Education
By Patti Martin Bartsche

Ones to Watch 2018
Ready to Make a Difference

It was in 2012 that American Funeral Director first reached out to mortuary directors and instructors throughout the country and asked them 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 expect will make their mark on funeral service. This year is no exception.

Meet eight students who are poised to make an impact on the funeral profession. We’re keeping an eye on them – and so should you.
Ask Chet Brown why he wants to be a funeral director, and you hear this heartfelt reply: “I want to remake my torn life into a remarkable success story that is an inspiration to others.”

Consider Brown’s story: A Jamaican born inner-city youth, student counselor and graduate of Manchester High School (in Jamaica), struggling with social breakdowns from community violence, disappointments and family disruptions, grabs onto hope in a relative’s contracting business at the age of 18 until moving to the United States in 2014. This hope helped him to realize that if he worked hard he could achieve any dream he wanted, and so he turned the page.

“The United States is the land of opportunity, and when I had the chance to come here, I wanted to make the most of the opportunity I was being given,” Brown explained.

In 2015, Brown attended Boston Public School’s adult education programs and the Xcel Hiset program and finished within a year. He also worked as a paid volunteer for the Tech Goes Home Computer Literacy Program where he encouraged social and educational relationships and developments within the community.

Confident, committed and focused, he began his studies at FINE Mortuary College in the spring of 2016, seeking a two-year associate degree in applied science at the age of 31. He sought to find an apprenticeship in the profession, and within days he was working in the field.

“Chet has possessed a unique personality to be recognized, and his love, compassion and unwavering spirit to deal with any eventuality when his service is called upon in the funeral home is a true embodiment of what an outstanding funeral director should be,” said David Russell Jr., president of Russell and Pica Funeral Home in Brockton, Massachusetts.

Becoming a funeral director, Brown explained, became a personal dream after so many relatives and close friends died that it began to feel routine.

“I want to meet people and impact the lives around me in more meaningful ways,” he said. “I remember taking care of my grandparents who were dying. They knew that they were dying, and to watch them prepare to depart this world, there was just such a sense of dignity ... I knew that I wanted to provide that same dignity for them – and others – in death.”

It was the death of his grandparents, as well as those of friends, that helped Brown develop sympathy, compassion and the desire to comfort and console those around him.

“It is a privilege to be called to service,” Brown said. “People are coming to you when they are the most vulnerable, and they are looking to you to comfort and console them and care for their loved one.”

The 34-year-old Brown graduated last month with honors, with his wife and six daughters there to cheer him on.

He’s excited about what will come next. Beyond becoming a licensed funeral director, Brown also wants to start a community-based organization that brings together people of all races, classes and genders to support each other, and to develop a practice where sharing a wide diversity of different customs and cultures creates an oasis for success and the development of a friendly community.

The business, he explains, will not be an establishment of death, but rather a symbol of appreciation of the life lived that honors the body and life of the deceased. “We are a collective-ness of different cultures that make up society,” Brown said. “And for all of our differences, we have so much in common. We are not as different as sometimes we think we are.”

Brown’s plans also include getting his bachelor’s degree in funeral science management to become a mortuary science educator. “To be able to create a platform to develop and contribute back to the system in terms of education, well, that would be an honor,” he said. “To be able to help develop students how others have developed me, I can’t think of anything better.”

With every step he takes, Brown wants to be a positive influence ... for his family and funeral service.

“I want my daughters to understand that whatever your mind sees, whatever your mind is able to imagine, you can bring it to reality with discipline, hard work and tenacity,” he said. “Things aren’t always going to be easy, sometimes they are going to seem impossible, but that’s when you work harder – and never give up.”

Brown plans to put that same positivity into his funeral service career. “You may personally be having a bad day, but when a family walks into the funeral home, they are your priority. You must show the family the best of yourself, be empathetic and help them through the darkest hour in their lives. I am very much humbled to serve, and I will give my best each day ... that’s what families deserve.”
Idella Thompson  
Worsham College of Mortuary Science | Wheeling, Illinois

James Mockler, president of Mockler Funeral Home in Caribou, Maine, clearly remembers the first time he met Idella Thompson.

