

Featured Story

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Journey to Serve



No matter the industry, business size or specific role, there are certain qualities that employers want in their workforce. Work ethic, loyalty, dedication, the ability to work under pressure and the ability to work well as a team are all ideal characteristics that companies seek when they post a job listing.

These characteristics – inherent in veterans – can also be found within the death-care profession.

And now, a joint collaboration between the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Educational Foundation and the Funeral Service Foundation, is hoping to attract veterans who are looking to continue their service to country as they start the next chapter of their lives.

The two nonprofit organizations have teamed up to launch “Journey to Serve,” an initiative focused on recruiting veterans for employment throughout the death-care profession.

“Our two organizations came together to address an ongoing challenge that funeral service professionals continue to face: recruiting and retaining capable, focused staff,” Funeral Service Foundation Chair Anthony Guerra and ICCFA Educational Foundation President Jim Price said in a joint statement announcing the program. “Military veterans embody the same strength of character that so often defines a funeral service professional. Through ‘Journey to Serve,’ we are honored to connect veterans with meaningful work that aligns with the values at the core of their military service, and at the same time, provide the

profession with the tools and resources to recruit and retain talented employees.”

Funded equally by both foundations, and endorsed by ICCFA and NFDA, the initiative features tools and resources to aid in veteran recruitment on a local, regional and national scale.

Funeral professionals got a first look at the initiative during a virtual kickoff event last month.

“The men and women who serve their country and have successful military careers exhibit certain skills and traits – such as dedication, perseverance and organizational ability – that

are also well-suited to the funeral profession,” said Lisa Rosser, CEO of The Value of a Veteran, who delivered the keynote address at the virtual event.

Rosser founded The Value of a Veteran in 2007, when the veteran unemployment rate was 23%. She noticed that thousands of organizations were focused on direct help to service members, but no one was focused on changing the mindset, understanding and practices of the employers.

“In the military you have men and women who have served their country and who have certain skills and traits that would translate well into funeral service,” said Rosser, whose military career included 10 years of active U.S. Army duty, and 12 years with the Army Reserves. “It may not look like it at first glance, but if an employer looks a little deeper those skills are right there. The value a veteran can bring to an organization, especially funeral service, cannot be understated.”

In “The Guide for Human Resource Professionals to Regarding, Recruiting, and Retaining Military Veterans,” Rosser outlines some of those values, including:

Focused on mission accomplishment. Service members spend their entire military career being assessed on whether they can complete the mission. The guidance they receive may not always be clear, the conditions may be less than ideal, and they almost always lack all of the equipment and people they would need to do the job perfectly. And, yet – they persevere and succeed. They make do with what they have and look for creative ways to finish what needs to get done.

Adaptable to change. The military lifestyle is the very definition of a “challenging work environment.” There are few other occupations where employees can be told to grab their gear and be somewhere in the world in 18 hours, pack up their family and all their worldly belongings and move for the 7th time in 10 years, or accept a change in mission that keeps them deployed for an extra 4 months in the desert.

Quick to learn; rapid to adapt. Service members typically change jobs within the military every 9-18 months, and there is rarely overlap time or transition time with an incumbent.

They are expected to get up to speed quickly on the critical information needed to do their jobs. They “hit the ground running” and within 90 days of starting an assignment appear to others as if they have been working in the position for years.

fluid situations and working with people who have experienced trauma. And in many ways, this is exactly what ‘last responders’ do as well ... heading to natural disasters, having to work under changing conditions and helping traumatized families. It may not seem like it at first glance, but these two groups share many of the same skillsets.”

Journey to Serve was created to provide customizable veterans recruitment resources to help all stakeholders in the funeral profession:



Take accountability seriously. From the wartime ethos of “leave no man behind” to the more routine requirement of signing a hand receipt for \$25,000,0000 worth of equipment, personal accountability is seared into the minds of veterans. Employees with this skill look beyond just what the job description says they are expected to do. They internalize the sense of responsibility for the people, the property and the results entrusted to them.

