

Interviewee: Keeney, Genevieve

Interview Date: September 20, 2008

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Genevieve Keeney
Museums of Houston
National Museum of Funeral History

Interviewed by: Anna Burke
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AB: Hello this is Anna Burke I am sitting here with Genevieve Keeney Director of the National Museum of Funeral History. Thank you so much for speaking with me today. Let's start with the history of the Funeral Museum. Whose vision was it to start a museum dedicated to funeral history?

GK: It was Mr. Waltrip who is the founder of Service Corporation International. He has been in the funeral industry basically his entire life. His family founded Heights Funeral Home here in Houston, Texas. Due to the death of his father early on in their business he, unfortunately, had to go into running the family business and became the Funeral Director and grew it to what it is today which is the largest corporation of funeral service in the country.

AB: And that is the reason why it is located in Houston?

GK: Yes and that's why it is here in Houston. There is so much interesting traditions and rituals and customs that go into the funeral industry itself and just funerals in general. That it was changing as time changed, they felt that it was very, very interesting and important to hold on to some of our old funeral customs and put them in a museum so people can see how it evolved through time.

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AB: What cultures does the museum cover?

GK: It covers the American culture of course mainly. We get a lot of our, the majority of our stuff is American based. But we do have stuff from other countries that have been donated or put on loan to us. We have a Japanese hearse, we have two German hearses and now we have an international portion that we have just created. That covers Italy, of course because of Rome, "Celebrating the Life and Deaths of the Popes" and we are also now covering Mexico. We have Ghana, West Africa. So those are the main countries that we have right now.

AB: I'd like to just start discussing some of the exhibits on display here and on the web. I understand you have an online exhibit entitled "1900 Casket Factory," could you tell me about this?

GK: The Casket Factory was basically constructed to portray one of the largest casket companies, Marcelles Casket Company, who was in business for over 100 years. They were some of the original casket makers, finely crafted caskets. They went out of business and I guess as a tribute to them and all that were to the funeral industry, we created an exhibit to showcase their fine work.

AB: What is showcased on the exhibit online?

GK: It, from my understanding, I'm not really familiar with the online one, it's just basically talks about the Marcelles caskets and the just a little replica of I think the vignettes that we have displayed in there.

AB: Could you just walk me through some of the more popular exhibits that you have here in the museum?

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GK: Some of the popular ones is obviously “The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” because it is a great tribute to them. It talks about what “The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” is and we have a TV that displays the changing of the guard, which is a very ceremonial period that happens throughout the day there. It is very structured and disciplined and touching if you ever sit and watch it. Because it is giving tribute to those who sacrificed their lives for us, so we are addressing them. We also, another one of the popular ones is the presidential one. The “Presidential Museum” displays all the different Presidents throughout time starting with Washington. Of course we don’t have all of them but whatever we did have we were able to get the memorial folders of or the newspaper articles or some of the actual artifacts during that President’s funeral. We do have some of the artifacts and stuff from some of the most recent presidents and we are expanding that now, right now we are expanding so that we can make room for Gerald R. Ford and for our future presidents, President Clinton and the Bush’s. So we expect to be able to showcase them as well and presidents beyond that, because we should honor the leaders of our country in that way. Another one is “Funerals of Famous” that showcases different famous funerals and famous people. We do have the Princess Grace of Monaco’s hearse. That was put on loan to us. Then we have different memorial cards and folders that are handed out at the ceremonies of the different funerals of the famous. Then of course our hearses are always popular too. Because we have a large collection of hearses throughout time, all the way back to the one that they believe to be the original hearse, the original horse drawn hearse, all the way up to some of the most recent hearses and we are hoping to get one of the Presidential hearses when it comes time to have it’s lease up and we will house it in there.

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AB: Can you tell me about the original hearse that you have here?

GK: The original hearse is believed to be from the 1800's and it is horse drawn, of course, and it has glass sides to it and it has what they called feather plumes that are on the top. The plumes, the number of plumes back in the day on the original hearses, the more plumes that you had the higher status in society that you were, so the plumes represented your economical status. The black plumes were always reserved for the men and the white for the women and children. It's got curtains around it and it is just big enough for pretty much a casket.

AB: I noticed a lot of your hearses are really ornate. How common was it to have something this ornate in commission?

GK: That I think that just goes along with the time period. With, you know, funerals was a ceremony, it was something celebrating of one's life. I think that everyone always wants everything done... you know the last of the days, if you will, at the funeral everything is done in elaborate. Back then the craftsmen, the majority of the casket makers were furniture makers and they just were able to craft very well and they just crafted in a very ornate manner.

AB: Are your hearses original or are some of the reproductions?

GK: They are all originals.

AB: Wow.

