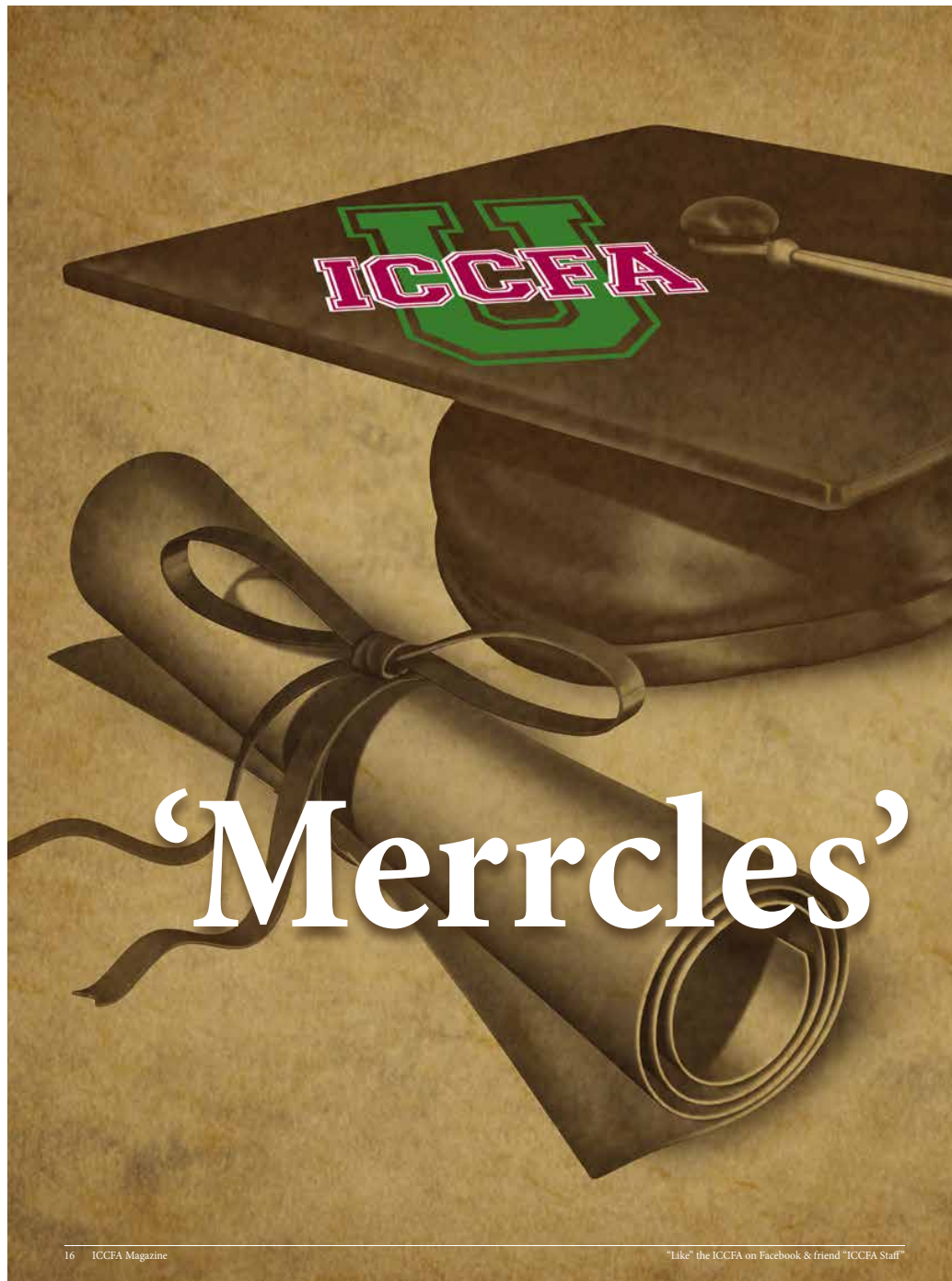


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16 ICCFA Magazine

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Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks at the ICCFA University

by Ann Marie St. George

AM I IN THE RIGHT PLACE?

