

Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

Meet the New Gupton-Jones President

■ Summary

What does a fourth-generation licensed funeral director and embalmer who also has extensive experience in the academic area do for a next career step? If your name is Hope Iglehart, you become the president of your alma mater. In May, Pierce Mortuary Colleges announced the hiring of Iglehart as president of Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service in Decatur, Georgia. For Iglehart, who most recently served as Gupton-Jones' campus academic dean, the appointment is the realization of a lifelong dream. "I think that for every young person who was ever interested in funeral service, I am proof that the job they dream of can indeed be accomplished," she said. We recently had a chance to chat with Iglehart about funeral service, her new position and dreams realized. *Patti Martin Bartsche reports*

When did you know that you wanted to become a funeral director?

When I was in the fifth grade and my grandfather (John T. Hurley, a past president of the Georgia Funeral Service Practitioners Association) passed. I remember riding in the funeral car and seeing all of the people who had traveled from all over the nation, from all over the state and from Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service to show their respect.

You are a fourth-generation funeral director. Did you feel any family pressure to become a licensed funeral director and embalmer?

No, actually, my parents wanted me to pursue other endeavors. They knew how much time invested would be required for success. My great-aunt encouraged me to follow in my grandfather's path.

What is your definition of a funeral director?



Hope Iglehart

Someone who possesses compassion and professionalism while assisting families in one of the most difficult moments of their lives.

You hold an associate's degree from Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service, a bachelor's in

English from Bennett College for Women and an MBA from Piedmont College. Can you talk a little bit about your educational journey?

When I left Bennett College, I came to Gupton-Jones because all I could think about was going to Gupton-Jones – what it represented. It was the Harvard of funeral service for my family and my profession. Both my uncles attended, and all the people I know who were influential in the industry in the previous generation had gone to Gupton-Jones. Five years after graduating from Gupton-Jones, I realized I wanted to work in higher education, so I started my master's degree program while working in funeral service.

You returned to Gupton-Jones as a full-time instructor. Why?

At the time I had worked in higher education and funeral service for 16 years. I thought it would be a great opportunity to share what I have learned with future generations.

You are now president of the college you graduated from. How does it feel?

It feels like I have accomplished one of my lifelong dreams – to be the president of my alma mater, and I think that for every young person who was ever interested in funeral service, I am proof that the job they dream of can indeed be accomplished. I feel my life experiences in higher education in funeral service have uniquely prepared me for this position, and I love to see people grow within the profession, no matter what stage they are at in their life.

How has Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service changed since you were a student?

As an institution and as educational professionals, the Gupton-Jones team has found more ways to provide not just academics but practical application of funeral service principles and theories, such as our selection room for arrangement conference practice and our new chapel for conducting simulated funeral services. In addition, we have expanded our offerings of software and technology for instructional support in the classroom and online, as we now also have an online program to accommodate distance learners and students requiring a more flexible schedule that flows with modern life requirements.

What were your favorite classes to teach at Gupton-Jones?

I enjoyed teaching sociology and small business management, but I especially appreciated the counseling and psychology of funeral service courses because they required the students to truly think and understand the roles of empathy and compassion in funeral service.

In 2018, you were named Gupton-Jones' campus academic dean. Why was this an important career move for you?

It allowed me the opportunity to use the student affairs skills and the academic affairs skills that I honed in my previous experiences in higher education to see the vision for where the president and Pierce Mortuary Colleges were trying to move the school to benefit our students and graduates. It gave me a different perspective on education and the behind-the-scenes mechanism of making decisions for the college that have major impact on these students and future matriculating classes to ensure the future success and growth of the school.

Is the curriculum at mortuary schools changing and adapting enough to meet the needs of today's students and consumers?

I believe the curriculum is moving toward today's needs; however, it is a process. We have to blend tradition with modern culture, and that takes time and effort on the part of the students, the college, and the profession to work together to move into the future.

Two of the most heard criticisms from mortuary students are that they often don't get "real life" experience prior to graduation and that it's difficult to find apprenticeships after graduation. Is there something mortuary schools could be doing differently?

