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What's Ahead for Funeral Service?

Funeral Professionals Share Their Thoughts

Profile

By Patti Martin Bartsche

A Conversation with ...

Terry School

Passion. It's a word that quickly comes to mind when you talk with Terry School, founder of The Davis Whitehall Co.

You hear it when he talks about the need for lives to be remembered, the importance of personalization and customization, the need to heal and creating memories you can feel.

You see it as he carefully cradles an urn for Mom or Dad or places his latest offering – a Tribute Coin – in your hand, encouraging you to rub your fingers across the raised image of a loved one on the coin.

You feel it in his quiet demeanor and the respect for funeral service that is seemingly woven into his DNA.

School might not be a licensed funeral director, but his passion for the profession, his desire to help families heal, and his need to continually innovate and develop products that help in the healing process, make him one of funeral service's biggest advocates.

"I view urn customization and personalization as a ministry, because nothing requires more compassion and understanding than the death of a loved one – nothing. Whenever we can help a family gain a sense of healing or relief from their grief, we have achieved something truly phenomenal," School says.

There is no doubt that the young boy who grew up watching his grandfather and father work with wood has found his calling in the funeral profession, working closely with funeral directors in creating one-of-a-kind lasting memorials.

While School, who launched the Colorado Springs, Colorado-based Davis Whitehall Co. in 1991, is more comfortable talking about the funeral profession or the company's products, we recently had a chance to have a wide-ranging conversation with the 64 year old, talking about his early years, how he found his way into funeral service, the need for permanent memorialization and how personal loss inspired Davis Whitehall's newest product offering – and its immediate impact.

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I was born in Green Bay, Wisconsin, the second oldest of nine children. Growing up, my family moved around the Midwest – first to Ohio then Indiana, then on to Pennsylvania, and finally back to Wisconsin. I moved to Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 1980 and launched Davis Whitehall in 1991.

My wife, Deonne, and I were married 24 years ago. An interesting story is that I met Deonne in an elevator on the way to jury duty on Valentine's Day in 1994 and we were married two years later. Our daughter, Dana, has blessed us with two grandchildren.

Where did your love of woodworking come from?

I'd have to say it was the result of watching my father and grandfather working with wood while growing up. The final pieces were not works of art, but the time we spent together was priceless.

Terry and Deonne School in the Davis Whitehall facility with their Cairn Terriers Abby (left) and Bear. ***(Photo credit: Don Jones/Studio 9 Photography)***

Terry School with a clamp rack in the Davis Whitehall facility, which he founded in 1991. *(Photo credit: Don Jones/Studio 9 Photography)*

Do you remember the first piece you made (pre-Davis Whitehall)?

The first woodworking project I recall was a coffee table and end table that I made for my mother when I was in high school. My mother is no longer alive, but the pieces are still in use.

In 1991, you established The Davis Whitehall Co. Can you talk about how the business came into being?

It started when I was asked to find an urn for a family member who was being deployed during the first Gulf War. The family was making contingency plans in the event their daughter did not return from duty. When I started searching, I was, to say the least, disappointed at the selection of cremation urns on the market at the time.

I realized my woodworking skills could be used to create wooden urns. It was an opportunity to offer a high-quality alternative to the profession. I was very fortunate to connect early on with a funeral professional who used a bit of "tough love" to ensure I always thought about cremation and presented our urns from the correct perspective.

Was there a pivotal moment that you knew that the funeral profession was where you needed to be?

There wasn't a specific moment per se, but the culmination of the ongoing, positive feedback from funeral directors about the urns I was producing. This indicated to me that I was on to something with my urns.

In establishing Davis Whitehall, what did you want to do?

It was my goal to create handcrafted, hardwood cremation urns that families would deem beautiful and lasting tributes to a loved one. I wanted to dedicate myself, and eventually our entire team, to be passionate about the care and service offered to grieving families while working with them to create their loved one's special urn. After all, this is the last gift the family will ever buy for their loved one.

Where did the name Davis Whitehall come from?

First, here's a little back story. As I first started making urns, my mentor asked me what I was going to call my company. He recommended that whatever name I chose, that it not include my name and that it was one with an "old and established" aura or ambiance.

