It was in 2012 that we first reached out to mortuary directors and instructors throughout the country to nominate their best students to be featured in our “Ones to Watch,” which recognizes students who more than make the grade in school, in their jobs and in their communities. In the years since, we’ve had the privilege of profiling individuals who we believe will make their mark on funeral service. This year is no exception. To celebrate the fifth anniversary of “Ones to Watch,” we are introducing you to six students who are poised to make an impact on the funeral profession. We’re also catching up with some of our previous honorees. We’re keeping an eye on them – and so should you.
Daniel J. Groff  
Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science  
Pittsburgh

... it gave me a perspective about what funeral service is really all about,” he said.

It also strengthened his resolve to become a licensed funeral director. “I think it was then that I had that moment that this (funeral service) was what I was meant to be doing,” Groff said. “I knew I would be going into funeral service for the right reasons.”

After graduating high school, Groff attended a local community college for a year before enrolling at PIMS. While at PIMS, Groff has maintained a 4.0 GPA.

But that pursuit of academic excellence tells only one part of Groff’s story. Groff has also been a positive influence on his classmates. “He is a role model to his peers and has gained their trust and admiration,” Marsaglia wrote. “David gives of his time to tutor students experiencing difficulty in their courses. He truly is committed to school, his students and to funeral service.”

Following a recent tragedy in Pittsburgh involving the deaths of a family of five, Groff proposed a fundraising event to help pay for the funeral service and assist the surviving family members. “It was truly a magnanimous gesture,” Marsaglia said.

“I think it’s important for us to reach out and help whenever we can,” Groff said. “I think that’s just what we need to do. For me, if I can, I will.”

The philosophy is part of the fabric of Groff’s life. He’s been a member of Buck Connect Club, where he was involved in activities with mentally challenged children, as well as volunteering with the Lancaster County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. “I like to be able to give a helping hand ... and I know I will be involved wherever my career takes me.”

Groff is a leader – not a follower, Marsaglia said. “He has demonstrated the commitment and diligence in wanting to make change,” Marsaglia said. “Where others fear change and are intimidated by it, Daniel welcomes change and promotes it. There is no doubt he will succeed in all that he does, and he will make a difference in the future of funeral service.”

Groff sees himself working at a large, progressive funeral home in the future. “I think there has been a standard way of doing things for many years, but I think changes can be made to give families what they want,” he said. “I want to be one of those people who can initiate that change little by little. I want to help families understand their options and help give them that memorable service for their loved one.”

A s the dean of faculty and students at Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, Joseph A. Marsaglia has come in contact with numerous students over the years.

So when he starts off a nomination letter with, “Not too often comes along a student like ...” you know that individual must be something special.

Daniel J. Groff, Marsaglia wrote, “is a mature young man whose energy and excitement about his mortuary studies is contagious. Daniel has made a positive impression on everyone from the start of his matriculation ... and was quickly recognized as being a leader.”

The Leola, Pennsylvania, resident, who graduates this month, always knew that he wanted to go into funeral service. That desire, Groff says, can be traced back to 2007 – to the first funeral he ever attended.

“It was for my grandpa,” the 20-year-old recalled. “He was a Mason, and while his service was big, it was also very personal. A lot went into that service ... and it stuck with me.”

Through connections he made while working at a restaurant, Groff starting working as a funeral assistant while in high school. “It was really a learning experience
Sometimes, it takes a while to find your way back home. 

Such is the case with David Groff (who has no relation to Daniel J. Groff).

While his great-grandfather, grandfather and father were all licensed funeral directors, Groff’s career – at least initially – took him to a different direction.

The Lancaster, Pennsylvania, resident headed west for a successful marketing career that saw him working for the Chicago Bulls, Phoenix Suns and Phoenix Coyotes.

The 49-year-old Groff is the first to say that there were so many amazing things happening with his job, family and community that he wasn’t ready to return to the family fold.

But about four years ago, Groff had what he calls “an awakening.”

“We lost our mother, and I began to feel (very) far away from them,” Groff said. “It was all about family... with my five brothers and sisters and 11 nieces and nephews and my 86-year-old father. I wanted to find a way to get back to them.”

An opportunity presented itself several years later, and when it did, Groff enrolled in the mortuary science program at Mesa Community College in Paradise Valley. In May, he graduated and returned to Lancaster to begin serving his apprenticeship at the family funeral home.