Where are they serving food? Do I fit in? Where are my classes? Will I make new friends? Did I bring the right clothes? Where do I sign up for the fun stuff? How long will it take me to say something stupid? In my case, never very long.

I was a freshman again. And all the old memories of my first year of college came flooding back.

These were my thoughts as I walked into the Fogelman Executive Center where the ICCFA University is held annually on the beautiful campus of the University of Memphis. It is my first year attending the ICCFA University, a six-day awe-inspiring event. Check out this year's details at <https://iccfa.com/university>.

I am sharing my experience in the hope that you will consider becoming a freshman again, too. After 35 years in this profession, I needed a reboot and the University turned out to be the perfect answer. I have been a vendor member of the ICCFA for more than eight years and I always enjoy attending the Annual Convention & Expo. It is innovative and has something for everyone in the deathcare profession.

While regularly exhibiting at the convention, I became aware of the University and was instantly curious. However, only after attending this year's annual Wide World of Sales event did I push myself to follow through on applying for acceptance to the ICCFA University held July 19–24, 2019.

Knowing it might be a tough sell to my company to cover all the costs associated with attendance, and it was a little over my personal budget, I applied for and was granted a scholarship to cover tuition and meals. The ICCFA Educational Foundation offers more than 85 scholarships annually to cover the cost of attendance: training and materials and three meals a day. I performed a happy dance in my head as I explained all the benefits of attending to my boss. Scoring a fabulous scholarship sealed the deal!

There are eight colleges within the University:

1. College of 21st Century Services
2. College of Cremation Services
3. College of Funeral Home Management
4. College of International Studies
5. College of Land Management & Grounds Operations
6. College of Leadership, Administration & Management
7. J. Asher Neel College of Sales and Marketing
8. College of Hospitality and Event Management

Seven of the eight colleges are open to freshman, so I had to decide which one I should attend.



Ann Marie St. George (left)
with fellow University attendees.

I narrowed it down to either leadership or sales. Then my company asked me to choose sales and marketing in order to share what I learn with our sales team upon my return. I agreed wholeheartedly, especially since the company was covering my transportation and hotel expenses.

After registering to attend four months in advance of the event (the wait felt like forever), I needed to decide where to stay. The two closest hotels were the Fogelman Executive Center rated “good” on Hotels.com or the Holiday Inn University of Memphis rated “fabulous.” I wanted to be close to all the action, so I booked a room at the Fogelman located on the campus of the University where all the classes, meals, and fireside chats are held. The Holiday Inn, which is across the street, is less than a five-minute walk.

Book early because several attendees had to find hotels that were not within a short walking distance or Uber ride for that matter.

In the months, weeks, and days before the start of the University, I received several emails to help me prepare for the six-day experience.

Day 1: Friday

My Echo Dot goes off at 3:00 am and I mentally need to convince myself to roll out of bed, not an easy feat. I am already packed because I have a 6:00 am flight with an hour drive to the airport. My flight lands in Memphis around 11:00 am and registration opens at 2:00 pm.

William, my Lyft driver, gets me to the Fogelman Executive Center after a few U-turns and a back-alley drop-off behind the center. Yes, I still gave him a five-star review. He may not have known the area, but he had a great story. I walk in and ICCFA meeting manager Kelly Spann is already there setting up and preparing for us early arrivals.

Along with my name badge, I am given a colored ribbon to designate my “freshmanness.” While going through my welcome packet, I am greeted by a few of the college deans who are milling around; luckily, I didn’t say anything stupid.

