



Funeral Director's Chat #011

With Robin Heppell

<http://www.funeraldirectorschat.com/2011/robin-heppell/>

Nancy Burban: I'm Nancy Burban, your host for Funeral Director's Chat, a podcast providing funeral professionals with insight to current industry topics, news and trends. Today I have the great pleasure of speaking to a colleague and a friend, Robin Heppell. He is quite the renaissance man when it comes to funeral services. He has the distinction of being one of the first recipients of the Certified Funeral Service Practitioner Award by the Academy of Professional Service Practice in Western Canada. He is also a fourth-generation funeral director and he's a funeral celebrant. But I'll let him tell you a little bit more about himself. Welcome Robin.

Robin Heppell: Well Nancy, thanks a lot for inviting me. This is a great pleasure, always nice to be on the other side of the microphone. Yeah, I got my start in funeral service somewhat indirectly. My mom's side of the family are from just outside of Toronto, Ontario in Bolton. And I was born and raised here on the west coast in Victoria, BC. But we would spend our summers out at the funeral home. And the motto there at Egan Funeral Home was if you can eat and sleep, you can work.

So, at a young age I was introduced to funeral service. And over the years we would go back and forth. And then when I graduated from high school in Victoria here, I still had dreams of being a NHL goalie. And actually went out to Ontario for the summer, to play hockey and work at a hockey school. And again was quickly put to work my grandpa and my uncle Paul.

And I ended up, after the summer, I came back here to play hockey actually in Victoria. And my dad said to me, he said, well you're not going to sit around all day. And I said, well I don't know what I'm going to do. And get this. I was so shy that my dad actually phoned down to McCall's Funeral Home and set up an appointment for me to get a job. So, you know, things have changed over the last 20 plus years.

And I started right then in that September of 1986, working at McCall's. Eventually started my apprenticeship and got my funeral director and my embalmers license. And started to kind of just work my way up there at the funeral home here in Victoria.

Nancy: That's great. Now you call yourself a born again undertaker. Can you kind of explain what that means?

Robin: Well sure. When you kind of look at the history of funeral service over the last hundred years or more. Back then, a hundred years ago, my grandfather and my great-grandfather and a lot of other undertakers at that time were entrepreneurs and in the true sense of the word. They

weren't just the funeral director. They were the undertaker and they had the furniture store, the hardware store. My grandfather spent time as a fire chief. And, you know, especially in these small towns. And what happened though, over the course of a hundred years, as the industry really matured, we first then got the funeral homes and then the funeral, really the more established facilities. And also, from a career perspective they went from the undertakers, doing that but also doing other things as well, to these one career funeral directors.

And at the same time North America was moving along and doing quite well. And even after the Second World War things were kind of booming in the industry and the industry became quite profitable for people.

And there didn't really need to be a lot of innovation. Things in that kind of middle part of this century, things in funeral service didn't change a whole lot, compared to what's happened in the last 10 years that we've witnessed.

So not that, not blaming the people that were in that position because they were just doing what they needed to do. The public at that time were still fairly religious and were having services kind of dictated by how the burial rites of their denomination prescribed. And they just provided the services.

But in the latter half of the last century, people started getting a little bit more of independence. And they started putting some of their traditions, they just didn't blindly accept their parent's traditions. And they would challenge them. And we saw that was what happened in the 60s and 70s with music and all those social things that were happening. And that's when things slowly started to change for funeral service too.

And especially, what we saw out here in Victoria, it's funny. In the retirement areas, you seem to get the trends first. Because people have left where they grew up and they've come out to retirement. And they leave things behind, such as maybe family burial plots. You know, those are left behind. You can't pack that up with you.

But they also leave the kind of those family traditions, whether it be going to church regularly and other things that they would be expected to do in their home community. They don't really have that pressure when they're in a new community. And sure, some people carry on those traditions. But there's not the same pressure as there is when people are in their hometown.

