

Interview with Al Lineberry, afc2016037_03980

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Interviewed by Sarah Bryan at Hanes-Lineberry Funeral Home, Greensboro, North Carolina

Sarah Bryan: Let me ask you for the recording to introduce yourself and tell me where we are.

AL: I'm Al Lineberry with the Hanes-Lineberry Funeral Homes, in Greensboro, North Carolina.

SB: And how long have you been in this field, and what got you started?

AL: I have been in it for 48 years. My father had it since 1955, and Mr. Hanes, Henry Hanes, started it in 1919. So it's been almost two hundred (laughs) – almost a hundred years in existence.

SB: In Greensboro the whole time?

AL: In Greensboro. We've had five different locations as we move and things change.

SB: Can you tell me a bit about the history of the early locations, some of the—

AL: Well, it was first on a street called Sycamore Street, which is really the center of downtown. And then we moved to, Mr. Hanes moved to, the corner of West Market Street and Eugene Street, which is next to the courthouse, federal courthouse downtown. He was going to move out further on West Market Street, but he died in 1947, and betwixt and between, as I said, Dad came in 1955 and purchased the majority stock in the company, which was pretty well on its way out of business, really. So he worked hard [motorcycle noise outside] and we built another location on Vanstory Street here in Greensboro, second location. Then he purchased another funeral home in Greensboro, which was the Murray Funeral Home. Then I purchased a funeral home down on the East Coast, and one up in Rockingham County. But this has been kind of the main location here, at North Elm Street, for all these years.

SB: How did your father come to this field, to the profession?

AL: Ah, you get into a religious question there. Dad was born in Memphis, Tennessee. The Lineberry family actually is from this area, in Guilford County and Randolph County area. His dad was a mechanic on a steamship. He had a third-grade education and was the one who'd straighten out the shafts on the steamboats. So

anyway, Dad's mom died at an early age, and Granddad died, buried somebody additional, and they had a couple children. And Dad I think got to where he didn't want to live at home anymore – at 18 years old, from what I can recall. Moved to Burlington with an aunt. He had nothing to do, he had one year of college I think, a little bit of one, and he was walking by a funeral home by the name of Rich Thompson Funeral Home in Burlington, and he said he felt a magnetic pull [to] go in there and ask for a job. And he got a job. Try to make a long story short, he applied for an educational scholarship to the National Foundation of Funeral Service, which was in Evanston, Illinois, part of Northwestern University. And he did win that. Oh, about that time he went to Asheville, after Burlington, got a job there, then he got the scholarship. And Mrs. Hanes had married Mr. Bell, asked dad to kind of manage this place for her. He said, "I'm not managing. I'll be glad to buy your interest in it." So he did, and came here, and expanded quite a few times since then. Did that make any sense?

SB: Yeah, absolutely. I'm interested what you described as the magnetic pull. Did he describe that in more detail when he talked about it?

AL: Ah, well, it's called ESP – extra spiritual push, or extra spiritual pull. He was not religious, he had somewhat of a religious background growing up, a Christian background. I'm going to tell you an intimate detail. In Asheville, he married Mom in Asheville, and they entertained a lot. I was probably about seven years old, [Mom had just had it?] with not the partying part, but the drinking part. A little conversion in your life, actually. He became very involved in the First Baptist Church in Asheville, and when he came to Greensboro he became very involved in First Baptist here.

[00:05:00] And in the Baptist Convention he was the first moderator who was not a minister. And all throughout his life things happened, and you sit back and say, "Wow. How did it happen, and why?" You know, hindsight gives you all kind of good insights. It's just driven.

SB: Yeah. I very much believe in that.

AL: He was a great mentor. Mom and Dad both were incredible.

SB: So was there a great sense of ministry in his work, then?

AL: He felt called into this work, if you will. And I think we all are probably guided in a certain direction, if you kind of open up and let whatever skill levels you have work. In my own life, I was going to go to law school, and just got fed up with school, and came and asked Dad for a job. He said, "Well, oh. Okay." [Laughs] But he started me at the very, very bottom. And, matter of fact, when I came out of college the Vietnam War was going on and I was drafted, and didn't make the draft, so he started me out making less than what I would have made had I gone into the military. So

anyway, I've been blessed the whole way through, and married, family, and all that. So it's been good.

