



FDChat #02 – Funeral Celebrants

Nancy Burban: Hi, I'm Nancy Burban, your host of Funeral Director's Chat. Today, I'll be speaking with Glenda Stansbury of Oklahoma-based In-Sight Institute. She is the dean of In-Sight Institute, and she's also the marketing director for In-Sight Books, which was founded by her father, Doug Manning, many years ago. Is that right, Glenda?

Glenda Stansbury: Correct, about 30 years ago.

Nancy: About 30 years ago. We're going to be speaking today about a growing trend in the industry, funeral Celebrants. I'm going to let Glenda start off and tell us a little bit about what that is.

Glenda: Funeral Celebrants are individuals who are specifically trained to provide personalized and individualized services for people. Usually, the type of families who request a Celebrant or a funeral director suggests a Celebrant to, are those people who do not want a typical religious service or denominationally-based service. They are the people who now are not affiliated with any kind of church or just are not looking for that kind of experience in a funeral service. We fill that niche for those people who really call themselves spiritual but not religious, and don't want the religious elements added to their funeral service.

Nancy: I see. What does a funeral Celebrant actually do?

Glenda: Obviously, we do what a minister would do in a funeral service, as far as just conducting the service, but we do many things before that happens. When a family contacts a Celebrant or a funeral director contacts a Celebrant, we arrange to have a family meeting with as many of the family members as we can gather. That's a very important piece of what we do. Not only do we allow healing time for the family to get together and tell stories, but also that's where we get our information in order to put together a eulogy and an entire service that really reflects the life and the lifestyle of that loved one.

Then we work very closely with the funeral director to make sure that everything is coordinated, that the music is correct, and all of the pieces that go into a funeral service. Then we conduct the service the day of the service. We can do any kind of service a family needs. We do funeral

services. We do memorial services. We do grave sites. Anything that a family wants to honor their loved one, we're certainly capable of doing.

Nancy: I see. You just ran a training this weekend in Oklahoma City. Is that correct?

Glenda: Yes, that's right. It's our first one of this year. We do seven every year, and we always try to get kicked off here in Oklahoma City. We had a wonderfully diverse group. We had people from Canada, and California, and Wisconsin, and all over the place. It was a really nice group of people who were really looking for ways that they could either add to the services that they were offering at their funeral home, or individuals who were looking to get into this as a profession and offer their services to funeral homes in their area.

Nancy: Great. Now, Glenda, I understand that your father, who was Doug Manning, brought this movement to the United States from Australia and New Zealand. Can you tell us a little bit about how that actually happened?

Glenda: Doug does a lot of public speaking around the country on the areas of grief and elder care, and he does a lot of speaking presentations to funeral directors. In the early '90s, he was asked to come to Australia and do a two-week tour doing trainings and seminars for funeral directors in that country. While he was there, he kept running into people who called themselves civil Celebrants.

He got very intrigued by that, and started asking the question, and found out that Celebrants had become a movement there in Australia because the only real church affiliation that was available to Australians is a really high liturgical Church of England kind of approach.

Only about five to 10 percent of the people in the entire country belong to church, so the individuals were saying, "You're not giving us what we need in a funeral experience," because it's all very high church kind of stuff.

So the country actually started licensing what they call civil Celebrants. That's like wedding commissioners are licensed in Canada. Their whole goal was to provide services for those people who did not want that kind of high religious service.

Then a couple of years later, Doug went back to New Zealand, and found Celebrants there, and visited with them, and understood that they were filling a very important niche also in their country.

When he came back from those two trips, he really looked around at what was going on here in North America and realizing that as church attendance is declining in the United States and Canada, fewer and fewer people are feeling like their needs are being met in a funeral experience because all they had to choose from was a rent-a-minister or somebody who was going to come in and do a religious or a cookie-cutter kind of service.

So, we thought this would be a wonderful opportunity for us to meet the needs of those people. Those are the kind of people who are choosing not to have a service or who are choosing immediate cremation because they don't think that there's anything important or meaningful in a funeral service experience. They haven't seen it.

We really did this. We started this 10 years ago with the whole hope of bringing people back to funeral service, bringing people back to the healing experience of having a well-done funeral.

We decided let's go try it. We did our first training in Boston in 1999 and thought, "OK, we found a niche here where there really is a need." So we've been training people ever since.

