

Cooperative Funeral Fund Inc.

Being Pink in a Blue World

as seen in:



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Viewpoint

By Ann Marie St. George

Being in a **Blue** Pink World

In honor of October being breast cancer awareness month, I would like to share the awesomeness of “girl power.” I am tired of hearing stories about the negative side of being female in a male-dominant funeral world. As we become a more prominent force in the death-care industry, I want to share the funny side of being a female funeral director/embalmer. As many of you know, we are an even more unique breed than our male counterparts.

To know me as a female funeral director is to know the woman who encouraged me to be whatever I wanted to be, my mom. Sitting quietly, looking across the plastic bars of her hospital bed in the neurological ICU, I see my actively athletic mom lying still.

At 82, she played tennis twice this week, along with a round of golf with one of her friends. It has been a long night for my three siblings and myself – the oldest, but not always wisest. I am writing this (yes some of us still write long hand) on a yellow pad borrowed from my

younger author sister who is writing a new book across from me as we sit and wait for answers. She, of course, is on a laptop. The initial diagnosis is amyloid angiopathy, simply explained, a protein buildup that caused bleeding in the frontal lobe of my mom’s brain. She does not know us, however she can sign her own name. The brain is a fascinating curiosity. As I watch her breathing and study the monitor above her head, I flash back to a different hospital many years ago.

I am back to that moment where I am trying to discreetly roll the

stretcher down the hospital corridor to the morgue and coming around the corner literally running into my mom along with a few of her hospital volunteer friends. “Hey, it’s my daughter the undertaker. Everyone, this is my daughter, Ann Marie, so what are you doing here?”

Um, I guess it wasn’t as obvious as I thought. My mom loved telling everyone what I did. Sometimes I think she secretly enjoyed people’s reactions – you know the one where the person you’re speaking with thinks you are joking ... hee-hee, priceless.



Clockwise from above: A young Ann Marie St. George with her mother, Theresa Moll. Driving a hearse was one of Ann Marie St. George's jobs as a funeral director. Theresa Moll (center) and her sisters. (Photos courtesy of Ann Marie St. George)

I am trying so hard to not feel anxious and afraid. My one tough cookie mom would hate any of us seeing her this way. I am grateful for her stillness, although I can't wait for her to wake up and give us one of her biting comebacks. As my brother said to her as she lay quietly, "This was one hell of a way to get us all together." I looked over just to hear a fading "yes," followed by a Cheshire cat grin. My mom, the youngest of eight children, came to this country from Scotland, turning 19 on the "original" Queen Mary, now docked in Long Beach, California.

One of five incredibly strong sisters, she is my role model with the mantra: "You can be whatever you want to be." I remember the day I

came home from dental hygiene school and excitedly exclaimed that I wanted to be a funeral director. Never batting an eye, she responded, "Great, if that is what you want to be." I wasn't sure if she was humoring me or being supportive; our humor is very similar. I believe this was the same moment that she told me that my grandmother and her friends used to go wake hopping as young women. You have to love family traditions.

Mom always encouraged me to share my "funeral" stories during

our family dinners. Not all of my family enjoyed hearing them. Remember my author sister? Who knew some day she would publish a romance novel that centered around a funeral home ("Silver Lake Secrets" by Alison Stone).

As my mom still lies sleeping, I reminisce about how she never made me feel like I couldn't do or be anything because I was a girl. I was the biggest tomboy, climbing trees, playing street hockey and fighting boys on street corners – defending my siblings from bullies

with a fearlessness that rivaled Hulk Hogan (my era's championship wrestler). The only difference I saw between boys and girls were the obvious ones, which the nuns weren't always so forthcoming with. Yes, 12 years of Catholic education has given me a unique perspective on life, living, death and dying.

