



Commentary by Kim Stacey, M.A., LFD, CGC

## EMPOWERING FAMILIES THROUGH FOCUSED EXPERIENCE

A few weeks ago I was delighted when I received an email from Monica Torres, a licensed Embalmer and Desairologist, asking if I could look over an article she was preparing for publication: *Desairology: The Embalmer's Unclaimed Art*. She also sent along some of her firm's promotional brochures as additional background.



I first met her in 2012 when she was awarded a scholarship offered by the (now defunct) *Association of Women Funeral Professionals*. Three years later, Monica now lives in Phoenix, Arizona, and is the owner/operator of *NXT Generation Mortuary Support Services, LLC*. As a licensed funeral director, embalmer and Desairologist, the support solutions she provides local mortuaries and funeral homes include

the obvious: funeral directing, trade embalming, restoration and reconstruction. And one of her brochures lists a service offering that caused my heart to skip a beat: “guided and assisted family participation dress sessions.”

But, I’m getting ahead of myself. Like you, perhaps, at the time I got that email I wasn’t confident I knew what Desairology even *was*, nor why embalmers would want to claim the

“art” as their own — or even why funeral home owner/operators should *care*. Now that I’ve got those things out of the way, I can move on to the real reason for this month’s column.

### What is Desairology?

I found the common definition of the term to be rather vague: “cosmetology for the deceased.” Here’s a more inclusive definition, which comes from the US Legal website ([www.uslegal.com](http://www.uslegal.com)): “The art of Desairology involves caring for the hair, skin and nails of the deceased in a funeral home preparation room. The specialty is performed by a Desairologist who is licensed in cosmetology under state law.”

But honestly, Monica offered the very best definition during our follow-up conversation: “Desairology is the *perfect marriage of embalming and cosmetology*. A true Desairologist uses embalming techniques to restore the skin and then uses a variety of cosmetology skills to restore the natural appearance of the deceased.”

### What can a Desairologist do for your firm?

Pulling from the article she wrote, I can tell you Monica believes the continuing decline in full “traditional” funeral services isn’t the result of economic forces, but rather the result of poorly trained funeral professionals: “I’ve heard a number of embalmers mention

that 'lack of time' is the reasoning behind poorly set features and over-cosmetized decedents. I used to think these embalmers did not take pride in their work. I have come to realize this is not the case. It is that simple fact they have little and/or no training in Desaiology."

And she's quick to say a licensed Desaiologist will provide firms with "the opportunity to recoup revenue that would otherwise be lost because embalming was not chosen, but to also offer families that special moment that will leave them with a positive lasting impression of their deceased loved one." Recouped revenue is always a good thing; but that "positive lasting impression" is a real brand-enhancer. Now the reason for writing this column: often, one of those positive lasting impressions is the direct result of Monica's orchestration of what she calls the *Assisted Family Dress Experience*.

Again, you might have to ask, *What is it?* "The *Experience*," wrote Monica, "offers families professionally guided assistance and one-on-one interaction with their deceased loved one. Families are encouraged to partake in dressing, cosmetizing, and styling the hair and nails of their loved ones." She designed this service, appropriate for both embalmed and unembalmed bodies, specifically for cremation families. And what do they think of it? "The feedback...has been overwhelmingly positive."

I've got to be honest — when I first read about the *Assisted Family Dress Experience*, I thought of my training as a *home funeral guide* with Final Passages (<http://www.finalpassages.org>), which was the focus of an article written in 2006 for *American Funeral Director*, "Can You Embrace the Home Funeral Movement?" Much of that training involved

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the same type of activities: guiding and assisting family members in the washing, dressing and casketing of their deceased loved one (all of which takes place in the home setting). Without doubt, I've found participants in the home funeral experience, whether immediate family or close friends, find the time they spend caring for the deceased to be emotionally very powerful and quite cathartic. I could only assume those who participate in Monica's *Assisted Family Dress Experience* feel the same way.

But the magic can only start if there's *willingness*. "When families first come in to the funeral home, I offer the opportunity to them. If they say yes, I ask them to bring clothing for the deceased, including undergarments. When they arrive for the session, the minimally prepared, partially dressed body is lying in state — not in the prep room where all is stainless steel, cold and clinical, but in a visitation room.

"Before anything else, we gather together in a conference room for a straightforward conversation about what they will see and do during the experience. I always counsel them beforehand — it's essential. This educational time prepares them for what they will experience, reduces their anxiety and lays the groundwork for a positive experience. I cannot express how important the 'counseling' part of the *Assisted Family Dress Experience* is. Preparation for families is *key* to creating a positive experience."

She explains how she will use professional mortuary cosmetics (what she calls "mortuary magic") to bring the person's appearance back to a lifelike state; it is then their opportunity to

assist her — or to assume a greater measure of control — in making the deceased "look like they love and remember," using commonly available cosmetic products (oftentimes those belonging to the deceased).

To protect the funeral firm, Monica always asks them to sign a waiver of liability before entering the visitation room. In a follow-up email, she wrote, "Some liability issues mortuaries need to consider are: *physical injury* (that's why the experience must be 'guided' by a licensed funeral director), *mental anguish*, *communicable disease hazards* and finally, *discrimination*, especially in regards to religion."

Upon entering the visitation room, participants find scented candles burning and soft music playing in the background. Monica provides everyone with gloves and protective clothing, but not everyone in a group has to participate. She has chairs and blankets close by in case some just want to watch.

"This experience is at the individual's comfort level; if someone only wants to watch me dress the deceased, that's fine. But if he or she wants to help, that's wonderful."

When someone is struggling with a task, she is quick to offer suggestions and assistance. And she confided, "During the dressing, I will manipulate the body, while they pull the clothing on."

The *Assisted Family Dress Experience* usually lasts 90 minutes, sometimes as much as two hours. Often, participants choose to linger; it seems once the appearance of the deceased is restored, they want to spend more time with them.

After facilitating approximately 20

such experiences, Monica realized, "There's such healing for the families." She confided one woman was rather surprised at the power within the event, honestly remarking, "I didn't even know I needed this." Being the smart woman she is, Monica started thinking: "This is a service that every mortuary can provide and charge for; simply put, this is a level of participation families want, and we should give it to them."

I believe the *Assisted Family Dress Experience* would appeal to anyone wishing more control over how their loved one's funeral arrangements unfold, anyone who wants to take charge and be responsible for their own family members, or who are looking for a more private and intimate way to care for a deceased loved one — and according to the 2012 *Funeral Service Foundation Study*, any one of those things describes today's consumer.

Monica agrees: "Most families will want a last opportunity to view their deceased loved ones...the way they love and remember them. It has been proven over time that funeral service, although constantly evolving, will never cease to be important to the human race. How we as funeral directors and embalmers shape the industry is within our own power." *MM*

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