



C.P.J. Field.

Why Would You Want To Do A Job Like That?

Travelling around funeral homes this past year, I've been struck by the number of women employed within CPJ Field. I suppose I was expecting a male-only environment, because, let's face it, why would a woman want to be surrounded by death and grief every day? And, would they be tough enough, mentally and physically, to cope? Lordy lorks, I sound like a sexist pig... hmmm.

I thought it would interesting to interview three ladies about their working life and how they came into the funeral industry... this led to some surprising encounters with pioneering people. Not only are they all determined, but CPJ Field has provided them with the opportunity to make their mark in the industry they love.

Pippa Yates (49)

Funeral Arranger

"I just thought it would be answering the phone, opening the post and doing basic office work; have nothing



to do with the actual funerals. But how wrong I was!" Pippa tells me when I visit her at the small 'office', just off the high street in Forest Row (I'm surprised it's just her - there's no funeral director about).

After years of bringing up children and working in therapeutic healing, Pippa answered an advert for a 'Receptionist' with CPJ Field in early 2013, but soon found out exactly what her new part-time role involved.

As a funeral arranger, Pippa (or her colleague Moira) is the person who people see or talk to about arranging a funeral. Her illusion of just being a receptionist was shattered during her initial months' training,

when she realised it was down to her to provide a calming influence on these emotionally charged interactions. But that was never going to be a problem for Pippa.

“I slipped naturally into the role as I’d previously worked with people who were sick or dying, and being a mother, we’re designed to be nurturing, aren’t we. I suppose that’s why all the funeral arrangers I know are women - plus the fact that the hours [job share] fit around family life.”

Women, indeed, do make up 100% of the funeral arrangers in CPJ Field. But not all arrangers want to get so stuck into their role...

Pippa, it turns out, is a strong character in many ways. During her basic training, she saw the embalming process (which she describes as “quite disturbing”) and a cremation. “I wanted to get properly involved straight away and my experiences gave me more empathy with the families. And because I know exactly what goes on now, I can answer any questions truthfully.”

Dealing with the families is only half the role, though, and Pippa’s time is spent doing plenty of paperwork (which has to be done without error) and interacting with the local community - she does plenty of the latter. During our interview, numerous people pop by to visit the art gallery which is on the floor above and she has regular visitors, which she calls her ‘Over-70s Club’, who come in for a coffee and a chat. They feel they can ask questions ‘without feeling embarrassed’.

There is good reason for people to feel comfortable with Pippa. Not only has she lived in Forest Row for 20 years and is known locally, but she enjoys meeting people. However, there is another side to Pippa - she is really competitive. “If I do something, I want to be the best at it. After I’d got settled into my work, I wanted to get more funeral business through the door and the way to do that in any village is to make yourself approachable.”

With her funeral director, Dave Holmden, at her side, Pippa has taken Ballard & Shortall out into the community (outside her working hours): a regular bric-a-brac stall at the village market was the most successful in terms of meeting people and raising money for charity. “Initially, some people thought it was in bad taste for us to have a stall, but they soon relaxed and we became part of the market. It’s very difficult to promote our business, but this type of involvement works.”

Pippa admits she went into ideas overdrive last year and got involved, with the blessing of Jeremy Field, in several projects with personal and community benefits. After a friend’s mother died at nearby St Raphaels, having suffered with dementia, Pippa decided to donate the money raised during Death Awareness Week* to this care home which had provided excellent support. Then, in a bid to understand more about dementia, Pippa persuaded Dave to go on a Virtual Dementia Tour (VDT)** with her. “Basically, we were kitted out so we could experience what it would be like to have stage 7 dementia [very severe]. It was absolutely terrifying and we were only living with it for 10 minutes. It took ages for me to calm down afterwards.”

Wishing to spread this experience of dementia, Pippa’s next step was to plan the organisation of another VDT for local professionals - carers, nurses, police, etc. She also became involved with East Sussex County Council to try and host a ‘Dementia Supper Club’***, but she has hit a snag - she suffered a mini stroke (TIA) in February of this year and Dave is currently covering maternity leave, so is unable to be so involved.

