

Interview with Timmy Butler, afc2016037\_04002

July 10, 2017

Interviewed at Butler & Son Funeral Home, Clinton, NC, by Sarah Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

Sarah Bryan: Let me ask you to introduce yourself for the recording, just so I can check the levels.

Timmy Butler: Okay. My name is Timmy Butler. I'm the president of Butler & Son Funeral Home. We're based out of Roseboro and Clinton, North Carolina.

SB: Okay. Well let me – let me think where we should start. Let me ask you to tell me what first drew you to the –

TB: Funeral business?

SB: – funeral business.

TB: Well, I guess I can say from the standpoint of, you know, starting from my parents. Like I said, I am [from] a family of nine sisters and brothers, ten of us, and we grew up on our family farm, which is about five miles outside of town here in Clinton, which we still own, matter of fact, our family farm. And my dad always was the type of guy who, he always would take a chance when it came to business and everything. And his original trade – of course, growing up on the farm – then he started cutting hair as a licensed barber at the military bases, Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune. And then he got married, came back to the farm, and you know, start raising all those kids. And Roseboro was about ten miles out, and his Masonic lodge, place, was up in Roseboro, plus he had a barbershop up there. So it is, believe it or not, probably one of the few towns in the state that has two funeral homes by the same name. There was a Butler Funeral Home there, which was a predominantly white funeral home there, but it was not an African American funeral home there. And he happened to take a neighbor of ours down to St. Pauls, to his dad's funeral, and spoke to a funeral director down there. He was asking about, he said [?]. Well, with him not being licensed, he was pretty much looking into business ownership. So he spoke with a Masonic brother about it, whose name was Melvin, him and Melvin, and they decided to look into the process. They did, they bought a little two-story house, renovated it. And the law requires you have a licensed funeral services – or embalmer, funeral director, at that time. They hired one to come in, and that's how this got started. This was in October of, I think, probably 1970. I was maybe 13 or 14. And the ironic thing about it is that at that time, within two weeks after it opened up, my grandfather passed. He was my dad's dad. That's the first person we buried, was our grandfather, my grandfather. And from that point, the rest is history. You know, I spent a lot of time around it during the summertime, doing any

and odd jobs, washing cars, I went to removals, hospitals, nursing homes, things like that— but never took it really, really seriously until I left to go to college. And when I went to Central<sup>1</sup>, my major was business, and as I approached probably my last couple years I started checking into the business side of this funeral service thing. And one day I was going to a class — I'll never forget, a quantitative methods class — and it was pouring down rain. And I got to class, and my instructor, who was named T. R. Richmond — he was one of our former chancellors, he's deceased now — he was sitting in class, said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to class." [Laughs] And he said, "Well, come in my office, because nobody showed up for class today." And he started asking me the same story about my parents, and I was telling him about my siblings, how many of them went to college. He said, "You know what, you've got a familial legacy. You really should look into funeral service. Then you can combine your business background, and protect that legacy, as far as what your parents have started." I said, "Oh, okay." And believe it or not, once I graduated college I — my degree was in business and finance — I got offered a couple jobs as auditor in banking, finance. And I got offered a job with a company called SunAmerica Corporation, as an auditor. And it was in Fayetteville, which is only 30 miles from my home. Fayetteville has a mortuary school. And it was kind of like it came together. So I took the job there, and I, matter of fact, called Dean Richmond, who was coming up as chancellor, and he gave me a recommendation, helped me get a job. And as soon as I got the job I enrolled in mortuary school — which was only about a block or so from my office. And so probably within about a year and a half — it's a two-year program, pretty much full-time, but I got a chance to transfer all my credits from Central, and I enrolled in mortuary school — probably within a year and a half, close to two years, I was out. Passed my boards, and after I got all that done, spoke to my dad, and he was really wanting to expand, so we decided to sell our partnership off to the partner, and we built a new facility. And we just renamed it Butler and Son. So then we had two in Roseboro, Butler, and Butler and Son. So the rest is pretty much history. So it's grown pretty much from there. Basically a good experience. Like I said, got a chance to, all of us had worked together as a family with the farming thing, but same thing in the funeral business. I have a sister who came in and got licensed as a funeral director. She's a retired teacher now, shortly after that. And other family members pitch in and everything. So it's kind of like, being at work together with the family I think has really helped — When you're from large families, of course you are going to deal with death, like anyone else.

0:05:00 Maybe a little more frequently, because so many people. And I sit down right now, I think of that my mom had eight sisters and brothers, and my dad had nine sisters and brothers, and I'm thinking, "God, I've buried all of them." Cousins. And you know, now it's from the standpoint, I'm turning 60 this year, and my sisters and brothers are older than I am — I'm number nine. And I'm thinking, now I'm saying, you now what, I've got to face up to it. Unless something happened to me, I'm going to go

