It was six years ago that American Funeral Director first reached out to mortuary directors and instructors throughout the country to nominate their best students to be featured as 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 expect will make their mark on funeral service. This year is no exception.

Meet five students who are poised to make an impact on the funeral profession.

We’re keeping an eye on them – and so should you.
The Brookville, Pennsylvania, native joined the local volunteer fire department at 15, and by 17 became an Eagle Scout with a service project that restored and returned a mothballed Maxim MG08 World War I--era machine gun to the Jefferson County Courthouse lawn.

“I’ve always had this tendency to want to help other people,” Carrier said. “It’s just a part of who I am, I guess.”

So it’s not really surprising that Carrier found his way into funeral service. That journey began in high school when his grandfather died in April 2013. Although he had wanted to sign up for the military after graduation and then pursue a career in criminal justice, Carrier said something clicked during the viewing and funeral for his grandfather.

“It was the first death I recall, and I was old enough to grieve and understand what was happening,” Carrier explained. “I became very interested in funeral service, wondering what the process was and thinking about how nice (funeral director) Mark McKinney and the staff were and how they took care of us in our time of need. I wanted to know more.”

So Carrier decided to change his senior project from criminal justice to funeral directing and embalming.

“It was a shock to many people, including my parents, but I think they realized that I had the passion, personality and compassion for it,” he said. “I had thought I wanted to go into criminal justice, but I thought funeral service was just a different side in helping others.”

Carrier contacted McKinney, and asked to do a job shadow for his senior project.

“I almost instantly fell in love with everything about funeral service and I was fascinated when I saw my first dead body,” Carrier said. “It intrigued me, which made me ask when I could see an embalming.”

Within a month, McKinney approached Carrier’s parents to obtain permission for their son to see his first embalming. “With a little persuasion on my mother’s side, we got a yes,” Carrier laughed. “Ever since my first embalming I have become so intrigued and fascinated by the human body, the process of embalming and each service you provide for families.”

Carrier would go on to work at McKinney-d’Arby Funeral Home throughout high school.

After his 2015 high school graduation, Carrier accepted a full-time summer job at Deeley Funeral Home in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. “The job put me on call for every removal, embalming, visitation and funeral to get the true feel for life as a funeral director,” Carrier said. “I learned so many valuable techniques both in the prep room and for services in dealing with grieving families.”

By the time he entered the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science in the fall of 2015, there was no doubt that funeral service was Carrier’s calling.

And he hasn’t disappointed.

“While I am privileged to watch young people grow on a regular basis from neophytes into well-educated professionals in funeral service, seldom do I run into a young person that has really placed his ‘mark’ on society as has Lance Carrier,” Gene Ogrodnik, president and CEO at PIMS wrote in his nomination letter.

Carrier’s calling to funeral service, Ogrodnik noted, was matched with an equally distinguished academic record. Carrier’s first graduation award (a diploma in embalming and funeral directing) was earned in January with the highest GPA of his cohort. Carrier earned his associate’s degree in specialized business in May and will earn his bachelor’s in environmental science in May 2018.

While funeral service can be emotionally draining, Carrier makes sure to take time for himself, spending time with family and friends and enjoying activities, including hunting. “It’s what I need to do so I can be my best for the families I serve,” he said.

As a funeral director, Carrier has one goal: to take care of grieving families and their most precious loved one at one of the most helpless times in their lives – to care for the family and help them through the funeral and the grieving process.

“We are being entrusted with someone’s most prized possession – their loved one – and that’s an honor not to be taken lightly,” he said.

At 20, Carrier has many options – and just as many goals.

“What I would like to do one day is find my way back to Brookville and maybe own my own business,” he said. “I’d also like to be county coroner ... we’ll just have to see what the future brings.”

At 20, Lance Carrier has already placed his mark on society.
Leili McMurrough, program director at Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Wheeling, Illinois, says Bethani Jacobsen is not your typical mortuary science student.

“She is currently Miss Illinois International and (is) poised to compete at the next level,” McMurrough wrote in her nomination letter.

But don’t let that pageant sash fool you. Jacobsen, McMurrough is quick to add, has wanted nothing other than to be a funeral director.

“When my grandmother passed away it was a life-changing event,” Jacobsen said. “I was sitting in the back of the funeral chapel watching the funeral directors talking to and comforting our family ... and I knew, I just knew that I had found my calling.”