SB: Can you tell me about your process of learning when you – Well actually, before that, if I can back up, what were your memories and impressions of the business and the work before you joined it?

AL: Well, you know, you do your summer jobs and things. In another location, on Market Street, we had this hallway with a ramp going up, like for wheelchairs and things, and it had inside walls. I had to scrub those walls in the summertime, and that was a really – I didn't enjoy that a whole lot. And putting up tents at cemeteries, and you know, doing this, that, and the other. The bits and pieces that everybody in the world doesn't realize that funeral directors do, and all the hours that go into a service, are much more than just having the funeral, going to a funeral. So like any profession, if it looks like it's easy, somebody's in the background doing an awful lot of work, detail work. And that's, our profession is very much that way.

SB: And when you joined, what was your learning process, your training, like?

AL: Well, you learn to be very punctual. A lot of professions don't have to have that punctuality, and you learn to listen a whole lot, and not make judgements, and learn to ask questions that are pertinent to what you're trying to do and get the family at ease. You want to learn about the family, and that takes – Dad told me it'll take you five years to kind of get comfortable with that, and he was absolutely right. But I had some incredible mentors here, and everybody helped each other, looked after each other, had each other's back type thing. And you know, service is the only product we sell. Casket's incidental, and urns are incidental to the whole thing. So service is where he was, and I am too, very sensitive.

SB: Who were some of those mentors, in addition to your father?

AL: Oh, there was Norman Yates, Roy Heikle, Bob Hunter, Lee Powell – god – Gene Dodson. There are just, there are so many. We've got, with our cemeteries and funeral homes, got a staff of about thirty people. Each one offers something to you. A guy named Red Greer, Claude Greer, was hugely influential on me and he'll never know it. He came to Dad for a job and he hadn't finished high school, and Dad had always said himself that "I will never hire anybody that's not a high school graduate." And he broke his rules there and he hired Red. He saw something in him that I don't think Red even knew was there. He said, "Red, I will hire you on one condition: you get your GED within a year." And so he did get a GED, and Dad sent him off to school to get an Associate Degree-type thing in funeral service.

[00:10:00] And Red was a very passionate person, compassionate, artistic. He played the Hawaiian guitar in bands. That's just part-time stuff, but he knew how to build relationships as anybody I've ever seen, and families who used his services just thought the rest of us were bad. Not bad, but not as good as Red. And that was a really big event in my life, because I was probably 12 or 13 years old when Dad hired him. And then Dad hired some people—he could read people really well, knew how to guide them through a process of learning. Dad was also superintendent of the public schools during the segregation issues, and I think his ability to work and read with people and communicate helped—I know it helped this area a whole lot. So.

SB: Those all sound like really special people, remarkable men.

AL: Yeah.

SB: I was going to ask—oh, oh, yeah. The notion of, well what your dad told you about its taking five years to—

AL: Well, you feel comfortable in relating to people, understanding people. We also had a, basically a two-week seminar that half the staff would go to one week and half the next, and it was—trying to remember the name of it now—“Life Appreciation.” And that event was a 40-hour workshop, away from here, and you couldn't go home, you had to stay in a motel while the content was going on. And you learned—they introduced you to those people you didn't know in your same field of work, wherever you were, that wanted to participate, and you'd get with other people, and socializing, and about midway through you start talking about each other, what I see in you and how attentive you are, or whatever it is. And then you go through your own death. You lie down on the floor and put a sheet on you. So you can't say anything but the others are talking about you, like, “Oh my gosh, he died! I'm going to miss him!” or “her.” And all of a sudden you see the person under the sheet start to cry. They shake a little bit. Because you don't know the impact you had on other people. When you listen and get to empathize, how important that is in our work. That was a key growing moment for me and all the other staff that was here.

SB: Sounds like a great exercise.

AL: Yeah! It was.

SB: Is that still done?

AL: Ah—the gentleman that started it retired. I mean, I'm 70, and he's got to be 80. So I don't think that's still going on. I haven't heard anything lately. But it was a nice turning point for most of our staff.