So what's happened, especially what seemed to happen here, was cremation was very high, higher than normal. And one of the things that we had, was we had no one to call. And currently the cremation rate in Victoria overall is over 90 percent. We've kind of, we joke around that we don't even keep track anymore. If a burial family walks in, it's kind of a bonus.

So it's something that we've had to kind of work through, and then, so getting back to that question, almost have to take on that role of what those entrepreneurs were doing a hundred years ago. Because they would, at that time, there was no history for them to rely upon, so they were just doing what the families requested of them at the time, and grandpa used to say that him and his dad would walk out to some farmhouse and embalm the body right in the kitchen and set the person in the parlour part of the house or in the living room, and then they would move the deceased to the church for the service and that type of thing.

And we really got really prescribed, and this was the way, in the middle of the century, this was the way funeral service was done, and we weren't really open to the suggestions of the public. Well, as the balance of power shifted back to the public, and I'm not just talking about funeral service, but all kinds of industries, we need to be a little bit more nimble and be thinking on our feet.

Because now, people have lost loyalty to all kinds of brands, whether it be their car brand or whether it be the brand of clothes that they wear, or whether it be the funeral homes that have served them in the past. And if they're new to a community, there isn't that tradition there either. So there's a lot more to lose now. And if you just say, "Well, this is the way we do funeral service, and if you don't like it, go somewhere else," people nowadays, especially the younger generation, well, they'll go somewhere else. So I like to think of us, if we can think back and act like they did a hundred years ago, we wouldn't probably be struggling as much as a whole, as the industry has in the past 10 or 15 years.

Nancy: I know, Robin, you had said that many times the third-generation undertakers or funeral directors kind of rely on what their parents, what their father or their grandfather did in the past, and they just offer the same kind of services. And they do have a clientele, because the clientele was built up by their grandparents and by their parents, and the prior generations. And now we have to reinvent ourselves, because there are so many different options out there. And especially where you're from, with a 90 percent cremation rate or higher, you have to be a little bit creative in thinking of different services to offer the families. Is that right?

Robin: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. And, you know, really, I think one little bit of advice for any request that you get from a family, you want to, the initial response should be, "Yes," or, "I'm pretty sure we could do that, just give me a little bit of time." And as long as it's not disrespectful at all, why not? And people, you can see when people leave funerals that have had a lot of personal involvement, and maybe it's taken a little bit more time on the funeral director's part, but you might get 150 or 200 people walking away saying, "Wow, that's just been, that was just an amazing service." And it's just, you can't do business that way of just saying, you know, here's our services, you know, take it or leave it. Sure, there's maybe some pockets throughout North America that that could still happen, but I would hope that most people are here to serve their client families over serving themselves. And just, if they have a request of making something a bit more personalized, the better.

Oh, and I don't really, like, if we try to personalize a service, we always link it to putting, you know, doing something to the casket or something like that. It always goes back to what's more important to us. And we should really get that out of the client family, and what would make it more personalized to them. And most of the time, Nancy, it's not an expense thing and it doesn't take a lot of extra time. It just, maybe a little bit.

But after a while, you're going to, I think funeral homes will, they'll experience more positive comments and they'll create that, like a new brand, not just, we've been in business for a hundred years and I'm a fourth-generation funeral director, so do business with me. That just doesn't fly nowadays. So people, if you could say, "Wow, I want to go there because they have the greatest services," and we just recently, unfortunately, had a funeral for my dad last month.

Nancy: I'm sorry, Robin.

Robin: Well, thanks, Nancy. And I do appreciate all the comments through Facebook. It is amazing to see how connected we are as a community, so I always appreciate that, and hate to have to go through it on that side. But when it happens, it's great that we have that network. And lots of people said, "Wow, that was just, you know, that was one of the best funerals I've ever been to." And they kind of joke, like, "I never thought that I would say, wow, that was a great funeral." And it wasn't that it was elaborate. Now, we did probably knock down the cremation rate a little bit there, because we had, you know, our family is kind of a traditional-minded family, and so we had burial. But with that we had, myself and my mom and my two sisters and my dad's nephew and his best friend all spoke and the service was about an hour and 10 minutes long so people go, "Wow. That's a long funeral." But people at the end thought, "Wow. That was quick." They weren't looking at their watch because it wasn't some long, boring service and all that it took was a little bit extra organization on our part to make sure that we covered what we wanted and I think we had a great send-off.