GK: They are all originals. Actually when you'll see, when they change from horse drawn hearses into motorized hearses, basically what they did when the Ford pick up truck came out, they would take the top off the horse drawn carriage and they would take the bed off the back of the truck, took the top of the horse drawn carriage off of the

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wheels and put it on the back of the Ford pick up truck. Then it became a motorized hearse and that's how the hearse evolved from horse drawn to motorized, they would still maintain the body of the hearse but then they just put it on the back of a truck.

AB: What are some of the most unusual exhibits that you have had on display here? I noticed that you had the little Snow White casket.

GK: Yeah the Snow White, the money casket gets a lot of publicity. A lot of people look at that. That casket actually, they had a "Over the Top" in Houston, it's a show that talks about different things in Houston and they were doing a segment about six months ago on "Over the Top" and they wanted to know, of course, what was the most expensive funeral and we are not allowed to divulge that information because of client privilege confidentiality. So we just let them in and the money casket was a big hit because it just shows that you can take it with you. You know they say, "You can't take your money with you." But yes in that retrospect you can and somebody actually had their money encased into a casket.

AB: How much is in there?

GK: A little over \$1,000 was in it originally. It actually had money lined in the inner lining as well but that got stolen.

AB: Oh my goodness.

GK: Yeah so that is interesting. So there are the ones Ghana coffins from West Africa. Those are hand crafted, made by the people, the local people there. Those caskets are basically cost their year's wages which is about \$450 and they save up a whole year's wages to have the casket made for their family member. I believe, if I remember correctly, I have a little bit more information that was interesting to me that I learned. Or

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maybe when we get to it I'll elaborate more on those caskets. There's an interesting story on how those came to be over here in the United States and in our museum.

AB: Well feel free to talk.

GK: Let me find the answer here. I wrote some footnotes on it. I remember somebody's uncle died and they went back to Ghana to get a casket made for them.

See...yeah Connie Que was the artist.

AB: How do you spell it?

GK: I'm not sure how to spell the actual name I spelled it the way it sounded. But it may be on the poster in the back that actually talks about. He was from the town in Ghana, West Africa. His uncle was dying and he had a canoe built for him. It was showcased, actually, okay... so he had the canoe built for his uncle who had died and we first learned about it in a National Geographic... that's how it came to be... National Geographic had done a display on them. They were in the Olympics in Atlanta as art pieces because when he went back to get it built for his uncle then he brought the idea back over here and introduced it to National Geographic and the Olympics in Atlanta and became art pieces there. Then once Mr. Buttercraig found out about it then he contacted the National Geographic and had asked if we could showcase them here. Then they donated them to us and we are the first museum to actually display them as caskets instead of art pieces. Actually they were in I want to say maybe Neiman Marcus. I think it was maybe Neiman Marcus one of the big catalogs, one of the big department stores, the elaborate ones. They were in their catalog where you could actually purchase one. You know you have to order it obviously from Ghana and they would build it for you and then send it to you. I think it was around \$2,000 for them. It was really interesting. But

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you can get a lot more in depth detail on the verbiage that is back there. I can't recall it all. I've read it a couple of times but I only get hit and miss the highlights of it basically.

AB: And these represented various points or hobbies in a person's life?

GK: Basically more so it represented what they did in their life. Like if you were a fisherman then they would construct a casket like a fish or a crab or a boat, you know, because you were a fisherman you did stuff on the sea. They say like a mother hen... if there was someone who took care of the home or took care of the children, took care of the family, would be buried in a hen casket because they were like a mother hen.

Someone that had wealth might have gone to the Mercedes casket. Someone who was a pilot or a boat mechanic go into the boat engine and stuff like that... so it was more or less their occupation through life.

AB: Was this always the tradition over there?

GK: Yes.

AB: Are they completely functional?

GK: Yes they just a little small for us. If you open them they built small but if you get over there in Africa, the people over there... of course we eat so we grow. They tend to live off their land and they... so their stature is just a little different than us but yeah they are completely functional.

AB: Weren't they afraid of the pressure of the dirt crushing some of the artwork?

GK: I think it's not so much about preserving it as a piece of art as it is about giving a tribute to the person who has died. Yes. Does it crush under the weight of the earth?