“As I was helping to put the campaign together, what I saw time and again is how funeral professionals were being referred to as ‘last responders,’” Rosser said. “And then it hit me – while they are in service, veterans are often considered ‘first responders’ – running into the chaos, dealing with

funeral homes, cemeteries, crematories, suppliers, and mortuary science programs, as well as national, state and regional funeral associations.

A dedicated website www.journeytoserve.com provides a comprehensive toolkit free of charge to all funeral service professionals in the United States. (The Funeral Service Foundation and ICCFA Educational Foundation are working with the Funeral Service Association of Canada to roll out Canadian-specific materials this summer.)

The toolkit offers funeral professionals a variety of resources to help them in recruiting veterans. There is a link to the Journey to Serve video, which funeral professionals

can use on their websites. There are also radio spots, sample social media posts and graphics as well as hyperlocal Facebook campaign tools. Funeral professionals also have access to a slide deck on how to use recruiting tools as well as answers to the most frequently asked questions funeral professionals have about recruiting vet-

erans. Additional resources include print ads, digital ads, postcards, press releases and more.

The website also offers resources for veterans. A slide deck explains why veterans should consider the funeral profession, as well as a quiz for veterans to take to see if the funeral profession is right for them. A comparison

sheet that offers information on what funeral service career is a good fit for a veteran with his or her military ranks. In addition, the website will provide links to national and state funeral service job boards, links to mortuary science schools and training program, and announcements of (and links to) applications for funeral service-specific academic scholarships for veterans.

In addition, Journey to Serve will also offer two veterans per year a \$5,000 scholarship to study mortuary science. One scholarship will be offered for the Fall 2021 semester, the other for the Spring 2022 semester. The scholarship program is expected to be ongoing for the next several years.

The campaign's launch could not have come at a better time.

During times of crisis, as with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the "service" part of the funeral profession shines. Even during the height of the pandemic, funeral directors took pride in the caring for bodies of the deceased with respect while also balancing helping families who were shocked, grieving and vulnerable.

"Prior to the coronavirus crisis, our profession had already been significantly challenged with the recruitment of talent," said Price, senior vice president industry relations at Park Lawn Corp. "The pandemic has only further helped to demonstrate that challenge and improve this situation. In my opinion, veterans comprise one of the most capable and resilient individuals in North America and are a perfect fit for death care."

NFDA CEO Christine Pepper agrees.

"One of the challenges reported by our members is finding employees who will care for families with respect and compassion," Pepper said. "We hope that Journey to Serve will help not just NFDA and ICCFA members, but all of funeral service find veterans



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who will be great employees and help them in their businesses, with their families and in their communities.”

With more than 220,000 service members completing their service obligations or retiring every year, the funeral profession has the opportunity to attract individuals who possess such essential traits as leadership, teamwork, team building, critical thinking and stress management.

“Encouraging military veterans to deploy their talents into all areas of our work benefits the entire profession,” said Jay Dodds, the 2019-2021 ICCFA president and Funeral Service Foundation trustee emeritus. “Professionals across the funeral service spectrum will find value in the program including cemeteries, cremation facilities, funeral homes, suppliers, mortuary science programs, and national, state and regional funeral associations.”

In the Beginning

Journey to Serve traces its beginnings back several years ... to casual conversations that brought the program to life.

“When I first got on the board of NFDA and was going up through the chairs, my good friend Jay Dodds was going through the chairs at ICCFA,” said Bob Arrington, founder and president of Arrington Funeral Directors in Jackson, Tennessee. “We were both on the board of the Funeral Service Foundation, and at one of those meetings, we got talking, and wondered if we could ever do a joint project. We both thought it would be nice if the two largest organizations in funeral service could come together for something that would benefit all of the profession.”

For Price, the idea for the project began, in a way, at the ICCFA’s 2017 Annual Convention & Expo in Nashville, Tennessee. He was presenting Jan Scruggs, an Army

veteran and founder of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, with the ICCFA’s Educational Foundation’s Lasting Impact Award.

“We had approximately 500 people in attendance,” Price recalled. “I requested that everyone in attendance that was a veteran of the armed services to please raise their hand. As it turned out, there were perhaps around 25 veterans in attendance. I requested that each of them come forward so that we could take a group photo of them, including Jan.”