“I first met Idella over eight years ago when, as a freshman in high school (actually the end of her 8th-grade year), she called and told me about her desire to become a licensed funeral director and was wondering about the possibilities of job shadowing,” Mockler recalled.

Mockler told her that he would be happy to have her job shadow and told her to keep an eye on the obituaries in the paper and, if interested, call him and they would see what happened.

“Over the years, I have had many individuals interested in helping me, and this is how I usually leave it. Most people will never call me back, a few will call and come in a few times, then realize that funeral service wasn’t what they thought it was, and once in a while someone will show a true interest and keep coming back,” Mockler said. “Within a couple of days, Idella saw an obituary, called and asked if my offer to job shadow still stood. I told her of course it did, and from that day forward, she had never missed an opportunity to be here at the funeral home, at first to job shadow and now as a valuable employee to the families we serve.”

The 23-year-old Thompson, who will graduate this month from Worsham College of Mortuary Science, laughingly recalls that interaction, but adds that her desire to become a funeral director really dates back to when she was 6 years old.

“My dad wasn’t in the funeral business, but he had a lot of business associates who died (my father was in his 50s when I was born), and so, we went to a lot of funerals when I was growing up,” Thompson said. “I never saw it as weird (going to funerals); rather I looked at funeral directors as individuals who were giving back to their communities … and I really liked that aspect. I thought funeral service was a way to help community members through a difficult time.”

She also developed a deep appreciation for those who are called to serve.

“Funeral directors … theirs is a job that is full of integrity and honoring the dead,” Thompson said. “Families are choosing you to take care of their most prized possession – their loved one. There is no greater honor.”

Thompson began job shadowing at Mockler Funeral Home in her freshman year. Mockler was impressed with her dedication. “Even when it came to school, she would make arrangements to get her school work done so she could be here at the funeral home,” he said.

And on her 18th birthday – and the age when the State of Maine allows an individual to apply for a funeral service attendant’s license – Thompson had her application completed and dropped it in the mail on her way to school. “I was so excited to drop it off,” she said. “It meant that I would be able to help make removals.”

Thompson’s duties at the funeral home have included working during visitations, sitting in during arrangements, assisting with the deceased, and helping with a myriad of office details, “all of which she does with enthusiasm, a willingness to learn and a work ethic not often found anymore,” Mockler said.

With the true trait of community leader, Mockler said, Thompson is involved in numerous other activities. She has received awards and commendations from the Girls Scouts organization, is very active in the local Republican Party and serves as a ballot clerk in her hometown of Caribou during elections.

With the encouragement of her parents, Thompson enrolled at University of Maine at Presque Isle after high school and graduated in May 2017 with a degree in criminal justice.

Thompson continued to work at Mockler’s while she was in college, and it was a surprise to no one when she enrolled at Worsham shortly after receiving her four-year degree.

“There was no question in my mind that I would be going to mortuary school,” Thompson said.

There’s no question that she’s heading back to Mockler’s for her apprenticeship, either.

“We’re a team (at Mockler’s),” she said. “Having had the opportunity to work has been a huge part of making me who I am today. The compassion, care and support I have witnessed there each and every day has helped shape me.”

Thompson’s passion and compassion make her one of a kind.

“There is no doubt in my mind, that Idella will excel in wherever her career takes her,” Mockler said. “She will be a true asset and leader in funeral service for many years to come.”

For Thompson, her future likely includes continuing to work at Mockler Funeral Home and eventually going back to school to obtain her master’s degree and teach at a mortuary college.

“I would love to be able to mentor and inspire others as I have been mentored and inspired,” she said. “I can’t think of anything more important.”
In a roundabout way, Jaky Correll chose a career in funeral service because of the death of her uncle.

But not for the obvious reason. “I was a teen when my uncle died, and he was probably one of the biggest influences in my life,” Correll said. “But no one really talked to me when it happened ... I had a lot of complicated grief, and for a long time, I shut down completely.”

