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Father Knows
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COVER STORY

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Father Knows Best

Dads have the power to pass on knowledge and wisdom to their children.

For children who have followed in their funeral director father's footsteps, these important lessons are the foundation of who they are and what they do.

In honor of Father's Day, two families share their stories.

GARY AND TREY JENSEN

Gary Jensen: Lead funeral director, Thomason Funeral Home & Crematory, Weiser, Idaho

Trey Jensen: Funeral director and location leader overseeing three locations in Oregon and Idaho – Lienkaemper Chapel, Shaffer Jensen Memorial Chapel, and Thomason Funeral Home & Crematory

How does the funeral profession draw you into the fold when you have no intention of becoming a funeral director?

It's a good question ... and one with a multitude of answers.

Gary Jensen, lead funeral director at Thomason Funeral Home & Crematory in Weiser, Idaho, said being a funeral director was not his first choice. What the 59-year-old wanted to do was to be a teacher and basketball coach like his father.

"My mom's dad was a funeral director, and my dad worked for him for one summer," Gary explained. "My mom knew all too well the demands and toll it placed on the family. She had no desire to be tied down to the funeral home."

But as fate (and love) would have it, Gary ended up marrying a woman who was the third generation of her family to be involved in funeral service.

The now 59-year-old Gary eventually enrolled in the College of Mortuary Science in San Francisco and graduated in 1995.

Not once has he questioned the decision.

Fast forward two decades.

Gary and Yvonne Jensen would continue to work together in funeral service; he as a funeral director, she in funeral home administration. The couple would go on to have six children and would, for a time, live at Duggan's Serra Mortuary in Daly City, California, while Gary was attending mortuary school.

It was at the mortuary that the couple's oldest child, Trey, would, as a toddler, play in the casket room.

Growing up, the now 32-year-old Trey didn't necessarily feel the desire to follow in his family's footsteps.

"It wasn't necessarily my plan to go to mortuary school," he explained. "I wanted to become a pediatrician at first, but then, looking at the financial aspect and the amount of schooling he would need, I decided to try funeral service."

From first-hand experience, Trey knew what life was going to be like as a funeral



ABOVE: THREE GENERATIONS OF THE JENSEN FAMILY. STANDING (FROM LEFT) GENESIS JENSEN, YVONNE JENSEN, GARY JENSEN. SITTING KAI JENSEN, TREY JENSEN, ELI JENSEN. RIGHT: TREY JENSEN (LEFT) IS PROUDLY FOLLOWING IN HIS FATHER'S FUNERAL DIRECTOR FOOTSTEPS. (JENNIFER MILLER PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOUNDATION PARTNERS GROUP)

director. Not only was his father a funeral director, but there was legacy of funeral directors in his family tree, dating back to his great-grandfather, Raiford Benson, who had been a funeral director and funeral home owner in Malad, Utah.

Eyes wide open, Trey enrolled in the mortuary science program at Arapahoe Community College in Littleton, Colorado, graduating in 2019.

"It was 100% my choice to become a funeral director," Trey said. "There was no pressure from my father, no expectation that I would be a generational funeral director."

He understood what would be required – and expected – of him as a funeral director. "It was always a part of my life. I was always around it; it was our life," he said.





GARY (LEFT) AND TREY JENSEN ARE NOT ONLY COLLEAGUES, BUT FATHER AND SON WHO SHARE A PASSION FOR FUNERAL SERVICE. (JENNIFER MILLER PHOTO COURTESY OF FOUNDATION PARTNERS GROUP)

"I might not have known everything that went into the job, but I knew it was a demanding profession.

"There were Christmases where we had to open presents at 5 p.m. because my dad was called away to assist another family," he recalled.

Gary remembers those times very well.

"Trey has had the opportunity to live in several funeral homes, and he and his siblings have waited patiently on Christmas morning for me to get home from a call to open presents," he said. He knew that plans could most certainly change in a matter of minutes when a family was in need. All the things that might be a surprise or challenging to someone who has not been a part of our profession have always been second nature to Trey because it has been his life."