Price, who had been asked to be a member of the ICCFA’s newly formed Veterans Committee, quickly learned that while the ICCFA knew it has veterans within its membership, the actual number was unknown. “So, from that point forward, every membership application, registration form, application for scholarships, etc. included the question, ‘Are you a veteran of the armed services?’ They were then offered the choice to select their branch from among the five branches of the armed services. What the committee and I learned very quickly was that we as a profession were ‘all world in appreciating/honoring veterans,’ however, we haven’t done much along the lines of recruiting veterans. From that day forward, every chance I’ve had to share with a live audience about all of the wonderful things going on with the ICCFA Educational Foundation, I’ve never missed the opportunity to recognize veterans that are in attendance. Sometimes, no one, sometimes 200 attendees in the room and sometimes only four or five. What we knew with certainty is that we can certainly do better!”

That opportunity to do better came into being in 2019 when Arrington and Dodds were seated together during the ICCFA Annual Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, where Dodds was being installed as ICCFA president.

“At that time, he was the current

president of the Funeral Service Foundation,” Price said. “Through our dinner conversation, we both mutually agreed that our two 501(c)(3) nonprofit foundations just might be able to find an initiative that we could support teaming up for together. Bob was totally supportive that his board of trustees consider supporting a potential initiative.”

“We thought that a project through the two foundations would be the best way to go,” Arrington said. “They had a veterans committee that was beginning to actively find ways to get veterans into funeral service. It was a great initiative, something that has real value ... for veterans and funeral service.”

By the time the NFDA convention in Chicago rolled around, a task force with members of both nonprofits had been formed. “We had a face-to-face meeting, sitting around brainstorming ideas for a couple hours in Chicago. Everyone came away with a feeling that what we were going to do was good ... that we could do something impactful together.”

Funeral Service Foundation Executive Director Lee Wiensch pointed out that the Funeral Service Foundation invests in people and programs to strengthen funeral service and lift up grieving communities, “and this joint project with the ICCFA Educational Foundation is a solid mission fit. Recruiting capable, focused, and caring veterans into the important work of funeral service strengthens our profession and our communities.

“This Journey to Serve collaborative partnership also strengthens the profession by bringing together two valued organizations committed to serving all of funeral service,” Wiensch added. “We’re thrilled to share this initiative with the entire profession and look forward to future collaborations with the ICCFA Educational Foundation.”

Journey to Serve will be a win for

all of funeral service, Nadira Baddeleyanage, ICCFA's executive director, believes.

"Natural leadership and teamwork. Problem solving and decision-making. Honesty and attention to detail. If you could find a job candidate with these qualities, I'm sure you would hire them on the spot. This is exactly the type of employee every employer needs, and these are the very qualities that you will get when you hire a veteran," Baddeliyanage said.

"The selfless dedication that drives a death-care professional to serve their community, their passion to help others and be that calm and trustworthy presence in the hardest of times are hallmarks of the profession, but they are also hallmarks of military service. Veterans joining death care to continue their career of service is a natural fit," she added.

NFDA's Pepper agrees.

"The characteristics embodied by veterans – trust, resilience, a sense of duty, the ability to work under difficult circumstances – are highly-valued by employers in the funeral service profession," she said. "We hope that Journey to Serve helps not just NFDA and ICCFA members, but all of funeral service find veterans who will be great employees and help them in their businesses, with their families and in their communities."

Journey to Serve is being welcomed by veterans already working in the funeral profession.

"Funeral service is like the honor guard in that it's a calling," said David Mahlstedt, who served as part of the U.S. Army's Old Guard from 1990 to 1993 and who now works as a funeral director at William Snyder & Forgie Snyder Funeral Homes Inc. in Pittsburgh. "It requires a conscious decision to make sacrifices required to help families in their time of need. The rewards you get back make it worth everything you invest into it."

Visit journeytoserve.com for more information. •

Let's get to know veterans that are now working in funeral service:

★ David Mahlstedt: Journey to Serve



Like many teenage boys, David Mahlstedt grew up watching "Rambo" movies and idolizing the military. So, it seemed natural that between his junior and senior years of high school, the then 17-year-old Hastings, Minnesota, resident signed up for the U.S. Army through its delayed enlistment program.