Nancy: Coming from a background as a Baptist minister, as your father was, he must have really sincerely embraced this in order to incorporate this into his offerings, I would assume.

Glenda: Absolutely. Of course, even when he was a minister, he was usually one of those rent-a-ministers that the funeral directors always called because they knew that he could handle those families who did not want a religious background, or a religious experience, or a religious service. So he was pretty comfortable with that going in. It has always given people pause that a former Baptist minister is out here training people how to do secular services. But his underlying goal has always been the value of the funeral, the value of the funeral process, and how important it is in the grief journey.

He really comes to this as a speaker and a writer in the area of grief, and he believes that a well-done funeral service really sets people off on a healthy journey in their grief experience. He was so concerned that so many people were turning away from that experience just because they didn't think there was anything out there for them.

Regardless of how he felt in the religious aspects, his desire to see healthy grief experiences and well-done funeral experiences was much stronger than any need for any kind of Evangelical look. He knows that this is absolutely the most healing thing a family can do, and that we need to do everything possible in funeral service to provide that kind of service for every person who walks in the door. We feel like Celebrants are the way to do that.

Nancy: John Reed Sr., the president of the National Funeral Directors Association, has said that it's up to 50 percent of Americans today who claim to not belong to a church and don't see any value in a religious funeral, but they still want a ceremony and a celebration at the end of life. I know it's up to 85 to 90 percent in Australia and New Zealand, but 50 percent is pretty significant in the U.S., wouldn't you say?

Glenda: Yes, and I'm really not sure where he gets those numbers, but I would tend to agree with. The last American Religious Identification Survey came out last year, and those numbers run somewhere around, I would say, probably about 30 percent of the people who say that they have absolutely no religious affiliation, and about 49 percent of those people who say they do not want to have a religious wedding or a religious funeral. So the trend is growing. The people who identify themselves as what we call the "nones," the "nones" who say no religion, no affiliation. Right now, if you grouped all of those people into a state, they would be the second-largest state in the country behind California.

It's a growing number of people, and it's always challenging for us when we go talk to funeral directors, especially in the Bible Belt or those areas, and they say, "Oh, everybody in our town goes to church." Well, that's really not true.

You've got even people in the buckle of the Bible Belt who are saying, "I don't want to be preached at at a funeral. I don't want all of those impersonal and non-relatable items utilized in a service for my loved one."

Those are the people that we have turned into the immediate disposition group. Those are the people who are saying, "You just take care of cremating the body, and I'm going to go do something else that I have control over."

So we have to find a way to make sure that they understand that they have options, and that there are choices out there outside of the traditional, one-size-fits-all, stick-the-name-at-the-top-of-the-clergy-card, kind of approach to funerals. That's our goal.

Nancy: 25 years ago, religious funerals were really the only option available, and I think your father has filled a significant need by bringing this to America. Currently today, I know that most of your funeral Celebrants are experiencing a lot of success in introducing this into the individual communities, whether they're the Bible Belt or not.

Glenda: Right. They are, for the most part. I certainly have some Celebrants who go back to their communities hoping that the local funeral home is going to use them. Sometimes they're a little disappointed because funeral directors are a little fearful of new, a little fearful of change, a little fearful that it might make the local clergy mad. But once they see what kinds of services we can do, once they see the happy families that leave after these services, then they finally go, OK, now I get it.

We're also helping the funeral industry, helping their bottom line, because if you have a family who would normally walk in and ask for an immediate disposition or service, and we can turn them around into a full-service funeral of some kind, then that's an economic impact as well as being able to say that you're serving your families well.

A lot of our Celebrants are doing incredibly well. Some of them would like to be a lot busier, just hoping that the funeral directors are going to call them. But, we always have hope every year that as we grow and as people know about us, that funeral directors will reach out and utilize the Celebrants that are available.

A lot of funeral homes have trained their own people on staff so that they've got people already available. When the family walks in, they've got people on staff who can immediately serve them as a Celebrant. That's really smart marketing on their part.

Nancy: I understand that there is a funeral chain in Florida and I believe one in Ohio that actually has more than three, possibly five, funeral Celebrants on staff. Is that correct?