Correll’s experience at the funeral home – before she even contemplated a career in funeral service – was that the director did not understand the amount of grief she was going through. “I didn’t understand it and couldn’t speak about it, but I was grieving. And that wasn’t recognized.”

A loss changes a person, Correll pointed out. “My experience at the funeral home was that the person handling the service didn’t understand the amount of grief I was going through,” she said. “There just wasn’t a level of empathy to help me through my grief journey.”

Correll said she has always been drawn to helping others, so when she was considering career choices, funeral service seemed like a natural fit.

“I’ve always wanted to help people, and I can’t think of a more important time to help people than when they are at their lowest (with the death of a loved one),” Correll said.

In her nomination letter, Mid-America faculty member Amy Baxley described Correll as a “motivated dreamer.” Correll, “is creative and uses this talent to promote school functions and represent Mid-America in a positive way,” Baxley said.

Correll has also been active in generating interest in community events, such as leading the school’s Pi Sigma Eta fraternity in a local cemetery cleanup project. “The cemetery is neglected, no one owns it, and it’s constantly under attack from vandals,” she said. “We had an opportunity to go in and help clean it up. It was really rewarding to be able to do something to respect the people buried there. We have to honor and respect our dead ... even if we don’t know them.”

Graduating in the fall, Correll is looking forward to being a different kind of funeral director.

“I think you have to be everything when you’re a funeral director ... a counselor, a leader, an interventionist, a support system,” she said. “You sign up to take on every burden of that family; you’re helping to give them closure, and when they leave your building, they should remember the positive aspects and not wonder why things went a certain way.”
Becoming a funeral director was not an automatic career choice for Nicholas C. Beck.

Although his father, Chris, is the owner of Beck Funeral Home & Cremation Service Inc. in Spring Grove, Pennsylvania, Beck was applying during his junior year in high school to colleges with chemical engineering programs.

Things changed in his senior year, though, when Beck was given the option to participate in a cooperative work program that would allow him to get out of school early and go to work.

“My parents had a business (the funeral home), so I decided to give it a try,” he said. Although he had grown up around funeral service, being a funeral director wasn’t a lifelong dream – or something he was pressured to pursue.

“Things changed, though, when I had the opportunity to work in the funeral home ... to see what it really was about,” Beck said.

And what he saw and learned convinced him to apply to PIMS. “Funeral directors have the ability to help people, to provide a service many people are unable to do, and to help families during a difficult time in their lives ... and do it the right way,” Beck said.

Beck, who graduated earlier this year, said his father has been supportive of his decisions every step of the way. “The fact was he never said, ‘This is what you’re going to do,’ but funeral service is an option that was made available to me,” he said.

Since graduation, Beck has been doing his internship at the family firm. As a Cremation Association of North America certified crematory operator, Beck oversees the daily operations of the firm’s crematory.

Chris Beck calls his son an outstanding second-generation funeral director. “He pays great attention to detail, assuring that every family he meets has a meaningful life celebration for their loved one,” he said. “He has a natural ability to make families feel comfortable during their time of loss. He is truly a wonderful asset to his family business.”

Once licensed, Beck plans to continue working at the family firm. That business will be expanding at the end of the year, with the opening of a second location in York, Pennsylvania. Plans call for Beck to be the managing supervisor.

“That means to me that my father has a great deal of trust in me. I’ve learned from him the type of funeral director I want to be,” he said. “To know that he believes that I can do the job to the same standards as he does, well, I’m honored.”

Nicholas C. Beck (right) with his father, Chris, in front of Beck Funeral Home & Cremation Service Inc. (Photo courtesy of Nicholas C. Beck)
Christopher “Topher” Crosby arrived on the campus of Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science in the fall of 2017 full of enthusiasm. That enthusiasm has not waned; rather, Crosby has grown more passionate about the profession and the opportunities awaiting him after his December graduation, faculty members say.

“Topher has already secured his apprenticeship after seizing interview opportunities with several employers,” according to the nomination letter signed by faculty members, including CCMS President Jack E. Lechtner Jr. “He’s made it a practice to meet as many funeral service professionals as possible, understanding that there is something to learn from all the encounters.”