SB: Let me ask you to talk a bit about how things may have changed in the field over the course of your career.

AL: Well, of course the biggest change has been from burial to cremation. When I first started there was no cremation in this area whatever, and now it's probably about 48% of the families we serve will have the person cremated. And the reality is, it's the body that you're doing something with. The reality is it's the emotional, intellectual conflict that people in the grief mode are going through, and learning how to help them understand that and go through, get the task-y things done in order to build up to a service that has meaning and purpose to it, so the person can start reentering a new life the next day. It's the transition is – the first year is really, really, really hard, because you've got to go through the birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays. But you don't lose that relationship ever, and that love is always here. I've had a daughter to die, and my parents, and the pain, at certain times is – you can't describe it, because it surprises you sometimes. You come up to a stoplight, and boy, something hits you. It just kind of does something to you. But it's still a battle of intellect and emotion.

[00:15:00] And the five stages of grief are there, whether you're a teenager going through teenage-hood, or a new mom, or – you're leaving one part of your life and going to a new part. And the things that go along with that, those five stages interact with each other for a long time. And all through our lives and various events.

SB: I'm so sorry to hear about your daughter.

AL: Well thank you, I appreciate that.

SB: And your parents, of course. Has the experience of grief enriched your relationships –

AL: It's heightened my, again, my listening. And at least, especially when a child, when a child is separated from their parent, you have more of an understanding of what they're feeling. And most of the time it's a big, blank sheet of paper in front of your face. But I think you learn to work with that and help them. It's a devastation, there's no doubt about it, but I think it gives me more – or a person who's gone through that – a little deeper understanding of what they're going through, rather than what we imagine they're going through. It's just like when people say, "Well, I don't want to linger on with" this, that, or the other; I say the same thing: just unplug me, and keep giving me medicines and keep me pain-free and let me be. That's easy for you and me to say about ourselves. When you've got to put that on your wife or your child or whatever, it's a totally different feeling. Again, it's the battle of intellect and emotion.

SB: I imagine that the families that you help probably really sense that empathy with you, that you've had an experience like that.

AL: Well, you know. I want them to feel comfortable. If I tell them that my daughter died, that is not a helpful statement to anybody, unless I read it right. It puts them in more of a defensive mode, like, "Oh, I don't want to hurt his feelings," or something like that, or sensitive to what he's maybe feeling. But anyway, I don't bring it up that much. I do believe she's much better off than she was, no matter what.

SB: And that leads me to— if you're comfortable with my asking this— can you talk about the role of your own spiritual beliefs in what you do? And I certainly understand if you'd rather—

AL: No, my spiritual beliefs, I'm totally comfortable with them. I don't try to influence anybody with them at all. I think God makes each one of us a different way, and in a lot of regards its personal. My religion is very much external. I'm extremely active in my church next door. But I've got so many Jewish friends, and Muslims—I mean, I appreciate their religions, and I appreciate— They're very devout, and they know I'm very devout, so I'm not going to impose my feelings whatsoever. I just, sometimes you feel like you need to pray with somebody, you do, but once again, it's after you kind of find the empathy with them and where they are. What surprises me today is that not many ministers have prayers with families. Which is really interesting, sometimes.

SB: That's surprising.

AL: Yeah.

SB: Why do you think that is?

AL: I don't have—I can't answer that question. I've always wondered.

SB: How about in terms of the memorial services and funerals themselves, how has the ceremony changed, or—

AL: To me the biggest change actually happened when President Kennedy was killed. And that was where his brother spoke, or reflections, if you will. Before that, it never happened. I say never—not to my mind, it didn't. And then today family members speak, it could be one, it could be four or five. Grandchildren. And that's been a big change, and a lot of ministers feel uncomfortable about it, because in the Christian religion it's a very religious Christian service, and it's about resurrection.

[00:20:00] And to take our focus off of the resurrection is probably what they see as not a good idea. Usually somebody who's talking about the deceased is going to talk about their own personal reflections and feelings about the person, the funny part, a lot of it.