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<sup>1</sup> North Carolina Central University, in Durham

through the process with my sisters and brothers. And that's, that's something, it makes you think a little bit different, because with all being around each other all these years, doing things, the farming, and funeral business for other people in the family and things like that. But the reality is setting in that we're going to have to take that same path. So now, where—you know, being young and excited, you have all those interests and stuff like that—you've seen so much in this business, when it comes to the [?] and stuff like that. The emotional and the psychological side, thinking, as you get older, you have to prepare yourself in different ways. And I'm finding out with me now, the clinical side, I'm alleviating some of the responsibilities that I've been—I've done anything from, you know, cut grass to—everything. I've got an employee who's a young lady that's just passed the national and state boards, so from the standpoint of the clinical side, I'll probably start letting her do most of the embalming, probably, this coming year. I probably won't do as much, because—I do ninety percent of mine, unless I'm out of town and I have someone on call. So I'm probably going to start with that, as far as the embalming, clinical side. I'll let her do most of that, then we'll work to the standpoint that, the funeral service side. And it is, you know, it's one of those things, you've got to love what you're doing. Yeah. You've really got to love it. People can see right through it if you don't. Because, you know, it's not really that easy, smooth transition all the time. I'm finding out more and more now, as I get older, really the tough side now is the fact that you're dealing with so many personalities within the funeral process, and the legal standpoint, now. You've got so much liability that you deal with now. Years ago, with cremation, and things like that, it was just basic, but now with cremation you've got a lot of legal aspects with that, even as far as the funeral service. Because you've got so many blended families and things now, where you've got to make sure you're dealing with the right person responsible. So I mean, it's a lot of legal things going on now that you didn't have to deal with years ago. So that, include that in that you're dealing with loved once, that makes it a little different transition. It really does. And put it on top of you've got to maintain these, you know, very high-quality, very expensive facilities, and cars and things like that. So it's just a lot of things that you can't see going in. But it's just a lot of time growing into it. Yeah.

SB: A lot of moving parts.

TB: Yeah, yeah.

SB: Responsibilities in different directions.

TB: Yeah, it is. It is. It is. But it's been an experience. I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's been an experience that basically, I think it helps shape a lot of your thought process as it come to—I know for a fact—overall health and wellness, just overall [sighs] aspects of knowing you've got to face the inevitable of death yourself one day, and loved ones, spouses and kids. So it makes you, it really does, it makes you look at things just a little different. It does.

SB: I'm taking notes because you mentioned several really interesting areas that I would really like to come back to.

TB: Okay.

SB: Could we start first though by just a bit more about your very earliest days, before you went to mortuary school? How involved were you in the day-to-day operations of your family business?

TB: Really, believe it or not, more in the farm. Because like I said, farming was our primary thing, we've still got a family farm. That was it, we were on the farm. You know, Dad, he had a barbershop which he did part-time, and then he had a funeral home—where, we had a funeral home, we had somebody licensed there who was the manager, which the law required. We would go in and we would do any odd jobs, you know—wash the car, or do some maintenance around there or something. Or, you know, at a funeral service where they needed some additional hands, we'd do it that way—just enough to understand what it was about. Weekends, we'd be on call, we'd make removals, we'd see the embalming done. And within the ownership, your father, you get a chance to see stuff, just hanging around as an employee, where I was actually part of it. So like any other probably 13- or 14-year-old, you're curious about certain things. But one thing I tell people, when it come to death, once you get an opportunity to be around it for a while—especially with dead human bodies and things—you understand it's just like anything else. Death, whether it comes through any other aspect, it's the finality part of it. But also, you keep, to separate it from the standpoint of knowing it's a little different because this is a human being.

00:10:04 It's not like my pet, or this or that. It's a human being. So with that, you know, it's some, it's more of an extension to that. What I mean by that is, even though the person is dead, they have a right to be remembered with some type of ceremony. Okay? Then with that, the person has loved ones who have a right to be comforted as time go on. So it expands a little more than with just the basic. It's not like with any other creature that died, where that's basically it. It carries on. So that's the key. And I learned, got a chance to learn early on, that it's something just a little different then with death, and found out that, even being around quite a bit, is the relationship that you performed with people—through my dad, and even down to me now—a lifelong—it's almost like a, a lifelong bond. Because I see people now, you know, that, I handled the remains of their mother and father. Before, we'd see each other, we'd chat and talk and everything, but now it's a little different. It's almost like you become a part of that family, because you helped them develop this lasting memory of the family member who's departed. So now that brings you into the family. And I tell my twins, my daughters—one's in pharmacy, one's in med school up at Wake Forest—and so we talk about that aspect, with them being in the health field. And I tell them that, I see them

what seems like once you go into that funeral service part, you become a part of that family. It's a different relationship than it was before.

SB: More intimacy with—

TB: Really. Yeah. Yeah. And you know, I saw that when I was younger, but after I got to be an adult I definitely got the chance to plug in with that. Mm-hmm.

SB: I often ask the funeral directors I speak with about how you deal with the emotions of your work, and, say, particularly when there's an especially traumatic death, or a death of a child, say. I'd like to ask you that as well, but I also wonder if you could expand a bit also on— if you're comfortable talking about it— more about working with your own family members. Because that's an aspect I haven't really thought about.

TB: Well, you know, and especially now, from the standpoint— I tell people, really, me personally, I feel you've got to be connected or locked in to your faith. I don't know where, I can't say all funeral directors or service people are basically that way. But my Christian faith has helped me to see this thing like white and black. [Phone rings, break in recording.] So like I was saying, the Christian faith gives you the chance to see basically the difference in the— You know, I do believe that we all have good in us, and we all have loved ones. So with that being said, I also believe that this is not the end, when your body goes back to the ground. I do believe your spirit lives on, depending on basically whether you had the opportunity to align, get yourself pretty much in line with the supreme being. I believe that we live on through lots of things. So like I said, again, as I've aged, that's the rock that I pretty much lean on. Because I do believe now, it gets back to the thing of burying a family member, I can look back and see, you know, maybe they were older and had to suffer through illness and everything, but again, I can jump hurdle over that and see when they were at their finest, as far as healthy, and smiling, and doing things. I think of my parents the same way, my mom and dad, the same thing. They're both dead. Dad lived to be 87, Mom lived to be 82. So I got a chance to, out of the ten of us, probably spent more time around them than the rest of them, because my adult life, everybody else had gone away. So you get a chance to, to lock in on some things, from seeing that, you know what? Death is not this bad thing people say. Because I do believe, certain times, death is the way to escape the trauma or the pain that this body had to go through. And the only way out of it is through death. And so that's a good thing, because at the end of the day I feel like the suffering part is something that— none of us want to see our loved ones suffer, and we don't want to suffer, so sometime the only way out of suffering is through death.