I entered mortuary school in the early '80s, quickly realizing in a class of 40 there were only three girls. At the age of 19, my only thoughts were "awesome dating odds!" By the time we graduated, there were only two girls. Yes, bettering my odds. I loved being a woman in a male-dominant industry. However, today the trend seems to be heading in the other direction with enrollment of most mortuary schools being female dominant.

In the '80s, I heard the litany of why we as women couldn't be hired or, I should say, the reason behind why we weren't hired. There were three biggies: (1) They won't be able to lift the bodies. (2) They won't be able to lift the bodies. (3) They won't be able to lift the bodies. Really?

You try lifting in these darn heels! I even fell down a flight of stairs under a casket during a service because of heels. Let's try an even playing field. I bet that is a visual that will make you smile.

My first experience working as a funeral director/embalmer began when I was hired by a man who had three daughters, none of whom were interested in working in the business. He resolved the problem by hiring three female funeral directors. We were "Cas's Angels." He loved telling people, "My girls can run circles around your guys any day of the week." In the '80s we were truly a rarity, and we certainly enjoyed the attention. I believe they thought our boss had lost his mind.

We hardly ever felt the downside of being female funeral directors – just the humor in it. Did we have to prove ourselves more? Absolutely. The first car I ever waxed was a

hearse, and my male counterpart got to wax the limo ... hee-hee, not sure which was worse. My boss called me out of bed more often than my male counterparts, because I never complained. I just did my job – a job I was built for and loved.

As a woman, it is OK for me to hug the grieving families without worrying about being creepy. Female huggers are culturally more acceptable, which, as a hugger myself, is a real bonus. I read a blog once where a female funeral director felt like a grieving family member was hitting on her and how she felt it was "soo" inappropriate in the funeral home. Ugh, I am sorry if it was Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Otherwise, I am sure it would have been more than appropriate. We all deal with grieving families flirting with us – male and female funeral directors alike. Hey, they may even be our next spouse (I hope some of you see the humor in that), so get over yourself.

I have had men follow me while driving the hearse and no, we were not in procession. This fascinating man said he had never seen a woman drive a hearse before and wanted to know why and if I would go out with him. Maybe, if his not-very-impressed wife wasn't sitting in the car next to him!

Another time a female funeral director and I were propositioned by someone holding a sign as they passed the hearse I was driving. Our response via a return sign had them speeding away. A man intrigued by my pager asked what I did for a living. My response as I downed a shot of tequila, "I am a heart surgeon, and I am on call." When he didn't believe me, I ran through a detailed description of the human anatomy, that truly only a heart surgeon would understand, wink-wink. Sorry to say no phone numbers were exchanged, "The Rock" he was not. Being asked out by a pallbearer at the back of the hearse, in a cemetery as I was closing the door had me pause and say,

"Yes." That truly took some courage, and "The Rock" he might have been.

My favorite perk of being a female funeral director is when making a removal, the male orderlies are more than willing to help. I remember one removal in particular where a couple of orderlies were standing by watching while I struggled to pull the 300-plus pound deceased onto my stretcher. One of them timidly asked if they could help, and with a grin I said, "Absolutely, in fact you can do the whole removal!" Apparently, the last female they offered help to bit their heads off. My thoughts: "What, was she crazy?"

Being pink in a blue funeral world has more advantages than drawbacks. These advantages may be subtle, however, they are there in spades. I have learned to never take myself too seriously. We are all human trying to figure out this crazy world in which we live.

As male and female funeral directors alike, we bring different things to the table, and together we are nothing but awesome. Our job is tough enough, especially when we watch those we love struggle with serious illnesses. I don't know what will happen with my mom because it is too soon to guess. All we can do as a family is think positively and say a few prayers. My dilemma: What do I do with the Powerball tickets I found in her condo?

I do know I am grateful to her for my tenacity, wit and charm. Right now, I see her silently rolling her eyes and probably wondering what I am going to do with her tickets.

Lastly, it is breast cancer awareness month, so please do the smart thing and be proactive. Your awesome self depends on it. •