In his nomination letter, Mesa Community College Program Director Dr. Thomas R. Taggart noted that the second-career student was diligent and passionate in his studies. “It is refreshing to see his excitement in this new endeavor, soaking in all the information and sharing his experiences in phone calls home,” Taggart wrote.

Groff was not only a pleasure to have in class, Taggart said, but he spearheaded study groups and worked to find opportunities to connect and help his classmates. “He is very well rounded, approachable, compassionate and dedicated,” Taggart said, “and he just seems to have that unique heart for service that is so important in this business.”

That “heart for service” has deep roots in the Groff family. Growing up, Groff watched his father, a third-generation funeral director, grow the Fred F. Groff funeral home, which was started by his great-grandfather from a single location in Lancaster to nine funeral homes in Lancaster and surrounding areas. In 1991, Groff’s sister, Lisa, joined the family business.

After his parents decided to sell the business in 1999, Groff said joining the family business “wasn’t a thought anymore.” His sister went on to work for the company that purchased the family business before eventually opening The Groffs Family Funeral & Cremation Services in 2010, just blocks from the family’s original funeral home.

Last year, the opportunity for Lisa Groff to purchase the family’s legacy funeral home – Fred F. Groff funeral home – became a reality.

“I knew it was time,” Groff said. He enrolled at Mesa Community College in March 2015.

Having a chance to return to Pennsylvania and work alongside his sister and longtime Groff funeral home employee (and business partner) Thomas S. Butler, is exciting.

“My family never pushed me into funeral service, but they’re happy it’s where I am now,” he said. “The future is very bright. I’m dedicated to the business, I have a community I look forward to give to, and I’m with family. That’s all I can ask for.”
Ask Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service instructor David Herbert to name a rising star in funeral service, and you’ll quickly hear one name: Katy McLean.

The 23-year-old is scheduled to graduate in September, and Herbert, a 32-year veteran of funeral service education at Gupton-Jones said that, “If I were a funeral home owner/manager, I would hire her in a heartbeat. To say she would be a perfect choice to work for me would be the understatement of the century.”

There are many reasons, Herbert wrote in his nomination letter, why McLean is a standout student. There’s her strong work ethic. Her involvement in the school’s student council and Sigma Eta fraternity. And her family legacy. “She represents the fifth-generation of her family firm, McLean Funeral Home in Belmont, North Carolina,” Herbert wrote. “She is striving to become the first woman in her family to be both a licensed embalmer and funeral director. Her mother and only sister are licensed funeral directors, not licensed embalmers. She is very proud to be striving for this accomplishment. And having seen her work ethic for the past two quarters, I feel very secure in saying that she is a very proud and determined young woman and will easily meet this immediate goal.”

While there is a long McLean legacy in funeral service, the 23-year-old first opted to get a degree in business management.

“Growing up, I had the typical childhood dreams ... being a vet, a doctor,” McLean said. “I decided to go to college (Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina) to make sure I knew what I wanted to do.”

There was no pressure to enter the family business, she said, which made the decision to enter funeral service entirely her own. “A business degree made a lot of sense because I wanted to know the business side ... I wasn’t sure that I wanted to be a funeral director, but I wanted to have that (business side) knowledge.”

It wasn’t until after graduation that McLean decided that she wanted to go into funeral service – and not just to be a licensed funeral director. “I wanted to be different ... I want to be a licensed embalmer as well,” she said. “If I was doing to do this, I wanted to do this fully. There’s never been a McLean girl embalmer, so I wanted to be the first.”

McLean is starting her apprenticeship at the family funeral home this month. “I’ve been working there since I was a freshman in high school,” she said. “But this will be different, I’m sure. I’m more confident with my educational background now. I’m ready to serve our families.”

Being a member of the fifth generation in funeral service, McLean understands that she has big shoes to fill. “When people are going through the most difficult times, when people need you the most, that’s who I want to be ... the person people turn to,” she said. “I want to serve families to my fullest potential ... just as my family has for years.”

McLean is also hoping to bring some of her own special touches to the profession. “At the end of the day, it’s all about remembering a loved one whether that’s cremation or burial,” she said. “There’s a lot more customization today, and I want to be able to help families remember that loved one in the way they want to remember their loved one.”