Not surprisingly my room isn’t ready, bummer. No worries, this gives me a chance to join a friend and some other attendees who are going downtown for lunch. As I jump into a car with four strangers and one friend, I am a little nervous. But that car is soon



filled with newfound friends sharing stories; as I said I love a good story! We all laugh through lunch and I return in time to find my room, unpack, change, and head for the auditorium to attend orientation followed by a welcome reception and dinner.

The auditorium is abuzz. Friends are catching up with friends; introductions are being made between strangers. The

orientation is where we learn who's who, the lay of the land, and what to expect over the next couple of days. I distinctly remember the clear warnings about Beale Street on Friday and Saturday nights. Apparently, it is similar to Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Hmm, as tempting as that sounds I heed the warnings. The chancellor introduces the deans of each college and each of them tells an intriguing personal story.

The reception follows and we mingle over appetizers and cold beverages. What strikes me most is everyone's openness to introduce themselves and share their stories. Because we have colored ribbons representing what year we are, I am able to spot other freshmen very quickly. There are about 88 of us, the largest freshman class in the history of the University. The upperclassmen greet us with smiles and assurances that we are going to "love it." I am truly hoping they are not being sarcastic.

We head to the third floor and the dining area, where we will be eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the next few days, if we choose to. I enjoyed the food, so I didn't feel any need to go elsewhere. I went to bed fairly early, excited to start my learning.

Day 2: Saturday

Alarm rings at 6:30 am because I don't want to miss breakfast or be late for class. Oh no, what am I going to wear? They said really, really, casual or did they say comfortable? I brought mostly dresses, which I guess are kinda casual but definitely comfortable. My dean is the illustrious Gary O'Sullivan and we are going to create several "Merrcles" in the next five days.

Scheduled are four information-packed classes each day, with the first 1.5-hour class starting at 9:00 am and the last ending at 5:00 pm with 30-minute breaks in between and an hour for lunch. By 5:00 pm, my brain is on overload and I have only said three stupid things—a good day for me. Wait, the day isn't over; tonight is "sports night."

Being athletic I am fired up, what sport will we be playing? Softball? Kickball? Dodgeball? Wait, what? Cornhole? I have never played Cornhole before, how hard could it be? All I can think of is Beavis and Butthead and the episode where they keep saying, "cornholio." As I am looking at the board with all the crazy team names, a smiling stranger named Sandra says, "Hey do you want to be my teammate?" "Sure," I said. I am thinking to myself, "I hope she knows how to play cuz I don't." Apparently, my new friend and teammate has played in Cornhole tournaments and is quite good. Guess what our team name is ... hee hee.

All told there are 40 teams participating in sports night and it does not disappoint! We are loud, boisterous, and the camaraderie is awesome. We are cheering for each other and our competitors. Some people are so competitive; um, yeah maybe I am, too. We win one round and lose the next, so we head back to the hotel for a cold beverage and some pizza.

It was a great day of exercising our brains, muscles, and mouths. Can anyone say, "Fireside Chat?" The "Fireside Chat" is a Gary O'Sullivan-patented event. If you want to experience it, you need to attend the University in order to understand and appreciate it!

Number of ICCFA University Attendees by College

College of 21st Century Services	16
College of Cremation Services	20
College of Funeral Home Management	17
College of Hospitality and Event Management	28
College of International Studies	12
College of Land Management & Grounds Operations	31
College of Leadership, Administration & Management	45
J. Asher Neel College of Sales and Marketing	28
Total Attendees	197

Day 3: Sunday

Back at it at 9:00 am, well, 8:00 am, because one needs to eat these wonderful breakfasts. Today, even though I may have stayed up a little later than I should have, I absorb every word from the four speakers, fervently writing everything I can. The instructors are generous in offering emails, which include not only their presentations but encouragement. I cannot wait to share and implement what I am learning. I write my "Merrcle" after each class and then off to dinner, followed by a nap and another "Fireside Chat." Tonight is a free night, so many attendees head downtown to enjoy the mystery of Beale Street.

