

“Any day above ground is a good one”

A Conversation with the National Museum of Funeral History’s Director, Genevieve Keeney

Robert L. Waltrip founded the National Museum of Funeral History in 1992 in order to “educate the public and preserve the heritage of death care.” Waltrip’s family founded the Heights Funeral Home in Houston, Texas, and Waltrip became director upon his father’s untimely death. He expanded the business, Service Corporation International, into what is today, the largest funeral service corporation in the country. Having witnessed the variety of traditions, customs, and rituals that accompany funerals and the funeral industry, Waltrip felt it was important to open a museum to showcase how they have evolved over time.

On September 20, 2008, Genevieve Keeney, the director of the National Museum of Funeral History, sat down with Anna Burke Herrera to discuss the history of Houston’s funeral museum.

Anna Burke Herrera (AB): What are some of the more popular exhibits that you have in the museum?

Genevieve Keeney (GK): “The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” ... We have a TV that displays the changing of the guard, which is a very ceremonial period that happens throughout the day there. It is very structured and disciplined and touching. ... Another popular one is the “Presidential Museum,” [which] displays all the different presidents throughout time starting with Washington. Of course we don’t have [artifacts for] all of them, but we do have the memorial folders or the newspaper articles or some of the actual artifacts from that president’s funeral. We do have some of the artifacts from some of the most recent presidents, and we are expanding that now, so that we can make

This authentic uniform was worn by a member of The Old Guard while on duty at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, D.C.

All photos courtesy of the National Museum of Funeral History.

room for Gerald R. Ford and for our future presidents, President Clinton and the Bushs. Another one is “Funerals of Famous.” ... We do have Princess Grace of Monaco’s hearse. That was put on loan to us. Then we have different memorial cards and folders that are handed out at the ceremonies of the different funerals of the famous. Of course our hearses are always popular too because we have a large collection of hearses throughout time [including the one used in the funerals for presidents Ford and Reagan] ...

AB: What were the early hearses like?

GK: [Our] original hearse is believed to be from the 1800s and it is horse drawn, of course, it has glass sides to it, and it has what they called feather plumes that are on the top ... More plumes [meant] that you had [a] higher status in society ... The black plumes were always reserved for the men and the white for the women and children. It’s got curtains around it and [it is only] big enough for pretty much a casket. ...

When they changed from horse drawn hearses into motorized hearses, basically what they did when the Ford pick-up truck came out, they would take the top off the horse drawn carriage and they would [put it on] the back of the truck ...

AB: What cultures does the museum cover?

GK: It covers the American culture of course mainly. ... But we do have a Japanese hearse, we have two German hearses, and now we have an international portion [of the museum] that we have just created. That covers Italy, of course because of Rome, “Celebrating the Life and Deaths of the Popes,” and we are also now covering Mexico. We have Ghana, West Africa.

AB: What are some of the most unusual exhibits that you have had on display here? I noticed that you had the Snow White casket.

GK: Yeah, [we have] the Snow White, [but] the money casket



The Presidential Exhibit has an exact replica of the Derringer pistol used by John Wilkes Booth in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.



gets a lot of publicity. The money casket was a big hit because it just shows that you *can* take it with you. [People] say, “You can’t take your money with you.” But yes, in retrospect you can, and somebody actually had their money encased into a casket. A little over \$1,000 was in it originally. It actually had money in the inner lining as well, but that got stolen. [*Houston, Over the Top* with Debra Duncan – 2007 to 2008] did a segment [about] the most expensive funeral. We are not allowed to divulge that information because of client privilege confidentiality.



You CAN take it with you! This custom-made casket features authentic dollar bills and coins.

AB: Could you tell me about your timeline exhibit, beginning with the Egyptian exhibit?

GK: Embalming started with the Egyptians. They master crafted the technique of preserving the body. ... Thomas Holmes, who is the father of American embalming, ... was a doctor. His main goal was to come up with a technique to ... preserve the body long enough to get the soldiers from the Civil War off the battlefield and back home for a proper burial. ... They used the gravity bottles to get the fluid into the body. Now we have the machines that do it for us. Once Dr. Holmes created the concept and came up with the idea, then it became common practice. Now-a-days, with the increased transportation abilities there are no embalmers on the battlefield. Sometimes a body can take the fluid



A replica of King Tut's sarcophagus.

very well and you can open it up twenty years [later] and they are still there. ... It's the sealed gasket casket. It's put into a vault. It's kept from any air or water or any kind of element being able to get to it. A whole bunch of different elements combine to really preserve a body in pristine state, it's not just the embalming fluid alone.

