

## Life lessons from growing up in a funeral home



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I get weird looks when I tell people I grew up in a funeral home. Some look aghast. Others just look incredulous.

My parents acquired the funeral home in Deux-Montagnes, Que., from my grandparents when I was a toddler. It was all I knew. But as I grew up, I began to realize my life strayed pretty far from the standard definition of normal.

For the first couple of years we lived right above the funeral parlour, which caused a few problems.

Imagine trying to explain to a two-year-old and a four-year-old that they must be very quiet and have no running or screaming lest they disturb the mourners downstairs? I certainly didn't understand, but I always knew by the sound of my dad's angry tread pounding up the stairs that I was in trouble.

I also couldn't see why it was a poor idea to open the parlour door for Cindy, our ornery basset hound. Nothing says mourning like a howling pooch among the bereaved.

Sometimes funeral operations had to be changed for the sake of childhood living. Philip, my older brother, almost walked in on an embalming in the basement when he was 4. Poor kid had no idea why his father slammed a door in his face.

After that, embalmings quietly moved off site, but my parents never bothered to change the name of the room. I can't quite describe the look I'd get from adults when I told them I played in the embalming room. Shock and horror just don't do it justice.

My mother would chide me for using the term, but never explained what it meant. I only clued in to the definition of embalming at around age 10. Then I finally understood why others thought I was weird.

People often ask me whether I knew what death meant at such a young age. As a toddler, you can't understand death intellectually, but I can tell you that even at age 2, I could look at a dead person and tell that no one was home. I often found myself gazing at the deceased, mesmerized, wondering why the skin always seemed so orange. I guess we needed a better makeup person.

It may seem odd, but I have plenty of happy memories from the funeral home. I fondly recall our friendly embalmer, Roland, who used to give me spicy fish candies and teach me to draw houses when I came home from nursery school.

And I did benefit from some unique lessons while we lived above the parlour. I learned there was no point putting out any Halloween candy because there wasn't a single soul brave enough to visit our house. I'm not sure who was more frightened of us, the parents or the kids.

I learned that no one will stay in a funeral home when the power goes out.

Hydro Quebec had a lot of problems back then, so the power might go out if someone sneezed hard enough down the street. My dad had a generator and could have full power back on within 10 minutes, but no one would stick around. Even the widow would make a beeline for the door.

I also learned it's not a great idea to host a 10th birthday party sleepover on funeral parlour premises. The business was at least closed by this point; the only remnant of death left behind was a locked room full of caskets. Of course, that room gave out a siren call for a group of curious girls, who kept trying to pry the doors open.

In the middle of the night, the door to our sleeping room mysteriously opened all by itself, which left my parents dealing with a horde of hysterical children. We probably scarred them for life. In hindsight, the sleepover was a bad idea, but my parents were just trying to fulfill the normal wishes of a little girl.

I also learned how to keep cool in a sticky situation.

At funeral homes, caskets are transported using gurneys and stay supported from underneath throughout the proceedings. The only time they are lifted is once services are over and the pallbearers lead the mourners out of the funeral home.

Because of this, you wouldn't know until the procession that your expensive casket suffered from a manufacturing defect that left its screws improperly aligned.

This is a terrible time to have the bottom fall out of the casket and the deceased dumped unceremoniously onto your front steps.

At least it only happened once.

The only thing that prevented a complete mourner meltdown was a quick-thinking nun who slammed the parlour doors in everyone's faces before they could get out and gawk.

For years after we closed the business, I didn't tell people about the funeral home. I wasn't embarrassed; it just never occurred to me that others would find my childhood fascinating.

I've slowly come to appreciate the effort my parents made to keep life as normal as possible for us. I've also learned that funeral homes provide great fodder for speeches and party stories.

The funeral business was popularized by Hollywood a few years ago in TV shows like *Six Feet Under*. Sometimes people ask me whether I'm a fan of these shows. I've actually never watched them. Their fantasy just can't compare to my reality.

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