

Ask the Undertaker



By Ryan Helfenbein

When it comes to Halloween, my family has always been the go-to source for unique costumes. Perhaps it's due to my line of work, or simply the fact that this industry breeds creative thinkers. Whatever the reason, we often end up creating the neighborhood kids' costumes. It is also common during this time of year for people to ask questions about my family's profession.

Hollywood has certainly done its part to raise unusual questions, and the tales we tell around the campfire simply exacerbate these visions. "Do you believe in ghosts?" is a common one, and I can assure you that if I did, I wouldn't be an undertaker. "Are you scared of the dark?" Well, my wife swears that I am. "Do decedents frighten you?" As my father has always said, "It's the living you need to worry about." Finally, the ever so popular, "Can individuals sit up after they pass away?" I've heard that one more times than I care to count.

Whether it is a graveyard as the source of Frankenstein's brain or a coffin for Dracula to rest in, the undertaker has always had some sort of role to play when it comes to scary movies. Hollywood loves the ever-so-popular act of a "man rising out of casket." As a matter of fact, it is not uncommon for people outside of Hollywood to have reported this occurring. Just recently, during a presentation, a woman told a story of seeing this with her own eyes. In addition, a fraternity brother of mine told a similar story of the same thing happening when he was a child. With this said, in the 100-plus combined years my family has spent in this industry, we have yet to see such levitation. Nor have any of my family members come in contact with an undertaker who has seen it in "real life."

How has this myth become so ingrained in movies and folklore, or better yet, why do so many people swear they've seen this occur? Maybe it's a tall tale that dates back to the days before modern preparation (embalming) or even modern

medicine? This could be true as there were many mechanisms created for the prevention of a premature burial, as discussed here in the last issue. Maybe it is a case of mind over matter, as the repeated images in scary movies create suggestions in our minds. Or, as some people say, "Perhaps it is due to air build up or even rigor mortis." Maybe that's it. Rigor mortis takes place in the body after death and can cause the muscles to tighten, perhaps even contract, making the individual sit up. But wait a minute here, according to the book *Forensic Taphonomy: the Postmortem Fate of Human Remains* by William D. Haglund, "... rigor mortis does not cause muscular contraction and, Hollywood movies to the contrary, dead bodies do not sit up, grasp objects, or walk about due to rigor."

It's a relief that that question is finally answered. Or is it? It was reported in June of this year that just prior to a funeral, a decedent in Brazil sat up, turned to the assembled mourners, asked for a drink of water, then laid back down. According to the *Christian Post News*, the decedent in question was rushed to the hospital where he was pronounced dead -- for a second time. It may well be that the individual was not deceased the first time. In addition, the family must have had a difficult time doing

the services for a second time, because that funeral director most likely turned in his license, headed out of town and is now far removed from this line of work.

So a body cannot sit up after death? Then what about hair and fingernails? Don't they keep growing after death? Believe it or not, this is another question I've often heard. But again, this is another popular misconception. What gives the impression of hair and nails growing is the fact that the skin shrinks a bit after the embalming process is completed. This is due to dehydration that occurs shortly after the procedure is finished. So, another myth exposed.

As the costumed trick or treaters arrive on your doorstep this year, perhaps you'll find yourself thinking of other questions concerning undertaking. But let's hope that rather than conjuring up eerie thoughts of what may or may not occur after death, you're thinking, "Wow! I wonder what local undertaking family made that costume?"

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Caregivers: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

The 11th annual Caregivers' Wellness Day invites caregivers to attend the free event on Nov. 10 to help them help themselves. Caregiver Wellness Day provides multiple opportunities:

- INFORMAL CAREGIVERS TAKE A BREAK FROM THE EVERYDAY STRESS OF CAREGIVING.
- YOU PARTICIPATE IN EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS FOCUSED ON CARING FOR YOU.
- QUIET TIME IS AVAILABLE IN THE CENTER'S BEAUTIFUL COURTYARD.
- YOU CAN MEET NEW FRIENDS WHO SHARE THE SAME DAY-TO-DAY STRESSES AS YOU.

At Wellness Day, participants will have opportunities to enjoy mini-massages, hand massage, healing touch or acupuncture for stress relief. Speakers are still being scheduled, and will include Mary Fridley, founder of Gero-Resources LLC, as well as Sandy Berkeley, Mary Chaput and Jennifer Sapp of the Anne Arundel County Department of Aging and Disabilities.

Topics include "How can a care manager help me?" "Planning for the holidays" and "Identifying your support network," among others. The annual event is free for anyone taking care of a family member, neighbor or friend, but not for professional caregivers. Area businesses and organizations will attend to share their information and door prizes will be presented.

Transportation may be available upon request, a catered lunch is offered and entertainment is planned.

Free in-home respite care and free out-of-home respite care will be provided by Active Day Centers.

The Wellness Day is Saturday, Nov. 10, from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Annapolis Senior Activity Center, 119 S. Villa Ave. For information, call 410.222.4464, Ext. 3043. Wellness Day registration information will be posted on www.aacounty.org/aging later this fall.

SPOTLIGHT - WHO IS THE UNDERTAKER?

"Spotlight" is a new column that we'll be including in each of the coming issues.

Inquiries come in often asking who we are. This column will provide answers to many of those questions.



Ryan Helfenbein learned early on that growing up in a funeral business home made life interesting. Most kids' parents didn't get calls from school teachers because their children were drawing caskets in the classroom. And you can probably pretend to be a superhero, cop, cowboy or rock star, but you probably don't play undertaker.

But there were advantages. Living above a funeral home in what was then a very rural community on the Eastern Shore, Ryan and his brothers learned first-hand from their father the high level of dignity and respect that accompanied his line of work. And Ryan discovered other pluses. The parking lot made a great arena for street hockey games and the funeral home made a great spot for hiding from babysitters.

The unique upbringing still remained front and center. Babysitters seemed to change faster than the weather. Summer family vacations were always taken at the annual funeral directors convention in Ocean City. Without trying, Ryan learned the ways of an undertaker. He remembers well the time his dad came to him on the day the family was to leave for a two-day sailing trip to

explain the adventure was off. This sort of thing happened all the time, but this trip had been planned for months.

"We can always go sailing another weekend, where this family cannot alter what has happened to them," his father said.

Without Ryan knowing it at the time, the seed had been planted. But through most of his formative years, he never considered entering the family business. Ryan and his brothers went off to college, graduated and later could proudly say that they were among only 12 percent of licensed funeral directors with bachelor's degrees. It was during his college years that Ryan realized that not all funeral homes were operated the same way. He began to appreciate the way his father ran the business -- from top to bottom. His father would transport the body, handle arrangements with the family, make preparation procedures, dig and open the grave, set up the burial tent and equipment, create the outer enclosure for the grave, work the funeral service and fill in the grave. He would even come back years later to make sure the markers at the site were still in good standing.

As a practicing undertaker now, it is not surprising that Ryan, too, is taking the same all-inclusive approach. Ryan notes that history is repeating itself in other ways as well. When his son reached 4 years old, he heard the boy tell his Lego men, "It's time to go back to the funeral home." At least he is not drawing caskets in the classroom ... yet.