Faculty members describe Crosby as a conscientious student with nearly perfect attendance and an excellent academic record. He regularly participates in class discussions and initiates conversations outside of the classroom, revealing a genuine interest in death-care topics.

“His commitment to this profession seems to be unwavering. Topher believes that by genuinely listening to families in his care, he can truly meet their needs – even if those needs are met by less traditional options,” the nomination letter said. “For him, funeral service is a true calling, and we have no doubt that Topher will minister to the bereaved as if caring for his own family.”

Crosby’s decision to become a funeral director was, he says, a direct result of his previous career.

“I was working with Life Connection of Ohio, teaching about organ, eye and tissue donation,” Crosby explained. “Being on that end of death care sparked my interest to look into other careers related to death care,” the 26-year-old explained. “Knowing what families went through, I felt that I was being called to funeral service.”

Crosby is progressive in his thinking when it comes to meeting the needs of families, and he has genuine interest in green burials, home funerals and other options.

For example, Crosby loves the idea of green burials and being able to return the body back to earth. “I believe that I, myself have taken so much, in the end I just want to give back ... and that’s an option that should be offered and discussed with families,” he said.

Crosby, who will be starting his career as an apprentice at Cromes-Edwards Funeral Home & Crematory in Sidney, Ohio, in January, believes that death needs to be an experience ... that families should be offered the opportunity to participate in the preparation and dressing of their loved one. “This is where we need to be headed,” Crosby said. “Let’s go back 150 years and get rid of the idea that death is scary. Let’s instead find ways to help people work with their deceased loved ones instead of on their deceased loved one. It’s a big difference.”
Nathaniel Mitchell
St. Petersburg College | St. Petersburg, Florida

When you’re looking for a job in your early 20s, working as a first-call escort for a funeral home can seem like a good idea.

That’s exactly what Nathaniel Mitchell thought when a friend called the then 22-year-old, saying he thought he would be a good fit for the position.

Mitchell agreed ... and for a year that’s exactly what he did.

Fast forward 11 years. Mitchell is still living in Oklahoma, but the job he held for a decade had hit a dead end. “I knew I needed to do something to support my family better,” Mitchell said.

That something, after much thought, was to enroll in mortuary school. “I liked working the first escort, and the more I began researching the schools offering mortuary programs, the more excited I got about my next career,” Mitchell said.

So, he headed off to St. Petersburg College in St. Petersburg, Florida, with his wife and two children.

Going back to school at first was nerve wracking, Mitchell said. “I was older than a lot of the other students, but I knew that I needed to do it to provide a better life for my family.”

Mitchell soon found himself balancing his family, school and a job at Anderson-McQueen Funeral and Cremation Centers. Mitchell started out doing removals; after about six months, when the firm saw a jump in the number of cremations being performed, he started working in the crematory.

“Nathaniel will never say no to me or his fellow workers,” wrote funeral director Ira Kirkwood in his nomination letter. “I am Nate’s manager, and I am so impressed with him. To me, he is my second in command.”

For example, Kirkwood wrote, the location’s bio-cremation machine was not working in early June. Nate took it upon himself to disconnect the part that was causing the delay; and he replaced the filter and now the machine is working,” Kirkwood said.

Since being Cremation Association of North America crematory operations certified, Mitchell now also works as a crematory operator at Anderson-McQueen. “I can say that he is very good with the cremation retorts,” Kirkwood said.

“I’ve been able to catch on to things quickly,” Mitchell said. “I like learning about new things, and when you combine that with the work ethic that was instilled by my father, I’m going to give it my best every time.”

That “giving my best” philosophy extends to his fellow students from the St. Petersburg funeral program. Students come to the location to learn about cremations, and in many cases, it is Mitchell who welcomes the students.

“One of the assignments for one of our classes is to witness a cremation from the start of the process until it is finished,” Mitchell explained. “I know what it’s like to be a student, so I share with them as much information as possible to help them fully understand the process.”

