

much more in tune to the emotions of the family," she explained. "Since I've been at the arrangement table recently, I am more compassionate and understanding of their needs."

Erdmann said that she works to make her mother proud every day. "I feel the hand of my mother when meeting families, and the love my mom had for me is reflected in how I care for the families. Some would say that I touch their lives. I prefer to say they touch mine."

Licensed in five states, Erdmann recently made the move back to a family-owned firm in Minnesota. "My willingness to try new things and go where I am led has afforded me amazing opportunities. I am tru-

ly blessed and honored to do what I do."

### Heather Diana



GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

NASSAU COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Diana was a senior in high school when her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Sadly, he died shortly before her senior prom and high school graduation. "It was devastating," she recalls. But what inspired her, at age 17, to become a funeral director? "A very good friend of my dad's was a funeral director, and he had been there through his illness and helped walk

us through the dark times and planning a proper service for my father." Diana resolved that she, too, would be the one to help others who experienced the loss of a loved one.

Licensed for more than 16 years, Diana, who is also certified as a non-denominational celebrant, manages Fairchild Sons Funeral Home, a well-known firm on Long Island. She is an active member of NFDA, the New York State Funeral Directors Association and Nassau/Suffolk Funeral Directors.

"Funeral service to me is the highest honor that can be bestowed on an individual or company. The moral obligation ignites a passion in me to help, and if I can make it easier for people, no

matter what it takes, I have done my duty," said Diana. "I may attend a funeral every day, but the people I serve daily do not. I get one chance to hopefully start people on a healthy path through their grief."

### Denise Melvin Hammelrath



FAIRFIELD, OHIO

CINCINNATI COLLEGE OF MORTUARY SCIENCE

Prior to her career in

funeral service, Hammelrath worked as a medical technologist. At 36, disenchanting with shift work, she wanted to try something new and discovered mortuary science.

"I have always been fascinated with the working of the human body," said Hammelrath, who had seen autopsies performed by hospital pathologists. "From the day I stepped into CCMS, I knew I was where I was supposed to be. I was intrigued by the science of embalming and the sociological aspect [of funeral service]." In fact, she was so captivated by the subject matter that she taught at her alma mater for five years.

When she was 6, Hammelrath remembers being peremptorily pushed aside by a funeral director handling her grandfather's rites. For this reason, she made it a point to include children in funeral service planning.

"My decision to become a funeral director/embalmer is one I have never regretted. I am often humbled by the families I serve," she explained. "My arrangement conferences are often filled with laughter. I'm told by

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families that I make the process 'easy,' and that is my goal."

Hammelrath's motto, "funerals are for the living," is readily apparent. She tries to accommodate a family's wish to view the deceased even when the condition of the remains indicates otherwise. Toward that end, her restorative art skills have been important in making a person viewable.

Families choosing full services and those opting for direct cremation are given the very same attention. "I feel that direct cremation, while inexpensive, doesn't properly answer the needs of most families," said Hammelrath, adding that "many times, my direct cremation families require more attention than

the full-service families because of the lack of ceremony and support from family and friends." The much bandied-about word "closure" is not one Hammelrath subscribes to. "You don't have closure with the death of a loved one."

"I love my job and I always will, but there are times when the caretaker has to take care of herself. Burnout is a real thing, and having a life outside of funeral service is of the utmost importance," cautioned Hammelrath. When she is asked the inevitable question of why she does the work she does, this is her answer: "Because it gives me the opportunity to make a horrible time in your life more bearable."

## Tiffany Morley

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

SIMMONS INSTITUTE OF FUNERAL SERVICE

While her father was waiting for a heart transplant, he asked Morley if she would attend nursing school. She obliged him by enrolling in an RN program but found that she became too emotionally attached to the patients. It was suggested to her that she find another vocation. With the guidance of a kindly nurse, Morley chose mortuary college. Sadly, her father died two weeks before she began her studies.

"My dad looked great at the viewing, which was surprising, as he was blown with IV fluid, edema, but you could not tell," Morley shared. "The funeral home was Heffner in York, Pennsylvania, and they were so wonderful and kind and caring to me and my family, and this I will never forget."

At Simmons, Morley earned the highest score of her graduating class on the National Board Exam. After graduation, she went to work for a corporately owned funeral home until it was sold in 2004, crediting the business with teaching her the most of "any place I had worked."

A year later, Morley was hired by the University of Rochester Medical School Anatomical Gift Program as the funeral director/sexton of the entire body-donation program. She is responsible for performing all of the embalming and cremations. Since 1997, she has also been employed by the Lions Eye Bank at Rochester, holding a variety of positions.

Morley is active in a number of industry groups as well, including the New York

State Funeral Directors Association, where she serves on the Continuing Education Task Force and Convention Committee. A past president of the Rochester Genesee Valley Funeral Directors Association, she remains an executive board member and oversees its continuing education program.

For Morley, who has been licensed for more than 20 years, contact with a family does not end at the funeral. She believes strongly in following up to answer any residual questions or even just to talk.

"Funeral service is the most important service of any given to humans, as nothing is more precious than life and human mankind. To be entrusted to care for someone's deceased loved one is the most honorable task one can have. Following through with their every detail will mean the world to them, and they will never forget this care and compassion at their very difficult but short period of time."

## Melissa Johnson Williams

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

WORSHAM COLLEGE OF MORTUARY SCIENCE



Among funeral directors, the name Johnson is well known. As educators and chroniclers of the industry, Edward and Gail Johnson left behind a rich legacy, and their daughter, Melissa Johnson Williams, has followed in their footsteps as a funeral director, embalmer, writer and lecturer.

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