

# THE DOORS ARE OPEN



Five women from various former professions who have broken through the proverbial glass ceiling in funeral service.



Lee Senderov

**BY LEE SENDEROV**

For as long as I can remember, the study of leadership has energized me. I have been blessed to know, follow and work with an amazing collection of inspirational individuals who have molded me into the leader I am today. That list begins with my dad, who advised me to “work for someone whose job you aspire to have one day,” and includes Simon Sinek, world-renowned speaker and author of *Together Is Better*, who said, “Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.”

We all wear many hats, but professional women often wear more of them than their male counterparts. A *Harvard Business Review* article written at the start of the pandemic stated, “Despite the fact that women outnumber men in the paid workforce,

women still do more of the domestic work and childcare – almost twice as much as their male partners.” And although significantly more women than men are graduating from mortuary schools today, the funeral profession, like many other

businesses, is still largely male dominated in executive leadership positions.

My own funeral industry career journey began in 2021. I was president of the digital division of Richland Group, a Berkshire Hathaway company specializing in metals and jewelry manufacturing, when I received a call from a recruiter about joining Foundation Partners Group. I had never thought about the deathcare profession, but I was intrigued. I ultimately decided to join Foundation Partners because I sincerely believe there is an opportunity to improve how families interact with deathcare services by combining a modern, digital experience with the compassionate end-of-life care provided by funeral directors and other field personnel.

In my experience working in many different industries over the past 20 years, I do not think the challenges women face in the funeral profession are necessarily different from those in other professions. I do find, however, that the service nature of the fu-

neral profession does tend to make women deprioritize themselves as they work to support families during the darkest days of their lives.

Foundation Partners Group has a history of supporting and nurturing women leaders in our funeral homes and in regional and national management positions. Since the company was founded in 2010, the number of women leaders and team members has grown from 33% to 53% of our workforce of nearly 2,000 employees. From the C-suite to field offices, women bring their unique talents to comfort and support the more than 150,000 families Foundation Partners serves each year across 270 locations in 21 states.

Recently, I sat down with four of these leaders to learn more about their journeys in the industry, their views on the challenges facing women in our profession and their advice for women looking to rise in funeral service leadership. Highlights follow from my conversations with:

- Julie Judge, *senior vice president of human resources*
- Holly Escudero, *area vice president*
- Danielle Bicker, *southwest Florida director of operations*
- Isabel Vieira, *Foundation Partners Advisory Board member and location leader.*

Recognizing the importance of collective effort in fostering women's leadership, I invited Andrew Clark, chief customer officer, to share his insights as well.

## CAREER JOURNEYS

Holly, Danielle and Julie began their careers in healthcare before discovering that funeral service was their true calling. Holly was senior director of business operations for a large medical group, Danielle worked as a certified nursing assistant delivering home hospice care and Julie was a C-level executive at a healthcare staffing firm.

"Deathcare was particularly intriguing as it, like healthcare, serves a greater purpose," said Holly. "The work we do each day in funeral service is so important to the families we care for. The funeral directors, attendants, operators and administrators each play such a vital role in a family's ability to get through tough times."

After earning a degree from Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Wheeling, Illinois, in 2011, Danielle's deathcare career journey took her from Illinois to Colorado before she settled in southwestern Florida. "I reached out to John and Michelle Farley Williams, who owned and operated Farley Funeral



Julie Judge



Holly Escudero



Danielle Bicker



Isabel Vieira

Homes & Crematory in Venice and North Port," said Danielle. "John took the time to sit down and meet with me even though he wasn't looking to hire another employee at that time. He and I met four to five different times before he offered me a full-time position with Farley Funeral Homes. I will forever be grateful for the time and energy they both spent to get to know me, learn about my career experience and ask me questions about how I could make their team better. Since starting with Farley Funeral Homes & Crematory in May of 2020, John and Michelle have provided me with the utmost respect and support to guide me through the process of leadership and management."

Julie was a chief experience officer in Columbia, Maryland, when she was approached by a headhunter for her current role. "I quickly realized that funeral service and healthcare are similar in that they are mission-oriented professions that serve others," she said.

Isabel was born in New Jersey to Portuguese parents and found funeral service as a second career after 15 years as a manager in a public accounting office. "Funerals, death and the care of decedents was something that I talked about a lot," she said, "mostly out of curiosity, I guess. As a young girl, my mom would tell me how, in Portugal, care of the dead was left to the women. They would bathe, dress and perfume the deceased and keep them at home in their beds, where family and friends would visit until the next day, when they were buried. The women's jobs did not stop there, however. They also cooked for all those who came to visit and offered comfort and support to those closest to the deceased. That sounds like a funeral director to me."