00:15:02 So that's the aspect I take it in now. And you know, I think back to when I was younger, even before [?] I always— someone would say, you would be scared. You know, it's the unknown. It is the unknown. But being around it all these years, I realize now that even that it's some comforting in death. I see family members come in and



help [?] their dad or their mom, sisters and brothers, aunts, they haven't seen him in four or five years. And they show a picture, just like me he's a healthy individual. And you see him, I see him come through there, just completely – Then the challenge is, is you're trained to get them back looking like that. Or better. And that's the thing. I've heard people come in, and say, "Oh my god, I can't cry. Because they look so good. Oh my god." And that's what they remember about it. They remember how good they were looking in that casket. All the six or seven years of being in the hospital or being in the nursing home or whatever, that's erased out of their mind, because they remember what they saw, that last impression. So that's the memory. Friend of mine had a slogan – Nathaniel Tucker, who's a director, and I was talking about his funeral homes, we, like everything else, we have our logo or whatever, and ours is "Commitment to caring." His was "Whatever memories remain, let them be beautiful." And I always thought that was a good – yeah. So that's the way I approach it from the standpoint of a family member. And that's the thing that has helped me to keep moving forward with this. Because we all want to be able to give comfort, with my family and other families. The traumatic of losing this person – permanently, I mean, not being able to see them is bad enough – but the assurance of knowing that this person, you know, lived a good life, and had earned the right to a decent, honorable service of some type. And the fact that their remains were intact. Yeah. That makes a difference. Makes a difference. Because you know, when embalming started, actually because of that. World War I was about the first time the United States was embalming, and it was from bringing our soldiers in, being able to prepare them and bring them home to be viewed. That's how the embalming process started. Because before that you had to do immediate burial. But when, after World War I definitely, and to the '20s and '30s, when the embalming process got to really be an art, to be able to bring them home and let people see them. [Phone rings.] That made a difference. Yeah. It did.

SB: I gather that that tradition of having the body in the home for, you know, the viewing and the sitting, that that in rural areas carried on well into the –

TB: It did, it did. And the reason, one reason, honestly – the real reason for visitation and viewing – it's confirmation of the fact, people like to have that body to be there just to confirm the fact that the person was truly dead. Okay? Bringing them home got to be an aspect from the standpoint of, because before, during the funeral and things like that, people used to go to the house to prepare the body, wash them and bathe them, embalm them, and leave them there. So that aspect is kind of – I don't do as many, I've done some over the years, but not as many now, because the standpoint, and believe it or not, it's reversed. Believe it or not, long ago a lot of people were dying at home, and they wanted to stay home. Then it got to the aspect, they didn't want it to be home, they wanted to take them out. But now it's transitioned back, with hospice – because hospice has expanded to being just basically something that deal with cancer patients, to any critical or long-term illness that you're going to – hospice will come in. So it's gotten to people are doing that more. But on the funeral service side, you've got people doing

less, from the standpoint of I would say a lot of public confirmation of the fact that, because they are having people to be home, you know, so many things that you see now – social media, video of funerals, things like that, is in the mix – so a lot of families are doing more from the home, are wanting people to be home, wanting them to be surrounded, and then when it come time for the ceremony they just want something simple, and go with it and everything. But the whole thing for the funeral at home was confirmation. The rural areas probably did it more so than the cities and everything because that was just their tradition, as far as the neighborly thing people came in and did things. They still have these, what they call the setting-up, which is basically people still visit the house and stay at night the days between the funeral service. So that's something I don't think will ever leave, as far as the rural areas. That's just something that's with us to say.

00:20:00 SB: That still happens?

TB: That still happens.

SB: I didn't know that.

TB: Yeah, people go to the house. Say a person die on Monday, the funeral's maybe Friday, so in between people will visit the house and bring them food and stuff for the days leading up to the funeral service. So that's just something that is always going to be going on.

SB: And is that with the body still – returned to the home?

TB: No. No, the body's –

SB: Oh, I see.

TB: Most of the visitation now is done at the funeral home. And that, again, is transitioning, because from the standpoint, years ago we had a little two-story house. Your space wasn't all that ample. Compared to now, you've got mortuaries. I can do, at my chapel, a couple hundred people, easily. So people would rather come to the mortuary where it's more convenient than having it at the house. [Phone rings, break in recording]

SB: I was wondering if you could talk to me a little bit about, both historically and today, about the importance of funeral directors and the funeral services field in the African American community.