AB: Can you tell me about the three person casket?

GK: The three person casket was designed for a husband and wife who had lost their child, and they were so grief stricken that they wanted to follow the child in death. They went to the nearest casket maker and asked him to please create a triple casket large enough for the three of them to be buried together. They were going to do a murder/suicide. ... By the time the casket was near completion, the grief period had passed and the mother and father went their separate ways. The casket was never picked up. When the casket company closed, they still had this casket in their inventory and they donated it to us, along with the story.

AB: Do you have any glass caskets here?

GK: Yes we do have two glass caskets. We have the replica of the casket [from] the movie, *Sleeping Beauty*. Then we have another glass casket made of very thick glass. That was basically a concept that someone had created, ... [but] the idea never took off. I think a lot of people were leery of its functionality.



Known as the “Piscatory Ring” or “Ring of the Fisherman,” this replica of the gold ring seal of Pope Benedict XV is inscribed “Benedictus P.P. XV.” It features a bas relief depiction of St. Peter casting his net from a fishing boat, as was his occupation. Because the apostles were known as “fishers of men (Matthew 4:19),” the ring

signifies the role of St. Peter as the original head of the organized Catholic Church. Its origin dates back to 1265, and in modern times, the ring is used to seal important correspondence of the pope accompanied by his signature known as “briefs.”

AB: Can you tell me about your 1860 German Glaswagen Funeral Coach?

GK: We have this wonderful gentleman who is on our board, Buck Kamphausen, [who] collects cars and ... he has some of the German hearses. [The wheels] are not straight. They are angled so that the hearse can maneuver the cobblestones, [which was the only significant difference between American and European hearses.]

AB: You have the JFK “Eternal Flame” here I understand.

GK: It's from the Arlington National Cemetery. They have the real one there, basically they switched [it] out when Mrs. Kennedy died. They had to unearth everything and they switched out all the mechanisms. ... It's a more modern eternal flame that is sitting there and [we have] the old one. Arlington National Cemetery asked if we wanted it to put it in our Presidential exhibit. It is just a nice tribute to go along with [JFK's replica] casket that we have.



The collection represents the single largest assemblage of fantasy coffins outside of Ghana. Each is designed to capture the essence of the departed - be it a character trait, an occupation, or a symbol of one's standing in the community. Ghana's most noted designer coffin maker, Kane Quaye, began crafting "Fantasy Coffins" more than thirty years ago at his dying uncle's request for a special coffin. Because his uncle was a fisherman, Quaye built him a coffin in the shape of a fishing canoe. The National Museum of Funeral History is the first to display these pieces as coffins instead of art.

AB: Can you tell me a little bit about the Pope exhibit?

GK: That is "Celebrating the Lives and Deaths of the Popes." It was inspired by ... the funeral of Pope John Paul II, the process of it, the ceremonial portion of it, and the whole fact that so many people were moved by it. We thought it would be really, really neat to do an exhibit ... to showcase such an extravagant event as that. I think that when people come to the museum they can actually relate to [the exhibit] because it affects the people in our time, something that they can feel and remember. It's kind of like the *Challenger* [space shuttle] or Princess Diana, ... something that people these days are familiar with. It's been three years in the making. It took two years to get approval from the Vatican so that they may open their doors to us and allow us to 1) get permission to even have this type of exhibit, and then 2) to be able to have access to some of the artifacts and the behind the scene photos ... so that we could actually do the exhibit justice and give it the respect and honor that it deserves.

AB: What is your "Reflections on the Wall" exhibit?

GK: The "Reflections on the Wall" ... traveled around the U.S. for eight years. It is now on permanent loan to us from the Smithsonian. [We have] the actual original photos that were taken at the dedication ceremony of the "Reflections of the Wall" for the Vietnam Memorial wall. That's how our museum got built by the generosity of the people saying "Here, I think this needs to be showcased rather than thrown away."

AB: Can you tell me about the museum consulting on several film, television, and print productions?

GK: A lot of our pieces have been rented out by some of the different producers ... for prop purposes. The pilot for *Six Feet Under* was one of the film productions that our museum was instrumental [in. We] helped them to name the funeral home. ... A lot of family homes are best known by the name of the owner. [We made] sure that the props that were within it, like the bottles and stuff like that, were correctly labeled and that they portrayed the correct information. *The Women of Independent Means* that was directed by Sally Fields, [we helped] her to do some informational portions within that movie. ... They consult to make sure that the information they are presenting is correct. We get a lot of people that call us - I have a book called *The History of American Funeral Directing*. That is my dictionary, or my bible, or my encyclopedia, if you will, to make sure that when people call and ask questions about certain things in history that we give them the accurate information.