Yes. Everything can crush under the weight of the earth. Even a standard pine box can crush under the weight of the earth. The weight of the earth is 3,000 pounds. So any

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type of casket or anything you put into the ground has the potential and its okay because the goal is to never dig them up again. So if it crushes, it crushes. But it wasn't to be like... I'm going to burry you in this today and 10 years later dig it back it back up and hope that it is in the same state. Now with that being said, caskets being crushed by the weight of the earth, that is true in fact how we came up with what we call burial vaults. Well its burial vaults is kind of a two way story. Back in the early 1900's the burial vaults were designed to curtail grave robbing. Because people would dig up and go down and rob out of the graves. Well they would put them in a burial, in a vault which is basically cemented around and put the body in and then put a big cement slab on the top and it keeps people from being able to dig into it. Because you would actually need a crane to get the top off, but now days it is more a preservation of the structure of the land. So a lot of cemeteries that you go to and it will all depend on the cemetery in which you are going to be buried in, some cemeteries require that you have a vault be made, a burial vault be made because 1) it preserves the structure of the land because when – after a while, after a couple of years the dirt settles back down and yes... once it crushes that casket if it does then you are going to have a sink hole where that casket lied. With the burial vaults you don't get that you maintain the ground.

AB: Could you walk me through your timeline exhibit, beginning with the Egyptian exhibit?

GK: That one basically is set up for embalming okay. That's its main reasoning. How embalming evolved and how it is what it is today. Embalming started with the Egyptians. They master crafted the technique of preserving the body. Obviously you can dig up a mummy today and they are still well preserved. So basically they had taken the

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techniques of the Egyptians and Thomas Holmes, whom we know as – or is the father of American embalming. There was one other embalmer but he was in the south. Thomas Holmes was the main embalmer. He was a doctor. His main goal was to come up with a technique to preserve the body – not for preservation over a long period of time but to preserve the body long enough to get the soldiers from the civil war off the battle field and back to home for a proper burial.

AB: Was it a common practice to have embalmers on the battlefield?

GK: Not until Dr. Holmes. Once Dr. Holmes created the concept and came up with the idea, then it became common practice. Now-a-days, with the increased transportation abilities there are no embalmers on the battlefield. All the bodies are shipped to the embalmers via aircraft carriers and stuff like that now. Now embalming, you see it evolve into the modern day embalming which unfortunately the exhibit is down right now but you may have saw it in the past, was just kind of an old embalming lab if you will. That was the older ones where they used the gravity bottles to get the fluid into the body. Now we have the more modern, we have the machines that do it for us and it's pretty... it's nicer it makes it easier. But we have the state of the art equipment now. We have nice facilities that makes it easier. Yeah so embalming is just preservation of the body for a short amount of time. It doesn't preserve the body forever. Sometimes a body can take the fluid very well and can you can open it up 20 years and they are still there. But that's not just the embalming that's done that. It's the embalming, it's the casket, it's the sealed gasket casket. It's put into a vault. It's kept from any air or water or anytime of element being able to get to it. You have to have a whole bunch to be able to preserve,

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a whole bunch of different elements combined to really preserve a body in pristine state, it's not just the embalming fluid alone.

AB: Can you tell me about the three person casket? You told me an interesting story about that.

GK: The three person casket was designed for a husband and wife who had lost their child and they were so grief stricken that they wanted to follow the child in death. So they went to the nearest casket maker and asked him to please create a triple casket large enough for the three of them to be buried together. They were going to do a murder/suicide and have the funeral director bury the three of them together. By the time the casket was near it's completion of being constructed the grief period had passed and the mother and father went their separate ways and the casket was never picked up. When the casket company closed they still had this casket in their inventory and they donated it to us, along with the story.

AB: Wow. Do you have any glass caskets here?

GK: Yes we do have two glass caskets. We have the replica of the Sleeping Beauty casket that you see in the movie, "Sleeping Beauty." Then we have another glass casket made of very thick glass. That was basically a concept that someone had created. They were trying to get somebody to pretty much buy off on the idea of having a glass caskets. But the gentleman for some reason, he ended up in jail, for some reason... the guy that created the idea of the glass casket he ended up in jail for some issues that surrounded that. The idea never took off. Nobody ever came in and said, "Oh." There was just no demand for glass caskets. Nobody really found it to be fascinating or something that they would buy. I think a lot of people were leery of its functionality. The lid of it is very

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heavy, the glass is heavy. You had to have a lot of glass to withstand the weight of the earth and it just wasn't economical. Yeah it may have been cheaper but in the long run it was just the weight of it and the functionality of it just wasn't there and there was no demand for it.

AB: Can you tell me about your 1860 German Glaswagen Funeral Coach?

GK: The German hearses. The German hearses basically they were... we have this wonderful gentleman who is on our board, Bug Camphousen, he probably owns almost one of the largest car collections in the world. He collects cars and we house a lot of his cars here. He loans them to us. He has some of the German hearses. Basically the... let me see if I can find where I have... I don't have any more on there. There's really not a whole lot, I mean German and... it's from Germany and the wheels were constructed if you ever noticed at an angle. They are not straight they are kind of angled and that's so that the hearse can maneuver the cobblestones over there because the majority of their roads are cobblestone and the wheels would get stuck in it if they weren't angled right.

AB: Is there a noticeable different between European hearses and American hearses?

GK: The horse drawn ones yes.