TB: Okay. Okay. Ah, and it's like everything else, from the standpoint, over the years it has been a lot of I think coming-together or integration of a lot of traditions and

everything else related to African American and other races. But certain things, I think, will always be a traditional difference. And it's strange, because I think a couple of them is because of the fact that the older, well-established businesses in the African American community – one is hair-care, beauty shops, barber shops – I think that's always going to be there. Okay? Other one is funeral homes. And I think the reason for that is because of the fact that our tradition, the African American tradition of funeral services has always been of like a homegoing celebration. That started back after the Civil War, in terms of the 1800s, and as I look back now from the standpoint of looking at history, even from as far as when the slaves came over, and from all my reading and things, when one would die, they would always seek that they have custody of the body, even though the slaveowner had it, would give it to them, and they would have some type of ceremony. Yeah. They would have their own little burial ground, cemetery. Matter of fact, I was in Charleston back the first of the month, and me and my wife and daughters got the chance to visit Middleton Plantation, which is one of the largest plantations on the East Coast. At the time I think it said maybe 150 slaves. And we saw two or three little burial grounds, each generation would go through, they would – right on the old plantation, they would have the little cemeteries. So I think that will always be in our communities. It's just embedded from the standpoint of the homegoing, from the faith-based process, I think we're just really, really strong, as far as to always have some type of ceremony or something, the tradition in the funeral service. Now, with that being said, there has been some adjustments over the years. Like everybody else, cremation has come in. In the rural areas it's not as high a cremation rate as I think in the metropolitan, bigger cities. Economics has caused people to start doing cremation more. But even so, with that, what I've found out, even if I do a cremation, in my market, if I can do some type of ceremony with it, that's fine. I think that serves the purpose. Some type of ceremony, with that. Traditionally in the African American community, there's always been a longer time between death and the funeral service. And that's documented. That is definitely true. Compared to in the Caucasian community, they had to bury people a lot quicker than we do. A couple things involved in that. But the most, I think, relevant thing in that is the fact that, definitely over the years, the last 40, 50, 60 years, a lot of African Americans migrated up north. Okay? And when they would have death down south, they would always try to plan the ceremony so the folks up north could get back to that. Okay. And I think that's something that will always be in our community too. Not saying that the Caucasian – but as a whole, probably, really I don't think a lot of – especially with down south, a lot of the whites, other races, migrated up north as much as African Americans did. Okay. So when people say that, "Why do you think you all take so long to bury them?" You know, from the standpoint, some people say stuff like, as far as whites, they bury them quicker because they may turn dark – no, no, no, that ain't it.

00:25:00 It's just as far as – it's just the fact that most of them can turn it quicker because most of them are there. And compared to our community, they have to come a distance. And so that's the length between the time of death and the time of ceremony. Where I



see that going, I think it's always going to be. It's always going to be that way. Cremation? I don't know. I don't know whether or not cremation will in some— It's funny, in North Carolina, the mountains and the beaches are high cremation rates. They are probably hovering 25 to 50%, the mountains and the beaches. I know why it is in the beaches, because of the fact that the beaches are retired people. Okay. And they're down there. A lot of them don't have a lot of families to go back to, so they're cremated, whatever. In the mountains, same thing. A lot of people are there, so they can cremate and everything. Those are the two higher areas of cremation. And now as far as which direction we're going, [sighs] we will always see the need, I think, as far as funeral director, funeral service, in the community. Okay. The issue that's going to, I think, go forward more than anything else, the fact that back in the '80s, Federal Trade Commission required us to itemize price. I've got to itemize pricing, where we've got the price of service, service, service. Okay. People, the last 15 or 20 years, can go online, buy caskets, they can buy vaults. So as far as the merchandise factor, I think that's going to be a, we'll probably lose some share with that. But as far as the embalming, which is what most people can't do, ok, as far as— sometimes they do, they get wedding planners or event planners to plan the ceremony, but as far as that clinical side, handling the emotional side, and the technical things, that'll always be there. Cause at the end of the day, I don't think the average person would want to go through all that challenge, as far as planning all that stuff [?]. Because believe it or not, I have people come to me, and they will bring me their clothes. [Slaps table.] Everything else I do. They just bring me the clothes. Then I have some people come to me that bring some clothes, then they want to be involved in every detail. Even down to, you know, I make memory videos; they want to make their own video. Sometimes they want a family member to come in and do the hair. Some people want to be hands-on about it, and you have some don't. All they want to do is— And believe it or not, some don't bring me clothes. I have the clothes here. They'll come in and just look, "You got that? Call me back when they're dressed." So you know, it's just different mindsets about different things. But I always, I think there will always be a need for the one thing, that clinical science as far as the preparation, the average person can't do that. And the next thing, as far as the psychological and emotional support as the funeral director. Because I don't think the experts want to take on that, when they're in that type of situation, as far as the mindset. So that's why I say. And we're challenged more so to be able to give that type of service. Believe it or not, the social media thing is really, it's come in on us real hard. Some firms are really going out there on that. But I pride myself on being a little, just a little bit careful, with a lot of the social media aspects of things, because at the end of the day you're dealing with stuff, you know, some families, they may be emotional, like that, when they come up to it— they'll come up and say, "I didn't want this to be out there," pictures of them in a casket. You know what I'm saying? So it's a lot of things you got to protect with that. The younger generation of funeral directors, I've found out, they're really, they're really into that social media aspect, the Facebook and stuff. I've heard some firms, when a person die, they have an economic problem, they go out there and the set up a Gofundme account. I'm just a little more private when it

come to the business aspects. You know what I'm saying? But you've got a lot of firms, they're cool with that. And I just pride myself in being pretty much just offering a service when it comes to the business side. It's between me and you, not the general public.

SB: And the family can decide if they want to—

TB: That's what I'm saying. And if you want to do a Gofundme page, do it. Don't put Butler & Son there, because I don't want people to be calling me and saying— mm, you do it with the family. Because I'm dealing with the family. Yeah. So those are the challenging times that we have now. Like I said, the younger funeral directors, you know, the ones that are in school, they're training in all this update, things like that. But then it can have a boomerang effect on you. You've got to challenge that. Another thing is you've got a couple large corporations that came in probably fifteen years ago and bought up a lot of independent funeral homes— SCI<sup>2</sup>, Loewen Group, uh, uh— Carriage Services.