Glenda: The funeral home in Florida, they have two or three on staff, and then they've got two or three who are independent contractors, but they only work for that firm. They call them all the time. There's a large family firm in the Ohio area that has three on staff and another three or four that are independent contractors that only work for them. They've actually put on staff what they call a Celebrant coordinator who works with all the funeral directors if they have families come in, and help them pair them up with a Celebrant, and make sure that the families get with the Celebrant and understand what all's going to go on.

Same is true in California. A large, large funeral home in the L.A. area, they have one gentleman who coordinates all the Celebrants and they've got about 15 Celebrants who are available to them. They're not on staff, but they're all independent contractors who work almost solely for that firm. They have a coordinator who makes sure that families get paired up with a Celebrant.

Some of the larger firms are really seeing that this is a powerful marketing tool, that it's a powerful way to encourage families to do more as they're honoring their loved one.

Nancy: Right. Let's talk a little bit about cremation. I know cremation is very significant in the New Zealand-Australia area, and it's on the rise in the United States as well, and Canada, of course. How does that impact on cremation or specifically direct cremation?

Glenda: I think that is our one foot back into the door. There's probably around a 90 to 95 percent cremation rate in Australia and New Zealand, but those two countries have never heard the word immediate disposition. It's just not done there. They usually have the body embalmed, they have a full service, and then the body goes to be cremated. They found very early how to deal with the families and offer them options so that they know this is how one does a service. When cremation first started here in the United States and Canada back... Really, it's been around for a while, but it really started gaining ground in the late '60s and the '70s.

We, as a profession, did not respond very well. We just shut down and went, "Oh, it's a cremation," and didn't really articulate for families what their options were. We priced it cheaper. We did all kinds of things that say to families, "This is a second-rate service, but if you want to have it, OK."

Now we're stuck with this two-tier pricing, which is a real problem, for burial versus cremation. But we also have created these families who walk in and say, "We've seen what you have to offer. We've seen the rent-a-minister. We've seen the cookie-cutter funeral. That's not for us. All we want you to be is the body disposer."

So, I think, probably Celebrants have the most powerful piece of turning those immediate cremation services around because we can say, "Oh no, we can offer you something incredibly personalized, incredibly unique, and you will appreciate having spent the time and the money putting together a service that honors your loved one."

I cannot tell you how many cremation families that I've worked with that, after the fact, they said, "We really thought about not having a service at all, but we're thrilled that we did."

So if more funeral directors understand that this is such an incredible tool for bringing those particular groups of families back, then they would be knocking on our door begging us to hand them Celebrants.

Nancy: Rituals and ceremonies are a very important part of the grieving process, and if one doesn't grieve... That's the whole reason for a funeral is for people to grieve their loss and to celebrate the life that has just passed.

Glenda: Absolutely. It's not normal. We've almost gotten so immune to it that we just don't think anything about it. But, it's truly not a normal reaction for a person to say, "Gee, my loved one just died, and I don't want to do anything to recognize or honor that."

Nancy: Right.

Glenda: So when somebody walks in and says, "I want an immediate disposition and no service," that's a very abnormal reaction, and it's usually growing out of something else. It's growing out of disgust with past services or even hurt from past services. "Gee, when I went to my grandmother's funeral, they said her name wrong," or "They never even mentioned her," or whatever. It's a reactionary kind of response, and we never really stop and analyze that to understand that that's not normal.

We have to find ways to allow those people to have what, you would say, a ritual and a ceremony that is healing, and healthy, and normal in whatever way they want it, whether that's a graveside or whether that's a memorial service, or a tribute service, or whatever, just to offer them that option, to really stop and commemorate.

It's important. It's important in the grief process. It's important to us as a society. If we stop honoring the dead, then we stop valuing the living. We really have to find ways to provide those tools for everyone in our community, and everyone in the group that we're working with to say, "You have ways of doing this that will be meaningful, and personal, and the perfect opportunity."

Nancy: It's not just for the family, it's for the community. I know that I've seen a couple where they spoke about the deceased, and even though the man was in his late-80's, they spoke about when he was a Boy Scout. They spoke about when he was in the military and his accomplishments. They spoke about what a loving husband, what a wonderful father he was, the different things that he did in his community. They really gave a full picture, and they painted a beautiful picture of who he was as a man.