AB: Okay.

GK: Because of the wheels.

AB: Just the wheels?

GK: Just the wheels.

AB: You have the JFK "Eternal Flame" here I understand. Why was it chosen to come to the Funeral Museum in 1998 as opposed to it staying in Washington D.C.?

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GK: Of course we have worked closely with the Arlington National Cemetery but basically nobody wanted it. It really was no significance. Nobody really wanted it and so they loaned it to us. It's from the Arlington National Cemetery. I mean they have the real one there, you know, so if they want to see the eternal flame... basically what they did is they switched out when Mrs. Kennedy died they put her there too so they had to unearth everything and they switched out all the mechanisms, basically they switched it out. It's a more modern eternal flame that is sitting there and that's the old one. So why go see the old one when you can see the original one? If you are at Arlington National Cemetery you are going to see the original one. So there was really no demand for it or any need for it. And again with us having relations with Arlington National Cemetery they asked if we wanted it to put it in our Presidential (because they knew of our Presidential exhibit). So it is just a nice tribute to go along with the casket that we have, the replica of JFK.

AB: I understand you have a new exhibit opening on September 27th of this year. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

GK: That is "Celebrating the Lives and Deaths of the Popes." It was inspired by Mr. Bettiger when he watched the funeral of Pope John Paul II. How the process of it, the ceremonial portion of it and the whole fact that so many people were moved by it. We thought it would be really, really neat to do an exhibit...(phone ringing) sorry about that, that it would be really, really neat to do an exhibit to showcase such an extravagant event as that. One that I think that when people come to the museum they can actually relate to because it affects the people in our time, you know, something that they can feel and remember. It's kind of like The Challenger or Princess Diana – we do have some small

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exhibits about them but there is something that people these days are familiar with. So we wanted to kind of showcase that and really pay tribute to a significant ceremony. So we created... it took, it's been three years in the making. It took two years to get approval from the Vatican so that they may open their doors to us and allow us to 1) get permission to even have this type of exhibit and then 2) to be able to have access to some of the artifacts and the behind the scene photos of what actually went on at the funeral other than what we were able to see on television, so that we could actually do the exhibit justice and give it the respect and honor that it deserves.

AB: What artifacts were you able to get from The Vatican?

GK: We've got a lot of the behind the scene photos. We were able to get some negatives of certain portions of the exhibits... or certain portions of like St. Peters, inside the altar of St. Peters so we were able to blow them up to the size in which you see them, because you need an original negative to do that. You can't just go in and take a photo and be able to work it. We were able to get some never before seen photos of Pope Pius, I believe it was the Xth or XIth. It's very hard there were several Pope Pius' so I get them confused so forgive me, but the actual... his name is back there. We got actual photos of Pope Pius – never before seen by the public. They are real photos and they are showcased. We actually have the sash of Pope John Paul II that he wore daily, never before... you know, I mean people have seen it on his body and it has the stains and everything on it, it's original piece that we were blessed with. They loaned it to us and it will be in our showcase. We were also given a mold to the ring of Pope Pius VXth. His, the fisherman's ring is destroyed upon the Pope's death because it is the ring that they use to seal documents with. They allowed us to have the original molding and had it casted

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and have an actual fisherman's ring in the flesh that will be showcased to give people an idea... and it's interesting because when you see certain pieces, like throughout the [REDACTED], we were fortunate enough to get to [REDACTED] made by the company that made the [REDACTED] right before they closed. They closed just before we requested two of them. We have original book of all the front pages of "Reservoir Romany," it's their paper there. It is the paper of The Vatican, their newspaper. They gave us the book and the book is huge, and it's all in Italian of course. But just to have a piece like that I think is quite amazing. We were able to have exclusive rights to Pope's tailor, Gamarelli's, who has been serving the Pope for over 200 years. They allowed us to have the tailor make vestments for us to wear on our mannequins. We actually have an original piece, uniform from The Papal Gentleman and we have an original uniform of the Saviatti, who are the Pope's pallbearers. We have – that's pretty much it. We have the actual prayer book from the funeral mass and we were able to get the actual dimensions of the caskets that the Pope was buried in – so that we could – and we had permission to replicate them. We also had gotten permission to replicate the exact dimensions of Pope John Paul II's crypt in The Gratta. So we've gotten a lot, a lot from them. I think one of the hardest things for us to get was the Swiss Guardian forms. Because those are, the items are so controlled by the Commandant of the Swiss Guard and it is a very prestigious honor to wear that honor, to allow that to walk out their doors was a huge undertaking. Of course we had to purchase everything but at the same time just to be honored to be able to have those and to be able to showcase them in the manner in which they were presented at the Pope's funeral. We are very blessed to be able to do that.

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AB: Are you going to move all of your international exhibits into that area as well?