00:30:03 Then that changed up, probably about ten years ago, because they found out that as— I guess, as well as it look, believe it or not, most funeral homes are independently owned, community-based. And what I mean by that, the person feels more comfortable coming in here, talking with me, knowing [?], than like going into a Kmart, Rose's, speaking to a stranger about funeral service. And that's what you'll find the corporate people doing. But then you find out, corporate people will buy them and want the independent people to continue working for them. So it's been a change in that mindset, because they realize that they would lose market share by doing that. So I see the independently owned funeral director pretty much being there. Because I think they can adjust a lot better. Certain industries are not made to be corporate, I think. I think funeral service is like that. I do.

SB: How do you feel about photography at funerals, and of deceased people?

TB: Good and, on one end, again, liability. I always got to get a okay from the family, because sometime family have to [?] and they'll tell me, "That's no problem." You know. But someone just to come in and not have approval, I got a issue with that. Because I've had some families tell me, "Please don't have them take pictures." And we announce, "Don't take pictures." Because some people will take pictures and post them on Facebook. You know what I'm saying? So now you got to be real, real careful with that, because if a person go do something like that and they put it out there, and the family, they're going to look at me and go, it was my responsibility to make sure that everything was private, from that standpoint. So we watch that really closely. Especially when we're at a outside— It's more prevalent in a venue than at a church. Usually at a

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<sup>2</sup> Service Corporation International

church, the church can control that. But if you go to like a school or an auditorium or something like that, people coming in, it's kind of tough. We've got to maintain that. I've actually had to put a person kind of like, place guard at the foot of the casket, so when people come by, say, "Look, no pictures. Family request." I have put notes, "No—  
" So. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And those are things that people take for granted, but you've got to do that. Because a lot of people, they will look for you to make sure everything goes well, if something like that happens.

SB: That must be much harder now with phones, with cameras in people's phones.

TB: Yeah, they'll go by the body to view the body, and start taking pictures with the phones. "Oh, no, don't do that, because the family requested not to do that." So. Yeah. You got to be very careful with that nowadays. Very careful. Yeah.

SB: What about—you mentioned families who like to take part in part of the care of the body, like doing the hair, or dressing them. Are most funeral homes equipped for people to come in and do that? Do funeral directors have preferences about that?

TB: Well, I have contracts that I use, and I just tell them what they're used for and everything. But I have had a lot of people who are, you know, they're used to one who's been doing their hair all their life, they still come in. And of course I have no problem with that. Once they tell me that, I'll just basically go ahead and get an agreement for them to sign, that person, then they'll call me and I'll set up an appointment for them to come and do it. Same thing with a barber. [Phone rings; pause in recording.] So with that being said, normally, like I said, I think it will always be a place for the African American funeral director. I think we, I've looked at some surveys [?] from the standpoint of, you know, they found out that pastors in churches, as far as most ethical and most trustworthy, then African American funeral director are right up there because the people get a chance to interact and they trust them with their loved ones. So that means that, you know, we are depended upon to do what's basically right for the general community we serve.

SB: That reminds me of something that Don Brown told me about. I think he was telling me about—was it Mr. Norcott who was his mentor?

TB: Yeah. Mr. Gratz Norcott.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gratz Norcott (1925-1999) was an undertaker in Ayden, North Carolina, and mentor to funeral director Don Brown, interviewed for the Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession in the Carolinas project.

SB: – that Mr. Norcott was very much like that, a very trusted person in town, because he, in being the funeral director, he was also somebody who had a lot of legal knowledge, and could –

TB: Sure. Sure. You've got to wear many hats. Many hats.

SB: Medical, he had an ambulance –

TB: Yeah, in the old days the funeral director was the transport service, where they would take people to the hospital. But we are asked to wear many hats, from the standpoint of, because like I say, lots of times when death comes it just paralyze people, and you really have to – the aftercare, which is after the death, I've found out that is more prevalent now than it was years ago, because they look for you to be able to migrate them through a lot of things as far as – you know, give them a good attorney for their wills, as far as dealing with any of the insurance and things they have.

00:35:07 So it's just a lot of more going on after the death aspects that we have to engage in. And like I say, that's part of our aftercare program, that we try to do as much as we can to help people with that. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

SB: How has your work changed with – it seems like in recent generations, people have been living a whole lot longer than they did even twenty and thirty years ago.

TB: Sure. Mm-hmm.

SB: Does that affect your work, or any aspect of it?

TB: Believe it or not, on the clinical side, yes and no, because that means, you know, if you live long enough, that means opportunity for more chronic or long-term diseases to be there. So that means prep work, preparation work is sometimes a little more challenging. But on the other end, on the social side, you find out that it's not because, to be honest with you, you find out when you bury people that's in their nineties or whatever, unless they've got a lot of family members, it's not a lot of people engaged. You find now when you bury a person who's ninety-something, maybe had one sister, one brother, or something like that, you find out at the ceremony's not a whole lot of people there. First of all, the people they knew are, most of them are dead. Second of all, their siblings that's left, they probably have some folks. Unless the person maybe was a long-term educator, a long-term educator, a long-term something in the community, where they had some connection with that younger generation; then they will show up. But if they don't, sometimes no, then then we don't have a lot of folks there, because people that know them pretty much have died. Yeah. So it's – it's, it has its pros and the cons for that, when you start living that long. Funny, down the road here on [Highway] 701, buried two brothers – that's probably fifteen years ago. One was 104, one was 102.