Gary, Yvonne, and Trey eventually found themselves working together for Gary and Debby Trick, owners of Lienkaemper Funeral Chapels in Ontario, Oregon, and Thomason Funeral Home and Crematory in Weiser, Idaho.

When the Tricks decided to sell their business, the Jensens considered purchasing it, creating a family business of their own. Eventually, though, the firm was sold to Foundation Partners Group.

"We've made it a family business of a sort, just under the Foundation Partners

umbrella," Trey laughed.

So, what's it like working with family?

"Thankfully, we are all like-minded and love to work with and be around each other. Helping our families and communities has always been our number-one priority," Gary said. "When we are busy and things get stressful, we know we can always rely on each other. But when you're working with your parents, we all know who gets the final say on things ... of course, Mom does!"

"To be able to see my mom or dad daily is just great," Trey added. "To watch my dad and the love he brings to the job is remarkable. To watch him care for a family, no matter their situation, and to provide them with the best service at the most difficult time in their lives makes me so proud."

There is nothing his father won't do for a family, even if it means giving the dress shoes off his feet for a service.

"My dad doesn't think twice ... he just does," Trey said.

Gary is a proud father as he discusses his son's career choice.

"It is a great honor that he chose to follow in my footsteps. This is definitely a demanding profession, one which I believe is a true calling to help those going through the most difficult times in their lives," he said. Trey naturally has such a calm disposition and has always been highly sensitive

and caring to those in need. He is extremely dedicated to the families and communities we serve, and I could not be prouder of the man he has become."

Being in a managerial position has allowed Trey to be more flexible with his time, especially now that he's a married father of two.

"We want to be there for the families we serve 24/7, but with the additional staff, it does allow me to step away a little bit or allow another staff member to step away," he pointed out. "But when I get a call at 2 a.m., or a family walks in at 4:30 p.m. as we are getting ready to close our doors, it's time to put on a smile and meet them on what is likely the hardest time in their life. I saw my father do it countless times, and that's what makes him such a selfless funeral director ... he puts others in front of himself."

Just as he grew up in a funeral family, so do Trey's children (Eli is 7, Kai is 2 1/2). "They are aware of what daddy does," he said. "We are very open about death; it's not something we hide. They understand that sometimes daddy needs to go help a family or that daddy might not be around part of a Saturday because of a service."

And what if one of his children one day came to him and said they wanted to be a funeral director?

“My 7-year-old has already told me, ‘Daddy, I want to be a funeral director like you,’” Trey laughed. “And I said, ‘Well if you want to, go right ahead.’ I don’t think they quite understand all that it entails, so if it comes up again, I’m going to be very honest.

“In this profession, you have to be certain about it; you can’t be wishy-washy,” he added. “I’ll be more than happy to guide him along the way if that’s what he ultimately wants to do, but just like going into funeral service was my decision, it has to be his decision. And it has to be his decision for the right reasons.”

If his children do decide to follow in his footsteps, Trey will be more than happy to share the lessons his father has taught him.

“I think the most important thing my dad has taught me is why we stay behind the scenes,” Trey said. “It isn’t about us, obviously. We are a planner, sometimes a pastor, sometimes a therapist ... but that isn’t our main job. Our main job is to guide people through their time of grief and to make things as easy as possible. That’s the mission of a funeral director.”

DJ AND PEYTON BREWER

DJ Brewer: Director of Operational Support with Anthem Partners for Tennessee locations, managing director of Medina Funeral Home and Cremation Service

Peyton Brewer: Rising junior, Crocket County High School, Tennessee



PEYTON BREWER WILL BE WORKING ALONGSIDE HIS FATHER, DJ, THIS SUMMER AT MEDINA FUNERAL HOME IN MEDINA, TENNESSEE. (PHOTO COURTESY OF DJ BREWER)

While many high schoolers are unsure what they want to do after graduation, that’s not the case for soon-to-be 16-year-old Peyton Brewer.