The McLean Funeral Home has a strong legacy in the Beaumont community, one that McLean pledges to continue. “I’m a better embalmer (and funeral director) than I was yesterday, but not as good as I’m going to be tomorrow,” she said. “And that’s my goal, to be better than I am now so that I can serve people to the highest potential.”
If you had asked Megan Schumacher in high school if funeral director was among her career choices, the 22-year-old would probably have laughed.

But as the St. Joseph, Illinois, resident learned, fate sometimes has a way of putting things in perspective.

While in high school, Schumacher began working at an animal clinic. She continued to work there while she attended Parkland College in Champaign. As she began taking science-related courses, Schumacher was drawn to anatomy and physiology. Her interest led her to accept a patient care position in the cardiovascular intensive care unit at a local hospital.

During her time at the hospital, she was promoted several times, becoming a senior health care technician as well as heading the new hire orientation program. One of her responsibilities was the care of patients that failed to thrive after surgery.

“Death became something that Megan faced on an almost daily basis,” Worsham program director Leili McMurrough wrote in her nomination letter. “What sets her apart from most is that in the face of such difficult circumstances, she always made sure to take a few moments to ensure families had an opportunity to see their loved ones at peace and without medical devices. She felt drawn to comfort those grieving families.”

For Schumacher, it quickly became obvious that caring for the dead and their families gave her a sense of purpose. A casual conversation with a colleague at the veterinarian’s office put her in touch with a local funeral director.

“After spending some time there (at the funeral home), I knew what I wanted – needed – to do,” she said. “I’m thankful that my jobs and experiences led me to this ... I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

Schumacher started at Worsham College in September 2015.

“Megan’s intellect and hard work are clearly demonstrated by her cumulative average of 95,” McMurrough wrote in her nomination letter. “In Megan’s case, however, such a record reflects not only her dedication to her studies but also the depth of her commitment. She is a reflective, analytical young woman who readily accepts challenges.”

Schumacher, McMurrough noted, has sought out every opportunity available and quickly became a student funeral directors would request.

“Several months ago, a funeral home called the school looking for a part-time student and I recommended Megan,” McMurrough wrote. “He recently called and told me she was one of the best employees he has ever hired, and he wants to hire her on as an apprentice.”

And it is at Donnellan Funeral Home in Skokie, Illinois, where Schumacher will be apprenticing after her fall graduation. “I’ve been lucky enough to be working part time at Donnellan and even luckier that I’ll be doing my apprenticeship there,” she said.

The experience of working at Donnellan has afforded Schumacher an opportunity to match classroom and hands-on learning. “I’ve been able to sit with a director at an arrangement conference, see how the behind-the-scenes paperwork is done and really see how a funeral home operates,” she said.

She’s also been able to use her knowledge in very personal ways. “Both my parents lost their dads while I was in school, and I was able to answer their questions and explain the embalming process,” she said. “I think being able to explain to them what happens gives them that closure and lets them know that their loved ones were cared for during the visitation and funeral.”

Schumacher plans on staying at Donnellan for “a long time,” but adds that she dreams of one day owning her own place. “That’s my aspiration,” she said, “but if that’s not where the future takes me and I continue to have a job at Donnellan, I’m fine with that.”
Leticia Alvarado says her desire to become a funeral director dates back three decades.

“I think I knew by the time I was 6 or 7 that I wanted to go into funeral service,” the 37-year-old Alvarado said. “I can’t explain why other than to say that I wanted to help others.”

While it has been a long and somewhat winding road, Alvarado will be graduating in the fall from the funeral service education program at American River College in Fair Oaks, California.

For Alvarado, it is the realization of a long-held dream.

“I can’t imagine doing anything else,” she said. “I’ve been pursuing this for years – not one or two – but 10 years. And there have been many obstacles, but I’ve made it.”

Alvarado’s journey to become a funeral director started in 2005. In the decade since, she’s balanced school, a full-time job and raising her (now) 6-year-old son – her dream never wavering.

Since 2007, she’s been working at Dignity Memorial properties in California. She completed her apprenticeship at Oak Hill Memorial Park in San Jose in 2010, and now works at Mount Vernon Memorial Park in Fair Oaks.

Along the way, Alvarado volunteered to become the funeral home liaison in her community for the “Every 15 Minutes” program, which is designed to instill in teens the potentially dangerous consequences of drinking alcohol and texting while driving.

“What makes Leticia unique is her commitment to service to the community,” funeral service educator program coordinator Damon de la Cruz wrote in Alvarado’s nomination letter.