Those are the oldest people I've buried. Yeah. McLamb. Mr. Edgar McLamb was 104, and I buried his brother who was 102. I buried his daughters; one was like 91, other one was like late eighties. But that 104 and 102 are the oldest people, those two brothers.

SB: What a lifespan.

TB: Yes. My mother-in-law's turned 100. She turned 100 March 21. She's doing good. She's doing good. Yeah.

SB: That's great. What a blessing to have somebody with you that long.

TB: I know. I know. It's amazing. It is, it's just amazing. I mean, how much they've seen over the years. So it makes a difference, it does. It does.

SB: My grandmother just passed in March, and she was 96.

TB: Oh man.

SB: And I miss her terribly –

TB: Sure.

SB: – but I think how lucky I am to be in my forties and still have had a grandmother.

TB: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It makes a difference. It makes a big difference. It does. People don't look at that. And then you start looking back, oh man – that's so much wisdom that's gone on. From the standpoint of just to be able to live on this earth that long, see that many changes. It's a humbling experience. It is. It is. It is.

SB: Another thing I was thinking about that seems to be changing in recent years – I wonder how this affects the fact that so many funeral homes are predominantly African American or predominantly white – is that there are so many multiracial families now.

TB: Yeah, it is.

SB: Does that affect what funeral home they go to, say if one spouse is white and one is African American?

TB: Sometime it does, but you know, it's a strange thing. We got over 750-some funeral homes in the state now, 757, something like that right now. I don't know, it's just the thing – we've got probably 300 African Americans. You can go to any community, pretty much, you may see one predominantly white funeral home that's



been there years, years, years, and two or three African American funeral homes. And I always wonder why is that. But it's the same thing, a lot of it goes back to the faith-based. You've got a lot of churches branching off in the last fifty years or so. So with that being said. Another thing, now I've been doing research on it, because a friend of mine – his name's [Tim White?] – he and I went to mortuary school together in the '80s, and we used to wonder the same thing: why is it in town where we get that same service, same facility, and people are still segregated when it come to funeral homes? Well, he told me he found something, I've been trying to look. Up to a certain amount of time – and I think it's true – up to a certain amount of years, it was against the law for an African American man to see a white female naked. And I heard that again somewhere. Now, it's somewhere in the law, that they could not see a white female naked. And he think that that may have had a lot to do with it. Because you think back when embalming really became prevalent, in the '30s, '20s, '30s, '40s, wasn't that many African Americans; they were assistants. Okay?

00:40:07 They weren't licensed, couldn't get licensed. A lot of them learned to embalm from the standpoint, they were assistants, they helped assist the white mortuaries to prepare the bodies that was coming in [?]. So I would think probably. And they did, I think Echols out of New York was the first mortuary school that allowed blacks to go. So they started going to school, and then of course after integration probably [?]. So with that being said, it's a very traditional thing. Not as prevalent in bigger cities as it is down South. I got a friend of mine who runs a funeral service up North, in California, places like that; you know, they bury anybody. But compared to here, I'm – probably 95 percent of our – I will bury a Caucasian, there is integration there, like you said, I will bury a Hispanic from time to time – but 95 percent are African American. And most of the traditional – But a strange thing, though. We have here in this county, we have one right down the street here, Hope Valley, which is a mortuary, white-owned, and one in Garland. That business is 50 percent African American. Now, I know the one down here, Hope Valley, he is what they called, years ago, we had firms to open up called discounters. Just like Walmart and places like that opened up, and market lower prices, that's they way they market – lower prices. And the one in Garland was the only funeral home down there for years. Okay. The people could have came to Roseboro, to us, or could have came to Clinton. But he started out selling appliances and things. Okay. So the people he sold appliances to, when they would die, he would bury them. So he's been burying black folk for years. Now there's a black funeral home down there now. But he still buries blacks. So with that being said, what I've learned is – Now. One thing about our tradition, I think [?], if – we will [patronize?] a business to the end. Okay? From the standpoint of funerals. He started burying them years ago, they'll still go to him, some of them. Now the guy, I don't know how this is going to play up, because he's been there probably eight, seven or eight years. And he's pretty much marketing lower prices and things. So I don't know how it'll play out. At the end of the day it's one of those things where I have a certain market of the folks here, they're going to come here. Compared to, if he offers a certain market, [?] price and everything. It's a

balancing act. But you know, one thing I— I've never been one to market or promote quantity. Honestly, I don't want to bury everybody. I just don't want to. It's like any business. Certain business, you don't want to. I've always prided myself on quality. I'd rather do one good-quality service— things good, they have the resources to pay you— than to try to do four, and you put them on the books. Because another day I worked in finance, that gave me— you know, the human body is not property like everything else. What I mean is, they call it what they call quasi-property. We have a property aspect, but at the same time, we go to court, we can't sell you like a car, house, whatever. So what I'm saying, your recourses are not the same. And again, too, is when you start doing things like that, burying things, and you have to leave [out?] inspections and doing collections, it hurts you in this business, because you've got to take that— you have to make that choice, "Okay, I'm going to take this person to court, lose that family and those behind them. I won't get my money" unless that person has something you can attach a lien to, an estate, something like that. So it's not worth it. So the best way is on the front-end. I've had people come in— I've had people come in, and we've sat here and said, "Look, this is what we can do." And they say, "I just can't come up with this money, I don't have anything." I say, "Well, just pay me for the preparation, and if you want to use the funeral home down the road, I have no problem with that." Because maybe they can work out some kind of deal. I'd rather not go a step further and go into that, and it's going to cost— and I've had that happen. Next time somebody come in they have the insurance paying, and we went ahead and planned it. So I'd rather go that way. Especially as I get older. Don't get caught up in a lot— you can't get caught up in a lot of business on the books.

