

Still Life



If a job is worth doing, then it is worth doing well. Actually in the case of Susan Melrose, a job done well is just the start. Susan has recently been presented with the Trustees' Award of the BIE (and a cheque for £500) in recognition of her outstanding practical examination results - 98% for the straight case and 100% for the post mortem example. No mean feat.

Susan began her embalming career in 2004, and took to it really well under the direction of her husband, Peter Melrose, who is also a BIE and BIFD member.

Susan recognised the value of education and said, "I felt that the education element added a dimension to the encouragement I was getting from many clients, who were delighted with the results I was delivering, but I felt that it needed underpinning with something tangible. The BIE course seemed the obvious next step". She began her formal training by attending classes run by Isobel Farlow, from Woodland Embalming College, which put her learning into a framework.

Susan is based in Seaton Delaval and is works full time as a trade embalmer to many independent funeral directors in a 60-mile radius. She advises, "Like anything worth doing, once you commit and focus, the results follow. I would recommend anyone who feels that they could benefit from education to take the step. It was hard work, but I feel really proud in the accomplishment of the award". She is also a BIFD Student Member and has recently passed her foundation module. Here she gives here unique insight into why she is a special specialist.

How did you arrive at what you are doing today?

Nursing; When someone died I always volunteered to lay them out and attend to last offices. I strongly believed then, and still do that just because someone has died it should not mean that is the end of their care. Dignity and respect follow on in death as they do in life. Everyone is entitled to it.

What was the best advice you have ever heard?

To work in a career that you enjoy. I once heard that if you find a job you love to do then you will never have to work a day in your life. Happiness is a vital component in work as it is in life. I feel very fortunate that I have found embalming.

What is your typical day? – Describe your job.

It is always a 9am start with a cup of tea and a plan for the day. Often funeral directors will have booked in a body into my care the day before, and I always leave capacity for most eventualities which can present themselves during the day. The majority of my day is spent in the mortuary doing embalming, but as part of a team of independent funeral directors, I can drive vehicles, attend to clients and look after the phones. My interest of funeral directing has increased and have recently began my diploma studies. I have just finished my foundation module and await the results. Education really is important, and the diploma for me was the "Gold Standard" route.

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

The increase of females within the profession. I am delighted that with the advent of manual handling equipment things which historically appeared to be in the male domain have vanished now we all

play on a level field. Thirty years ago, it was almost unthinkable that a woman would be able to attend to all aspects; the ones that did should be regarded as pioneers. Gender is hardly an issue now within the industry and I applaud that position.

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

Certainly. I don't think death care can occupy your working life and the situation of discussing it for your eventual turn would not crop up. In fairness it does not occupy my waking hours, but I have discussed what I want with my husband Peter and he has with me too!

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

No. Ironic, eh?!

Do you consider that music important to a funeral service?

Something as powerful as music is a vital component to a funeral service in my opinion. It can work on many levels. It may have a special significance to either the deceased, or their family, and really contributes positive emotional energy to the service. The generation I belong to has had music available in so many formats and genres, and people even use the term "Soundtrack to my life", which I think illustrates the point.

Are funerals today value for money?

Without equivocation. We are based in the North east and I know costs do differ with geography. I would like to feel that we provide excellent value. Value is distinct from cost. Buy well, buy once. Value, coupled with translating exactly the wishes of the client, I think then one has a recipe for success. There are a whole host of components which collectively make a funeral, and by building in value in all aspects, the overall service to the family, our client, becomes the best possible.

What would you change about funeral services today given the opportunity?

More time for cremation services. There can be a dimension of clock watching and this can appear to reduce the experience for the family. I appreciate that an extra time slot can be factored in, but in reality it means additional cost, when if ten minutes were added, the difference would be welcome.

Have you ever refused a clients wishes?

I am lucky in that respect, as my client always wants the same for the deceased as I do. The best possible appearance. The costs are fixed in advance, and as an embalmer, I always strive to exceed expectations and deliver the best possible result.

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

Retirement is a long way off. It is a hurdle we will look at much later in our lives. I believe that it is important to plan your future within certain parameters, but retirement is not on the horizon just yet.

Do you have a will?

Indeed. It is another aspect that it is sensible to attend to, and more importantly keep up to date. They are spectacularly easy to have done, and provide enormous peace of mind.

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

The most significant benefit is being

able to do the job you love, and the comfort of knowing that families are benefitting from my work. The feedback from funeral directors is always really positive, and you know that will increase the confidence that their client has with them. The least attractive is that the hours can be long (being self employed), and I never turn work away. You have to plan to ensure that your work life does not take over your personal and social life.

Which was the most significant funeral in your memory?

The funeral for a baby. Certain funerals do hold in your memory for a long time; this was the first time I lowered a coffin into a grave. It is a strange feeling the first time and I would be lying if I said that I did not feel quite emotional about it afterwards. I think we all reflect, and this is a good human trait.

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

I believe that it can. It is surprising that so many people do not think about their funerals and leave their family to make the choices on their behalf, not knowing exactly what their loved one wanted. The media can play a good part in empowering people to make decisions, and also communicate the issues to their relatives. I feel that largely death is handled well through the media and like anything in life, if it needs facing up to - it is best done from an informed perspective.

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

I think the main thing I carry with me is 'thoughts in my mind' that each case I work with is an individual deserving my best care and attention. The chosen life style of that person is irrelevant, be they a former victim of drug abuse or person of a perceived elevated social status. They are all treated with care and dignity. I know exactly where this ethos came from – my husband. I witnessed the care and attention that he invested in his work and found it an inspiration as well as a benchmark for excellence. I want to carry it on.

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

A rolling stretcher! It makes removal from homes, hospitals and even moving in the mortuary, an easy task. It removed the potential for lifting injuries and the associated problems that brings. A luxury – has to be a Trocar handle . If you are an embalmer and use one, you will know exactly what I mean.

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

If your job has taught you one thing about life, what is it? – How precious life is, enjoy each day as if it was your last because as an embalmer you realise that no-one is guaranteed a long and healthy life. It brings forward into sharp focus how easy life can end – even if you are not ready for it.