Glenda: Absolutely. One of the most heartwarming things for me after a service is for somebody to walk up and say, "You know, I knew that person for 40 years, and you told me things I didn't know about them." That's special. It gives them a whole different group of memories to leave that service with, and to remember their friend, or their neighbor, or their coworker, whoever.

Maybe they didn't know everything about them as they were growing up, or whatever. It's always fun for us to do the older person's funeral because it's such a full life, and you get to talk about wonderful experiences. Our goal in that family meeting is to make sure that we present a very complete picture of who that person was.

Nancy: Now Glenda, we had spoken previously, and you had shared with me some stories about some funerals that you did, that you had an especially creative approach. Would you mind sharing that with our listeners?

Glenda: Well every service gives us an opportunity to really think about what can we do ceremonially or creatively to make this a really long lasting meaningful experience. In many of

the services that I do - not all Celebrants do this, but a lot of them do - I try to always find some kind of a memory takeaway, is what we call them, that we handout to the audience after the service, and give them a little physical token to take away to remember the loved one.

I've handed out golf tees, or I've handed out crossword puzzle pages. I've handed out little puffs of cotton balls because this woman really loved clouds. I've handed out bookmarks. All kinds of different pieces.

It's just one more little element to saying, "This life was important, and this life is worth remembering, and we are giving you something very tangible that you can take home, and remember that person by."

So those are always a lot of fun. People always really enjoy them when they receive them. I've done services for 97 year olds, and I've done services for 16 year olds, and so every life has a different take on it.

You just try your best to make that you've represented what that family wants, what that family needs, and to just give that story in such a way that people are wowed by it.

I don't know how else to say that. You write as creatively as you can in a manner that people will really remember the stories. I don't care if they remember me; I want them to remember the stories, to walk away saying, "I really got something out of that."

We have lots of Celebrants that have been incredibly creative putting together ribbons. One of the Celebrants handed out little sparkles in little baggies, and she told the children in the family that it was fairy dust. That she had gone out the night before, and gathered in the backyard, so they could remember their loved one. All kinds of different fun things. Something that represents the life.

I had one funeral director sidle up to be one day - he was one that had never been supportive of Celebrants, really didn't see a need for it until his firm started using me - and he started seeing how happy these families were. He sidled up to me a couple of months ago, I was getting ready to do a service, and he said, "So what are you going to give away today?"

So he even, in his doubt and disbelief, that this was something important, understood that that's a very special service, and it's a special way to leave those families with something that they'll remember.

Nancy: And it's a shared experience at the end of the day, isn't it?

Glenda: Oh yeah, absolutely. You can put whatever little token that we gave you on a shelf, and the next time you look at that, you'll remember that person. If somebody else is at the service, you can both talk about that. So it kind of brings everybody together. It takes it into our community to grieve the loss. So we were just trying to find ways to make the audience, especially, feel like they're part of that experience. Too often the audience who comes to a funeral, kind of feels a little disconnected. They're just kind of there because they are supposed to be there.

They're there for a friend. Or they're there because it's expected. And to kind of incorporate them, and include them, and tell them that they are important to the family and the grief journey, and to be present for them, makes them feel like they are a little bit more actively involved.

Nancy: Can you share with us a little bit about... I think you did a celebration for a famous stained glass artist?

Glenda: Yes. That was a wonderfully, a real creative opportunity. She was a nationally known stained glass artist. She had actually served as the President of the National Stained Glass Association, at one time, had done a lot of stained glass work here in Oklahoma City. She was responsible for repairing all of the stained glass in downtown Oklahoma City churches that were damaged after the Oklahoma City bombing. So she's been honored a lot, and her talent, in what she brought to her particular profession.

So when we did her service, the current President of the National Stained Glass Association, and the editor of their journal, the "Stained Glass Journal", flew in from Kansas City for her service. It was a really nice service, wonderful stories. The family was just sweet as they could be. I handed out little pieces of stained glass, little broken glass pieces, to everybody at the end of the service.

The editor of the magazine, and the President came up to me afterwards, and said, "Oh my goodness, this is just incredible. Not at all what we had expected." So they asked for a copy of the service.

The next time they published the "Stained Glass Association Journal", they put the entire service in the "Journal", and illustrated it with pictures of her stained glass. So it was the first time I had an illustrated funeral that was published. But it was gorgeous.