I've heard profanity used [laughs] in church, in the pulpit. And there are times and places for that, but I know a lot of ministers feel uncomfortable but they don't want to say no to the family. They want to give them the leeway to make them go through the process too. So that's been an interesting thing to watch, and then to hear other people comment about, "Ooh, I felt uncomfortable with them doing that," or, "They did a great job. I'm so glad they did," So that's been an interesting thing. Memorial service, funeral service, in my mind are the same words. Some people think a memorial service is something without a body there. A funeral service is a funeral service. That's where we're worshiping God and giving Him thanks for the person who's been there and the influence they've had; which makes me say that I have never been to a bad funeral, no matter how bad the person is [laughs] or has been. There's always hope. And that's really comforting, these many years. I used to kind of not sit in and listen to the homily or what the minister had to say, but I generally do now, because it just makes you say "I wish I knew that person that way" or "I wish I knew them better." And it's kind of, we're all one big family that way.

SB: I'm so glad you said that. I had never heard that, you know, the convention of people speaking and sharing memories at funerals was a fairly recent—

AL: Well, 40 years [laughs], whatever it's been. But you go back in the history of funerals, and it's a long time ago, you know, the chief of the tribe would be the only one that spoke. So, that's, the customs are just what they are.

[Pause in recording, Mr. Lineberry's daughter closes office door.]

SB: How do funeral directors relate to each other, people who are in different businesses? Is there a sense of cooperation?

AL: It's a very quiet competition within each community. We try— and this is the difference, you wonder whether the advertising, marketing that you do is to make you feel better, or if it's just to do more of it than your competitor. And we leave the customer out of it. [Laughs] A lot of times. I think we're starting to learn that if you don't leave the customer out, you come from their perspective on our own. Which is, that's a bit of a change, and I think that's just maturity. But we don't hammer each other in private, public, or any other way. Most funeral directors are very cordial to each other, especially if you're out— we go to state meetings and national meetings, and get along great. Just people, we're just people. There's nothing weird that we talk about. It's usually sports for the guys and hairdos and clothes for the women, I guess. I don't—I don't know what it is. Watching my wife work, I guess.

SB: Now, am I right in thinking that you've been in the leadership of a professional organization?

AL: I was president of the International Order of the Golden Rule, which is the international organization of funeral homes across the world.

SB: Can you tell me about the organization and your work?

AL: Well, to be a member you have to go through a litany of tests, and not everybody gets in. Usually it's one person in one city. A town, a city like New York, it may be different. Or a huge metropolitan area. You're from Durham, where only one person would get in. It's about a year process, and then your name is brought up before the board of directors, and they vote you in or out. [Laughs] And it's all kinds of things, primarily the competition to find whether you're going to get in or out, and whether you've got a good reputation in the community. And that's examined. And that's a worldwide deal. I got to visit people in Australia and England, and throughout Europe.

[00:25:06] They're great trips! [Laughs] But you learn the cultures and how different we are, but the same goal is in mind, and that's to help the person adjust to a different lifestyle. [Traffic noise outside] And that's pretty incredible, when you see people getting shot in Syria today, and weeping – I mean, it affects us all the same way. Loss is difficult. Very difficult.

SB: How is this kind of work different in other countries, in terms of the funeral director's role?

AL: Well, the one that sticks out in my mind, the biggest, I guess, was either Hong Kong or – somewhere over there, in Asia. Where we counsel with a family one-on-one, they had a semi-circle of windows, little slot offices, and there's a glass, even, in front of them. And there's a funeral director here, and a funeral director's there, and the family is on the other side of that window, and they're talking funeral arrangements. Which I found very – I found disturbing – but for them, that's their culture, so it's fine. And the other thing, in Hong Kong, is what really stuck out for me, is the caskets are made from trees – in that, they'll take a tree and cut it in eight-foot sections, seven-foot sections, hollow it out, and that's the casket. And we went down to a warehouse – I felt so sorry for this lady, little old lady, must have been 80 years old – she had to go down these steps, down to where this warehouse is, and pick out her casket. And they're stacked five on top of each other. And I thought, "I'm glad we don't do it that way." But that was – that was really strange! But then the other thing, which is really cool – most of the people are cremated over there, I'd say close to 100% – they have got these earthen jars that are like, at least 100 gallons, and they've got 10 or 12 generations of ashes in those things. And it's just – it was just phenomenal, because they have the name up here, but they have all these other thousands of names below it. So if you wanted to do an Ancestry.com, you just go to the funeral home and look at it – there it is! And that was fascinating to me.