And it just takes a little bit extra effort but I think what happens is we're at this place where we're always on the defensive now too and it's part of the way things have gone over the last 20 years in the industry. Because there's price shoppers and there's memorial societies and Neptune societies and all these things. So we think that people are price conscious and really I think most people are more value conscious. If they don't see any value then they don't want to spend the money but if they see value they will spend the money.

I think when funeral directors are sitting across from a family they should just take a risk and I know you and I have talked about this in the past. And the greatest moments of my career when I've helped people out when I was working at McCall's and making arrangements and had real impact on the family and hence everyone that attended. It was those times that, and we all have this, that little thought comes to your head, "Oh, should I suggest this or not? I don't know. Hmm? OK. You know what? I won't. I don't want to seem pushy."

But you might be pushy if you're trying to push a \$5,000 or a \$10,000 casket in a little scenario. Let's forget about the product but if it was something like, "I've heard you talk about your dad," And things like this and just spend a bit of time talking about the person and I know this isn't anything new. We hear about it at the conventions of personalizing services and the Celebrant Movement is a great thing to help foster that, of what Doug and Glenda have done.

But we hear that all the time but it's not always practiced or people are just a little too afraid to suggest something. A few times I felt that I have stuck my neck out on the line even for viewing, especially from here with the higher cremation rates. We don't have visitations like they do in most other places. We still have private family viewings but they're not common because people don't experience them.

And it's so easy just to ask the question, "Oh, would you like to see your loved one?" And if they say, "No, we don't really, we don't want to remember dad." Then OK. Then you just move on to the next question. Where I think we should be obligated if we've gone through and believe in the training that we've done and the benefit of viewing and saying goodbye. And just say, "Just give me a couple of minutes and I'll explain why people do view people when they die and just give you some options. And then you can make your decision. Would that be OK?"

And I've never had people say, "No, don't want to hear it."

Nancy: Right.

Robin: But it's just saying that one question and then on the other side people say, "I'm so glad that we did." And I'm not the one with the answers. We've all got this in us. It's just taking that little risk or a little nudge and I think those are the little things too that move the industry or the profession forward. And when people say, "You know, that funeral director was really helpful and they really created this meaningful tribute for mom or for dad." And if we could do that I think we'd all benefit. But most of the time we're, whether we're just too busy and we just want to get on with it. And I know that there's great, awesome funeral directors out there and there's others that just want to get the job done. So we're kind of stuck. Personally though we have to make a choice and it doesn't matter what happens really nationally or globally, really what happens is it's up to you in your backyard. And how you do things and individually people can make an impact in their own community.

Nancy: You're absolutely right Robin. And being a funeral celebrant you know how important it is to eulogize the person and celebrate the life. Not just the past year two but I've heard at different ceremonies where they had a funeral celebrant, people said, "You know, I didn't know he was a boy scout leader. I didn't know him when he was in his 20's. That was really nice to get to know him as a person not just in the past few years that I've known him."

Robin: Yeah. I really think that with the celebrant movement and the way Doug and Glenda teach it. I think the role that the funeral directors could really grab on to is the role of the MC because we've always stood at the back of the chapel and kind of 'out of sight, out of mind'. And when we say that, the families say, "I don't see any value of having them there at the church." That's the message that they're receiving when we don't do anything. We just stand there at the back. And now it's even worse because people have Blackberrys and iPhones and they're kind of checking their messages during services and things. And sure, I know that sometimes you have to do that during but not the entire time. A few times I've had the honor of being an MC of a service and it's a totally different perspective being at the front of the chapel, welcoming people, having the minister do their part and when they sit down and then you bring up the family and then the celebrant. And the MC would... I think if one thing if we grabbed on to something and just did that we wouldn't be kind of 'out of sight, out of mind' because people will say after seeing that for 10 years they might want to have the funeral in their backyard. But they'll go, "Well, we need the funeral person there because they're the one that organizes the service." Because they see them at the front of the chapel directing things.