GK: Yes that will be our international portion of our museum and we are planning on doing a lot more internationally based exhibits as I am able to have the time to do the research and acquire artifacts to support them or replicate some of them... to just really kind of give someone a feel of and learn, get educated, what goes on in other parts of the world. I think it is important because we are such a melting pot here in America I think it is important that maybe funerals are such... funerals are going to touch everybody.

Everybody is going to die one day, we just don't know when. To be able to I think educate is the most important thing that we can possibly do not only for our children but for each other and learn and teach them about the traditions and customs that maybe, you know, maybe some kids come through and their roots go back to let's say Mexico but they don't basically do the traditions here in America no longer as they would if they were raised in Mexico. But they can come to our museum and their parents can teach them, "This is what we did in Mexico. This is how we celebrated our dead. This is what we do every year." If someone was from Germany or from West Africa, or their roots go all the way back to West Africa they can just kind of learn about what they did back in those days. Some they still do but maybe they don't have the means to get to that country to actually understand it and be embraced by it. So basically my goal is to allow people to not only learn about other cultures and be more open to other people's beliefs and their religions and their customs and courtesy's surrounding the way that they celebrate death but just to kind of maybe learn about what their roots entailed throughout time.

AB: What is your "Reflections on the Wall" exhibit?

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GK: The "Reflections on the Wall," that was an exhibit that was a traveling exhibit.

Let me see how long that was a traveling one...I have my notes on the reflections. It traveled around the U.S. for eight years. It is now on permanent loan to us from the Smithsonian. We have good relations with them and they help us out on certain exhibits. Those were the actual original photos that were taken at the dedication ceremony of the "Reflections of the Wall" for the Vietnam Memorial wall.

AB: What archival holdings do you have and how accessible are these to the public?

GK: We have several. A lot of our archival they come, they are donated. They are people... funeral homes close down or someone has a grandma die and "I went into her house into her attic and the found all these things from her husband's funeral home he ran back in 1930 and would you like some of these pieces." A lot of them... that's how our museum got built by the generosity of the people saying "Here I think this needs to be showcased rather than thrown away." So we do have several of them. As far as them being accessible, some of them are accessible. We have some old... some of the trade magazines, a lot of the old literature and stuff from throughout time. They are accessible but they are pretty much... because we don't have an actual curator on staff they are... we would have to schedule an appointment and know exactly what it is they are wanting. But for them to come in and do a little bit of research we have it available we just don't have an open door policy you know where you can just come in. Because they have had in the past where some people were coming in and not doing the right thing all the time. So it hasn't been done since I've been here. Of course our main focus has been changing a lot of exhibits and bringing in new things.

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AB: Are any of your holdings in digital format – are there any plans to maybe put them online some of them?

GK: Possibly yeah. We really haven't thought that far ahead yet. I mean I know that there is a lot of things... we are a small museum and I'm wanting to make us... I want to put us into the next "tier" if you will of museums and really make it to where we can be something more of educational. Because my goal is, is to be a death education advocate and utilize this as my platform to allow people to come here and learn how to embrace death, learn that death isn't scary, learn that this isn't a bad place. Everybody is going to get effected by it one day. So why not learn on how to best handle it? – type thing. Go about it in a healthy way, because it is healthy. It's just unfortunate and nobody likes it.

AB: I understand that the museum has been a leading consultant on several film and television and print productions. Can you tell me about this?

GK: A lot of our pieces have been rented out by some of the different producers. They would come... for prop purposes. "Six Feet Under" – the pilot for "Six Feet Under" was one of the film productions that our museum was instrumental. Mr. Beddicer himself helped them to name the funeral home - to pick a name for their funeral home inside the... to be portrayed, basically to maintain the name of the family. They wanted to change it and call it something different. But a lot of family homes are best known by the name of the owner. So that was one of the things. He was responsible for making sure that the props that were within it like the bottles and stuff like they were correctly labeled and that they portrayed the correct information that they were trying to... that it wasn't a bottle with the wrong kind of label on it to make it look like a formaldehyde bottle or something you know. So it was really neat. He was really instrumental. "The Women of

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Independent Means” that was directed by Sally Fields. He was instrumental in helping her to do some informational portions within that movie... you know making sure that it was accurate and that what they were portraying was correct. There’s just been, people get... they consult to make sure that the information they are presenting is correct and they will utilize us to make sure that the information is correct. We get a lot of people that call us – I have book right there called “The History of American Funeral Directing” that is my dictionary, or my bible, or my encyclopedia if you will to make sure that when people, when they call and ask questions about certain things in history that we give them the accurate information because there is a lot.

AB: Are there any other exhibits that I missed that you would like to talk about?

GK: Not that really stand out I mean – the “Funeral Bus” I think is interesting.

