive learning journey. It is not a matter of just passing individual tests and assignments. It's a matter of studying and retaining in preparation for a comprehensive examination at the end of the

program, i.e., the National Board Examination (NBE).

It is very hard for young students to fully comprehend that they need to know and understand everything in their curriculum from day one in order to be fully prepared for the NBE. Each student needs to start his or her mortuary science program with the commitment to do his or her best at everything, all the time, in order to understand and learn everything that is being presented each day.

I was a terrible student my first time through mortuary school. I was young, immature and mistakenly thought it was just a matter of passing the next test or assignment. I didn't put the effort into valuing my education. Fortunately for me, I got a second chance when I came to CCMS to continue my education. I learned that the more effort I put into studying, the more valuable my education became. I learned to love to learn and soon realized that education equals opportunity. It is never too late for a student to put forth 100 percent effort because it will pay back a lifetime of dividends.

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**IS THERE ANYTHING YOU ARE GOING TO
MISS ABOUT GOVERNMENT WORK?**

After approximately 35 years in the government, I am ready to return to the civilian sector and the funeral profession. I will miss the hundreds of soldiers I had the opportunity to serve with in harm's way, in peacetime, overseas and in the states.

There is a special bond that is established among soldiers, marines, sailors, airmen and coastguardsmen serving together. Acts of bravery are often said to be motivated not by valor but because one soldier didn't want to let another down. Soldiers find that they are willing to do anything to protect their comrades in arms and come to realize they will do anything to protect you.

But I will tell you that I also have experienced that deep sense of camaraderie in funeral service. As funeral directors, we are invited into a sacred place, the family's private space, at a very special and sensitive time. We are entrusted to care for their loved one when they no longer can. Funeral directors share that

special camaraderie that others can't understand.

When I left Arlington, I was assigned to Headquarters Department of the Army to work in the logistics directorate, a field in which I was well trained and experienced. But as I told you, when I left Arlington, I wanted to stay in funeral service. I entertained several offers, both in and out of funeral service but wanted to wait for the right opportunity to present itself. I had a long affiliation with CCMS of more than 26 years and felt my skills could be used best there.

**WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS AND GOALS AS
PRESIDENT?**

Much of the success in my career is due to the professional and dedicated faculty and staff at CCMS who invested their time, experience, skills and talents to help position me to take advantage of the opportunities my education at CCMS provided. As I look forward to the final years of my career, I want to give back to funeral service. Nothing in my professional career has ever been more mean-

ingful than the simple thank-you from a family served, whether spoken or just understood. I've always felt lucky to have chosen such a rewarding profession, and now I look forward to helping our college pass on the tradition of excellence to the next generation of funeral service providers.

I hope that upon graduation from CCMS, each student can honestly reflect back on their time at the college and feel that they will truly miss the faculty, staff and their fellow classmates; that as they look forward to their new roles in funeral service, they will be confident that they are fully prepared for the challenges that lie ahead; and that they will proudly take their place in a long line of CCMS graduates that has continued the tradition uninterrupted for 134 years.

I expect this generation of funeral service professionals to define the deathcare profession for decades to come. *

Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.

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