The then-13-year-old Jacobsen had planned to become a forensic scientist, so her decision to change career paths was met with some resistance. “There were some people who believed early on that I shouldn’t pursue becoming a funeral director,” Jacobsen said. “They thought it would be too difficult emotionally and that I couldn’t handle the prep room.”

Jacobsen, though, would not be deterred. Instead, she called Strang Funeral Home in Antioch, Illinois, which had handled her grandmother’s arrangements, and asked to job shadow the funeral directors. “It was one of my best decisions,” Jacobsen said. “They took the time to show me what the job was about and encouraged me to attend mortuary school.”

While there was no doubt that she would one day become a funeral director, Jacobsen decided to first enroll in Upper Iowa University, where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree with a minor in psychology before enrolling in Worsham, where she will graduate this month.

“I didn’t want to be 19 and have a career,” Jacobsen explained. “I wanted that college experience.”

And a college experience she had. At Upper Iowa, Jacobsen was a Division II intercollegiate cross country and track athlete. Even when she was diagnosed with chronic exertional compartment syndrome—a muscle and nerve condition that causes pain and swelling in the affected muscles—in both legs, Jacobsen refused to give up. She continued to compete until the pain became unbearable; following an NCAA championship meet in her sophomore year, Jacobsen was rushed into surgery and a bilateral fasciotomy was performed.

Although the surgery left her scarred and in a wheelchair for a short period of time, Jacobsen refused to give in—or give up. After 12 weeks of intense therapy, Jacobsen was back to running—managing to break multiple school records in her last year at Upper Iowa.

“I never thought of not trying to come back,” Jacobsen said. “If you don’t try, you’ll never know what you can achieve.”

That experience of persevering when others didn’t think she would succeed would lead Jacobsen to organize a Girls on the Run Council in northern Illinois. The mission of the organization is to inspire girls to be healthy and confident using an experience-based curriculum that creatively integrates running.

The nonprofit Girls on the Run has also become Jacobsen’s pageant platform. With about 12 different titles to her name, Jacobsen was named Miss Illinois International earlier this year and competed in the Miss International 2017 pageant in early August (results were not known at press time).

“I love competing in pageants ... pageants are big in my family,” Jacobsen laughed. “One of the best parts is when they read my bio and there I am on stage in this beautiful gown and they say I’m from Wauconda, likes to bake and aspires to one day own her own funeral home. I love to see peoples’ reactions ... you can almost hear their jaws drop.”

While she has set her sights on one day owning her own funeral home, following graduation Jacobsen will begin her apprenticeship at Cress Funeral Home & Cremation Services in Madison, Wisconsin. “Right when I walked in there, I knew it was the place for me,” she said.

Jacobsen wants to focus on becoming the type of funeral director that took care of her grandmother. “Caring, compassionate and being there not just in their time of immediate need, but after,” she said. “I want to be there for families throughout their grief journey, not just during the funeral.”

McMurrough has no doubts that Jacobsen’s future is bright. “She takes the role of being a woman in funeral service seriously and wants to encourage more women to enter the profession,” McMurrough wrote. “She wants to be a voice of positivity for funeral service, and I know she will be successful. She embodies all the qualities we want in a funeral director.”
Henry D. Johnston
Arapahoe Community College | Littleton, Colorado


But to those who nominated him as a “One to Watch,” the description doesn’t begin to tell the story of Henry Johnston.

“Henry truly cares about people, their welfare and comfort while they are at ground zero of grief therapy,” longtime funeral service professional John “Mac” McCormick wrote in his nomination letter. “His deep well of compassion for humanity assures each and every family that he serves that he will be there for them in their darkest and most painful hours.”

Funeral director – and frequent American Funeral Director contributor Alexandra Kathryn Mosca added, “In dedication, demeanor and even in dress, Henry represents what a funeral director should be. He completely understands the gravity of the work funeral directors do and treats it with the utmost respect.”

Johnston’s desire to become a funeral director can be traced back more than two decades. “I grew up in a small town, and Sunday afternoons after church I would go visit my great-grandmother,” Johnston said. “I slowly saw her fade away, and she passed away when I was 11 years old.”

A young Johnston was adamant that he see his grandmother at the funeral home. “The funeral director who took care of her did a phenomenal job with her, and that made an impact on me ... it was really the pivotal moment in my deciding to become a funeral director,” he said.