What sets Mitchell apart, Kirkwood said, is his willingness to help.

“There are times when our removal staff is extremely busy during the day. Nate will volunteer his time to help our removal personnel on house calls, hospital calls and nursing home calls. He always steps up to the plate to help others,” Kirkwood said. “He also works funeral services with our funeral directors. The funeral directors always ask him to conduct services with them. They enjoy his assistance.”

Having graduated in the spring, Mitchell is studying for the national board exams, working and spending time with his family.

“It’s not an easy balance, Mitchell acknowledges, and admits that sometimes he doesn’t know how he does it. “But you don’t think about it,” he said. “You just focus on your goal ... and keep going.”

That philosophy came in handy, Mitchell recalled, when he did his first removal for Anderson-McQueen.

“It was a decomposed body ... and the smell hit me when I walked in. My first thought was, ‘How am I going to do this?’” Mitchell recalled. “That was immediately followed by, ‘This is the career I’ve chosen, and this person needs to be handled with dignity.’ I haven’t questioned my career choice again.”

Mitchell makes it a point to avail himself of the opportunities afforded him. “Nate is so willing to learn everything about funeral services. He will come into our prep room facility and soak up as much knowledge as he possibly can. Nate helps us to dress bodies, place them in the casket, making sure that these loved ones are well taken care of,” Kirkwood said. “He exemplifies compassion to the public.”

Asked about his passion for funeral service, Mitchell explains it this way: “We are not doing this service for the company, but we are doing these services for the family. It really is about the families that we serve. If we are not in this ministry for the families, then we are on the wrong career path.”

This article originally appeared in the September 2018 issue of American Funeral Director, published by Kates-Boylston Publications, and is being shared with permission. Visit www.americanfuneraldirector.com to subscribe.
For as long as she can remember, Leana Faustino has wanted to help people.

But it was the death of a friend when she was 16 that set Faustino on the funeral service path.

“I clearly remember the way the funeral service was conducted and how comforting the funeral directors were to everyone,” the 22-year-old said. “Seeing how comforting, compassionate and caring they were in such a difficult time made me want to become a funeral director.”

Having graduated from St. Petersburg College earlier this summer, Faustino is one step closer to realizing her dream.

“Funeral service is so much more than what you read about in books,” she said. “Funeral directors are a special kind of people.”

It’s a lesson Faustino has learned first hand.

While attending school, Faustino has been working as a funeral attendant at Anderson-McQueen Funeral and Cremation Centers.

“Upon her hiring, she was very quickly thrown into multiple responsibilities at a particularly busy firm and took it all in stride,” Anderson-McQueen funeral director Amee Wojciechowski said. “With very little training, Leana has already become experienced dealing with grieving families, processing death certificates, working funeral services, and many clerical tasks vital to the funeral home’s operation.”

Unlike some of her peers, Wojciechowski said, Faustino has gained first-hand experience that mortuary school doesn’t necessarily prepare a person for. “She has taken charge and become an invaluable asset to our team,” Wojciechowski said. “Leana is extremely dependable, always willing to help out however and whenever possible. This dependability coupled with her dedication and willingness to master new tasks will make her a great asset to the funeral service profession.”

For Faustino, having had the opportunity to work while attending school, has provided the opportunity to take what she’s learned in school and apply it to real-world situations.

“It’s good to get your foot in the door, because it’s one thing to read something in a book, and something completely different when you have to put it to use,” she said. “The experience has been invaluable, and it’s only strengthened my resolve to be the best funeral director I can be for the families I will be serving.”

The next step for Faustino is her practicum and internship with Anderson-McQueen.

“We at Anderson-McQueen look forward to the day Leana can join our team as a licensed funeral director,” Wojciechowski said.
Joseph Strednak
Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science

Joseph Strednak has had only one job since his sophomore year in high school – working at the Patrick T. Lanigan Funeral Home in East Pittsburgh.

So, it’s hardly a surprise that the 23-year-old has set his sights on a career in funeral service.