It really spoke to me that when you do something that's meaningful to people, they really respond to it. I doubt that that stained glass magazine has ever printed a funeral in its pages. It meant enough to them to say, "Yes, this is how we are going to honor our former leader."

Nancy: That is a wonderful story. Thank you for sharing that with us. Now Glenda, I know that you are a funeral director. But do you have to be a funeral director to be trained as a funeral Celebrant?

Glenda: Absolutely not. We market pretty heavily to the funeral profession, and so we get a lot of funeral directors who come. Also, we are approved for continuing ed credit in all of the states. So that's a nice little incentive for any funeral directors to come see us. But, we probably have about a 60/40 split in any group that we train between funeral directors and other people. For example, in this last class that we just taught last weekend, we had funeral directors there, but we also had a clergy person whose funeral home sent him because they want him to be able to do more than just the traditional service. We had two retiring educators. We had a nurse. We had a retired flight attendant.

So it's a real diverse group. We had an actor and singer from L.A. So it's a real diverse group of people. Each one of them says, "Gee, this really speaks to me, I think I have the talent and the skill to write, and to get up in front of people and do presentations."

So there is just no telling. We've had nuns. We've had priests. We've had clowns. We've had social workers. So, a real diverse group of people that this particular profession kind of speaks to. So it helps to be familiar with the funeral industry and how things run. But you can learn that. You can go work at a funeral home and learn that part.

Most of our funeral directors find, once they've been through training, and it's really hard to do both for one family. It's hard to wear both hats as a Celebrant and a funeral director.

So a lot of times we have funeral directors come to training, and then they go home and find somebody else, either on-staff or somebody in their community, that they can send back to training, that they will call on to be their Celebrant, and they will help facilitate the service, working in concert with that Celebrant.

Nancy: That makes sense.

Glenda: We also have some firms who have a couple of people on staff. We have a bereavement coordinator, and a funeral director, and they team together. So, if the funeral director is actually serving as funeral director for that family, then he's going to act as master of ceremonies for the service, and the bereavement coordinator will be the Celebrant. If he is not directly involved with that particular service as funeral director, then he'll be the Celebrant and the bereavement coordinator will be the masters of ceremonies. So there's lots of different permutations to that.

But certainly you do not have to be a funeral director. We want funeral directors to go through training to understand what we do, and to be very willing to offer Celebrant services either from them or from somebody else to their families.

Nancy: What type of personality traits does a successful funeral Celebrant usually have?

Glenda: Well, I think first of all, a real heart for hearing people, and a real comfort level with being with people in pain. Usually, when we are walking into a family meeting, it's the day of the death or the day after the death. So you've got lots of really raw feelings going on. So you've got to be somebody who is pretty comfortable in that kind of an emotional setting.

Nancy: Sure.

Glenda: I think second of all, you have to be a curious person. You have to want to know the stories, and want to know the "why" behind the stories, or want to know the "why" behind the music selections, or the pictures, or the video tribute. I find myself saying to families a lot, "Tell me why you chose that music?" Or "Tell me why you picked those pictures for the video tribute?" Because every one of those questions then usually leads to another insight into that person or another story.

So you kind of have to be real naturally curious, and listening. You have to be pretty comfortable, obviously, with public speaking because you are going to be getting up in front of people. sometimes large groups of people. You have to be a pretty good writer. But that's a learned skill. You can get better at that as you do it.

But, you certainly should go in with some semblance of writing skills to be able to pull all those stories together in a tribute that makes sense, if you will.

Your first goal is that you are a compassionate person with a real open heart that can listen. Then you have some of the talent skills to then do something with the stories that you've heard.

It's such an interesting wide range of people who are very good at this, and very successful at it. If you had sat them all in a room, you probably wouldn't have picked many of them at all. But, they have very natural skills or they have grown into their skills, and they just exude a real sense of calm, and competence, and families are willing to put their stories in their hands, and that's the important piece.

Nancy: So it's almost like being an investigative reporter with a touch of creativity.

Glenda: [laughs] Absolutely. Absolutely. I actually had somebody in the training last weekend who was in journalism and in marketing, and after we talked about the technical pieces of putting together a eulogy, and she said, "You know this is a lot like writing a newspaper story. You are looking for the lead. You are looking for the angles. You are looking for all of the supporting stories to go with it."

