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**REDEFINING THE GOOD LIFE**  
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**THIS MONTH'S FEATURES**

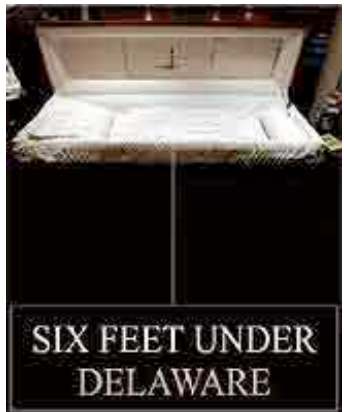
**Funeral Homes in the First State**

**SIX FEET UNDER DELAWARE**

*By Sheri Rehwoldt*

Even if you don't have cable TV, surely your radar has picked up on the latest dysfunctional family drama gripping the nation: HBO's *Six Feet Under*, about a family-owned funeral home in Los Angeles.

The story lines revolve around two sons struggling to manage the family business after their father is killed while running an errand in the family hearse. One son (David) is gay; another (Nate) is terrified of death and fled the business years ago. And their restless little sister (Claire) is not above stealing a body part to prove a point. The sizzle of sexual tension is always waiting to claim stage center, but glimpses into the world of caskets, embalming and restorative makeup have generated plenty of interest, too, and have much to do with keeping viewers hooked.



"When other kids my age were going to frat parties," says David in an early episode, "I was draining corpses and refashioning severed ears out of wax."

Local funeral directors, like Rick Bryson of Matthews-Bryson Funeral Home in Smyrna, are generally pleased with how the show depicts them. "People have this perception that we're creepy," Bryson says. "Well, we're not. One of the best things "Six Feet Under" does is portray funeral directors as real people with real lives. We're not the mechanical robots some people think we are."

Yet in some ways they do resemble the Energizer Bunny. A one-man show, Bryson estimates that he invests 40 to 50 man-hours per funeral. He's always on call—even on his birthday and Christmas. The requirements of the grief-management business are demanding, no doubt about it, and it's not a good career choice for those needing set hours, says Katherine Rice, one of 10 funeral directors employed by McCrery Funeral Homes, Inc. in Wilmington. "It's more like working a regular job, then setting your alarm clock for 2 a.m., putting your clothes on, going to a diner and having an intelligent conversation, going back home, taking your clothes off, going back to sleep, then getting up and going to your regular job."

Rice always wanted to be part of the industry. What enticed her, she says, were the stately exteriors of columned buildings and the poised staff.

After five years in the business, Rice knows the façade of serenity in a funeral home veils a bevy of activity. McCrery's received approximately 600 service calls last year. On any given shift, Rice may transport or embalm a body, prepare for a viewing and meet with family members. But for her, the addiction of the job is stronger than the drawbacks. "This is a business," she admits, "but it's also so much more. We really care about

the experience. And the best part is helping people; we try to make a bad situation a little more bearable.”

Rice has seen a half-dozen episodes of *Six Feet Under*, enough to know the content is more hype than substance. But she enjoys watching Nate’s blunders. Poor Nate has so much to learn. Once, instead of taking a body directly from the hospital to the funeral home, he stops for a leisurely chat with his girlfriend. He finally makes the delivery, leaving someone else to deal with a body that has stewed a while in its own juices.

As Rice explains, once a heart stops beating, blood begins to settle in the parts of the body closest to the ground. Livor mortis, or purple-red discoloration of the skin, appears within minutes to hours. So the more quickly embalming occurs, the better the presentation in an open casket. Embalming is not required by law, and even with the chemical additives, decay still occurs within weeks. “[Body] juices get corrosive,” explains Rice. “The second you die you begin decomposing. Embalming just retards it.”

Fingering a tray of cosmetics, she unscrews a container of tangerine-colored goop. “This gives everyone a nice pinky glow,” she explains. There’s also wax to fill cuts and abrasions, and a finishing powder that Rice estimates is 30 years old. “We don’t use much of the powder anymore,” she says. “Years ago the person looked very made up. Now it’s natural.”

Numerous other changes in the industry have occurred as well, says funeral director Gerry Givnish. With his four brothers, Givnish owns and operates 36 funeral homes in Delaware, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. “Funeral director [by definition] means telling others what to do; we don’t do that any more,” says Givnish. “Now we’re facilitators. We give families options.”

Baby boomers have led the charge towards personalization. They’re no longer willing to settle for a cookie-cutter approach to funeral services. “It’s changed what the funeral means today,” Givnish adds. “They all want to celebrate lives rather than focus on death.”

He offers as an example the funeral of a friend recently killed by a car as he walked to work. His Harley Davidson motorcycle was so important to him that the family decided they wanted the casket engraved with the Harley shield. “Harley allowed us to use it, specifically for this purpose,” says Givnish. “It was also embroidered on the casket linens. And we placed it in the back window of the hearse during the drive to the cemetery.”