Arriving at the name proved no small task. Fortunately, inspiration can come in many forms. One day, as I was sitting at a stoplight, I noticed the back of the car in front of me. The county shown on the license plate triggered the word "Whitcomb." From there I thought of the Whitcomb Hall Co., which then turned into the Whitehall Co., and seeing that the car had been purchased at Davis Chevrolet, I put those two together, and I came up with the name The Davis Whitehall Co. After repeating this over, and over again, the light turned green and it was a go.

You have long been an advocate of the customization and personalization of urns. Why has this been so important to you?

I view urn customization and personalization as a ministry because nothing requires more compassion and understanding than the death of a loved one – nothing. Customization and personalization are reflections of the life lived; and something that's not possible with a plain box.

The urn is the blank canvas on which we design for the family what was important in their loved one's life. Whenever we can help a family gain a sense of healing or relief from their grief, we have achieved something truly phenomenal.

You have also been vocal in saying that cremated remains should be called what they are Mom, Dad, Grandma, etc. Why is this distinction so important?

If you look up the word "remains" in the Cambridge Dictionary, it is defined as "pieces or parts of something that's left when most of it has been used, destroyed, or taken away." Is this how we want to refer to our loved ones? During the arrangement conference, I suggest to funeral directors that they ask, "What would you like to do with your mother after the cremation?" or "Where do you plan to inter Martha following the cremation," not "What do you want to do with the cremated remains?" This simple change in perspective grants due respect to both the deceased and their survivors.

How has Davis Whitehall evolved in the last (almost) two decades?

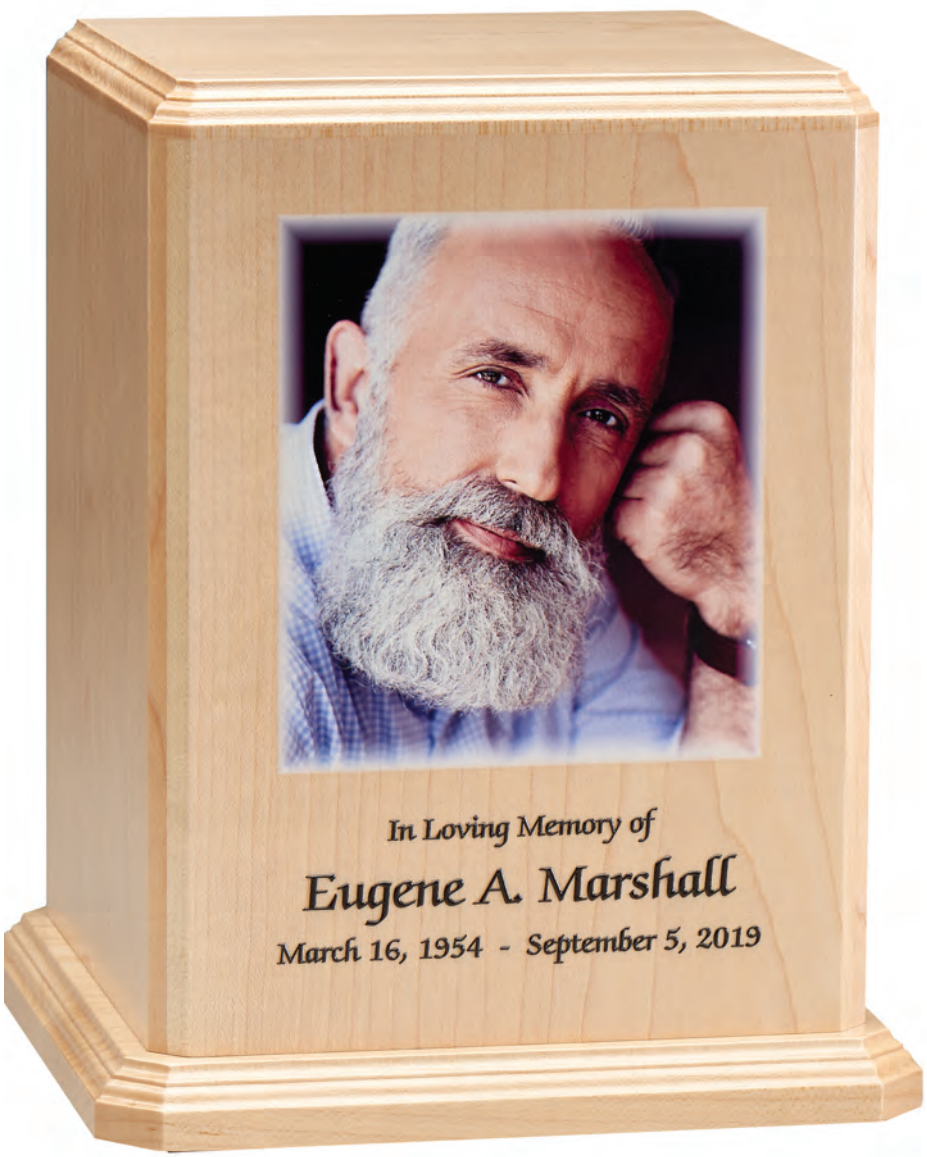
We've evolved quite a bit. We began in 1991 with 12 handcrafted hardwood urns in our initial product line, of which five remain. Eventually we began to discover and perfect new design tools that allowed us to use photos, drawings, sketches, and other personal images to enhance and customize urns. It then quickly became my goal to have Davis Whitehall become recognized as one of the premier sources for handcrafted, laser engraved, hardwood cremation urns. That could never have been accomplished without my talented team. In 1998, we bought our first laser and began offering sculpted, laser-carved urns. In 2005, we launched our customized photo engraving on our hardwood urns. Three years ago, we added laser engraving on metal urns and recently added textured printing. At the NFDA convention last year, we launched our Tribute Coins by Davis Whitehall.