SB: Yeah, it seems like if you're offering that kind of quality personal interaction—

TB: Sure. Sure. Sure.

SB: — that that's going to, in the long run, bring in more people.

TB: It will. Keep it going. Because, if you can from the standpoint of putting a lot of things on the books, you can't win doing that. You can't. I've heard of a lot of the old funeral homes— someone was telling me how much money has been owed to them over the years.

00:45:08 And then sometimes, again, you have to listen to your heart over your head. I've had a couple of instances where I know for a fact, a child had been sick years and years and years, young parents, they didn't have anything, but they've come to me. I've said, "Okay, bring me your obituary. I've got everything else." I give them merchandise, give them a vault. You listen to that. Sometimes you've got to do that. But you can't do that for everybody. It'll tell you when you've got a situation like that. And I've had a situation where, in the community, I've known all my life, stuff has happened, I said, you know, do this, and I give them an inexpensive vault, I give them

an inexpensive casket, and you just pay me for my service. And it just works out. It works out. Yeah, yeah. You've got to do it from time to time.

SB: And if it's like some national conglomerate corporation that's just putting a business down, they're not going to know.

TB: Sure. Oh no. No. They've got to – you know, they've got a profit margin. They've got to bring a profit margin and everything. That's what I'm finding out now: the longer you've been in it, the more you can maneuver and do some things like that. You always get it back. You can't lose for being compassionate and giving something. You just can't lose. Yeah, so. It works out good.

SB: Now, this is a part of the state that has a pretty big Hispanic population, and also, isn't there a Native American tribe very nearby? The Waccamaw-Siouans?<sup>4</sup>

TB: We do. Yeah. Because my dad, a barber, and most of his clients was Native Americans. Worked near our farm. But they didn't come us [for?] the funeral. They'd go [the white?]. But they would go to him and he'd cut his hair. So, with that being said, the Hispanics, one thing about them, I saw – where were we yesterday? Me and my wife were going somewhere. Where were we? It had to be in Sanford. I think I saw the first Hispanic funeral home. I think I was going through Sanford, she told me it was a funeral home. I didn't know they owned. So that being said, you know, they do a lot of – they are establishing their own churches and things, which I think will cause a lot of – but up until ten years ago or so, most of them were ship-outs. They just shipped them out. And I found out, the way they market, they shop price-wise, when it came to funeral service. So what I'm saying is, they want the best – they pay cash, they don't have, most of them don't have no insurances. So that has a lot to do with what funeral home they call, believe it or not. So you find one that start doing them, and the guy down the street here, he does a lot of them. But what I'm finding out, it's hard to market like that. It's hard to market, because I try to market from the standpoint of preparing on the front end, life insurances, pre-planning, whatever. So just to market, say, "Call me at need," it don't make it. Because like I said, they pay cash. But with that being said too, as time goes on and they establish more of a faith base with the churches, with the community, and hopefully a lot of them now are buying insurance and things like that, I think you'll see that change. But in twenty years – I would maybe do one or two a year, out of both locations. I don't do a lot of them, because like I say, you can't market to them a lot, because like I say, you know, they deal with a lot of cash and things, and they don't do a lot of pre-planning. And believe it or not, every one I've done – I've done one natural death. All the other Hispanics have been auto accidents. They die, a lot of them die in accidents. Car accidents. A lot of them.

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<sup>4</sup> The tribal seat of the Coharie Tribe is also nearby.

SB: How sad.

TB: Yeah. Yeah. A lot of them die in car accidents. I've done one natural death, Hispanics. With that, again, how can you plan, market, for an accident.

SB: For a sudden death.

TB: Can't do that. Yeah.

SB: I wouldn't have guessed that. I would have thought maybe—I don't know what I would have thought.

TB: Yeah.

SB: This may sound like kind of an off-the-wall question, but do you have clients who want to put objects of significance in the casket with people?

TB: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah.

SB: Can you talk about that a bit?

TB: Yeah. A lot of people want to put things like the favorite hat, or the Bible. Believe it or not, I had this year a guy, he was a big Mountain Dew drinker. I put a canned Mountain Dew in his hand in the casket, and everybody thought that was [the ?]. One thing I couldn't do, a lady called one time, wanted to know if she passed could we put her dog in there with her. I said, "No, I couldn't do that," because I mean, the dog had to be taxidermied and stuff. I said, "Better yet, do this. Take a really good photo of your dog, bring it to me, and I'll put it in the file." And she had cancer at this time. So that's what we did. Put that picture of him. So you can do things. Money. People put money in people's pockets.

00:50:00 I had a guy call me a couple of weeks ago, told me to put a twenty-dollar bill in this guy's pocket. "I'll give it to you." And I did, I put it in. He gave it to me.

SB: Why is that?

TB: I don't know. It was an inside joke between the two of them, about twenty dollars, I don't know, he owed him or he bet him. Something from the standpoint. He told me, I did it. So yeah. You will get those requests, and you try to follow through as much as you can. You really do.

SB: What about in terms of things that are put on the grave, once the person has been buried?