Immediately after graduation, Mahlstedt was on his way to Fort Benning, Georgia, for 15 weeks of basic training. It was 1990, the Gulf War had started and the 18-year-old Mahlstedt was being trained in desert combat for deployment to the Middle East.

It was during his training that a superior officer approached him and asked if he would be interested in joining the "Old Guard" – the honor guard of the Army.

"My first reaction was 'No, I'm going to war,'" Mahlstedt laughingly recalled. "But then I asked if I could have a moment to think about it. I came back a short time later and said I'd like to join the unit."

Mahlstedt would be a member of the Old Guard unit, stationed at Fort Myer (now Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall) in Virginia, where he served from 1990 to 1993.

During that time, Mahlstedt was involved in many ceremonies with President George H.W. Bush and President Bill Clinton. He was part of the military escort for foreign dignitary visits that included laying wreaths at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and their visits to the White House and Pentagon. He also participated in hundreds of military funerals at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C., including the funerals for the active-duty Army deaths that occurred during the Gulf War.

"Growing up on a farm in Minnesota, I never envisioned standing next to presidents and other foreign leaders," he said. "I read about the White House and Arlington National Cemetery, but to be there, it was eye opening."

But for Mahlstedt, the most vivid memories were those of the military funerals. "I was 18, 19, 20 years old at the time. It was meaningful to provide service for those veterans who had served and gone on to live a full life. But when you are involved in services for someone who hadn't lived a long life, who had died in combat, that was something else."

After leaving the Army in 1993, Mahlstedt spent the next 17 years in sales, selling software to trucking companies. He was successful, but the constant travel was draining.

In 2010, he left his sales career to spend more time with his family, and with the full support of his wife, decided to once again switch careers. He enrolled in the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, graduating in 2012.

"I think my experiences at Arlington really prepared me for a career in funeral service," Mahlstedt said. "I was impressed with the funeral directors I worked with at Arlington. I saw first hand their dedication, their commitment ... it was something to be admired."

And while he did not realize it at the time, a funeral director at one of the funeral homes Mahlstedt worked closely with in Washington, D.C., recognized the veteran's potential to be a funeral director.

"I saw the gentleman a number of times at military funerals and one day he asked me what I was going to do after I left the military," Mahlstedt recalled. "He asked if I had ever considered becoming a funeral director. I hadn't, and that was the end of the conversation."

After graduating from PIMS, Mahlstedt earned an associate degree with honors in funeral management. In 2014, he joined the William Snyder & Forgie-Snyder Funeral Homes Inc. and currently supervises the Forgie-Snyder Funeral Home in East McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

"There is no doubt that being a veteran gives you an advantage of doing anything ... especially a funeral director," Mahlstedt said. "There are skills that you learn in the military that translate very well into funeral service. Soldiers are taught on Day One that you need to be ready to go on a moment's notice. The other thing military people learn to deal with is the change of schedule; things can change in the blink of an eye."

"That translates well in funeral service," he added. "If the phone rings at 2 a.m. (for a removal), I jump out of bed, put a suit on and I'm ready to go."

While Mahlstedt chose to become a funeral director, there are any number of other opportunities that exist for veterans within funeral service. "You can be a crematory operator, drive a hearse, even go into sales. You don't have to go to mortuary school, but being a veteran there are benefits available, including paying for school."

As a funeral director, Mahlstedt has found his passion ... to serve people.

"Many veterans enter the military in the first place because they have a desire to serve their country," he noted. "Funeral directors have that same desire to serve."

And much like the military, funeral service is mission oriented. "Every

funeral is a mission, and as a funeral director, it's up to you to make sure the mission is completed to the best of your ability for your family," he said.

While his 17-year-old self would probably never have considered a career in funeral service, a 49-year-old Mahlstedt could not have made a better career choice. "I have never felt a higher calling than helping a family that has lost a loved one, being there for them and taking care of that loved one," he said. "I'm making less money (than during his sales career) but it's more rewarding."

While he most likely would have been a good funeral director even without being a veteran, Mahlstedt's time serving in the military provided him with a skillset and experiences he would not otherwise have had. "When you see a life die in front of you, it changes you as a person," he said. "It gives you a better appreciation for life ... and those left behind."