SB: That's really interesting. That's almost like a family plot in the cemetery.

AL: Right. Yeah. And they did, they had cremation gardens over there, if you will, they had the niches, above-ground niches, and they oftentimes will leave the ashes in there for five or six years, or until the next person dies, and then take out their ashes. And you see numbers of candles lit in front of those little niches, because they had ledges on them, and it would be for each generation, type of things, that's been in there. There are some pretty cool things. We could adopt them over here pretty easily.

SB: It sounds like they're in some ways more in touch with the past and family history than we are.

AL: I think so. I think so. You know, they, it's changing in China, but they would live generation to generation in the same household. They'd expand the household. Had a house, physical, but they would look after the parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and they saw that transition, they lived that transition, so they understood it and accepted it I think maybe a bit better than we do, as we scatter around over the country, and lose our families in a lot of ways, the concept of it.

SB: Now Greensboro is a real diverse city, isn't it?

AL: Mm-hm!

SB: In terms of ethnicity, immigration.

AL: Very much so.

SB: How does that affect your work?

AL: Well, we've learned how to do Hindu services, and Muslim, and Buddhist. Which are fine— you just learn the different culture. And oftentimes, because there's a language barrier, we try to talk with our hands, and try to find somebody from one of the schools to translate sometimes for us. But you know what the end result's supposed to be. So we're helping them to go through that process, though they certainly do it different than the typical American funeral. Now, you'll hear wailing, a lot of incense, and they may be here for 24 or 36 hours, in prayer.

[00:30:04] So you just, you learn that, learn to appreciate it, really.

SB: They may be actually on-site at the funeral home [for that long]?

AL: Oh yeah. Sure. Yeah.

SB: That's great that you can accommodate that.

AL: Well, we – again, we're all people. We're all people. And so it's not hard to do, you know?

SB: Are some of these cultures in which the family actually comes and takes care of the body themselves in some ways?

AL: Well, there are some Christians that do that. They'll bathe the body. The Jewish tradition always has committees that bathe the body and dress the body, prepare the body. The Muslims may be – they may, there's a sect in each of our religions, and they tell you. We're not bashful to say, "We don't understand what you're doing, so help us understand." Because if it's foreign to us, we've got to learn somehow.

SB: What about the religions that require burial by – is it by sundown the next day?

AL: Well, it's the cemetery then that you've got to work with. Because most all the cemeteries have got a 24-hour period. You have to give them 24-hour notice. A lot of work that goes on from the cemeteries, in preparation for the burial, that most all of us don't appreciate or understand. You say, "Well, they've got an opening and closing of the grave fee." That leads you to think they're going to take the backhoe or the people digging the grave, and fill it back up. Why would that cost \$900? Well, there's an awful lot of administrative work, and tons of paperwork, that's put on cemeteries when the state and the federals start to get into that. Like the federals got in the funeral home paperwork. And it's interesting. As computers continue to advance the software, our software programs are changing as well, which means sometimes more paperwork. And it's just – it's phenomenal [Laughs] how that's going.

SB: What sort of software programs are used?

AL: We use what's called HMIS, which is very, very detailed software. There are different kinds out there, and it just depends on how much you want to know, and how you take that information and extrapolate it and put it in something workable. HMIS is really, it's just based more on Disneyworld's software package; which, Disney, they want to know when you're going to take your next step. [Laughs] It's not quite that bad.

SB: But pretty detailed.

AL: Yeah, pretty detailed.

SB: Now, how many funeral homes are part of your group here?

AL: This is a long answer. We are part of a corporation that's called Service Corporation International, out of Houston, Texas. We joined a company in 1990 called the Lowen Group. It went through a hiccup period in like 2000, and had to file for Chapter 11, for financial reorganization. And I was going to retire at that point, and they asked me to stay on and help with the reorganization, which I did. I had 96 funeral homes and 26 cemeteries, I'd purchased that between 1990 and 2000. I sold that back to the company like in 1998. A lot of the businesses are called the Lineberry Group, Incorporated, which is a subsection under Service Corporation. So. Now I'm here in Greensboro, stay here, I can come and go when I want to. And virtually when I'm in Greensboro I come by here for at least four hours a day, and usually six, 10, or 12. So that's – the administration falls on our general manager and my daughter. Which is cool. Those are great people.