Day 4: Monday

I wonder what t-shirt Dean Gary O'Sullivan will wear today; there seems to be a theme. Our daily speakers are specifically chosen to cover certain material in a way that will help us learn and remember our daily Merrcles. Another learning day comes to a close and now we have to get ready for an action-packed evening. Tonight is the banquet at the Holiday Inn starting with food, followed by the Cornhole finals, and rounding the night out is a trivia competition. Each college is pitted against the other earning bragging rights. The J. Asher Neel College of Sales and Marketing wins in a very close battle answering the last question correctly to claim victory—truly one of my freshman highlights; did I mention I am competitive?

Day 5: Tuesday

Today is graduation day for the seniors. We pack in another day of insightful speakers who challenge the way we think and how we need to change if we are going to be ready for the way our profession is morphing. I am overwhelmed with all the information I have received, and my notebook is full of Merrcles! The graduation ceremony is inspiring and gives me incentive to come back next year. Tonight, we are on our own, so I go to dinner with some of my new friends, and we live dangerously by heading downtown to Beale Street. Yes, if you go to Memphis you need to take a peek at Beale Street; but be careful on Friday and Saturday.

Day 6: Wednesday

It's graduation day for the individual colleges. Oh no, it can't be over already. Gary leads us in a pledge to commit to following

through with the skills we have learned. We individually agree to implement something that will have a positive impact on our lives and careers in the next 90 days. He is very creative in how he makes us accountable. You will need to attend to learn how.

Our last class ends; we are all exchanging hugs, numbers, and promises to return next year. We have all been truly affected in a positive way by our shared experiences. It is humbling to be among so many people who are willing to help each other for the greater good.

Thank you to the extremely attentive staff that took care of and cleaned up after all of us every day. They went above and beyond, and I am honestly not sure if they ever slept. I personally thank James Price and the ICCFA Educational Foundation for the scholarship that afforded me my University freshman status.

Lastly, if you are still on the fence about attending, you need to stop making excuses and attend. There is no other experience like it in our profession. Like me, it might be what you need to reboot your career. The ICCFA University is truly a “Merrcle”! ■

ANN MARIE ST. GEORGE, CPC, AnnMarie.StGeorge@cffinc.com, a first-generation funeral director, has worked for the past 20 years as a regional manager for Cooperative Funeral Fund, a preneed and cemetery care fund management company. Thriving in the industry for over 35 years as a funeral director/embalmer, Ann Marie was pulled into the world of national disasters on 9/11; she lived only 11 blocks north of the World Trade Center. She is a Mortuary Officer for both DMORT Region II and Kenyon International Emergency Services. The devastation and grief Ann Marie has witnessed has contributed to her unique sense of humor. Topic suggestions are encouraged.

Graduates of the 2019 ICCFA University Listed by College

21st Century

Alberto Sandoval, Guatemala

Cremation

Rafael Azevedo Flores, Brazil

Nathan Caviness, Arizona

Mark Christopherson, Illinois

Linda Jankowski, South Carolina

Nathan Nardi, Maryland

Hospitality

Brian Bartlett, Utah

Brian Childers, Ohio

Chris Hensley, Indiana

Roger Martin, Kentucky

Lynne Moore, Oklahoma

Jeremy Rochell, Tennessee

Stephanie Zimmerman, Indiana

International

Clift Dempsey CCFE, Georgia

Joseph Moore, Oklahoma

Linda Olvera, Texas

Jose Raul Ruiz, Florida

Alesia Skinner LM, Pennsylvania

Land

Felipe Badotti, Brazil

Tamala Randolph, South Carolina

Leadership

Alexandra Petrini, California

Raymond Sala, California

Mike Sanchez, California

Sales

Susan Barney, North Carolina

Victor Holland, Texas

Jeremy Layton CFSP, Utah

Jackson Williams, Oklahoma

Linda Williams, Oklahoma

Benjamin Wilson, Virginia

