

# Profile

By Patti Martin Bartsche

## PREPARING FOR THE Next Generation

Monica Torres' road may have been a long and winding one, but the funeral director, embalmer, reconstruction specialist and founder of NXT Generation Mortuary Support is now exactly where she is supposed to be.



"It's been a series of experiences and events in life that have led me to this point," the 41-year-old Phoenix resident said. "Everything happens for a reason ... I truly believe that. I don't think I would be the funeral professional I am, the person I am, if I had taken a different path."

As a young girl growing up in Arizona, becoming a funeral director was not a career Torres ever considered.

While still in high school, Torres attended cosmetology school, and by 18 had started her own salon business.

Torres later enrolled at Arizona State University, graduating with a degree in recreation management with an emphasis in tourism and event planning.

Then she got married.

"I was a military wife for 10 years, and during that time I struggled to find work in recreation management," Torres said. "Each town we moved to, locals were hesitant to hire military because we moved around so much."

While she had trouble finding work in her profession, Torres noticed that every military town the couple lived in had a funeral home.

"I would often joke with my now ex-husband that I bet they would hire me," she laughed. "Of course, he thought I was crazy at the time."

But those casually made jokes over the years started to get Torres thinking.

"When I was growing up – and I never realized it then – I was different than the other kids," Torres said. "As a young child, my mom would send me to my aunt's ranch in the summer. I would always find dead animals and I'd be so curious about how they died. There was always a curiosity."

As a preteen, Torres began to draw dark images like skulls. "I remember my mom asking me why are you drawing things like that and not kittens and flowers," Torres recalled. "I really couldn't explain it; it was just natural to me ... it was


just very interesting to me."

And then at 21, Torres' grandmother died.

With her background in cosmetology, her family asked if she would be willing to do her grandmother's hair and makeup. Her grandmother, Torres added, had a distinct way of doing her hair and makeup, "and my family wanted to make sure my grandmother looked like herself."

"I remember it clearly," Torres recalled. "We went into the funeral home and it was the typical story ... my grandmother was laid out on a table and the room was dark and dimly lit."

Torres didn't question the trash bags her grandmother was laid out on, but rather got her supplies and went to work. "I remember looking up and seeing my family standing 8 to 10 feet away, with their arms crossed and looking very uncomfortable," Torres said. "But to me, it was just Grandma, and it was very natural for me."

A professional portrait of Monica Torres, a woman with long dark hair, smiling. She is wearing a grey blazer over a pink top and a necklace with a small pendant. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green foliage and a light-colored wall.

**Monica Torres is shaping the next generation of funeral service with the company she founded, NXT Generation Mortuary Support. (Photo credit: Patrick Madigan, Man in the Moon Studios)**





**Monica Torres, at the head of the table, meets with members of the Ohio Embalmers Association. (Photo credit: David Hicks)**

She hadn't had any experience working with a deceased person before, but for Torres, it was an overwhelmingly positive experience. "What I remember most was that it was a very healing experience ... a way that I could honor my grandmother."

The experience working with her grandmother soon had Torres thinking back to the death of her grandfather six years earlier. "When I saw him in the hospital, he was dying and looked like a skeleton ... he just didn't look like himself," she recalled. "For his funeral, though, the embalmer restored him so well ... he looked like himself."

After graduating from high school, Torres enrolled in ASU, lived at home, worked her spa business around her schoolwork, met her now ex-husband and fell in love.

Torres, who was planning to attend law school after graduation, instead got married and followed her pilot husband across the country for the next 10 years.

Somewhere along the line, though, her joke about working in a funeral home became something Torres seriously began to consider. "At the time of his last deployment we started

talking seriously about becoming a licensed funeral director," Torres recalled.

In 2008, she enrolled in Mesa Community College, graduating two years later with a degree in mortuary science.

Following graduation, Torres started her internship at Hansen Mortuaries in Phoenix. A progressive firm with strong leadership, Hansen's sent Torres to Hollywood, California, to train and take the instructor course with Dinair Airbrush Cosmetic Co. As a licensed cosmetologist, Torres wanted to learn more about the art of desairology, which involves caring for the hair, skin and nails of a deceased individual in a funeral home preparation room.

Inspired by what she had learned, Torres returned home and created a guided text and desairology course titled "Airbrush Artistry for Cosmetic Use in the Prep Room and Restorative Art." Accredited by the Arizona State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers, the course is still in use as an innovative training tool in desairology for embalmers and mortuary science students.