AB: That’s right.

GK: That huge mammoth of a vehicle that takes an act of congress to move and we had to do it twice.

AB: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

GK: That was actually a funeral bus that was constructed in San Francisco, California.

The purpose of the bus was, instead of having that long drawn out funeral procession of cars, that they create a bus long enough to carry the body and the entire family.

Unfortunately they needed to build another set of axles on the back and they... when it was going up the steep hills, since the weight was in the back of the bus, the bus kind of tipped back and they realized it wasn’t going to work. So it was crafted... it wasn’t crafted in the best way. So they took it out of commission and it ended up in our museum.

AB: Wow.

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GK: So and it is all made out of wood, other than of course the metal portions of the body of it, you know underneath where the tires and stuff are. If you ever look at the tires they are the tires that run along... they are like railroad tires. It is very interesting. Very heavy piece though.

AB: Why did you have to move it twice?

GK: We had to move it, the first time we had to move it because it sat all the way flush against the back wall and we built a new wall to kind of showcase the timeline of embalming. So we had to pull it back, we had to pull it forward if you will, away from the wall so we could put the embalming lab back there and Thomas Holmes back there. Then Mr. Beddicer said, "It's backwards let's turn it around." So then we had to rotate it completely around. So all in that little space I did a lot of car moving late at night. All those cars... none of them... you don't start them. You are supposed to start them throughout – two or three months to keep everything well greased and stuff. Of course we didn't have ventilation so we weren't going to start them so we had to push all those old cars – and they are heavy – they have a lot of weight to them. So we had to push a lot of stuff around and rearrange everything because we didn't have a lot of room. You move one exhibit you've got to move them all. We had sprinklers getting installed fire sprinklers and they installed them by bay. So we would have to clear one bay so you move one set of stuff this way and everything got a good shift. So pretty much everything in there except around the little display cases behind the Ghana coffins and the triple casket and the coffin vignette, the 1900 casket factory, that middle portion never got moved, everything else got moved. So it was nice – we've been very busy around here trying to create something spectacular for the public.

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AB: I think you've accomplished it. It is amazing in there. I'd like to move on to running the museum. Could you briefly describe your duties as director and the average day in running the museum?

GK: Right now, very hectic. I say so, to me right now, what I am going through is not an average day because we are expanding. An average day is coming to work. The museum opens at 10:00. I have several staff members. Not only am I just the Director of the museum but I am also the overseer of this entire complex. So I have to oversee the training center and I am basically the landlord to the school because they rent from the building. So basically just being the museum director, I wear many, many hats. So right now, as my day consists of overseeing the project, the construction project. Making sure that everything is done, making all the decisions on where things go. Making sure it is done right and designing exhibits. I design a lot of the exhibits as well. Then administratively, I do all the administrative stuff as well, the daily stuff. Then I oversee my staff members.

AB: Okay.

End Side 1, Tape 1

AB: What would you say is the most difficult aspect of running this particular museum?

GK: Right now the most difficult is probably taking it to the next level, taking it from the paradigm of it being a small museum and turning it into a big one.

AB: Do you think that you will ever move to a different building or just expand this one?

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GK: Just expand this one. We've already been thinking, "Okay if we are going expand where can we do that?" Yeah we have thought about that.

AB: How many people are involved in running the museum?

GK: Right now there are...five of us that run it on a weekly basis.

AB: And what are their positions?

GK: I have myself, who is the Director, Mr. Beddicer who is the president who volunteers his time. Then I have Lucy who is my manager. She runs the gift shop and the inventory and she oversees the two customer service representatives. I have one customer service representative in the Morning Monday through Friday and I have one on the weekend. Then she has to oversee all of the training classes because my customer service representatives, they do customer service, they run the gift shop basically. They take in the admissions, they take in gift shop sales. But they are also responsible for answering the phone and they are responsible for scheduling tours and scheduling classes for SCI trainings, the training center. Then the manager Lucy, she is responsible for the bookkeeping. She is responsible to ensure that the accountant gets all the things that he needs on our day to day operation. She is responsible for our inventory of gift shop and she is responsible for, making sure that the training class, when someone comes in for training she is responsible to make sure that the cleaning people know that the training class is coming and making sure the classrooms are set up appropriately and that we have enough classrooms for the classes that we are going to host that week.

AB: Are the collections here permanent holdings?

GK: No some of them are loan. We have both... we have permanent, we have permanent loan and we have loan.

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AB: What is the difference between permanent loan and loan?

GK: A permanent is one that we actually possess. A permanent loan is that people will say, "We will loan it to you as long as the museum is in existence. Once the museum, if the museum should ever close down then we want our items back." Also a permanent loan can also sometimes stop... like say somebody dies, your grandmamma donated something to the museum, put it on loan or permanent loan to the museum and the grandchild came and said, "Oh I know that my grandmother gave this on permanent loan but it is still loan and now I want it back." Sometimes we can have family members, next of kin or something that will come back and request the item.