## BIGGEST CHALLENGES

When the group was asked about the biggest challenges facing women in funeral service, two themes emerged: self-confidence and work-life balance.

"I believe a lot of women struggle with confidence in this industry, mainly because historically this business was dominated by men," said Danielle. "As the years have passed, more and more women have realized that funeral service is their true calling. The caring and compassionate demeanor of women is ex-

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tremely beneficial when it comes to assisting families at the worst times of their lives. I'm not saying that men in the industry are not capable of empathizing, but it seems to come more naturally for women."

That lack of confidence also stems from worldwide research that shows women are taken less seriously as leaders than their male counterparts. I am proud of and appreciate the fact that Foundation Partners values the leadership skills of both men and women."

Isabel sees work-life balance as the biggest challenge facing women in funeral service. "For women with young families, it's even harder," she said. "This is a very demanding industry. Often we must work long hours, weekends and even holidays, forcing us to cancel or reschedule personal plans. We willingly sacrifice our own families for our work families."

Holly agrees that work-life balance is a challenge but adds that it's not only a problem for women. "The challenge is modifying expectations and standards to support better work-life balance and decrease burnout," she said. "Funeral directors are people, too; they deserve and need to spend time with their families and friends. This balance will ultimately make them better, happier people and will improve the longevity and power of the profession."

"A good work-life balance can look different for different people," said Andrew, who brings a man's perspective to the discussion of work-life balance. "For me, it's about proper time management and setting priorities. I believe women who influence a team of workers can be very successful in a leadership role. A good leader recognizes

that influence and strives to create a working environment that supports a healthy work-life balance for team members.

"It starts with knowing and understanding your team's needs. For example, I know many parents who would prefer to drop off or pick up their kids from school. Allowing team members to have schedules beyond the standard 8-to-5 not only allows flexibility but promotes greater satisfaction. Team members who have leaders who understand what's important to them can help cultivate a strong and committed team."

### ADVICE FOR RISING LEADER

"Put people first" is Holly's simple advice to anyone looking to rise in the funeral profession. "Deathcare professionals are a phenomenal group with a strong, diverse skill set in organization, attention to detail, logistics, operations, and perhaps most admirably, people skills," she said. "I have never met a group of

people who can meet anyone and quickly connect, building trust and credibility in a matter of moments. As leaders in this industry, perhaps the most important thing we can do is recognize that skill set and honor it by putting people first. In their lives, they are often deprioritizing themselves and their families to support other families in tough times. Having a leader who understands that and prioritizes them is powerful. Make sure your team members know they matter and why. Say 'thank you' at every opportunity."

Julie encourages anyone interested in a career based on service to others to enter this rewarding profession – "if you aspire to be a servant leader and you have to right motives," she said. "I also encourage all leaders to have a circle of informal mentors – within and outside their organizations – to offer support and guidance when challenging situations arise."

Julie's advice is sound, indeed. I believe that, in general, women do not advocate for themselves enough and often do not ask for help because we think we can do it all. Be realistic about what you and your team can accomplish with the resources you have and ask for help when needed.

Think strategically about your career. Careers don't just happen; they are well-thought-out journeys. In every leadership position I have held, I ask myself: What skills do I have that I can apply to this position to ensure we win? What skills will I gain by taking on this role? Will the person I'll work for be my advocate?

### LOOKING AHEAD

The good news is that the days of women getting passed over for senior roles in the funeral profession are numbered. When all leaders in an organization come together and proactively consider women for advancement opportunities, impactful change will follow.

"As we have seen in other industries, having more diversity at all levels of any organization lends itself to a stronger, healthier organization," Holly said. "Women need to continue to push and illustrate the value they add not only as funeral directors but as leaders. Women in key leadership positions can bring positive change; they often come in with a fresh perspective, asking, 'Why do we do it this way?' and are unwilling to accept the common answer, 'Because that's the way we have always done it.'"

I'm proud of the work we are doing at Foundation Partners Group to ensure that we provide our employees with the best possible opportunities in our meaningful profession. ☰

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*Lee Senderov is chief marketing and digital officer for Foundation Partners Group.*

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