“Pat (Lanigan) has buried all of my family,” Strednak said. “At my grandma’s funeral, we started talking (about funeral service), and in December 2010, I started working there part time … and I’ve been there ever since.”

What started out as just a job quickly turned into a deep appreciation for the work funeral directors do, and their impact on the families they serve.

“Honestly, it was seeing how my boss impacted the lives of thousands of families, that made me realize that I wanted to be a funeral director,” the 23-year-old said. “He pays so much attention to detail, and I carry that with me to this day. How he takes care of families, even down to the smallest detail, this is what I want to do with every family I serve.”

Not too many students have entered Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science with such experience, knowledge and affection for the funeral profession, noted Joseph Marsaglia, dean of faculty and students at PIMS.

“His (Strednak’s) initiative to better himself, his community and society has always been a priority,” Marsaglia wrote in his nomination letter. “Even before starting mortuary school, Joseph was a certified crematory operator.”

As president of the PIMS Student Senate, he has been a role model to his peers, always willing to help.

“I think it’s important that you give back in any way you can,” said Strednak, who is graduating this month. “It doesn’t take a lot to make a big difference in someone’s life.”

Strednak doesn’t just talk the talk. Beyond school and work, he is a member and Eucharistic minister at Good Shepherd Parish in Braddock, Pennsylvania, a member of the board of trustees for Italian Sons and Daughters of America (Forrest Hills Lodge #224), a volunteer for the east Pittsburgh Borough clean up and flower planting and an NCAA Division III basketball official.

“I think it’s important to have interactions with people outside of the funeral home,” Strednak said. “You want to make connections, be a smiling face outside the business. I think it can only help so when the time comes that a family needs your services, they will feel a little more comfortable because they know you.”

It also provides opportunities, Strednak said, for people to ask questions outside the formal setting of the funeral home. “I think for many people, they have a lot of questions, and they feel uncomfortable coming into a funeral home for answers,” he said. “But if they see you in a more relaxed setting, you’re more approachable. Just the other day, I had someone come up to me and ask about cremation ... and we had a nice chat.”

Strednak has worked to become the best funeral professional he can be.

When the Patrick Lanigan Funeral Home decided to open a crematory onsite several years ago, Strednak decided that it was important to be crematory operator certified.

“I think it’s important to be as educated as possible,” Strednak said. “Cremation is something that more families are opting for, so I wanted to make sure I had as much knowledge as possible.”

An emphasis on education also led Strednak to earn his bachelor’s degree in business management from Point Park University in Pittsburgh.

“The reason? “One day I would like to own my own funeral home,” he said. “And if I’m going to do that, I want to be able to do that well, and that means understanding the business side of operations.”

Strednak also credits Lanigan with helping round out his education and giving him so many opportunities.

“Mortuary school is great because it teaches you the technical side of the funeral service,” Strednak noted. “But having the opportunity to put that book knowledge to use on a regular basis, that’s a real bonus.”

As a first-generation funeral director, Strednak added that having the real-life experience before entering mortuary school gave him a different outlook. “For kids who have family in funeral service, they have a better knowledge of day-to-day operations,” Strednak said. “Funeral service is a 24-hour a day, 365-day-a-year business. Calls come at all hours of the day. The work isn’t easy, but it is rewarding.”

Marsaglia is confident that Strednak will one day become president of the Pennsylvania Funeral Directors Association, a position that Lanigan previously held, and one Patrick T. Lanigan Funeral Home supervisor Stephanie Doriguzzi currently holds.

While following in his mentor’s footsteps may be a long-term goal, Strednak’s feet are firmly planted in the present.

“I want to work on being the best funeral director I can be,” Strednak said. •

This article originally appeared in the September 2018 issue of American Funeral Director, published by Kates-Boylston Publications, and is being shared with permission. Visit www.americanfuneraldirector.com to subscribe.
Join us for the only conference in the deathcare profession designed for owners, executives & high-level managers.

ICCF
FALL MANAGEMENT
CONFERENCE
SEPTEMBER 26-28, 2018
The Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa
MANALAPAN, FLORIDA
Learn more at www.iccfa.com/fall