



https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/valley/people/closeup/close-up-the-heart-of-the-hearse/article_f0eab4e1-d6e3-5269-88f8-85028c4e4ee6.html

Close Up: The heart of the hearse

Though Tyson Clemons is an expert embalmer, it's the emotional side of his work that's most challenging and rewarding.

By Leonor Grave Jul 24, 2019

Tyson Clemons is the funeral director at Valley Mortuary.

[Buy Now](#)

RYAN DORGAN / NEWS&GUIDE

There's no use in burying the lede here. No one likes to talk about death.

Yet all communities live with it. And with death comes its associated rituals. If you die in Jackson Hole you will likely find yourself at Valley Mortuary, where Tyson Clemons works as a funeral director and mortician.

Most kids don't dream of becoming morticians, and it's not a profession Clemons always knew he would take up either. He grew up in Pocatello, Idaho, and started his career working in urban forestry, which led him to take an EMT class, which led him to work at a medical supply company. After an accident prevented him from continuing in that line of work he was looking to explore other options.

“My nephew was a funeral director, and he said, ‘You know, you really ought to look into this.’”

So Clemons began talking to local funeral directors and decided he could see himself in that field. Though he decided that mortuary school was something he could do, he has a love-hate relationship with it. He attended mortuary school at Mesa Community College in Tempe, Arizona, and was able to work for a local funeral home while he took classes in topics like funeral directing, microbiology and the chemistry of embalming.

“They can teach you the things that are in a book,” Clemens said. “But until you’re out and dealing with the family aspect, dealing with the death aspect, there’s nothing that you can put in a book to prepare you.”

A typical embalming, Clemens said, takes between 45 minutes and an hour and 15 minutes. More difficult cases can require more time. The longest embalming procedure Clemens has conducted took almost seven hours.

While the process is not for the squeamish, Clemens said it is fairly straightforward.

“The embalming, a monkey can do,” Clemens said. “It’s fairly easy to embalm. I’ve embalmed family members. I’ve embalmed friends. From a 2- to a 102-year old and everyone in between. That aspect of it — what happens back there — is about 5% of what a funeral director does.”

Another thing that comes with the territory of the funeral business is the unpredictability of death.

“The funeral profession is just strange,” he said. “You can go three weeks without anything, without anybody passing away. And then the next day you have four people who have passed away. And all the sudden now you’ve gone from not working at all to working 80 hours in the next five days.”

He said that Valley Mortuary sees about 10 deaths each month. Most deaths occur in Jackson rather than Idaho, and most people are cremated rather than embalmed. In addition to Jackson and Idaho, people who die in Grand Teton or Yellowstone national park also come in.

Being the only mortician at the only funeral home in town means Clemens always needs to be ready to receive a call to go back to work.

Not only that, but he lives above the Valley Mortuary location in Driggs, Idaho, with his wife and two children, meaning that even when he’s home he’s close to his job.

“As a funeral director you’re never far away from work,” Clemons said. “It doesn’t matter if I’m on vacation; it doesn’t matter if my wife was in labor at the hospital. You get the phone call; you have to go.”

Tyson said his kids, 8 and 15, don’t think it’s that weird to live at a funeral home, even if their friends sometimes do.

He has had to miss school events, church events and family events for his job. But though that aspect of his work can be difficult, Clemons sees it as a privilege to be trusted by families with their loved ones.

“They bring you as part of their family; they are sharing those experiences with you,” he said. “There’s something that is just greater than anything you could ever feel.”

Though the physical rituals of death preparations are part of Clemons’ routine, that doesn’t mean they don’t affect him emotionally. He has taken care of both his grandmothers and his sister after they died. The most difficult thing he has to deal with, however, is taking care of children who die young.

“Taking care of little ones, there’s just nothing right or good about that,” he said. “Even if they’re sick, that’s just a lousy thing.”

Clemons tries to get his mind off work when he can for his sanity. He helps coach his kids’ T-ball and soccer teams, he tries to get out of the valley whenever he can, and he reads. Voraciously. He polished off 100 books last year, everything from spy thriller to fantasy, from David Baldacci to Arthur Conan Doyle.

He has also developed a sharp sense of humor to help him cope.

“As funeral director you either laugh or you cry,” he said. “And sometimes both.”

Though he emphasized that it’s important to be respectful when dealing with families, he has learned that no one wants to deal with an emotionless robot when grieving the loss of a loved one. He tries to be as genuine as possible throughout the process of working with families.

In his line of work Clemons can help provide closure and help families say goodbye. He has also learned that everyone deals with grief a little differently.

“It’s very individual, but it’s very public,” he said. “You have all your friends outside of work, but you also have your friends at work. Then you have your family, and then you have the people that you went to school with.

“And each one of those people are going to grieve in their own way.”

Most funeral directors don’t stay in their roles for over a decade, as Clemons has. It’s a job that takes a heavy toll. And while he has always had a spiritual background, working with so many families over the years has helped him better understand the grieving process as well as his own faith.

“I am not scared of death,” he said. “I’m not scared of what happens after somebody dies.”

Not everyone is equipped to be able to deal compassionately and professionally with families and loved ones during some of the most difficult moments in their life. Clemons has taken on that role in the past decade with grace. Death is just a part of his life.

“You take a piece of everybody home with you,” Clemons said. “And you leave a piece of yourself with everybody.”

Contact Leonor Grave by emailing leonor@jhnewsandguide.com.

JHNG Intern