The “Every 15 Minutes” program, de la Cruz explained, is coordinated through the local police department, fire department, paramedic departments, high schools and local funeral homes to simulate fatal car accidents involving alcohol and distracted driving.

“Leticia’s role is to coordinate removal and funeral vehicles,” de la Cruz wrote. “She also organizes the funeral service, including all the details such as floral arrangements. All of this work is done on a volunteer basis so that she might help local young adults understand the realities of drinking and driving and distracted driving.”

For Alvarado, the involvement comes from a very personal place. “A loved one of mine was killed in 2013 on Father’s Day because of the decisions he made,” she explained. “I want to prevent other young people from making the same mistakes.”

When she first heard about the program, Alvarado knew she had to be involved. “I told my boss that this was something I wanted to do,” she said. “It was that important for me ... I wanted to give back to the community, and if volunteering my time and sharing my story can make the difference for just one person, then it’s all worth it. My boss, Amberly Walter, has supported me 100 percent with this program.”

The program has grown steadily in the three years Alvarado has been involved ... and she’s committed to sharing her story for the long haul. “My mother told me when I was little that I always helped people because it was in me,” she said. “That need to help ... whether it’s families who have just lost a loved one or teens who potentially can make the wrong decision continues to be a part of who I am.”

Upon graduation, Alvarado will be both a licensed funeral director and embalmer. “Growing up, my mother would tell me, ‘Always help others because you are passionate of what you do and never expect anything in return,’ ” she said. “I don’t want to stop ... I want to continue to grow as a funeral director and provide families with whatever they need.”
Matthew J. Vincentini’s interest in funeral service began when he was an 8-year-old, attending his grandfather’s funeral. “I really became interested in how funerals were done,” he explained.

Fast forward to his senior year in high school. While Vincentini’s interest in funeral service was as strong as ever, discussions with his guidance counselor and parents convinced a young Vincentini that the time wasn’t right.

Instead, Vincentini headed off to a local community college. After a year, he left college to realize a dream of opening a pizza parlor. For three years, Vincentini successfully ran Vincentini’s Pizzeria Inc. in Syracuse.

But when the location’s three-year lease ran out, Vincentini once again faced a decision – find a new location for his pizzeria or work to realize his dream of becoming a funeral director.

Funeral directing won out, and Vincentini enrolled at the Simmons Institute of Funeral Service (which closed in 2013 after 113 years of operation in Syracuse, New York) graduating with several honors in 2004. Even before he began mortuary school, Vincentini began working at Buranich Funeral Home in Camillus, New York, where he continues to be employed. “They believed in me from the start,” he said.

For many mortuary students, graduation and finding full-time employment would have been enough. Not for Vincentini.

In 2011, he briefly considered returning to school. Three years later, he enrolled in the State University of New York at Canton to earn his bachelor’s degree in funeral services administration.

It was there, Dr. David R. Penepent, director of the funeral services administration program at SUNY Canton, wrote in his nomination letter, that Vincentini excelled.

“Most students take courses to earn a grade so they can accomplish their educational requirements for graduation,” Penepent wrote. “While Matthew did accomplish his academic requirements ... he was more than just the average student. He demonstrated an exemplary educational prowess especially in courses relating to business management.”

The 37-year-old Vincentini, Penepent said, was able to take the theories taught in class and apply the knowledge to real-life work experiences.

“Some students would complain about having to do work in an online class, however, Matt embraced it and motivated his group to strive toward success in every assignment submitted,” Penepent wrote.

More than just a grade generator, Penepent added, it was an opportunity for Vincentini to design working templates that he could use to improve customer service at Buranich.

“It was rare for us to receive customer surveys back from families,” Vincentini said. But by redesigning the survey and creating a customer thank you letter and implementing it into practice, the funeral home survey return rate has risen to 60 to 70 percent.

“We’re very service oriented, so to get such a huge return rate has been great,” Vincentini said. “We do everything we think is right, but sometimes it may not be right for the family.”

A case in point was one survey that came back from a family, which wrote that it would have been nice if the funeral home had mints available for the family (and visitors). “I showed it to my supervisor, and from that point forward we made sure to have mints available,” Vincentini said. “It’s a small thing, but it means a lot to families ... and we wouldn’t have known if that family had not filled out the survey.”

It’s creativity and innovations like the redesigned survey, Penepent said, that make Vincentini one of New York’s most progressive funeral directors.