And I think that's what our... [laughs] ... apparently where our, the name funeral director would have come from is directing things instead of just being ushers. I think we can have it be proactive directors. And so I don't mind plugging them at all, anyone who has the opportunity to take the celebrant training, it's great. But I think the MC part of it is most important for the funeral directors.

Nancy: That's an excellent point of view Robin. I really enjoyed hearing that and I think that it would give more meaning and it is a celebration. It's a celebration of the person's life and it should be treated with as much importance as a wedding or any other service.

Robin: Absolutely.

Nancy: Now let's get off the subject a little bit and I'd like to ask you how you started your marketing and consulting firm. "Funeral Futurists." Is that right?

Robin: Yeah. That's right.

Nancy: OK.

Robin: So at McCall's, it's a family-owned business and Dave McCall's been a great mentor for me. And I'm sure sometimes that I was giving him all these ideas and questions and things and really challenged him and sometimes I was probably a little bit a pain in the butt. But I think together we really grew things and expanded things. They're doing some great, great things now. But it got to the point where Dave's nephew and Dave's son are now in the business. And at the same time getting back to people asking about... like we were going through all these trends and dealing with cremation before a lot of other people were. So funeral homes would phone us all the time and they would say, "Oh, you know what? Rob kind of dealt with that. Maybe you should talk to Rob." Or, "I hear you're doing video tributes there. Well, talk to Rob." And this is back in the day when we did them on PowerPoint and had a big, heavy laptop computer in the chapel. So with that... Sorry. Was that, Nancy was that on your end? I had a big kind of ring in my ears.

Nancy: No. I don't know.

Robin: No. Oh, OK.

Nancy: You can start over. It's fine. Whenever you hear any static on the line you can stop and start over. Sometimes it's just due to the Internet, the transmission.

Robin: OK.

Nancy: I was asking you, Robin, I would like ask you about your marketing, consulting firm, "A Funeral Futurist"?

Robin: Great Nancy. Well, yeah. So when working with McCall's over time funeral homes started phoning us for advice because we were kind of going through some of these trends at the forefront and just learning by trial and error and testing things. And so a lot of times Dave McCall would say, "Oh well, you can talk to Rob about that." Whether it would be like 10 years ago about video tributes when we would make them on PowerPoint and have the big laptop in the chapel to a lot of other things. And at the same time what was happening was Dave's nephew Craig and his son Trevor were coming into the business and about three years ago it just felt that it would be a good transition for... I was a pre-need manager there for over 10 years. And Craig was coming up into that managerial role and I was seeing more interest outside of the business at McCall's and seeing other opportunities throughout the industry. So we had a really great transition through there. I went back to University and got my business degree in Entrepreneurial Management.

And then just started doing some consulting, writing some articles, helping people with their websites. I was a Canadian representative for Aldor Solutions for a few years. And then as my business grew I thought, "Even some of those traditional technology companies weren't really

being as entrepreneurial as they could and they weren't really seeing the social side." I could remember saying, "How are we going to integrate blogs into these funeral websites?"

And they said, "Well, why would want to blog on a funeral home website?" And so at that point I thought, "Well, I've heard those tight kind of responses before but before they were from some funeral home owners and managers just in a different context." So I stepped away from that and just started continuing speaking and now really just building a marketing and strategic consulting company. Helping funeral home owners, independent funeral home owners and managers throughout North America.

And the great thing is I continued to be entrepreneurial and the one thing that's kind of funny, Nancy, is that... although some people see me as a technology expert. I still say that technology, those are just the tools of the day. And we'll just use them as tools. We're not going to build businesses on them. Let's use established practices and strategies that have been around for years and we'll just use the current tools. So, my grandfather was very involved in his community in all the social networks. But, back then it wasn't Facebook, it was the Rotary and the Lodge and the church.