As a funeral director, he sees himself as someone who comes to a family at a moment when a loss has happened and helps them from all aspects. "I become the person they rely on throughout the process; they look to me to take care of all of the details, so they don't have to ... there is nothing more important."



Her Journey to Serve: Leigh Combs

For Leigh Matchison Combs, three profound experiences combined to lead her to a career into funeral service.

The first was the 2001 murder of her 22-year-old brother, Ryan Matchison.

The second occurred five years later when her twin brother, Sgt. Brent Matchison, who had deployed to Ramadi, Iraq, with the U.S. Army's 1st Armored Division was shot in the head during the Battle of Ramadi in December 2006.

The third was in May 2007 when a then 22-year-old Leigh Matchison enlisted in the U.S. Army as a medic.

"It really was a culmination of life experiences that led me to where I am today," said Combs, who is an adjunct clinical instructor at Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science and also works part time at Linnemann Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Center in Erlanger, Kentucky.

Combs was 17 when her older brother was murdered. "Ryan's was the first funeral I attended," she said.



“What I remember most was how good my brother looked; he was really well laid out; the funeral director did a really good job preparing him.”

(Editor's note: Three men were convicted in 2002 of murdering Matchison and Adam C. Harvey and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole for 25 years.)

Although Combs attended an open house at CCMS following her high school graduation, she opted instead to attend Northern Kentucky University to explore other options.

The decision to enlist in the Army came nearly six months after her brother, Brent, had been seriously injured.

“There was a medic who helped him, who helped him survive,” Combs said. “I knew I had the ability to be in the military and be that medic for someone else.”

After medic training, Combs attended Airborne school in Fort Benning, Georgia, and was assigned to 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. In December 2008, she deployed to Baghdad in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. There, she spent much of her deployment with the 3rd Brigade Special Troops Battalion Military Police.

Leaving the Army after her four-year commitment, Combs briefly considered a career in nursing before deciding to enroll in CCMS. “I don’t know what compelled me to go to

mortuary school ... I guess I had a deep-seeded need,” Combs said. “I kept going back to my brother’s funeral. My father and I were the first to see him (after he had been embalmed). I was terrified about how my mother would react when she saw him, but when she walked into the room, she said he looked ‘so good.’ That sat in the back of my mind for years.”

In 2016, Combs graduated from CCMS with a bachelor’s degree in mortuary science, and began working in various roles in death care, including cornea recovery for the Lions Eye Bank of West Central Ohio and contracting in restoration for Linnemann Funeral Homes. In 2018, she returned to CCMS as an adjunct clinical instructor.

“I think I’m doing what I was meant to do,” said the 36-year-old Combs, who married CCMS classmate (and Linnemann funeral director) John Combs in September.

Life in the military teaches order, discipline, commitment and attention to detail, all qualities that translate well for funeral service, Combs said.

“In the military you are taught combat lifesaving, and the key is to control the bleeding ... in many ways you find similar things in teaching embalming. You have to be proficient in finding arteries, first and foremost,” she said. “In each area, there are protocols you have to follow ... you have to be vigilant, follow procedures. There is a structure that

has to be followed each and every time.”

For Combs, the discipline stands out.

“When you live with the discipline that comes with enlistment, it leaves something with you,” she said. “As a medic, you have one chance to get it right ... the same can be said for funeral service, you only have one chance to get it right.”

And that’s why Combs feels most comfortable in the embalming room, using her skills to help give a grieving family the best possible outcome.

“Embalming is very detail oriented ... every step in the process matters and no steps can be skipped,” she said. “There are no shortcuts because what you do as a funeral professional is the last thing a family remembers about their loved one. It’s been years, but I still remember my brother and the attention he was given after he was murdered.”

While she has found her purpose as a funeral director and teacher, Combs pointed out that the profession offers a variety of opportunities for veterans: crematory operator, driving a hearse, working as a funeral attendant.

“I think there are spaces for veterans in every profession, but I think funeral service is particularly attractive for veterans,” she said. “They have served their country, why not serve their community? The utmost service is the final goodbye.”

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