SB: What are the advantages, and other factors, in terms of, say, corporate approaches?

AL: Well, even more so today, the benefits are just really incredibly good. Your position and work is very, very stable. Software programs, computer programs.

[00:35:00] They've got great backroom help and support systems. You stay really on top of what the trends may be going to, because they see it from a global perspective, much more so throughout the country. Many private funeral homes will tell you that they know what's going on in their community and that's all they care about. In reality, they will be influenced for the future, and we get to stay on top of that education. We have required education courses monthly, by the Internet, and sometimes webinars. And I'm pretty sure small funeral homes don't. I have been in that smaller funeral home. When I came in, we weren't really a small funeral home compared to regular funeral homes. We had built up a really pretty good business. We would have training sessions. From my college background, from business administration stuff, you have to communicate in what your thoughts are, and share communication. Most small funeral homes don't. They've got staffs of four people, and they think like each other. And a lot of times they do think like each other. But I enjoy the corporate structure. A lot of people in our industry who in the '90s were selling their business to corporates, they would just leave town. And because my business – I went to business school at Wake Forest – we study large corporations in our studies, and how the governance and all that works together. So I was not intimidated by larger organizations whatsoever. And I think that's why I've been here and enjoyed working with the guys. Their perspective in Houston is a different one than here on the ground. Sometimes we have to call our hand on that, let them know. "Come on down here and work with us, see what you're doing to us," you know. It's a great communications tool. Very supportive. I enjoy it a lot.

SB: I'm so interested to hear this, because you're the first person I've spoken to who's part of a large organization –

AL: Really?

SB: Yeah, the others I've spoken with are from small communities and small businesses.

AL: Well, bless their hearts. I mean, really. They're huge in their communities, they stay extremely active in the culture of the community. I've done that from my place too. I've been the president of a lot of things here. But relationship-building is so key, and that's why the private funeral homes are very much an active part of their communities. Either way, I think our profession is very helpful to community spirit.

SB: And either way, it sounds like the interpersonal skills are—

AL: Pretty much the same.

SB: Yeah.

AL: Right.

SB: How are you doing on time? Will you let me know if you're coming up on—

AL: I'm fine. I'm fine. [Chatting about Mr. Lineberry's schedule that morning.]

SB: Shifting gears a bit, how do you prepare for the aftermath, emotionally, yourself, when you have a particularly difficult case?

AL: One thing I thought I would not do is take my business home, take my work home. But evidently when I get really uptight about something, I get very quiet. And my wife will put up with that for about two days, then she'll say, "What's going on?" And then I'll unload on her, it's all over. She reads me like a book. You know, sometimes you just, it's hard to, you know, keep things on your heart. Because we're a pretty active company we do have several families daily. You do have to get your mind off of this one to go to that one, to change. I remember talking to one of the first oncologists here in Greensboro. His name was Dr. John Lusk. I said, "John, how do you go home, when you've just told parents that their 12-year-old has got leukemia and has got only a year to live? How do you take that and go home?"

[00:40:00] He said, "Al, I've just trained myself, when the door closes behind me it's another world out there, and I step away from this one." I said, "I've got to learn to do that." It's very hard. [Laughs] It's very hard. And sometimes you can't.

SB: Are there certain families, certain calls, that have really stayed with you over the years?