And I'm not saying you should give those up, but he was successful at what he did because he was where the people were at, and we need to do that today. Now, as we speak right now, Facebook necessarily isn't the long term answer.

But since there's such a group of people on Facebook, that's where we need to be today and tomorrow might be something else. But the strategy and the practice of connecting to your community is no different than what my grandfather did. We're just using a different means. And we're just going where the people are.

Nancy: You're absolutely right Robin, and if people are not aware of you before the emerging need, they'll just go through the phone book or in this case, they'll go through the Internet, and just pick the first couple of names that come up on the first page top of the fold.

Robin: That's right. Which gives people an opportunity. So you want to be involved in your networks but you also want your networks can also, especially your online presence, can help your ranking in those Google searches, and things like that. So those are very important. And we can't lead with, "We've been in business for 100 years and we're fourth generation." And although I'm really proud of my heritage within the profession, I don't just sit here and rest on that. I have to prove it today, and if I'm not proving it every day then people are going to go elsewhere. And funeral homes are no different.

In some areas you don't have to be as on the cutting edge as others. But what I've seen now Nancy, and how I help even some of my clients is through ways of being online, you can infiltrate the next market over without that person really even knowing what's going on. And they just kind of wonder, wow, are we getting less death calls here? Because there's a lot of people going to those other funeral homes but I guess they were just living in those communities.

People will now go to where they feel they are going to get their best value and where they're going to be best served.

Nancy: Now, Robin, how do funeral directors convey the message that they are...excuse me. How can funeral directors convey the message in their marketing that they are caring, and that they will take better care of the decedents?

Robin: Well I think overall, you have all these online resources to do that. And examples of that would be creating some education-based marketing, especially over brand marketing. The brand is established but we're not brands like Nike or Budweiser or things like that. And if we can show people either as becoming our own little expert within our community. If we're the death expert in our community, people are going to look up to that person. And then with that becomes, there's some trust there. You can build trust online by just being helpful. So by educating people, and you can do that through video online, you can do that through frequently asked questions. I like to call them QSAs. So questions that they should ask.

You have the specific questions that people always ask because that's what they're going to search for. But then you have these other questions that you integrate with them, questions that they would ask or that they should ask such as, "Can I still have a viewing if I choose cremation?" Because that's probably not on the mind of the person choosing cremation.

But if they see that question amongst your other questions, you're educating them. And if you're educating them without charging them anything for that service, you're going to build trust. It's always been the same, and you've heard this many times Nancy. It's about getting people to know you, like you, and trust you, and funeral services is no different at all, and probably more important to do that. Because not only do they want to trust you to look after them, they want to trust you to look after their loved one who has just died.

So, we can do that online, and we can't just rest on the laurels of what everyone has done in the past. We need to kind of prove it today. Other ways of doing that are testimonials. Sometimes we're chicken to ask for people to give us a testimonial.

I can relate to this too, but, Todd Van Beck said this at one seminar that I was attending. Todd said, "You know, I went and had cataract surgery and that doctor gave me my sight back, and I didn't send him a single thank you card." But we help families. And everyone of us, every funeral director here probably has a shoebox full of thank you cards of what a great job they did.

And how you helped me out at the worst possible time of my life. And so people are our raving fans. And we want to do it tactfully. But we should probably build in some systems in gathering some testimonials and sharing. Maybe having people give us a review on Google Places or on Yelp, and different services like that. Because, again, maybe people don't have a relationship with any funeral home and they search online. And if one funeral home has a whole bunch of reviews and testimonials.

And they have to be legitimate. They have to be a person's full name and kind of where they are from. You don't want to disclose privacy issues. But just having someone's initials or things like that, there's a lot of, the BS factor kind of goes off in people's minds now. We can't really bluff people like the way people try to do that a few years back.

So, they've got to be legitimate. And those services too, like Google and Yelp, people have to have registered accounts and things like that. And I know what's going to come next Nancy.