Your HeartFelt Tributes catalog features the tagline "Honoring a Life Worth Remembering." How important is it that the message is conveyed to families?

We designed the HeartFelt Tributes catalog to be used with families; we didn't just fill each page with urn designs. Rather, it was created to allow funeral directors to work with families to show that our urns can tell a story. Our intent was for the catalog to be a discussion starter for Don Jones/funeral directors to explain just how customization can help in "Honoring a Life Worth Remembering."

What impact have the innovative HeartFelt Keepsakes had for families?

The HeartFelt Keepsakes were introduced in 2009 and have grown to be one of our most successful offerings in the product line. In the eyes of many funeral professionals, it was what "put us on the map." As for its impact, I am still amazed at the number of calls and letters we receive



Davis Whitehall's Premier Texture Printed Photo Urn crafted in maple.
(Photo credit: Don Jones/Studio 9 Photography)

The Tribute Coin is similar in size to a silver dollar.
(Product credit: Don Jones/Studio 9 Photography)

from families to thank us and tell us how much the keepsakes mean to them. It's not unusual for us to receive orders for additional keepsakes months and years after the funeral.

In 2019, Davis Whitehall released an updated catalog that featured new products, including The Amish Series. Where does the inspiration come from?

Whether it's a new product or innovative customization offering, the inspiration comes from the funeral director. We have a reputation in the profession for listening and then creating new products based on this learning. In the case of the Amish series, I realized that creating the rough sawn effect required a special skillset, so I reached out to an Amish friend. This colleague possesses the same focus on quality that I have, so I was convinced the products would be reflective of the Davis Whitehall quality reputation.

Your father, Bob, died in 2018, and your mother, Elaine, died early in 2020. What should we know about your parents?

Both my parents grew up on dairy farms in Wisconsin. They instilled in every one of their nine children a healthy work ethic. They also encouraged every one of us to do our best in whatever job we undertook. I still remember one of my mother's favorite sayings about the size of our family – she wanted a football team but settled for a baseball team.

At the 2019 National Funeral Directors Association convention, you introduced Tribute Coins. How did this idea come about?

Funeral directors were always asking me why I didn't offer cremation jewelry. Upon investigation, I could see that the jewelry market was being well served by other companies, so I decided to go in another direction.

The inspiration for Tribute Coins by Davis Whitehall came from challenge coins, which are traditionally presented by military unit commanders in recognition of achievement.

In addition to memorializing a loved one, the Tribute Coins can be used to commemorate life celebrations and other milestones, such as births, weddings, anniversaries, as well as athletic and academic achievements.

What was the development process like?

In a word, it was "long!" It was three-and-a-half years from the time I first decided to create the coins until we were at a point where I felt they were ready for introduction. I knew that I wanted to use a high-quality stainless steel for the coin since stainless doesn't rust, tarnish, or corrode. However, the challenge was creating a way to get adhesion of the textured printing to the coin. It was an incredible amount of work, research, and a lot of prayer, but the end result was worth it. One of my overarching principles is – "when you are preserving a final memory, it must be perfect." This never was truer than with the development of Tribute Coins by Davis Whitehall.