“I want to follow in my father’s footsteps,” Peyton says matter-of-factly. “I want to be a funeral director just like him.”

Like his son, Darrell L. Brewer Jr. (DJ for short) felt the same way growing up.

He’s originally from Parsons, Tennessee, where his grandfather, the late Rev. Lawton G. Brewer, and his father, the late Darrell L. Brewer Sr., opened their first funeral home in 1976 and built the second location in Decaturville, Tennessee, in 1979.

“I always knew I was going to be a funeral director; there was never a doubt in my mind,” he said. “When I was young, I went to every service I could. I had this little suit that I wore. Sometimes, my dad would let me go with him when he had to pick somebody up. I was 4 or 5 years old, and I would get dressed in my suit because that’s what a funeral director does.”

That sense of pride Darrell Sr. felt when his son told him he wanted to be “just like his dad” is the same DJ now feels with Peyton. “It makes you feel good as a father that they show an interest in what you’re doing, that they want to do the same thing you’re doing because it’s important,” DJ said.

At the same time, DJ has had – and will likely continue to have – the same conversation with Peyton that his dad had with him years earlier.

“As I got older, my dad would ask me, ‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ ‘Are you



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ABOVE, LEFT: THE BREWER FAMILY (FROM LEFT): DJ, PEYTON, AND KIMBERLY. RIGHT: THREE GENERATION OF BREWER FUNERAL DIRECTORS (FROM LEFT) DJ BREWER, REV. LAWTON G. BREWER AND DARRELL L. BREWER SR. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF DJ BREWER)

sure you want to work the weekends?’ He reminded me that you’re never going to get rich being a funeral director,” DJ said. “Those are the same questions I’ve been asking Peyton, and just like me, he’s not changing his mind.”

Although his dad made him do a year of college before allowing him to enter mortuary school, “He told me he thought I’d change my mind,” DJ laughed, it’s not something he’s planning to do with his son. “He knows what he wants to do, and I’m here to support him.”

DJ attended John A. Gupton College of Mortuary Science in Nashville, Tennessee, graduating in 1998. “This year, I will be licensed for 25 years, and not once have I second-guessed my decision to be a funeral director.”

When he was growing up, DJ lived in housing at the funeral home with his parents, something DJ and his wife, Kim, did when Peyton was young.

“That service to others is instilled in you; it’s something you’re around all the time, and you begin to understand the ministry of being a funeral director,” DJ explained. “You see the ins and outs of what’s going on, and it draws you in. You eat, sleep, and breathe to serve others.”

For as long as he can remember, Peyton says he has wanted to be a funeral director.

“I can’t imagine doing anything else,” he explained.

And when asked about making such a

big career decision at such a young age, he explained, “I just tell people I was kind of raised into it.”

In fact, during the 2023-24 school year, Peyton took a work-based learning class which allowed him to leave school at 11:05 a.m. and go to work ... at the funeral home.

“It’s the perfect fit,” Peyton said. “I get to work at something I like and am going to do in the future.”

While DJ has held a number of positions, including funeral home owner, these days he is director of operational support with Anthem Partners for Tennessee locations and managing director of Medina Funeral Home and Cremation Service in Medina, Tennessee. Peyton can be found working there most days, and DJ’s wife, Kim, is the firm’s preplanning specialist.

While most teens would likely not want to spend so many hours around family, Peyton enjoys watching his father, soaking up firsthand what it means to be a funeral director.

“It’s really normal for me to be at the funeral home because I’ve spent so much of my life around funeral service,” he said. “I’ve been able to see how he works with families and tries to do his best with every family he comes in contact with.”

Peyton understands, perhaps better than most, that being a funeral director involves a delicate balance and that family doesn’t always come first.

There have been Thanksgivings and

Christmases that may have been delayed because of another’s family’s immediate need or Saturday plans that may have had to be rescheduled.