“I’m taking it a bit easier at the moment,” she laughs, fully aware that her drive to succeed will soon return. But she draws the line at becoming a funeral director. “Although I’d love to show off in front of the hearse, with a hat on, I think I’m too old now and I’m not very good at taking courses and doing training. And I’d lose the contact with the families - it’s such rewarding work, helping people at their lowest point.”

Quite an amazing funeral arranger, I think you would agree...

* Press Release for Ballard & Shortfall’s Death Awareness Week (12-19 May):
<http://www.dyingmatters.org/event/ballard-shortfall-forest-row-supports-dying-matters>



** Virtual Dementia Tour (US film): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hROU6f5TUQ>

*** East Sussex Dementia Supper Clubs: <http://www.escis.org.uk/health/dementia-supper-clubs/>

Tina Gunfield (49)

Chauffeur/Bearer

Keep your chin up, crack on with it and prove people wrong. Tina has taken on board this advice many times since becoming CPJ Field's pioneering female chauffeur/bearer. It's only now, two years since taking on the role, that she's feeling like she's 'one of the lads'.

The chauffeuring part of her job was second nature to her, having been a bus/coach driver since her early 20s (Tina says driving a limo takes her back to bus driving, so she prefers to be behind the wheel of the hearse). What made her choose the funeral industry, though, I ask. "Whenever I saw a hearse or a private ambulance, I felt that I really wanted to be driving them. Something in me wanted to be involved in the funeral business; but I never told anyone, not even my hubby, for fear of what they would say - they'd think I was weird."



Eventually, aged 45, Tina decided to follow her dreams. But it wasn't an easy path for her to take. For two years she actively applied to funeral homes - for any work. She phoned, dropped in CVs and applied for jobs, but even if there **was** a job going she got the 'vibe' that she wasn't what they wanted. The problem wasn't the driving, more the lifting of heavy loads.



“I never got a single reply from any funeral home I approached. As a woman, I was just not given the chance to prove that I was physically up to the job. I expect they thought I wouldn’t really want to lift bodies and do removals,” she says.

Anyone else might have given up, but Tina was determined.

She was ‘overwhelmed’ just to get an interview with Bill Scott (*at the time Principle FD at Shires?*) and she became a full-time chauffeur/bearer. “Bill wanted to make changes to the old image of funeral directing and I guess I was part of that process,” says Tina, who admits feeling awkward amongst her new male colleagues. “When I was asked to lift things, it felt as though there were waiting for me to refuse - I think they were afraid that they’d have to [excuse the pun] carry me.”

While she now feels comfortable in her role she still feels pressure when she works with anyone new, including families, because she stands out. “All they see is a woman doing a man’s job. I should have got over it by now, but it’s still novel to other people and I do draw their attention. I pressurise myself to get it right - to not trip over and the like.”

However, being female does have advantages. Tina’s role at Shires in Luton also encompasses cosmetically preparing the deceased - and her gender has certainly proved an advantage in **this** work. She says the families prefer to know that a woman is going to put makeup onto their mums and she can help Hindu and Seik women during their preparations, when men are not allowed into the chapel of rest.

“When I started here, there wasn’t too much attention paid to cosmetics, so I went on a course. The sense of achievement is huge when you present the deceased to the family, especially when they last saw them in hospital looking their worst. They will remember their last interaction for all the right reasons.”

Tina tells me, through tears, that she and her daughter prepared her own mother last October; doing her makeup and hair. “I decided this was the last thing I could do for Mum and she knew that I was trained so do you think she’d have wanted anyone else to look after her? Somehow I found the strength to do it...”

Tina has taken on another role, too. She’d always had an interest in embalming, but doubted her ability to become properly qualified because of the coursework, so dropped the idea. But after having some time off work to ‘get her head together’ after her mother died, she was given the opportunity to take a short embalming course. While not formally qualified, Tina believes with some more practical experience she can become the embalmer at the Luton branch. A lady of many talents...

“It’s nice to do a bit of everything here,” she admits. Outside of work, Tina is now proud to tell people what she does for a living and no longer cares if people think she’s ‘weird’ for working in the industry. Even her retired husband now works on a casual basis as a bearer (after initial reticence) and she wants to continue improving in her work. “I found out there’s another female chauffeur/bearer now within CPJ Field, but it was quite nice to be the pioneer!” she adds.

