

Cooperative Funeral Fund Inc.

Caring for One of Your Own

as seen in:



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LAST WORD

BY ANN MARIE ST. GEORGE

Caring for One of Your Own

While everyone close to you counts on you to make them feel better after the death of a loved one, you must confront your own grief as well.

As we met our new friend Walt, the elevator operator at JFK Medical Center in Atlantis, Florida, my mom and I caught up with him about his visit with his new grandson. Reaching the sixth floor, where the 12-bed Jay Robert Lauer Hospice and PC Unit occupies six rooms, we exited to find another familiar face. We hadn't seen Bernadette in the past week of our five-week daily visits to room 606.

With a warm smile and big hugs, she stopped to say, "He waited for me to get back from vacation!" I really wasn't quite sure what she was trying to tell us, but I smiled and accepted her usual heartfelt embrace. As we went through the brown and silver double doors leading to the unit, we were greeted by six staffers who had formed a human wall of concern.

As I looked over at my mom, who had an anxious, yet quizzical expression on her face, the light bulb of death went off in my head. My dad, my first protector, was gone. Turning to my mom, I reached out to forewarn her, only to be blocked by one of the nurses who wrapped her in an unsolicited emotional squeeze. My mom's small blue eyes became large and wet with emotion with the realization of why this hefty woman had her arms wrapped around her.

Though I had been very aware that my father was in his final days, it still came as a shock. The dad I knew, who was now physically gone, had been mentally gone for years. His good day/bad day struggle with Alzheimer's for the past 10 years had come to an end. As I earnestly strode toward his room, I struggled with my emotions. Should I be feeling more relief than sadness? His good-humored voice resonated in my head: "If I ever get like that, please take me out back and shoot me!"

As I entered his room, I glanced over to where he lay peacefully on his bed holding a bountiful bouquet of daisies. What came next were tears streaming down my face not from grief but from the uncontrollable laughter escaping my lips. Apparently, by the look of dismay on everyone's face, no one else saw the humor in my dad holding daisies. So, as subtly as I could, I asked, "I guess no one else looks at this picture and thinks 'pushing up daisies'?" It was at that point that one of the nurses threw the musical therapist under the bus: "Courtney said your dad loved the song *Daisy Bell*; the daisies in your dad's hands were because of the song." Um, yeah, okay... the poor nurse couldn't apologize enough until, of course, I broke the ice, letting her know my dad would have loved the gesture and yes, he would have gotten the joke.

"So, do I put the flowers in water or let them go with him?" Going into immediate funeral director mode, I started asking the delicate questions the staff was not used to being asked by a family member, and I believe it confused them more than my finding the daisies so funny.

As fellow funeral directors, you know it's a part of our brain we are unable to turn off, especially while standing

next to a dead body, but I'm not sure it helps us in our own grieving process. For me, it often delays it. How many times have we lost someone close and had to take care of their final wishes? While everyone close to you is looking for you to make them feel better, you're struggling with your own grief. Been there done that, one too many times (not one of the best benefits of coming from a very large family). Are you your family's funeral director? Yes, everyone we know finds this amusing until, of course, they need us.

We are in a genuinely distinctive position that can in some ways be silently stressful. In performing our daily grind (I mean vocation), we need to be aware of how we are affected when we lose someone close. A perfect example can be found in one of my favorite HBO series, *Six Feet Under*. In this particular episode, the father/owner of the funeral home is killed by a large truck while driving the hearse. What we witness is a funeral family's unique perspective on how they struggle between taking care of the deceased and those mourning his loss while trying to come to grips with one of their own dying. Here is the internet link: [youtube.com/watch?v=fXYsf-skRL-8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXYsf-skRL-8). If you are not internet savvy, go to the YouTube website and type in the search box: "six feet under father dies." There are several other episodes that show a similar struggle (be advised that some of the language is a little "raw").

I realize we all "know" we function the best we can in a stressful environment. However, what I want you to think about is taking care of your funeral director self. If you are what I call the "typical" funeral director, you have an amazing sense of humor. In keeping with this trait, I would like to share some fun ways to relieve stress that superheroes do. That's right, visit [superheroyou.com/reduce-stress-fun](https://www.superheroyou.com/reduce-stress-fun). You may have your own list of fun things you do to relieve stress; I would love to hear them.

The message I'm trying to share is that life and what we do is hard enough. We need to do something for ourselves. For those of you who are curious, I'd like to share the Nat King Cole version of one of my dad's favorite songs – and apparently one of his last: *Daisy Bell (On a Bicycle Built for Two)*: [youtube.com/watch?v=78MKBHR3NbU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78MKBHR3NbU).

Ann Marie St. George, CPC, is a first-generation funeral director who has worked for the past 20 years as a regional manager for Cooperative Funeral Fund, a preneed/cemetery care fund management company. Thriving in the industry for more than 35 years as a funeral director/embalmer, she was pulled into the world of national disasters with 9/11. She is a mortuary officer for both DMORT Region II and Kenyon International Emergency Services. The devastation and grief to which she has been exposed has contributed to her unique sense of humor, which she admits may also be due to genetics. St. George can be reached at annie@cffinc.com.