“The other family’s needs come first ... it’s not something we even really think about,” he said. “I’m not missing anything, because I’m doing what I want to do.”

For his part, DJ has tried hard to be there for Peyton, whether that meant going to his games or coaching one of his teams, reworking his schedule whenever possible. But there have been times, he acknowledged, that adjustments have needed to be made.

“When we’re at home and the phone rings, that family becomes a priority,” he said. “We work around other people’s schedules; that’s just what we do, that’s who we are, that’s the life we have embraced.”

Even as a young boy, Peyton could be found standing by his father’s side during funeral services. Dressed in a suit (just as his dad did as a kid), he would welcome family and friends of the deceased, offering the same type of care and compassion he learned from his father.

As he’s grown, Peyton has been able to take on more responsibilities, helping out with paperwork, office tasks, pallbearers, dressing a casketed body, removals, and just about everything he can now legally do. He’s also spent time at the crematory.

“I think it’s important to know how to do everything,” he said. “And I’m learning



PEYTON IS LEARNING ALL ASPECTS OF FUNERAL SERVICE FROM HIS FATHER, DJ. (PHOTO COURTESY OF DJ BREWER)

from the best; I'm learning to do it the right way."

DJ believes that Peyton's experience working at the funeral home will only help him when he enrolls in mortuary school.

"He's seen almost every aspect of what it means to be a funeral director," DJ said. "And I think that's an upside because what I sometimes hear from first-generation mortuary students is they really had no life experience within a funeral home, so they don't know everything that it entails. Peyton doesn't have that problem."

It's a proud DJ who talks about how natural Peyton is working with grieving families.

"He does everything he can to help a family, and I'm so appreciative that he takes the initiative to want to be there to help families," DJ said.

At nearly 16, Peyton has shown a maturity well beyond his years, his father says. "He's kind. He's compassionate. He knows the right thing to say ... and when not to say anything. He has funeral service in his blood."

Peyton returns the compliment, describing his father in the same terms, laughingly adding "understanding," "comforting," and "busy" to the list.

But never too busy, he is quick to add, to have time for some quality father-son time,

whether it's watching ball games, fishing, or playing golf.

"Peyton is definitely the better golfer," DJ laughed. "He's on the golf team; he can give me a few pointers."

That together time may be a little easier to plan out now that summer is here.

Peyton will be working at the Medina Funeral Home during his summer vacation, and DJ is purchasing a Dodge Grand Caravan for his son to drive back and forth from the family's home in Bells to the funeral home, which is about a 21-mile one-way trip.

Peyton's truck uses a little too much gas, DJ explained, and the van can be used for a variety of purposes.

When asked about his summer plans, Peyton said it was his idea to work at the funeral home during his off-school months. "I'm looking forward to it," he said. "There's always something new to learn, a new family to help."

And what's it like to work with family, especially when the boss is your father? Peyton chuckles before answering. "It's really fine ... I enjoy spending time with my father, even if it's at work."

"I don't think it's something we even think about," DJ added. "I have confidence in him that he's doing everything he's supposed to, and we're going to take care of that family the way they should be taken care of. It's definitely put a lot on him, but he's embraced it and he's taking on the challenge. Peyton has been successful, and he will continue to be successful. I have no doubt about that."

When he graduates high school, Peyton will be heading off to his father's alma mater, John A. Gupton. He's been on the campus several times, and among the people he has met is Tracy H. Allen, director of mortuary science and alumni relations, who just so happened to be a classmate of his father.

"I'm looking forward to it; I think I have a lot to offer," he said. "I want to be of service to others, and I can't think of a better way."

As the Brewer family prepares for their fourth generation to enter the profession, DJ can only say he is humbled by his son's decision to follow in his footsteps.

"Legacy" is a big word," DJ acknowledged. "The fact that my granddad and my dad were funeral directors, and then I became a funeral director, that's pretty amazing. Now that my son is choosing to be a funeral director, that does kind of take it to another level. We are truly blessed and humbled." •



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