AB: Do you ever rotate exhibits or artifacts?

GK: Yes we do.

AB: And what exhibits?

GK: The we had a "Wizard of Oz" exhibit that used to be up for the coroner, the little coroner guy – we have a mannequins. I hope to bring that one back out. I think that's really neat. We have a lot of neat stuff that is still in the back. We have a nice collection of mourning clothing that we just didn't have space for but now we have expanded I'm hoping to be able to put that out. We have a Rolls Royce Hearse that we haven't been able to showcase because I am now creating the restoration project for that piece because it needs to be restored. There is still just a lot of stuff in the back that we just haven't had a chance. It's been out, this has been before my time, but it has been out and then it went to the back and something else came out. A bunch of different types of caskets, different variations of caskets we have back in the back.

AB: You have me curious with that "Wizard of Oz" exhibit. What exactly was in it?

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GK: Basically it was just pictures of the movie “Wizard of Oz” and the coroner himself that went out and pronounced “The Wicked Witch Dead” and he actually came and they put on a little exhibit with him in it and he did a book signing. He did a signing of posters from the “Wizard of Oz” so it was a nice little exhibit attributing to him and the fact that he was the coroner. So it just a little something, a little known fact that even myself as a child, watching the “Wizard of Oz” so many times never picked up on that. So that was pretty much what that was about showcasing that... death even happens in the Disney movies.

AB: How do you go about acquiring exhibits?

GK: A lot of times we do internet research when we are looking for stuff. When we did... Pope John Paul... excuse me “Celebrating the Lives and Deaths of the Popes” a lot of the stuff like the newspaper articles that we have and some of the funeral memorial cards that we have, we did internet searching on those and we received them through the internet. A lot of times we get people calling us. “We have this great piece. We think you’d be interested in,” unfortunately I have 20 of those and I don’t need it. But yeah a lot of times people call us. I had... he never called me back. I had the grandson of Mr. Foley from the Foley’s department store. He called me and said he had his grandfather’s top hat that he had on the first grand opening of the Foley’s department store and he had a photo of it and “Would I be interested in showcasing it?” You know stuff like that. Just interesting things like that. People call... the Egyptian coffin, I have an Egyptian infant coffin in the back now going into my Egyptian exhibit tomb that I am currently, it is currently under construction. A gentleman called me about it. “I think I have a great thing that you would like to have in your exhibit” and it is on loan right now to me and

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it's back there and I will showcase it eventually, once I get it all set up. Gentleman called me "I have a JFK bust that I got and I think it will be great in your presidential portion," because we have a George Washington bust. That's how we get a lot of it, people just bring it to us. Some of it they sell to us...

AB: Oh okay.

GK: And some of it the put it on loan. Some of it we donate. We have a wonderful collection of - it's not up yet because I didn't have the wall space but we just got it about seven months ago - of kind of like the evolution of funeral history, funeral directing starting with the Egyptians and how it evolved and it is all in picture format so that is really neat. A gentleman just ...he gifted it to us.

AB: Do you ever turn down donations if they are not relevant?

GK: If they are not relevant and depending on their condition, if it would cost the museum more to try and restore it - so that it is displayable - just because we are so limited on space unfortunately, we are limited and I have had to turn some stuff down. Right now with the big expansion and a lot of people have called me, I just told them call me back in six months I can't handle your piece at this current moment. Not when I have a semi truck coming with all kinds of stuff, I can't handle any more.

AB: Are any of your exhibits ever "hands on" for the public?

GK: Hands on in the retrospect when they come in they can touch it and stuff like that...?

AB: Or if they can become involved in some kind of workshop? Do you ever have anything like that?

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GK: At this current moment we don't but that is where I want us to go to. I have a couple of workshops that I want get going that kind of allow people to become incorporated with maybe some of the exhibits they see. Like "Day of the Dead" they have the sugar skulls are a big thing and I think it would be really neat to have a little workshop for maybe for the kids, make sugar skulls because then you are learning about the tradition of it and the significance of the sugar skull. The, with the Pope one I want I plan on having little workshops that people can come and it's an exhibit that they saw and you take part of that exhibit and create it into something that... it's a hands on learning experience that they can take away with them type thing. Then I also want to do some grief workshops, bereavement workshops that allow people to come together in one location that realize they are not alone in their grief process but then also have it broken down. I wouldn't put everyone in one room that has different types of grief, or different type of loss because then sometimes it's not relatable and people sometimes think, "Oh you are grieving over your dog. I lost my baby." That type of thing. So you kind of want to have different workshops that allow people to come together as a community and realize that what they are going through is normal and is not affecting just them. That's one of the workshops that I think would be real important for people to take out of this if anything.