Torres, who was licensed as an em-

balmer in 2011 (and a funeral director a year later), traces her belief in the importance of embalming to her own life experiences, including the deaths of her grandmother and grandfather. "I realized deep down how important a well-presented body is, and how important it is for a family to see their loved one one last time," she said.

Although she was only 9 months old when her father, Raoul "Bully" Torres, died in a mining accident, and too young to remember the accident or the funeral, Torres grew up hearing the story about her father's funeral.

"He was very disfigured in the accident," Torres explained. "The funeral director, Sam Baca, who served my family, went out on a limb to provide an open-casket viewing. Because of the work he did, and because of the courage of my family, the entire town of Silver City, New Mexico, was able to say goodbye."

## Starting Over

By early 2014, Torres once again found herself at a crossroad.

"My divorce became final in December (2013), and I lost my best friend, my home, and my job within one

month,” she recalled. “I was in a time of uncertainty and was struggling to find my way.”

In what she can only describe as fate, Torres had previously purchased the book “Finding Your Strength in Difficult Times” by David Viscott for 25 cents at a yard sale.

“The morning I lost my job at a mortuary in Tempe, Arizona, I decided to open my own business,” Torres said. “At that time, I had made a list of different names and was trying to decide on one. That day my daily inspiration title in the book (‘Finding Strength’) was called the ‘The Next Step,’” Torres said. “The inspirational read was exactly what I needed, and I realized that I needed to be brave enough to take the next step to fulfill my dreams and create a new opportunity for myself.”

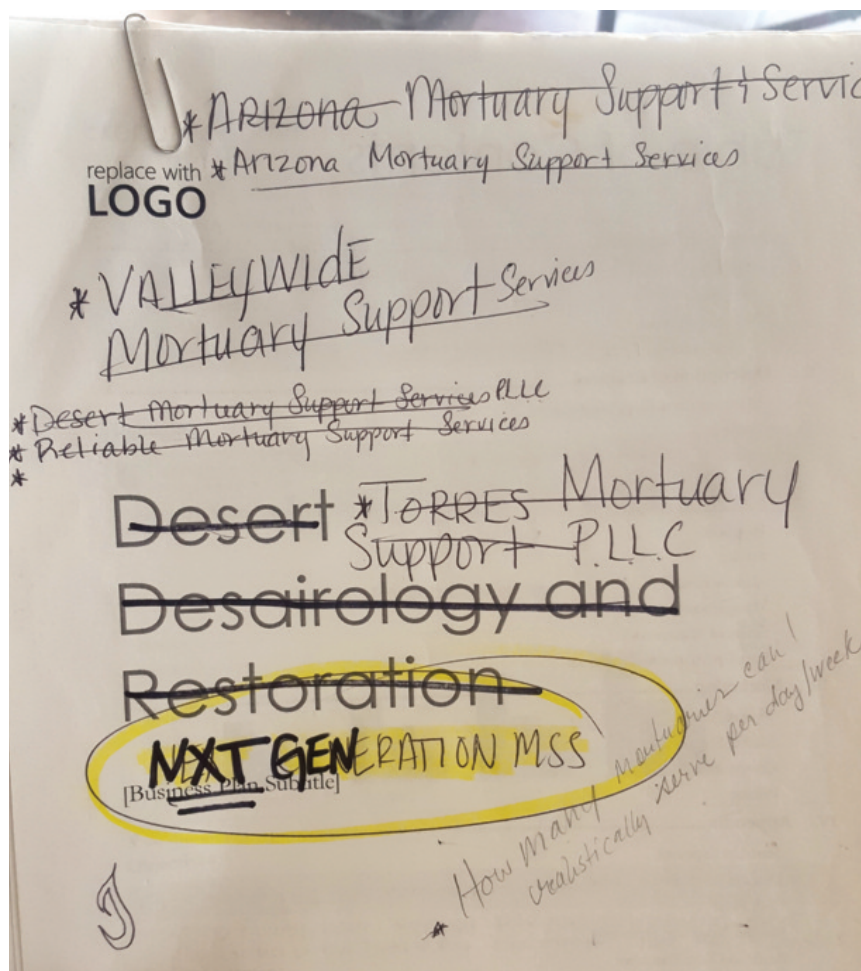
Part of taking that next step, Torres said, was settling on a name for her startup company.