“I have a passion for people ... they are always first for me,” Vincentini said. “And it’s ultimately a goal of mine to someday manage a team in a funeral home ... because only together can we be successful.”
As we celebrate the fifth anniversary of our “Ones to Watch,” we thought it would be fun to catch up with some of our previous honorees to see what they are doing.

**Ginny Sanzo**

This month, Ginny Sanzo will add one more line to her list of achievements: president of the New Jersey State Funeral Directors Association. Sanzo, who recently took over the management of three Carriage Services properties in Monmouth County, New Jersey – Bedle Funeral Home with locations in Keyport and Matawan, and Braun Funeral Home in Eatontown – was in the inaugural class of honorees in 2012.

Sanzo, who graduated from the New England Institute at Mount Ida College in Newton, Massachusetts, earned her degree in funeral home management in 2012. Since then, she’s been on an amazing journey.

“The three locations I am now managing were treated before like satellite locations,” she said. “What we’re going to do is bring back their legacy in their communities. They had a great reputation ... we want to grow that reputation.”

Later this month, Sanzo assumes the role of president of the NJSFDA. “It’s an exciting time,” she said. “There’s been a management restructuring, a new convention structure and a new convention location.” Sanzo is quick to embrace the change. “We can’t stay in the ‘how it’s always been done’ way,” she said. “It does take energy and effort and creativity to change, but think of all those missed opportunities if you’re not willing to try.”

**Rickey Williams II**

Rickey Williams II has long understood the value of education. The Augusta, Georgia, native talked about that value in 2014 when he was recognized as one of our “Ones to Watch.” “I think the best advice Mr. (Craig) Tremble (of Craig R. Tremble Funeral Home in Statesboro, Georgia) gave me was that there are a lot of people in funeral homes that are unlicensed, and if you’re unlicensed, you’re unlearned,” Williams said. “He helped me understand the importance of getting my credentials, of graduating and becoming licensed.”

Williams took those words to heart and now works as a licensed funeral director and embalmer. Most recently, he added another title – instructor. “I’m now an instructor in embalming and restorative arts at Guppton-Jones College of Funeral Service in Decatur, Georgia,” Williams said.

At 26, Williams initially received a little pushback from students, but respect came when students saw his commitment to embalming. “Embalming is still important ... for burial families and cremation families alike,” he said. “Families should be able to see their loved ones in a good manner for that final goodbye. We owe them nothing less.”
When it came time for him to find a job, Scott O’Marah didn’t need to look far.

O’Marah, one of the members of the 2013 class of “Ones to Watch,” was hired to work at New Comer Funeral Home in North Syracuse, New York ... the same firm he worked for part time at while attending the State University of New York at Canton and the same firm he did his year-long apprenticeship.

“It feels like home here,” O’Marah said. “It’s not your typical mom-and-pop establishment, but it’s not a big corporation either. It’s a place where you can really learn about funeral service ... I really enjoy working here.”

O’Marah, a first-generation funeral director, knows that many who enter profession don’t last long.

Not O’Marah.

“The number of people who leave within five years for another career is big,” he said, “but I’m not going to be one of those people. I enjoy helping families and, in my own small way, making a difference.”

Where he does see himself, though, is one day being in management.

“Every day I gain a little more knowledge, become better at what I’m doing,” he said. “My goal, my purpose, is to serve families to the best of my ability.”

John Decker

Oklahoma funeral director (and soon to be licensed Kansas funeral director as well) John Decker is exactly where he thought he’d be — working at the funeral homes established by his grandmother nearly three decades ago.

“I’m where I’m supposed to be,” said Decker, who graduated in 2015 from the University of Oklahoma in Goltry, Oklahoma.

He hasn’t really had any surprises working at the five locations his grandmother, Edith Irene Lanman, owns. “I guess the only thing is there’s a little more stress and pressure for me to get it right for the families now that I’m licensed,” he laughed.

And working alongside his grandmother only makes him certain that he’s chosen the right profession.

“This is who I am ... I can’t see myself doing anything else,” he said.

Decker also thinks that his grandmother, who became the first female president of the Oklahoma Funeral Directors Association in the late 1980s, is happy that he’s joined the family firm. “I think I’ve taken some of the stress off of her .... she doesn’t have to do the night work anymore,” he said. “And if she didn’t like something, I know she’d tell me.” •