Rice, too, has had family members roll Fatboys through the double doors of the McCrery Funeral Home chapel. “They can pretty much bring whatever they want to in here,” she says. “It’s their service. When it comes to funerals, people think they have limited choice, but it’s not true.”

Personal props aren’t diminishing the sanctity of the service, Givnish feels. They’re making it more meaningful.

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Pre-planning a funeral is another rising trend. And more Delawareans are becoming comfortable with the idea. Pre-planning doesn't have to include pre-payment, but with the cost of funerals averaging between \$6,000 and \$10,000, many want the security of knowing the funds will be there. The trend has been growing for at least 10 years, particularly within the senior market, says Timothy Meyers, a funeral director with Beeson Memorial Services in Newark and Wilmington. "We get people walking in about six times a month to pre-arrange. Children often come in for their parents who are entering nursing homes," he says. "They approach us for peace of mind."

Real peace of mind, however, will only be achieved when relatives of the deceased learn if a funeral home invested those pre-paid dollars wisely, and if the policy kept pace with inflation.

Pre-planning is not without other headaches. The spectrum of casket choices and accessories is truly daunting; it's almost too much to take on. "There's information overload in most casket rooms," admits Givnish. Caskets come in wood, bronze, copper and steel and are priced from \$500. A gorgeous, top-of-the-line model in Beeson's showroom runs around \$28,000. But the law also allows relatives of the deceased to cart in a casket they bought somewhere else—without incurring a surcharge from the funeral home.

"I always say the casket chooses you," says Rice.

The alternative to choosing a casket is to select a burial or keepsake urn. And then there are the wind chimes, paperweights and jewelry—true works of art—designed to hold a smidgeon of cremation ashes. It's surprising how popular these keepsakes have become, how comforting they are to grieving relatives.

Of the nearly 9,000 people who died in Delaware in 2001, 20 percent were cremated, says the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA). By 2010, that figure is expected to escalate to 35 percent.

Two reasons for the growing popularity of cremation are its simplicity and eco-friendliness. There's no mucking about with body fluids, unless the body is embalmed first. And the process is certainly straight-forward: A body is secured within a box or casket and placed in an oven capable of reaching 2,500 degrees. Several hours later, the body is reduced to six to nine pounds of bone fragments. These are processed into smaller pieces by a Cuisinart-type blade. The "cremains" are then packaged in a cardboard box or previously selected urn and returned to the family.

Direct cremation (cremation soon after death without embalming) is the least costly service a funeral home offers. For less than \$2,000, area funeral directors will transport, sanitize and shelter a body overnight, as well as take care of any necessary permits. Urns cost extra, of course, and a crematory will charge its fee to do the actual cremation (Direct Cremation Service of Delaware in Wilmington charges \$250). Additional cemetery costs will be tacked on if the ashes are buried or entombed in a cemetery.

One reason cremation lags in popularity, says Givnish, is that some clients can't decide what to do with the ashes. "I'd say 50 percent of our families are choosing to have the ashes buried, 30 percent are being scattered and 20 percent are in an urn somewhere in the family home."

Like most funeral directors, Bryson doesn't have a crematory in his funeral home—but then, he does live there. That makes Bryson something of an oddity in the funeral business. Most funeral homes across the nation have become strictly commercial structures. "We're a dying breed, if you'll excuse the pun," says Bryson. "I like to joke that I have the shortest commute."

Bryson sees nothing strange in sharing his home with dead bodies. It's not like he cuts through the embalming room to get to the family kitchen; his work and living areas are in separate parts of the house.

Bryson followed his father into the funeral business after studying to be a teacher. In many ways, he's making the same moves his grandfather made 80 years ago when he established the business. On occasion, Bryson hungers for a bit of the angst and intrigue that seem to find David and Nate in every episode. The reality is that it's a very unglamorous line of work. "I've never had a funeral for a porn star," he says, recalling one of the TV show's more memorable story lines.

But Bryson is quick to add that he wouldn't trade occupations if given the chance. He has the best of both worlds, he says. He gets to spend his days—and nights—doing work that he enjoys, and he has the satisfaction of knowing that others truly appreciate his efforts.

The funeral business functions within an aura of serenity, he adds, but there are always opportunities for a laugh. A well-primed sense of humor is the secret behind every funeral director. It's what enables them to be pillars of strength for grieving families.

Meyers agrees, but adds that sometimes it's an unexpected screw-up that give grievors an opportunity to chuckle during their darkest hour.

He recalls one funeral procession that did just that. "It was a funeral for a friend's grandmother," he explains. "It was a very long procession. A car cut in about six or seven cars from the front. My friend wasn't paying a lot of attention, so when that car later pulled into a shopping center, he followed—as did the rest of the procession." Meyers laughs, remembering the challenge of getting the cars back on track. "It lightened up the whole funeral; it made it a jovial experience. People still talk about it."

***Out & About***