AB: Are there any other exhibits you would like to talk about?

GK: The "Funeral Bus" I think is interesting. [It] was constructed in San Francisco, California. Instead of having that long drawn out funeral procession of cars, they create[d] a bus long enough to carry the body and the entire family. ... When it was going up the steep hills, ... the bus kind of tipped back and they realized it wasn't going to work.

Items showcased in "Celebrating the Lives and Deaths of the Popes" are: behind the scenes photos inside the altar of St. Peters; never before seen photos of Pope Pius; the sash of Pope John Paul II worn daily, stains and all; the original book of all the front pages of *Reservoir Romany*, the Vatican's newspaper; an original uniform from The Papal Gentleman and the Saviatti, the Pope's pallbearers; the prayer book from the funeral mass; a replica casket; and a replica of Pope John Paul II's crypt in The Gratta.

We had a *Wizard of Oz* exhibit that used to be up for the coroner, the little coroner guy — we have a mannequin. [Reopening in the “Thanks for the Memories” exhibit, summer 2012.] Basically it was just pictures of the movie *Wizard of Oz* and the coroner himself that went out and pronounced “the wicked witch is dead.” He did a signing of posters from the *Wizard of Oz* ... Death even happens in the Disney movies.

We have a nice collection of mourning clothing ... and a Rolls Royce hearse [now on display also] ...

AB: Does the museum offer workshops?

GK: I have a couple of workshops that I want to get going ... like “Day of the Dead.” I think it would be really neat to have a little workshop for the kids [to] make sugar skulls because then you are learning about the tradition of it and the significance of the sugar skull. I also want to do some grief workshops, bereavement workshops that allow people to come together in one location [and] realize they are not alone in their grief process. [I] want to have different workshops that allow people to come together as a community and realize that what they are going through is normal and is not affecting just them.

AB: Do you see a lot of emotional responses to some of your exhibits?

GK: A lot of times the emotion starts at the front door and they never come in. I have experienced that where some patrons were on a tour group, like a senior tour group and they weren’t told they were coming here and they drive in and they realize [it] and then they sit out front. ... Sometimes I’ll see it with parents. They will call ahead of time, “Is it okay for us to bring our kids.” I think a lot of it is just people don’t really understand what is really behind the walls. ... People will ask “Do you have bodies in there?” “No, we don’t have bodies in here.” Sometimes people think we are funeral home instead of a museum. ... But we get a lot of educational tours in here, schools, nursing schools. There is emotion, but I think a lot of it is the emotion stops the minute they walk in and they see it’s just a bunch of cars. ... Then all of a sudden their whole attitude changes and the emotions go on the wayside.

AB: Can you tell me a little bit about the demographics of your visitors?

GK: I was amazed at how many senior busses came. But very rarely do we see kids. I’ve been seeing more high schools come here because it is a potential profession, nurs-



Ofrendas (altars) were created during Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) to honor departed loved ones. Ofrendas were adorned with items reminiscent of their time on earth.

ing schools because it’s anatomical. ... Then, of course, we have the funeral students that come through here. ... We do have people who are travelers, tourists that come in, and we get them from all over.

AB: What is the most important thing that you want people who have never come to this museum to know?

GK: To know that death is not something to be feared, but something to be embraced and that it is a tradition, it is a custom and it should be celebrated by everybody. My goal is to be a death education advocate and utilize this as my platform to allow people to come here and learn how to embrace death, learn that death isn’t scary. [To] learn that this isn’t a bad place. Everybody is going to get effected by it one day. So why not learn on how to best handle it?

AB: What do you find is the most rewarding about being the director here?

GK: Being able to create new exhibits and really let people know that death is normal, death is natural, death is okay. ... My goal is to allow people to not only learn about other cultures, [but to] be more open to other people’s beliefs and their religions and their customs and courtesies surrounding the way that they celebrate death.

The National Museum of Funeral History is located at 415 Barren Springs Drive, Houston, Texas 77090. The museum is open Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and Sunday 12:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Admission: Adults, \$10.00; Seniors/Veterans, \$9.00; Children (under 12), \$7.00; Children (under 3), free. For more information visit www.nmfh.org, or call 281-876-3063.