Johnston would go on to attend the University of Idaho, serving as an apprentice in a local funeral home. But a then-19-year-old Johnston realized something very important: If he pursued a career as a funeral director in his 20s, he would burn himself out.

“Total moment in my deciding to become a funeral director, that wasn’t enough for Johnston.

“My goal was to be a licensed embalmer by the time I turn 32,” Johnston said. “The semester ends on my birthday, Aug. 7, I’m just getting my apprenticeship out of the way, and the diploma comes a little later. It’s a goal realized.”

Such was the case, Mosca said, when Johnston embarked on a difficult reconstruction project – that of a gunshot wound to the head. “Henry said (that there are) four words that I try not to allow to exist in my professional vocabulary – ‘They are not viewable.’

Johnston has also made it a point to be involved in a variety of activities, including president of the Inland Empire Funeral Directors Association.

“He’s also committed to being a resource for young funeral professionals. That commitment led Johnston and Kristin Newman, co-owner of Panebaker Funeral Home and Cremation Care Center Inc., in Hanover, Pennsylvania, to give a presentation about how young funeral directors can establish credibility during the 2016 National Funeral Directors Association Convention in Philadelphia.

The topic was revisited during an NFDA-sponsored webinar in February with Johnston and Newman. “It’s important that young funeral directors understand and respect the integrity and professionalism of our industry,” Johnston said.

At the same time, Johnston added, it’s important for industry veterans to understand that just because young professionals are not doing things the same exact way as in the past, it doesn’t mean it’s the wrong way. “I think there could be a better understanding ... and I think we need to find ways to bring that understanding together for the benefit of the families we serve today and in the future.”

While there may be a generational disconnect between people entering funeral service today and those that came before, both groups share a passion for serving people at their time of need.

“We don’t always have to do things the way they’ve always been because technology has helped the business tremendously with new and innovative ways to improve service to families,” Johnston said. “And that should be the focus ... how are we serving our families.”

He hopes to one day own his own firm as well as stay involved in industry associations on both the state and national levels. “We are at a transition period in the industry ... I want to be able to help inspire and focus young people coming into the industry to be respectful of those important funeral rituals and provide that loving care for every person who comes into our funeral homes.
Marilyn Lim
Dallas Institute of Funeral Service | Dallas

Mortuary schools have a key question for every prospective student: “What event made you consider funeral service as a possible career choice?”

This question is tremendously important for second-career students, says Brian Mullins, director of learning skills at Dallas Institute of Funeral Service in Dallas.

Marilyn Lim’s response, Mullins said, provided keen insight into why Lim is “One to Watch.”

A former teacher and a successful manager of a family-owned pub in Dallas, Lim enjoyed the camaraderie and diverse cultures and backgrounds of her patrons. In the course of her job, she came to know the owners and employees of the Calvario Funeral Home, which was located across the street.

“I was impressed with how they were so compassionate with the families in their care,” Lim said. “There was genuine concern for the well-being of not only the deceased, but for the living as well. I could see myself in funeral service.”

When a good friend died leaving three young children, Lim made the decision to pursue a career in helping the families of individuals who have suffered a loss.

Although Lim had attempted to start mortuary school several years back, a number of issues pushed that dream back until last year. “The time was right,” Lim said. “It was a dream delayed, but there was never a doubt that I would realize that dream.”

In many ways, Lim’s background enables her to understand the harsh realities of death, Lim said.

Her grandparents fled from China to Cambodia during the Sino-Japanese war where they survived the concentration camps of the era. Her family also lived through the dictatorship of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Her family history is filled with the horror of war and survival. Her mother is hearing impaired due to land mine explosions during the Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia.

Proficient in Chinese and English and conversant in Khmer, Laos, Teochew, French and Spanish, Lim, who is hearing impaired, is also learning American Sign Language.

“We live in a very diverse society where people are different,” Lim said. “Funeral service has to be aware of these cultural differences in life – and death,” added Lim, whose heritage is Chinese, Egyptian and French.

“I think by understanding how different cultures look at death, we can help in the grieving process,” Lim said. “One way does not fit all.”

While her goal is to one day own a funeral home, Lim wants to first work in a variety of settings, including corporate and independently owned. “I think there’s something to be learned every step on the way,” she said.