AL: The uniqueness of the service sometimes has. I do pay attention, when I'm in the community, just to – you can see how people are interacting with each other, and how long ago that death that they went through was, and I can feel pleased. Feel good about where they are. Second marriages are just, are wonderful, and my heart explodes. And we see a lot of that. That, to me, is adjusting; not going off and getting married the first year, but three or four years later and you know both couples that lost their spouses, and they've gotten together, and, I mean, it's just a wonderful feeling inside. The services that maybe stick with you are those that are unique. There was one service that we had, the person died, and the culture was to put money in between their fingers. We were told to embalm the person with their hands and fingers crossed, which is a little unusual. And they'd go and put hundred-dollar bills, gold pieces, just whatever. And they were here around the clock for four days, and serving alcohol – which, my dad left town. He would not drink. It was just his culture, nature. Then we had a service here, and absolutely full, couple hundred people. Then we had to drive to New Orleans with them in a procession. And this procession was about 15, 18 cars. All the way to New Orleans. And when we went through the burial process, to the cemetery, they took all the money out of hands, the son did, and threw a \$13,000 party for everybody down there. And that was – that was 30 years ago. \$13,000 was a huge sum. You can imagine the party. I wasn't there, but one of our staff persons went down. That was, I guess, the biggest unusual service.

SB: What was their ethnic, cultural background?

AL: They were Gypsies. And it was the king of the Gypsies for the eastern coast of the United States. And it was just a unique – I guess that was my introduction that all people really are different, different cultures are. But they were very cordial, happy – but literally you saw cars from New York and just all around here. It was crazy. [Laughs] It was wonderfully crazy.

SB: That's fascinating. Is there an established Gypsy community here? I guess "established" and –

AL: There is. There is. Basically the Gypsies own all the concessions at circuses. It's a very closed group, and they're not nomadic necessarily, but a lot of times they just travel. They're following the circuses. But they do have several conclaves around the country where they live.

SB: Have you worked with other Gypsy families since then?

AL: I have not. No. There hasn't been – you don't hear of many Gypsy deaths. I think probably New Orleans would probably have more of that than we would. That took us by surprise.

SB: That's fascinating. What an amazing experience. And that must be what, a – 18-hour drive, something like that, probably more?

AL: I have no idea. I'll fly any day. But the son – I think there's three sons, and they were just incredibly good kids, and they were really crushed. You know, reactions are the same. Just address them a little different.

SB: What about Latin American families and Hispanic families, how are their traditions?

AL: Well, pretty Catholic. So – just very Catholic, that's what their background is. Another, a lot of times, people that are from Mexico and die here, they want to – we send them back to Mexico.

[00:45:00] Which is always interesting, to me. But that's where – they've only been here half a generation, maybe one generation, and they want to go back home. So that's always, I've always thought about that.

SB: What's involved in that, from your end?

AL: Ah, you just have to go through embassies, get documentation a certain way, and all the countries have different ways they get things done. Mexico is not very hard at all, comparatively speaking. The rest of the world is more difficult. So. And the biggest difference is they want to protect their citizenry from any infections that may be happening here in the United States, and vice-versa. If somebody's in Europe, a certain way you've got to hermetically seal the body in the case, whether it's a casket or whatever. But that's for health reasons.

SB: How about in terms of actual burial and tombstones, memorial plaque? How have those traditions changed?

AL: Well, in my years they haven't changed a whole lot. I wish they would change back to putting epitaphs on them. I know my family, my wife's family, uses epitaphs – which is really cool. Because somebody's walking through the cemetery – Green Hill Cemetery is right, two blocks from us, and you can read some really sensational comments. But they're in the late 18-, early 1900s. Mid-1900s, or 1800s. And you say, "Wow, that person did something for the community. They did something for their church. They did something for somebody." But most of the markers today are just very straight-forward – date of birth, date of death, and name. I just like epitaphs. I just –

today – we have seen a change, where the private cemeteries used to do nothing but flat bronze memorials, maybe granite. That’s now changing back to upright monuments, because family want that. The upkeep is higher when there’s markers like that, but also the machinery that we have today makes it much easier to work around too. It used to be that it had to be hand-done around the markers, which is really a pain. That’s why weed-eaters were a nice addition. So there are flat markers a lot of places, but we’re seeing upright markers are coming back.

SB: Now, do you own cemeteries as well?

AL: We do. Here in Greensboro, Westminster Gardens and Guilford Memorial Park. Two sides of town. Our crematory is at Westminster. I think we’re the twelfth crematory in the state. It used to be, when I was starting, the only crematories were at Wake Forest, Duke, and Chapel Hill – college, I mean medical schools. And then it got to be overwhelming for them, because mores were changing. And so that became a lot of funeral homes that did it – we did it the same way through our cemetery. We did a lot of cremations for about a 15-county area.