Chloe McKnight (27)

Principal Funeral Director

It wasn’t just a phase - wanting to be a funeral director - like her parents and career’s advisor first thought. Now overseeing 12 funeral homes (all Shires and Heritage branches), Chloe had to be determined to reach her goal; a good job, too, as she still faces daily comments about her choice of career.

Why did the 13-year old Chloe decide on funeral directing, I ask. “Mum’s a nurse and Dad’s in the Navy so talk of death and dying was never far from conversation and a distant female relative had also been involved in the laying out of the deceased at home. I thought it would be an interesting job and I was fascinated by



peoples' attitudes towards death and dying - we all die, but people didn't (and still don't) want to face it,"



she explains.

She was properly hooked the moment she, aged 15, spent two weeks on a school work placement at a funeral home. After receiving no help or encouragement from the career's advisor, she had to scout around privately and, finally, the third funeral home she contacted gave her the opportunity she craved. This progressive business actually took on more female students than males and Chloe was shown every aspect of the job (with her willing agreement): visiting the mortuary for removals, preparing a body and attending funerals.

However, the path into the industry was blocked to her. Initially, by her parents who (wisely) thought she should go to university after school, and then by the recession which hit as she finished her BSc Psychology degree at Northampton. Staying on to take a Masters in Child and Adolescent Mental Health, it was another year until she returned to the Management Programme at ASDA which she had started as an 18 year old...

But always the goal was to become a funeral director. Eighteen months it took Chloe to find that role. She was offered plenty of jobs as a funeral arranger, but she didn't want to be office-bound and CPJ Field were the first to offer her an interview for a trainee FD position (in Amersham), following the retirement of the FD. She passed her NAFD Diploma in Funeral Arranging in July 2012 and by January this year [2015] she was promoted to Principle FD (another female pioneer).



Phew!

Quiet determination has been the key to Chloe's rise in the industry. She faced a wall of negativity when she first became a FD - not only because of her gender, but also her youth. "I'd get the usual comments when I went out to make house arrangements: 'Oh, you're female', or 'Oh, you're young', or even worse, 'You're young AND female'. I guess people stereotypically think funeral directors are gaunt, old men with a hat. But once you get talking with families they soon see that you are competent and know what you're talking about.

"The best (and worst) comment I had was this man coming up to me at a funeral and saying, 'Oh, it's nice to see a female doing this job... Not that it's that difficult; at least the men are giving you a go at it.'"

Entering the 'boys' club' atmosphere of the crematoria tea room and working with the police on Coroner's removals was also quite daunting, and Chloe took a while to become accustomed to the chauvinistic comments. "I'd never encountered these attitudes before, working in the female-dominated ASDA, so I used to doubt myself and wonder if I was really up to the job; it knocked my self-confidence a bit and for a long time I used to feel I had to work twice as hard to look half as good as my male counterparts."

She feels confident about herself now and largely is able to ignore any sexist or rude comments. But she's still annoyed when people replying to a job advert start their applications with 'Dear Mr McKnight', when it clearly states 'Miss McKnight' on the job specification.

On the other hand, Chloe reckons that at least three people a week will come up to her and say how nice it is to see a female FD, and now there are more females in the industry with directing roles. "It helps being female as you can be more tactile - people see you as caring and compassionate and after funerals they will come up and give me a hug. Other women also feel more comfortable talking to other women - especially with baby funerals. I get a lot out of helping people at the worst point in their lives."

I ask Chloe what her family now think of her work. "Dad always tells me I can't discuss work over dinner, but they are pleased. Plus my fiancé is a FD himself and he understands the emotional pressures of the job... although we try not to discuss work at home. If I'm meeting new people and I don't want to talk about my work then I say I'm an 'events' manager' - that's not a lie!"

Chloe, while very determined, is quite happy and content doing what she loves - as long as she can keep directing funerals and be part of the on-call rota. She has no wish to go for further promotion. "It's such fulfilling work and it's nice to have all the tradition and history behind me."

However, I'm sure Chloe realises she is breaking from tradition, especially when she tells me her favourite funeral was that of a feminist, who wanted a female minister to conduct the service while Chloe directed the funeral with four female bearers in attendance. Now that service would have turned some heads!

Photos:

Pippa and Tina - Hannah Sherriffs

Chloe - CPJF&C

