

# Coffins, cremation & curiosity

Here's a nice clean coffin when you need one?

"We're going to have a dress-up Halloween party, and we want to provide atmosphere with it," sighs Eugenean Steve Conrad. But after phoning his friend Ron Gates, a local mortician, he learned "there's no such thing as a demo model or a loaner."

Gates says it's common this time of year for people to call and ask to borrow coffins for Halloween pranks. It's that time of year when people can adopt a relaxed attitude about death and still be within the confines of good taste.

While he sees the humor of his profession, Gates, who is employed by England's Eugene Memorial Chapel, takes a more reverent view of the subject.

With a degree in mortuary science, a license as an embalmer and a position as funeral director, Gates says that, like a doctor, clergyman or lawyer, he performs a public service.

So, if you're giving or attending that special Halloween party, you may want to know a little more about death and dying for authenticity's sake. Here are some insights from Gates' career:

"Part of the attraction was curiosity," says Gates, of his career choice.

"It's not as morbid as people think. Handling the dead human body is only a small part of the job. Helping people gives a lot of satisfaction. People come back and thank you for helping them through a difficult time.

"When I was serving my apprenticeship, me and another mortician were out one night. I was out there dancing with this girl. I asked her what she did. She said she was a secretary. Then she asked me what I did, and when I told her I was a mortician, she tensed right up and almost stopped dancing.



Mortician Ron Gates says his profession is "not as morbid as people think." He spends more time helping and educating the widows, widowers and families through their grief.

Backed away from me. When the song was over she was gone. My friend said, 'don't tell them you're a mortician. Tell them you're a bookkeeper or an attorney or something.'

"I would like people to know that I'm here to help, and that I care. I'm one of the guys with a white hat and not a black hat. Some of the families that come in are on edge. They're skeptical. They think we're here

to take their money and not give them anything in return. But once the service is over, they usually thank us for making it easier on them. One of the things that keeps us going is the letters that come in thanking us for our patience and understanding.

"With a widow or widower, we try to be sympathetic to a point. To be courteous. We answer ques-

tions. Try not to hide anything from them. Try to be helpful.

"When we're helping families, some of them are pretty upset. We can't let ourselves get caught up in it. We don't sit down and talk to families for seven or eight hours straight. We take turns, so no one funeral director is overburdened with that kind of job.

"Most people fear things they don't know about. Most people don't know much about death. Once they learn about it, they realize there's nothing to be afraid of. One of our goals here is to educate people about the process.

"A lot of people can't accept it and put off making funeral arrangements. As funeral directors we accept it a lot better. But it's still difficult when it happens in our own families. No one can truly prepare themselves for that kind of loss.

"A fellow came in once whose wife was killed in a car accident. The first thing I did was mispronounce his name. He got angry and raised his voice at me. I told him he was just going through a stage of grief, that he was getting angry because of that. You tell 'em it's normal to feel anger, grief and so on, and it helps them understand it. After the funeral was over he thanked me for helping him deal with his emotions.

"One fella after a funeral asked me whether I was going to lower the casket or if I was going to take her out of there and resell the casket. How many times has an undertaker been accused of reselling a casket? I was so shocked he asked me. I told him he was welcome to watch it being lowered. So he did.

"If it was a rip-off, the people would be saying afterward, 'Hey, I've been had.' But they don't. They thank us. And they come back a second time. It doesn't have to be expensive. A

lot of people expect to pay \$5,000 to have a traditional funeral and are really amazed that it only costs \$1,500 or \$1,600 or \$1,700.

"There's always a few people that are gonna complain about the cost. Usually the families that are paying next to nothing are the most demanding. Of course, we have to allow for their emotions. They're going through a stage of grief. We have to watch 'em and be sure their decisions are reasonable.

"More and more people are making arrangements before they die. In fact, they're paying for it ahead of time. Part of it is growing public awareness about death. Part of it is they don't want their family to be burdened with those decisions when it happens.

"Different people accept death differently. Some people can't stand the thought of being buried in the ground. Others can't stand the thought of being burned. Cremated, I should say. The cremation rate is on the upswing. Probably up to 35 percent get cremated. Eight, nine years ago it was about three percent.

"I've had people say, how can you stand to embalm and cremate people all the time? I talked to a group of grammar school kids at a career day at a school in Corvallis. After class I asked how many wanted to be morticians. A couple kids raised their hand. But one kid said, 'how could you stand that, don't you worry about your public image?' I asked him what he wanted to do. He said he wanted to be a politician. I said, 'and you think I should be worried about my public image?'"



Photo by Bob Baker

Talk about "great pumpkins" — check out this 170-pound, grinning Jack-o-lantern on display at Jo Federigo's Restaurant.

Chef David Kuanbeck persuaded the produce man to leave the bright-orange pumpkin behind for Halloween.

But don't expect to see pie on the restaurant's menu. Jo Federigo's specializes in Italian food.

It's 170 lbs of great pumpkin