People are going to say, oh well, I don't want to do that because what if there's negative reviews? Well, I say, you know what? All the better. Because that then gives you an open platform to communicate with these people and invite them to try to come up with a solution. Now, if someone really messed up, then you've got to take onus for that.

You are collecting a few thousand or several thousand dollars to provide a service and if you're not doing a good job, you don't deserve the money. But if you make a legitimate mistake and you go and take steps to correct that, and communicate with people. And I've witnessed this and I've instructed clients how to do this online, Nancy.

And it's amazing, people will come around and say, I'm so glad you took the time to respond. And they'll take the message down. And if you go through the right processes. If someone is kind of flaming your business and you address that. And if you addressed it and they don't respond, these online companies may take that complainant's response or statement off.

Because you've kind of taken the high road and you've wanted to solve it, and they've kind of refused. So that can work, if you do it right, can really work in the funeral home's advantage. We're just being an open book. And we're human too. People make mistakes. Hopefully it's not horrendous. But those ones too, you need to address them. You just can't sweep them under the mat.

Because if they go unaddressed, I don't know how many corporate case studies there are now such as Toyota and all these companies that didn't...I think BMW, the same. Because things started happening online and people started talking, and they just thought it would go away, and it just kept on getting worse, and, and worse. So you need to be able to nip that in the bud as soon as you can.

Nancy: And good examples of that are Dell and Comcast Cares, where they went back on Twitter or Facebook and said, "I'm sorry. I had no idea. How can I make it up to you?"

Robin: Exactly. Yeah. And those companies then get great following and they are loyal. It shows that they are just real people too. That they are making mistakes but they are making an effort to turn a wrong into a right.

Nancy: Right. And even Zappos, where they offer, if you're not happy working for Zappos, please let us know, we'll give you \$2,000 to resign. Because they never want to have an unhappy employee because when you have an unhappy employee that permeates into your workforce and it touches every aspect of your business.

Robin: Yeah. I'm sure some funeral home owners, "Oh, I'd never be able to do that." But, if you could build the all star team, it's going to more than pay for itself. And people who aren't happy, if you could get rid of those people, because when you're not looking, they're dealing with families. If they're having bad days, that doesn't go away when they're talking to a family.

Nancy: And we know from our own experience, the Bob Biggins in Massachusetts, and John Beckworth, I think it's in Fort Worth, Texas. They have four funeral homes. And they have more cases than they can handle because everything is by referral. And they do such an excellent job at funeral services that they get more calls than they can possibly even handle. And when you see

people building more funeral homes in their county, it has to be because they are providing such excellent service that people are coming to them through word of mouth.

Robin: Absolutely, yeah. If you're going to start brand new and build a firm you're not going to do it solely just on marketing. You need, that whole referral part is part of your overall marketing program anyway. But, yeah, if they're not committed, it's not going to work, and it will just end up being a waste of money. It's great. It's funny, people say, if you're the Funeral Futurist, what's going to happen in five years or what have you?

And I say well, it's funny because the same prediction is around every year. Some funeral homes are going to continue to flourish because they get it and other are going to continue to whine and moan because they just wish it was the way it was. And the funny thing is, and this gets back to the undertaker part, they're kind of looking back to the way it was just a generation ago.

But really, if you're really true to your heritage, this was happening 100 years ago. It wasn't super competitive but the business was evolving very rapidly at that time, and it's evolving rapidly now. And so it just depends on what generation you want to link your strategic mentoring to.

Nancy: Right. There was that transition from home funerals and home wakes to funeral homes. And so, there was a bit of selling, if you'd like to call it that, going on back then. And now, you almost never hear of a home funeral or home wake.

Robin: No. Not too often. Although those are some of the progressive and proactive firms are offering that, they look after the main services like the preparation services or that type of thing in their own house. But they can assist people on wherever they want to have the service. Whether it's in someone's house, in a chapel, a church, or some arena. Even, I heard, one was in a rodeo corral, and everyone went and sat in the bleachers for the service. There's lots of examples of that so it should be wherever, whatever, within reason.