These coins have a very special meaning to you. Can you talk a little bit about them?

One of the first samples we produced was of my father, who passed in 2018. I have been carrying this coin with me without fail each day for the past year.

In early 2020, my mother was hospitalized with cancer in Wisconsin. In early March, as I was preparing to leave for a trade show, I received the dreaded call – my mother had no more than two days to live. I immediately left for the airport and arrived at the hospital early the next morning. Each family member was given time alone with our mother to say our goodbyes. When my turn came, I sat down next to my mother's bed.

"Terry, I miss your father so much. I wish he was here with me right now," my mother said.

That's when I said, "I have my coin of Dad in my pocket," and then handed her the Tribute Coin.

My mother took the coin from me and her fingers gently rubbed the coin, feeling the features of my father's face on the surface. Looking lovingly at the coin, she said, "I miss you so much, Bob. I will see you soon." The look on her face spoke volumes about the power of customization.

As she gave the coin back, she whispered to me. "Thank you so much. I am so proud of you, Terry." Later that night, she passed peacefully, surrounded by the family.

As the family gathered after Mom's funeral, I had a gift for each of them. Thanks to the efforts of my staff in Colorado Springs, a special tribute coin was designed that featured the likenesses of both my mother and father from their wedding photo in 1954. As you might expect, their responses were heartwarming, to say the least.

These coins are very tactile, very comforting. Can you talk a little bit about the reaction from people who have received these coins?

Aside from my family's previously mentioned reaction, we get very little feedback directly from customers since we work through funeral homes. However, what funeral directors tell us is that when families feel the raised surfaces of their loved one's face, it brings them a sense of healing.

I recall speaking with a mother who called after receiving a coin and said, "You gave me back my son again. I can touch his face again whenever I choose."

How would you like the coins to be used?

The coins should be used in any way that brings comfort. Some choose to display the coins; others find consolation in carrying them close, in a pocket or purse.

People are creative and will find new and unique ways to personally use the Tribute Coins.

Cremation is the preferred disposition for many individuals, and yet the importance of creating a place of permanent memorialization for Mom or Dad continues to lag. Why do you think this happens?

In many situations, a loved one's death occurs unexpectedly and catches the family by surprise. In these cases, the family is confronted with the required decisions related to the final disposition, including the funeral service and necessary paperwork. Optional decisions such as where to create a place of permanent memorialization are often tabled until later and ultimately forgotten.

To reinforce this point, I am continually amazed at the number of urns we have engraved this year with a death date other than 2020.

How important is it for funeral directors to offer families different urn choices?

Funeral directors must offer different urn choices – as well as customization options. Thanks to the internet, families have options for a wide choice of urns online. Many urn styles are now commodities. It is essential that funeral directors separate themselves from the products available on the internet – and customization is one of the best ways to do this.

We know personalization is important, yet it's not something that many funeral directors bring up when talking about urns. How can that conversation be moved?

It's really very simple. As an example, a funeral director is meeting with a family whose father was an avid golfer. The conversation might go something like this: "Connie, the time has come to choose an urn that will become the final resting place for your father. You had shared with me earlier your father's passion for golf. Let me show some urns that have a golfing motif. If you don't see anything here that you like, we can always customize an urn for your father."

Obviously, funeral directors can modify as they see fit, but the basic premise is contained above.

The technique is purely suggestive, there is no mention of the words ashes, cremated remains or cremains. The focus stays of the family's desire to honor and commemorate their deceased loved one.

You might not have imagined being a part of funeral service early on, but can you imagine being a part of any other industry now?

You're right – I never would have guessed I would be a part of this noble profession. I'm so honored that we are allowed to help funeral professionals prepare a final resting place for a family's loved one. I can't imagine doing anything else.

What would people be surprised to learn about you?

I think people would be surprised to learn that I was quite adventurous in my younger years. I played rugby, spent the better part of five summers guiding canoe trips in remote Canadian waters and one year spent a couple months wintering on a small, isolated island in Canada.

What does the future hold for you?

My 29 years in the profession have passed very quickly and every minute of this journey has been a blessing that I have enjoyed. Funeral directors continue to inspire me to create new products and services, and I'm not finished imagining ways to assist families with their memorialization needs. All I can say at this point is – stay tuned! •

The Custom Photo HeartFelt Keepsake helps to create a healing connection to a loved one's memory. ***(Photo credit: Don Jones/Studio 9 Photography)***