

Still Life

with Maggie Lawson from Lawson Parry Coffins



How did you arrive at what you are doing today?

I attended a funeral where a wicker coffin had been chosen which I had never seen before and found it an interesting choice compared to traditional wood. I 'Googled' coffins and in doing so found an extreme lack of choice for babies and children which quite saddened me and got me thinking.

What was the best advice you have ever heard?

Take each day at a time - don't rush the week.

What is your typical day? Describe your job.

Always an early start for me. Firstly all orders are progressed checked and then day's work is agreed for that day with the staff. I like to spend as much time in the work room as possible designing new ideas and concepts.

I help out with manning the telephones and sometimes personally hand-deliver our cribs when snow threatens deliveries or it's a bit of a rushed order.

What is the most significant development within the funeral supplier industry that you have encountered?

An influx of new products I would say, from three years ago I have seen a flood of new choice being uncovered in the market place. Coffins which have colour and which are bespoke; fabrics and new methods being introduced and of course more emphasis and awareness of environmentally friendly coffins with the introduction of natural burial grounds.

Have you thought about your own funeral beyond pre-payment – would you be happy to share your thoughts?

Well of course I shall be designing my own coffin. Natural Burial I think.

Have you made any special provisions with respect to your funeral?

Yes they are all listed.

Do you consider that music is important to a funeral service?

When you walk into a funeral service it is a comfort to hear music and not be met by silence. I think that it is very important to hear a departed's favourite choice in music or their loved ones choosing a piece of music for the departed which they know reflected a part of their life.

Are coffins today value for money?

Coffins are and should be a very personal choice. My father wanted to be carried out in a cardboard box before cardboard coffins were invented he could see no reason to 'waste money on a coffin or funeral service'.

Baby coffins are normally included free with the funeral and because of that a choice, if any, may be limited in value. From a quality point, very simple baby/children coffins seem to lack quality. I have a lot of parents contact me desperate for something more than a box. I like to think of my cribs as an alternative to free. Giving craftsmanship, quality, plus a beautiful design concept right down to pillows, blankets and keepsake.

Families nowadays need to choose something a bit more special, and want to celebrate a life by having a coffin personalised for the deceased to tell their story or have their story told for them by their family by colour or design or both.

From low cost to bespoke magnificent tribute coffins, they all have their place. I do think you pay for what you get, some coffins just do the job and suit the occasion and budget; and some coffins give to the funeral day and the loved ones left, so much more, with personal design,



quality of workmanship, and innovative materials used, reflecting a life or what should have been a life.

What would you change about coffins today given the opportunity?

I would like to think that all funeral professionals have at their fingertips a good wide-ranging selection of coffin options for the deceased family so no one has to say with regret that I wish I had known about that but I didn't.

We make a crib coffin for twins so they can be placed together side-by-side I would like to see more awareness made of the options available.

Have I ever refused a client's wishes?

Never. I pride myself in always going the extra mile.

Have you considered who will take over your business when you retire?

I would like to think that I will still design and create my baby cribs into retirement. I will always be active and my passion to help families with special requirements with their loss will always be my aim.

Do you have a will?

Oh yes, most certainly. With six cats and three dogs it has to be done.

What is the most significant benefit of your job? And the least attractive aspect?

I get to help families in their hours of grief by making the resting place for their loved one a comforting and beautiful one which will always form part of their memory when they think of the one they lost and reflect back to the funeral.

We are open 24/7. With loss of a foetus/stillborns families need to know even in hospital that their little one's will have a crib to lay in very soon rather than a cardboard box. For this reason I will take

calls day or night. Not the most attractive aspect in the early hours of the morning, but I will always be there to comfort, listen and help. Sudden death and peace of mind doesn't always follow between 9am - 5pm

Which was the most significant crib in your memory?

All the cribs for my babies and children are significant to me as we can work on a crib for up to 3 days and they are all finished differently. Families can choose the final details of the crib. The crib is always personal to that child and personal to my staff and myself we always know the infant's name so as the crib is made and changes each day we have the child's name following the crib through until it is finished.

Does the media have any influence in people's decision making, with respect to choice?

Oh yes, bring it on! Media brings to people very often a new choice and that has got to be important. I welcome exhibitions and advertising to show the general public and funeral professionals what we do and how we can enhance their current portfolio. I believe the Handled With Care exhibition organised by the BIFD, leads in a vital area of transparency of choice.

It is important that the general public understands more the 'funeral world' and what happens behind the closed doors so that they are more prepared and can understand the different steps when arranging the coffin and funeral - after all there is no training course for losing a loved one and no hand-book.

Do you carry anything routinely with you at work that is personal to you – where did it come from?

I do not carry but always have close to me



in the work room a very old and battered long shaped toffee tin of my fathers with the army in full dress riding across the lid going into battle.

In the tin I have all my 'dressmaker' precision tools some very small & precise curved scissors for embroidery trimming, very long and thick needles, my glasses for close up work, magnifying glass, spare machine needles, screwdriver, pencil.

Which piece of equipment could you not do without and/or which one is a complete luxury?

My embroidery machine must be at the top of my list we pride ourselves in embroidered nameplates so that we can create a personalised plate and nameplate keepsake in different colour silk threads adding butterflies, hearts or a special message.

Which question would you have liked to be asked, and why? How would you have answered it?

Why do you hand-make cribs? - We care passionately and deeply about our cribs, we think it's great that they are all bespoke and not off a production line. For us it makes each and every one special and personalised and it shows we care deeply and totally enjoy what we do and - as a lot of my thank you cards say, 'thank you for making a very difficult time a little easier' - we cannot ask for more than that.