Nancy: Uh huh.

Robin: What would be the best, and this is nothing new. People have been talking about this for the last ten years or so.

Nancy: Now do you see the cremation rate going up in the... You're in Canada so we know cremation is very high in Canada, do you see it going up in the United States?

Robin: Yeah, I think it's going to continue to increase and again, it's just going to increase because out of convenience, the more mobile our societies are it just means that they don't have a lot of 16 plots at the church cemetery for everyone because most of the family has left town. You can't take that with you. So if you're in the Midwest and you move to San Francisco sure, you might be able to have the burial back there but maybe none of the rest of the family is there. Maybe they're going to be in San Francisco for a while and then they're going to move to Florida or the Southeast somewhere so people are so much more mobile. Cremation is more of an option today to that transient society so it's just going to increase but it doesn't mean that direct cremation is going to increase.

I truly believe there is very little direct cremation. What we call direct cremation is when we're not involved, meaning the funeral home isn't involved in the service but I'm sure there's other things going on with that family and their friends, they just don't see the value in us participating in that. Whether it's them going out to a restaurant and celebrating the person's life over a meal and some drinks and dessert. That's a celebration, it's not a direct cremation. It is a direct cremation in our eyes but that's our terminology and we haven't done a great job of demonstrating how we can provide more value to the people who want cremation.

But I think that's going to be a case by case scenario of where people are at. In Victoria I can report that the catering revenues exceed casket revenues and continue to go up so when you're trending things and you see a line going up it's always better than lines going down that what we've been seeing over the last few years. I'm not saying drop your business and turn it into a catering and reception facility but you need to know that those trends are happening and the reason why that happened if I can explain it, Nancy is that...

Nancy: Oh no, go ahead.

Robin: Sure, so these people that came, and we'll use Victoria as the example, left wherever they were, whether they were coming from the Prairies or from the Eastern part of the country or from the UK, or Europe or Asia, in the West Coast we've got all kinds of cultures here.

Nancy: Uh huh.

Robin: But, they've left those traditions behind and they come here and maybe they don't choose a church and they choose to start golfing or fishing or things like that. What happens over time is where in those traditional markets people are still really connected to their church and that's where they would have their reception and the church ladies are going to make egg salad sandwiches. Here, they're not connected to those organizations that have those facilities. So at McCall's as an example, when I started there 25 years ago they had a fleet of 12 cars and I know it cause I had to wash them all.

Nancy: [laughs]

Robin: And we had this huge, they called it the concourse area and we'd park all the cars in there and then roll them out every morning and we'd mop this huge floor. It was kind of this ritual at McCall's. Then over time we started doing more catering and it kind of got into this, well, we don't want to have our catering in the garage because people knew that the cars were in there. Bring it up to present day, McCall's has a full commercial kitchen in the facility, that concourse has been turned into a full reception area with a fireplace and very well appointed. They're down to a fleet of four cars but they don't need them but they've got lots of receptions going on.

Well the great thing too is that people enjoy that time. There's probably more value, and this is going to upset some people but there's probably more value in the long run to the funeral home of the family spending \$2000 on catering versus \$2000 on a casket because if that's the case and you spend \$2000 on catering that's going to mean that there is 150 people at \$12 per person or whatever their number is. So those 150 people are going to be in your facility for an extra hour,

so that's 150 hours of exposure, and receptions are very positive because they are social and we are social creatures so people always love that part.

Even talking to the gals that worked with the catering, and actually Dave McCall's wife Debby and her friend Bea started it, and they were two bubbly ladies and people just loved it at the receptions and they'd always leave being in kind of great spirits even though they were just at a funeral.

Nancy: Uh huh.

Robin: So there's a very positive impact. Now again I want to preface you can't just change your operations today if you are at 30% cremation and go to that model but you need to start putting some of those things in. Maybe it's just getting in a deal with a local restaurant and you have a couple staff members at the restaurant helping out the wait staff or at least being present so that you can be part of that good spirit that's going on.