TB: Ah, depends, because a lot of cemeteries now, perpetual care, they require, for maintenance purposes they won't let you put anything above ground. Everything has to be flat. So they can mow the grass. So a lot of that depends on the cemetery. A lot of church cemeteries will like— a lot of people now in churches, I know, they put the little solar lights at the end of the headstones. They let them do that. Little things. Let them plant a rosebush, they'll do that.

SB: You mentioned Middleton Place, and that reminded me of how I've read for a long time about the Gullah people's traditions of putting, say, a broken piece of crockery, a dish or a mug, on a person's grave. Is that just a Lowcountry thing?

TB: I think it is. I think it is. I've heard about that, yeah, but I think that's Lowcountry. Because like I said, over the years, cemeteries have become, as far as the perpetual care, really finicky. And of course they don't want to do anything to turn the cemetery into a display. They got to keep everything on the even keel, because people would be bringing everything out there. So you know, cemetery plots are deeded, but they're deeded for grave purposes, because if they're deeded just regular, people can go out there and plant trees, whatever, on it. But they've got to put on there that it's going to be used for the dead human remains, or grave. It's even to the standpoint a lot of cemeteries specify what size tombstones, or what kind of tombstones. Yeah. Yeah. Church cemeteries are a little different. Most church cemeteries will let you, you know, plant a flower, you can put above-ground vaults or headstones, things like that.

SB: Well, I'm getting close to an hour and I don't want to take your whole afternoon, but just a couple of general questions. What do you feel makes somebody a good funeral director?

TB: Wow. [Laughs] Of course you've got to have compassion. You've got to have compassion. Ah, what I've found out, you've got to be able to listen a lot. I mean, really listen. I think I enjoy the fact that I smile. I had a lady tell me, [she] enjoyed the fact that I smile. You know she's sad, and you just [?], but I smile. You just engage a smile, because sometimes that's what they need to see. And another thing, keep it simple. I do. I try to keep it simple as I can. Some families come in with this complicated thing, that's okay, but I tell them, if you do this, this might happen. So keep it simple. And at the same time, you want it to be their decisions on how you're doing things. But at the same time, you've got to let them know it's a line between professionalism and getting to be—you know, you've got to let them know that. So a lot of listening, a lot of listening. Like I say, a lot of planning. You've got to have compassion. I think, I tell everybody, the funeral service always follows the Golden Rule— do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. So I always think from the standpoint of how I'd want somebody to treat my loved one, how you would want them to treat them. So that makes a difference too. So all that goes in, you know, the same circle with that. Just being able to listen and



engage and interact, have plenty of compassion. And you've got to love people. Yeah. You've got to love people. Because believe it or not, this profession, it can be consuming if you let it, now. It can consume you. I know when I first got into it, I'd see guys, you know, they don't take vacations. They just stay there, and they sit in the funeral home. Just— But you know, over the years, things have changed, from the standpoint you got live answering services. Anytime I can leave, the answering service can talk just like we're talking. I try to take three or four vacations a year, and if I'm not busy I'll go out to the farm. Things like that. You don't have to sit around and wait for the phone to ring. You've got your cell phone, you can dial it in— actually, I'm answering the phone for the other location. Actually in years past, you'd have somebody sitting in the funeral home every day, and then when they'd leave they'd dial up somebody's house. [?] the technology. Like I said, we used to have somebody manning the office during the day. Normally one person.

00:55:00 When we go out on services, I just take the number of people that take the vehicles, or how many vehicles we have is how many people we take. I'm trying to just keep it simple, because it can get a little overwhelming, the funeral service. I've seen some things that, like, "Okay. That's what they want." And then again, I've found out too, a lot of young ones, I tell them, "Don't make it about you. Don't go out and do a ceremony and don't highlight yourself." And that's another thing I've found out. I never mention Butler and Son Funeral Home at all when I'm on a funeral service. At all. I don't mention our name. At all. Because I feel people see that— I don't use that as my marketing ploy. Because my marketing, you see what I'm doing, you see how people are engaging, how I'm making them feel. You know. That's my marketing. So a lot of things. But you've got to, like I said, you've got to have the basic foundation, and that is the love of people, and basically being able to be compassionate enough to engage with them. Yeah. Yeah. That's the key. Mm-hmm.

SB: What have we not covered that you would like to include?

TB: Oh, man. We've covered a lot of territory. A lot. A lot.

SB: I'm sure, it's such a tremendous subject that—

TB: It is. It is. It is. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then again, you come in tomorrow I probably could tell you some things we touched upon today. That's just the way this profession is, because you see so many things. Ah— I think we've covered pretty much all the basics. We've covered tradition and things like that. Yeah. Yeah. We've covered it. Yeah. One thing about it is, I can tell you this— more females going into it the last fifteen years than before.

SB: Why is that, do you suppose?

TB: Ah, because one thing is, you know, up until a few years ago, the funeral director's side was male, the funeral service, embalmer, always been a male-dominated. Mortuary schools started marketing more, because they said compassion, females, I guess they found out females make really great funeral directors. I found out they make really good embalmers too. It ain't a thing where ladies – They make good embalmers too, excellent. So females have gone into it more so than males have over the last few years. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Ownership. Female ownership. Yeah. A lot of ladies owning funeral homes now. Yeah. Yeah. So it is, it's transitioning over that way. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

SB: Thank you so much.

TB: You're quite welcome.

SB: I really appreciate your sharing your time and knowledge. I've learned a lot.

TB: I've enjoyed it. Yeah. So definitely stay in touch, and let us know where else we can help you. We always want to. Always let people know that our mark, as far as a profession, is here, and let people learn to appreciate pretty much what we do, from the standpoint of being something that people can always rely on. Yeah. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

[End of recording.]