That learning has also included Lim becoming an active member of Soka Gakkai International, a global movement of people connected by Buddhism and the shared commitment to realize a future where life’s inherent dignity blooms.

“SGI has really helped me open myself to other people, other cultures, other religions,” Lim said. “I think it’s also helped me view grief in a different way ... the different cultural approaches to grief.”

And in a culturally diverse area like Dallas, that can only help her better serve families in their time of need and beyond, Lim said.

At the same time, Lim hopes her commitment to funeral service will also help her become an inspiration for future generations of Asian–Americans contemplating a career in funeral service.

“In Asian culture, the funeral business is seen as bad ... there’s a social stigma to being a funeral director,” said Lim, who graduated in March. “I want to change that ... I want to show that taking care of our dead is an honorable profession. Even though more Asian families choose cremation, it’s important that the dead are cared for in a careful, compassionate way .... and I want to be a part of that.”
Just ask Mika Ziv, who will graduate from the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science at the end of the year.

Ziv was 20, living in an apartment in downtown Cincinnati and running a restaurant full time when she decided it was time to go to college. Enrolling in the University of Cincinnati, Ziv started out as a psychology major.

But a conversation one day with one of her instructors – a psychologist who is also a licensed cosmetologist – started Ziv thinking. “In one conversation we started talking about funeral directors, and I explained that I really didn’t know much about the funeral profession,” she said. “My teacher then told me she thought I would be well-suited for the job.”

Ziv found her way to the university’s counseling center, where a counselor went over the course material. “Hearing what the courses included really appealed to me,” she said. “I really thought that a mortuary education was something that I really wanted to study.”

What Ziv didn’t realize, she laughingly says now, was that CCMS was just nine minutes away from where she grew up. “It’s funny now, looking back, that I never realized it was so close to me,” Ziv said. “But when I walked through the doors for the first time, I knew there was where I was meant to be.

Ziv graduated with her associate degree from the University of Cincinnati in 2015 and started at CCMS in August 2016.

From the first day of classes, Ziv has displayed a sense of passion for learning all things funeral service, Melissa Kloss, a faculty/clinical faculty member at CCMS, wrote in her nomination letter.

“Immersion in the curriculum would be an understatement,” Kloss said. “Many students speak of this passion, but Mika is one of the few that live it each and every day.”

“I can’t really explain all of the benefits I have reaped from mortuary school,” Ziv said. “I had an idea of what that transformative experience would be for me, but I really couldn’t understand (then) what an incredible experience it would be in my life.”

CCMS has provided her with an opportunity to take a good, hard look at not only who she is, and what she believes in, but also what shapes her as a human being, Ziv said. “It has helped me figure out what I would like to contribute to society.”

And those contributions include becoming a grief counselor. “I think, as a society, we really don’t talk about death,” she said. “In so many ways people alive today live with a sense of perceived invulnerability ... that they are not going to succumb to death, that death is not present in their lives. But death needs to be part of life. A well-rounded life includes understanding death.”

Ziv holds high regard for the deceased, stemming from her strong Jewish upbringing and faith, Kloss said. “Learning about the Judeo-Christian roots in funeral service has been of particular interest,” Kloss wrote. “She has been an ambassador for her own Jewish faith, even becoming part of the chevra kadisha at her synagogue, and volunteering at a funeral home serving a high Jewish population.”

“The Weil Funeral Home serves about 97 percent of the Jewish families in the area,” Ziv said. “I volunteer there because I want to help my community. (The death of a loved one) is a scary situation, and I really want to be able to take what I have learned back to the community, to help educate them.”

Being a funeral director, Ziv added, is one of the most righteous jobs she knows of. “I truly believe that a funeral director has a responsibility, an ethical duty, to educate a community on all aspects of death, dying and grief,” she said. “It’s not a responsibility that I take lightly.”

There has to be a balance between society and its relationship to death, Ziv believes. “And educating people about death, dying and grief is how you can start getting that balance,” she said.

Her passion for educating others will lead Ziv down another educational path upon graduation. She plans to attend graduate school to obtain a degree in psychology and then become a grief counselor. Eventually, she’d like to teach a course on death and dying at the college level.

“I’m lucky to be attending mortuary college at this time, because I feel you are not limited to just becoming a funeral director,” Ziv said. “You can pursue careers involving the subject matter as well. Whatever path you choose, you can bring something to families in their time of need.”