SB: Do many people donate their bodies these days?

AL: Not really. Well, I say – we’ve had about five this year. About 600 families we’ve seen. People don’t quite understand the word “donation.” Donation is where you give your school [body] for medical science, they dissect the body, the medical students. A lot of people think that they’re donating their organs. And that’s nowhere close. Most of the cadavers come from the prisons, and unclaimed bodies. Most of the schools are overwhelmed with what they’ve got. If a person doesn’t pre-arrange their body donation, they will not get accepted. So that’s an interesting little thing that actually, just in the last five years they’ll say, “Are they registered?” “No.” “Not going to take them. Got too many.” It’s interesting.

SB: Yeah, very. And also, in terms of how things change over the years, what about, say, in the process of embalming? Have there been significant changes?

[0:50:00] AL: Not significant changes. The machines that we use have a different functionality about them, but it doesn’t – technology has not really been a big factor in that.

SB: I guess the human body doesn’t change much.

AL: Not much at all, no. And what we’re doing is replacing fluids, so it’s not a – there’s not another machine that really does that. The best thing about the machines today is that they can identify a blood clot, which is really an inconvenience for embalming, and cause, create all kinds of wrong problems. It increases or decreases the

pulsating as it reaches a block, so it can get the block out. That's about what I know. The fluids themselves have changed a bit, but it's not been earth-shaking.

SB: What do you wish that people knew about your work? Or what are misconceptions that you wish were –

AL: Well, I sort of alluded to it earlier. We did a time-study, it takes 72 person hours to conduct a funeral service. It takes about 40 for a cremation service. And when I say "service," when I'm talking about from when we're notified of a death, whatever happens to their body – cremation, burial – whatever happens to their ashes – and the service in between. And there's that support service within our organization that, it's just not seen. And there's no way – you sound like you're very defensive when you get out there and tout that information to anybody, but I wish they'd understand that it's not pick up the phone, call the funeral home, and it's done. With the federal government's rules and regulations – which are very protective, some of them are pretty silly, but because one funeral director in the country did something wrong they're going to protect all of us. Most all laws are done that way. I guess that's the perception that – when someone dies there's a charge. It's a lot of money, there's no doubt about that. But the profit margin for funeral homes is very low, because it's very heavy in the personnel area. The cars – I mean, we're hitting eighty, ninety thousand dollars a car. Some of the cars you've got to have, like hearses. [Laughs] We have limousines, because we don't have limousine services like they do in Washington or New York. Places like that. Funeral homes up there don't have limousines at all. So anyway, it's just different, I guess.

SB: Well, this has been really fascinating.

AL: Well, thank you.

SB: What have we not addressed that you would like to – [phone ringing, pause in recording]

AL: Ah, Sarah, what I do know – the concern I have looking far-range is people who come into this business. There're less and less people coming in. But the other phenomenal thing is there are much more women coming in. We hired the first woman in the state, licensed funeral director.

SB: Who was that?

AL: It was so long ago I don't remember, but I remember Dad and I having the conversation. "Dad, there's nothing wrong with a woman doing this." I said, "As a matter of fact they've got more compassion than probably you and me put together." Much more insight of reading people. I remember the first three or four ladies that we

hired didn't really work out. One married within our organization, caused a divorce. "Oh, this is not going in the right direction, my dad's right." But most of them – I want to say a third or fourth of our staff are ladies. And in schools it's more like 80% are women. And so. But the numbers of people in schools is dwindling. So, you know, where are we going to find people ten, fifteen years from now?

[00:55:00] And the education requirements are getting harder and harder. Stronger and stronger. So it's just, down the road it's probably going to be an interesting situation, I'll probably be retired by that time, but I'll still watch from the sidelines.

SB: Well, thank you so much.

AL: All right, Sarah, I thank you for doing this. I think I thank you for doing this!
[Laughs]

SB: Oh, I'm so interested in this field.

AL: Well, good. Not many people do this. I've had some interviews with college kids who have done, you know, an essay or something. One was doing a Master's thesis on it. But nobody ever shares with me anything that comes out of it.

SB: Well, the— [End of recording.]