I can't speak to what other mortuary schools are doing, but Gupton-Jones provides our students practical application, and we often invite subject experts from the field to the college to talk with classes. Students build relationships through funeral directing clinicals and embalming clinicals, which often open

doors for potential apprenticeships and employment. Also, we encourage students to join and participate in their state and national funeral service associations, which provides them networking opportunities. We have partnered with associations to provide job fairs here on campus, and we post current openings to our Job Seekers board on our school website for our students and alumni. We are always looking for more ways to increase our students' exposure to the profession and chances for employment.

What are the biggest challenges facing today's mortuary students?

Learning how to communicate verbally with families, and balancing professionalism and social media, especially for millennial mortuary students who tend to focus on individual expression rather than conforming to social norms. Additional challenges are the necessity of understanding that cremation is here to stay and its impact on the profession. There is also a need to address how generational differences affect the profession. Baby boomers tend to seek traditional funeral rites, while millennials are more concerned with personalization and the feeling that they matter. They are also more interested in being green and eco-friendly and value convenience when spending their dollars, which means more integration with modern technology.

How do you envision your future as Gupton-Jones' president?

I envision the future to be bright, I have an awesome team and the college is growing. I see a great future for Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service.

Are there any projects you'd like to undertake in your new role?

Yes, I would love to grow the college with additional programming, including developing our distance learning program further and expanding into potential night course offerings. Gupton-Jones is also fortunate enough to be preparing for its 100th anniversary in 2020, and we are seeking to involve alumni as well as current students in our planning process to make this a centennial to remember for the next 100 years.

What are some of the bigger challenges and opportunities before higher education generally, and local colleges like Gupton-Jones specifically?

I think the biggest challenge is teaching our students how to think. Generally, our school systems teach our students how to take tests but not how to analyze a problem with a given scenario and develop a solution with the steps needed to achieve the desired results. Knowledge is key, but application is just as important as they face challenges in the funeral industry and in their own lives and must rise to meet them.

What sets Gupton-Jones apart from other mortuary schools?

Gupton-Jones is small enough to build positive lasting relationships with our students but advanced enough to provide them with the latest technology and most up-to-date resources. Our size, as well as our highly-qualified faculty, allow us to mentor the students in a way that is not feasible at a larger school, and our singular focus on providing degrees in funeral service allows us to concentrate our attention on what we do best – our core competencies in funeral service and embalming.

What do you like about higher education?

I love the opportunity to be a footnote in a person's journey toward greatness and success. We are called to be a blessing to others and help individuals to grow at all stages of their lives. As they learn from me, I learn from them as well.

How important are the ties between a school and its alumni?

Alumni relationships with the college are highly important to the success of our college. We have a wonderful advisory board that keeps us attuned to the needs of the funeral service industry, and alumni are a major part of this board. Alumni are crucial for the overall success of our college and its students. Alumni provide referrals to the college, which continue its mission of growing the next generation of funeral directors and embalmers.

They provide direct donations to the school as well as scholarship opportunities. Scholarships allow opportunities for students who are not financially equipped for funding their education to complete their matriculation and become funeral directors. It is my hope to start a capital campaign with alumni support to continue to grow the college for years to come. Relationships with alumni are key in generating apprenticeship and clinical opportunities for our students. When alumni return for speaking engagements, it fosters a connection between previous students and our current group of scholars, and we continue to strive to maintain and improve that relationship.

Gupton-Jones offers both an 18-month Associate of Science

program and an online Bachelor of Science in Funeral Service Management. Why are both programs important?

Gupton-Jones is proud to offer a stellar 18-month Associate of Science in Funeral Service degree, and we have an articulation agreement with our sister school Mid-America College if graduates would like to go on and obtain their Bachelor of Science Degree.

Offering both is important because some students are seeking an associate's program to prepare them for licensure, but other students want to continue their education to pursue other opportunities in funeral service where a bachelor's degree or beyond is a requirement.

Having access to both allows our students to finish and get their license or to further their education and continue on toward a J.D., Ph.D., M.D., or master's degree in fields that complement funeral service like grief counseling, mortuary law, or forensics.

What piece of advice would you offer students considering a career in funeral service?

Funeral service is relational and doesn't stop when you leave work every day. It is a calling, and it's truly about service – setting aside yourself and your wants to help and support others in their time of need. Also, it is not just about death and dying; it is about the living. My grandfather would say, "You develop your business while they're walking around, not when they're laying down." You develop relationships while they're still in this world, so when they move on, you are the one to ease their transition. •