Nancy: Uh huh. And people also if they want their funerals to replicate the positive experience that they just went through.

Robin: Exactly. [laughs] Probably the greatest complement I ever got for a service that I did as a celebrant and an MC, a guy came up to me afterwards and he said "Rob, I don't want to have a funeral but I want to have one of those".

Nancy: [laughs]

Robin: To us if it was how we defined a funeral, it would have been a funeral, the casket was there and all that.

Nancy: Uh huh.

Robin: It was just that it was meaningful and there was activity and all those extra little things didn't cost anything, it was just us knowing what we could do and having people prepared when they come up to speak. I know when working with my sisters for my dad's service, I said if you are going to speak you got to write it all out. I want you to write it out and work on it, and then fine tune it and just make sure that we have a great consistent message. As Doug and Glenda say we had a theme for the service. My dad was a teacher and he was teaching people up until he died. He always wanted to just share knowledge and also he learned too so we just wove that into the entire service and so it flowed really nicely instead of having something just kind of thrown together.

Again it just takes a little bit more effort but not a lot, and in the end all those people that attended will thank the funeral home for doing that, or they will say I want to go there because those funerals that they have there are amazing.

Nancy: Uh huh.

Robin: Way better than those other ones when we go to the other place.

Nancy: Right, and as Joe Sehee often says, our job as funeral service practitioners is to honor the dead and heal the living.

Robin: Exactly. Yep, absolutely, I couldn't agree more and with that, we can do both.

Nancy: Yea, absolutely. Now Robin, where are you going to be in your travels in the next few months?

Robin: Well Nancy I've got [laughs] it's a busy spring, that's for sure. In March we've got the ICCFA in Vegas so I'm looking forward to that. I'm co-presenting with my friend Nevin Mann on social media in 15 minutes a day. So it's going to be good because I know that a lot of people think that oh I don't want to get on Facebook or I don't want my staff on there because they are going to be on there for 55 minutes a day as the average is.

Nancy: Uh huh.

Robin: And then April we've got our B.C. convention, so British Columbia convention in beautiful Kelowna. Then, it's almost like week to week, then I'm at Utah next week for their 100th anniversary celebration. Then at the end of the month I'm in Ohio, so that's in April. And then we've got the Canadian national convention way out in the East Coast in St. John, New Brunswick and that's the FSAC convention. We have our monthly CEU webinars that people like because they still get that interactivity of a live event but they don't have to go anywhere for it and it's just a convenient way of getting your CEUs.

Nancy: Uh huh.

Robin: Then also too that we are just putting together is a very comprehensive marketing event for September so people can stay tuned for those more details but it will be a complete marketing plan that people walk away from for the coming year. I think it's going to be really interesting because we are going to tie in the traditional forms of marketing and integrate that with the new media marketing, and just making that consistent. Also not a headache because I think that's what people are finding now is all this stuff online although it's great it can be a headache when they just don't know what to do because they don't have a plan. We're going to put the entire thing together.

Nancy: Sounds exciting. Now if our listeners want to get more information from you, how can they do that Robin?

Robin: Well for the CEUs you can go to FuneralDirectorCEUs.com. For marketing and strategy opinions and resources just go to FuneralFuturistTips.com and you can watch some free videos there and download my free marketing sheet. So that's FuneralFuturistTips.com.

Nancy: And your email address, if you don't mind sharing?

Robin: Sure, it's Robin@FuneralFuturist.com.

Nancy: And you're on Facebook as well?

Robin: Facebook at [Facebook.com/FuneralFuturist](https://www.facebook.com/FuneralFuturist).

Nancy: Terrific, terrific. Is there anything you'd like to add Robin?

Robin: Well Nancy I could probably go on [laughs] . I think we picked a great topic and I'm really passionate about this but I think we'll just leave it at that for now and I just really appreciate your time today and our conversations that we've had in the past. This is a great podcast, your whole series so keep up the great work.

Nancy: Thank you so much Robin it's been a real pleasure chatting with you today.