“Thus, that NXT step I was taking in my life and my career would be reflected in the name of my business. Like so many modern funeral professionals, I am a first-generation funeral director, and I see myself as the NXT generation of funeral service,” she said. “As part of the Generation X, I feel we are the bridge between our past and our future. I wanted the name of my business to reflect that crossover. With those two ideas in mind, I settled on NXT Generation Mortuary Support.”

With NXT Generation Mortuary Support, Torres wanted to be able to offer services that she knew independent funeral homes were struggling to provide for themselves.

“I wanted to offer services that would be better outsourced,” she explained. “I am resourceful by nature – I believe in recycling and helping keep our earth lovely – so it just seemed natural for me to offer resourceful services that could provide staffing solutions for funeral homes needing an extra hand.”

In addition, Torres added, “I wanted to be able offer services that I had experience in like desaiology, as well as new and cutting-edge services like service dog rental.”



Monica Torres doodled a number of ideas for her new company's name before deciding on NXT Generation. (Photo courtesy of Monica Torres)

## Bringing the Past and Present Together

In establishing her new business, it was important that Torres also create a company motto that would more fully explain what she wanted to do.

*Bridging our past with our future* perfectly described what Torres wanted to accomplish.

“My company slogan is not only a reminder to my clients, but also to myself and my staff that I value our past and those professionals who paved the way for us, but that I also find great value in the future of funeral service and where the millennials are taking us,” Torres said. “As a Gen Xer, I definitely see myself as a bridge between our past and our future.”

Two years after founding NXT Generation Mortuary Support, Torres changed paths again.

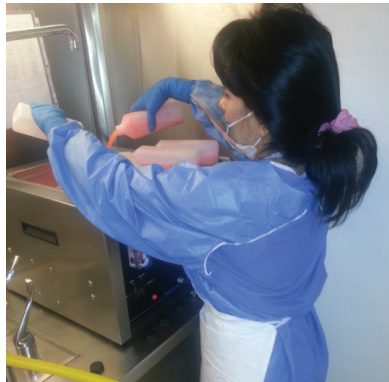
Early on, the Catholic Diocese in Phoenix became a NXT Generation client. After working with the diocese for three months as a contract trade embalmer, Torres was offered a full-time position as manager for Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery and Funeral Home. Six months later, she was promoted to general manager.

Torres knew that when she accepted the full-time position that things would have to change.

“I basically put my business on hold,” she said, adding that the management experience she knew she would receive was critical. “It is important to me that I learn and grow. The job has offered me new perspectives and experiences, allowing me to better understand funeral home owners and the challenges they face.”

Torres also went back to school in 2017, receiving advanced training in





**Monica Torres in action (from left) conducting a desairology webinar, mixing embalming fluid, helping family members dress a loved one during a family-assisted dress. (Photos courtesy of Monica Torres)**

postmortem reconstructive demisurgery at the Fountain National Academy of Professional Embalming Skills in Springfield, Missouri.

"I've been very lucky to have the most amazingly talented mentors that are truly ambassadors in our field, most notably Rachel Brown in Phoenix, and Vernie Fountain," Torres said. "Both have supported me, encouraged me to be creative and push the envelope when it comes to reconstruction and embalming."

### On the Move Again

Earlier this year, Torres decided to return full time to NXT Generation.

"The time was right," she said. "Funeral service is changing, and I want to be part of the solution."

"NXT Gen is here to offer support services for our industry, whether it is continued education and training opportunities or filling the gaps for staff solutions and program development," Torres said. "NXT Gen is a new type of trade specialty within our industry. Trade service isn't just embalming and shipping anymore."

Torres is passionate about her chosen profession, and believes funeral service needs to face its future eyes wide open.

And that includes cremation.

In this cremation-centric world, Torres pointed out, less attention is being paid to embalming.

"But it goes beyond just the embalming," she added. "The body itself has been forgotten about and keepsakes, receptions and merchandise has become the focus," she said.

"The worst part is that the consumer is not to blame. We have done this to ourselves by not offering services that are relevant and that revolve around the dead human body."

Torres is quick to add that she believes that a family viewing – whether there has been an embalming or not – is critical.

"After attending the Fountain Academy, I was able to fully grasp the importance of viewing and how that powerful experience helps us to find peace within our hearts," she said. "I personally feel it is the single most important service we offer to families. Without the dead human body, our industry would not exist. If there's anything I can drive home ... it is this fact."