I said, yeah, in a lot of ways. You are a little nicer than some of the investigative journalists that I've met. But you are asking the questions. You want to know why so that you can represent that life fully.

Nancy: Now Glenda, you are a funeral director. Is that right?

Glenda: Yes I am.

Nancy: And you teach at a local college?

Glenda: Yes, I teach at the University of Central Oklahoma in the funeral services department. I have been doing that for about a year and a half. That's a true joy of my life. It was one of my goals after I finished my funeral service licensing degree, was to be able to go back, and really hopefully share some of the skills and knowledge with the young funeral directors.

I think a lot of what I see...I go all over the country, and train lots of funeral directors, and some of them are old guys that have been out there for 40 years, and some of them are new. But, what I hear from them consistently is "Nobody really ever taught us how to talk to families well."

Arrangement conferences are just agony because you are never sure if you are doing it right, or how you're dealing with the family.

So my goal was to go back and really help them understand how to obtain those skills.

I don't teach Celebrants at the college level. I teach counseling, and listening, and those kind of pieces, because I think our next generation has to be better at the interpersonal skill piece.

We spend a lot of time training a lot of technical embalmers, and incredibly talented, wonderful people out there. But as the need for embalming declines, unfortunately, the need for people with

incredibly well done people skills, and consulting skills, and able to be a guider with families, is going to be even more necessary.

Nancy: It's crucial, it's really crucial. I know you're really good at it. You have to have that skill because you only get one chance to make the family feel comfortable, and to help them through this transition in their life.

Glenda: Yes. Yes. Our customers are changing drastically. Our customers are now the baby boomers which is my age group and younger. These are the people who have demanded that everything about their life is personalized. We have our own ring-tones on our cell phones. We have our own Facebook page, and we are going to declare everything that we believe upside down, the other, on our Facebook page. We have our own license tags; we have everything about us that says, "I'm special. I'm unique."

So that's the clientele that is walking into a funeral home. If that funeral home is not prepared to respond to that need, and we throw in with the same old, same old, same old, that my grandfather did, then they are going to turn around and walk out, because they have options now.

Nancy: You certainly are helping a lot of people by training Celebrants and spreading out into the communities, and all over the United States, as well as the UK and Canada.

Glenda: Well thank you.

Nancy: So I was reading today Glenda that the number three job in America, rated number three for satisfaction by "CNN Money", is actually funeral Celebrants. So I guess there is some recognition of this new practice?

Glenda: I guess so. I think that's very exciting that CNN is recognizing us as a profession. And I would agree with it. There is nothing as satisfying as walking away from a service where you know that you did the right thing for that family, and that you touched their lives and gave them long lasting memories. I've had a lot of jobs in my life, and a lot of professions in my life, and there's nothing that can even touch the satisfaction of serving a family like that. So I would agree with "CNN Money".

Nancy: That's great. I really enjoyed chatting with you today. It was really great.

Glenda: I appreciate it.

Nancy: Glenda, if there are listeners who would like more information on how to contact you and find a funeral Celebrant in their area, or they would actually like to participate in the training to become a funeral Celebrant, how would they get more information?

Glenda: Well the best way would be to go to our website, which is insightbooks.com. There is a page on Celebrants within our website. There is a page that says "Find a Celebrant. So if a family was looking for a Celebrant, they could go there and search by name, or search by state, or search by country, however they wish to search. That's not all our Celebrants. But those are Celebrants who have selected to be on our site and available for searching. So there is probably about 400 Celebrants on there, all around the country and in Canada.

So if somebody was looking for a Celebrant, they could certainly go on there and see if there was one in their area. They can always email me at Glenda@insightbooks.com if they have a question about finding a Celebrant or about the training.

There's also a page on the website that has all of our training locations. You can sign up on the website if you wish to come to training. All of the information about locations, and price, and all of those pieces are on the website. Or they're always welcome to email or call me here at In-Sight Books.

Nancy: OK. That sounds great. I really do hope that this trend does continue, because it brings new life to the funeral industry, and it's much needed.

Glenda: Well, thank you so much. I hope so too.

Nancy: Thank you Glenda.