That's why, Torres said, all of NXT Generation's accredited courses revolve around the future of embalming and a more progressive approach to preparing bodies for viewing.

"I saw a need for technical training and created the courses to help others who wanted to challenge themselves in the prep room," she said. "I wanted to bring the art of desairology out into the open within our industry and make courses available for others in our field."

It's what physically reminds families and friends of who we were in life," she explained. "Many women define themselves by the way they wear their hair and makeup, or if they choose, not to wear makeup at all. For men, it is equally important. The way they wear their facial hair or whether or not they manicure their hands or

what side they part their hair on. These are the things that we must recreate to provide a resemblance the family loves and remembers."

More than ever, with the transgendered population coming into the light, "it is important as embalmers that we understand the impact the art of desairology has on our industry and how people identify themselves," Torres said. "Desairology is the key to recapturing life's beauty in the face of death. It is not something that can be overlooked ... or rushed."

While Torres believes the majority of funeral professionals understand the importance of families seeing their loved one a last time, creating a pathway for family understanding can be challenging.

"We need to start getting comfortable with being uncomfortable and talking to families about embalming and final viewing options," Torres said.

Options, she added, like the family assisted dress experience, a service that NXT Generation offers funeral homes, as well as a course Torres teaches.

"I saw how families reacted to private ID views. I felt that our general standard of care for unembalmed bodies was substandard," Torres said. "I put myself in the families' place and immediately felt there was an opportunity to provide an alternative service that would not only recover revenue that was being lost through direct cremation, but I saw a golden opportunity to help guide families through a more meaningful

experience. For many families that private 15-minute identification is the funeral.”

### Making Her Mark

While Torres recognizes that funeral service has been slowly changing, she believes the time has come for the next generation of funeral service professionals to make their mark in time and evolve with the industry.

Asked what three things funeral directors should start doing right now, and Torres is quick to respond.

“Standing up for fair pay, getting prepared for issues revolving around the opioid crisis and issues related to transgendered persons, and becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable and talking to families about embalming and final viewing options,” she said. “That should be the starting point.”

Changes should also be introduced in mortuary schools’ curriculums to better reflect topics that are relevant to business today, Torres said.

Classes that she believes need to be considered include safety and best practices for lifting and manipulating human remains; managing stress and maintaining mental health for funeral directors and embalmers addressing sexual harassment; updating legal classes to reflect current issues such as gay marriages, transgendered persons and cremation law; desairology courses; and reconstruction courses with modern programs for donation and hard cases.

“Change can be hard, and it can be uncomfortable, but change is important – and necessary,” Torres said.

“I want our industry to evolve and continue to be respected,” she said. “I want to look back years from now and feel like I was a part of shaping something wonderful in American funeral service history. Someone has to be brave and take risks if we are going to help shape the future of funeral service; it is, after all, within our own power as funeral directors and embalmers. The future is what we make of it.”

### Looking Forward

Her road may have been long and winding, but Torres would not have wanted it any other way.

“Working in death care changes a person in many ways; it has taught me how important living in the moment really is,” Torres said. “I’ve worked very hard to get to this point in my career. I feel good about where I am at in my personal and professional life. I feel like I’m at a point where I am finally able to make an impact.”

Of course, Torres added, there are also hopes and dreams she’d love to fulfill, including creating an opportunity that would allow her to travel to funeral homes across the U.S. to offer support services.

Short term, though, Torres will continue to work meeting families and keeping an active role in the prep room and focus on new technical courses.

“Some of the courses I am working on now are preparation of unembalmed remains and raising the industry standard,” Torres said. “I’m also working on a controversial new course based in the art and science of embalming and reconstruction.”

The new course will include progressive embalming techniques for the modern consumer that includes postmortem breast augmentation, tummy tucks for posted cases, and cosmetic facial rejuvenation.

Long term, Torres said, she’s working on finding a path toward having the opportunity to serve at the port mortuary at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware.

“My mother has always been an influential presence in my life,” Torres said. “She’s always been a strong advocate in getting an education because no one can take that piece of paper away from you. That’s been driven home throughout my life and reminds me that the sky’s the limit. If you want something, you just need to find a way to go out and get it.”

And that, Torres said, is exactly what she plans to do. •



Monica Torres was awarded the Fountain National Academy of Professional Embalming Skills Distinguished Professional Service Medallion for her contributions to funeral service. (Photo courtesy of Monica Torres)