AB: How do you gauge public reaction to your exhibits, especially in a funeral museum?

GK: Yeah it's kind of hard. We don't have anything set up right now as in anything permanent. One of the ideas that I came up with was having kind of like a customer comment card that I want to create. One of them is before I start going into some of these

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workshops, mainly the grief ones, I want to get some feedback. If that was available in your area would that be something that you were interested in attending if it was here? A lot of people associate it with churches. You know going to a grief workshop would maybe be held in a church but not everybody belongs to a church and not everybody is comfortable with going to a church to express their feelings. Some of the funeral homes might have available to them but again not everyone wants to just walk into a funeral home for a grief workshop. We tend to only want to go to funeral home for one thing and one thing only, as least as possible. Here, this is an educational, I believe this is an educational, a building to promote education, to promote awareness and I think that they would maybe be a little bit more comfortable here. It's kind of like going to a school almost, you know, it's not... it doesn't have any stigma attached to it as a funeral home would or a church would, it's more neutral and I think it would be more opening. So by comments, do little cards. We do have a sign book, a guest registry book. You know when you come in on the front desk. It is a sign and there is a comment section in there and so I'll go through and I'll read those and I'll see what people say and it's kind of neat. It will say, "Great exhibit. I liked this piece, liked that piece." So I get a little feedback from that. Sometimes I'll just walk in there and I'll talk to guests and I'll ask them what do they think and just get it first hand from them and I listen. I like to listen to the patrons and find out what they like and what they don't like, like that.

AB: Especially with a funeral museum, I'm sure there is a lot of emotional responses to some of your exhibits do you ever find this is the case and how do you deal with things like that?

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GK: If they are emotionally based a lot of times the emotion starts at the front door and they never come in. I have experienced that where some patrons were on a tour group, like a senior tour group and they weren't told they were coming here and they drive in and they realize they came here and then they sit out front. I'll go out there and I'll say, "Would you like to have a seat inside it's hot out here?" "Oh no, no I don't want to go in there. I didn't know we were coming here" and stuff like that. So if it any of them emotionally based it starts at the front door is where the emotions begin and they never really, they never come in and they never come in any... they don't go in. Even though I try and comfort them or I try to tell them... basically we will be there to hold your hand if you want, but not really, but be there for support and they still don't. Sometimes I'll see it with parents they will call ahead of time, "Is it okay for us to bring our kids." They are wanting to see... and I think a lot of it is just people don't really understand what is really behind the walls. They take what... they take it, I guess what society has lead them to believe what a funeral home is about, if they have never really experienced a real funeral, they never have anyone die on them then I think... people will ask "Do you have bodies in there?" "No we don't have bodies in here." Sometimes people think we are funeral home instead of a museum. It is just because, it is just basically ignorance just because they don't know, they haven't been taught, they have never been shown. But we get a lot of educational tours in here, schools, nursing schools a lot come through here. But yeah there is emotion but I think a lot of it is the emotion stops the minute they walk and they see it's just a bunch of cars. Then all of the sudden they go from being scared, you know squimishing down the hall to "Oh wow, this stuff is really neat! Oh look at this. Oh this

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is cool.” Then all of the sudden their whole attitude changes and the emotions go on the wayside.

AB: So do you find there is a great deal of gravity or somberness that accompanies them during certain exhibits?

GK: No.

AB: Now the Pope exhibit is I know a different kind of exhibit. Are you going to be encouraging visitors to maintain a sense of respect as they go through that exhibit or how are you going to deal with that?

GK: Definitely and I think truthfully and I think you might be able to put in your own prospective or your own emotion into this question because I think the exhibit itself, I won't even have to implement any words or any I don't know... I don't think I will have to put forth any instruction of behavior expectations I think the exhibit will command it itself. I think the whole retrospect that it's the Pope, it's a religious affiliation and the whole fact that it is somebody's funeral. Sometimes when people walk into a funeral home it just automatically commands a specific behavior. It commands a specific response. I think, I mean you had felt it yourself when you walked through and I see it in the reactions of people when I do take them through. They are just awe inspired and it commands a behavior that I don't even think I need to direct.

AB: What do you find to be your most popular exhibit during the time you have been here?

GK: Hmmm that's kind of hard... the most popular one that people talk about? I think maybe the Egyptian and a lot of questions about the Pope. I think the Pope is going to supercede them all. The Pope has been the exhibit since I have been here. I think the

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Egyptian and the embalming lab when it was up where two of the most talked about or questioned exhibits. “Well what is the significance?” I think a lot of people get taken back as to why we have an Egyptian exhibit and it is just because they don’t understand the significance of the Egyptians to the funeral industry. Go down to the Museum of Natural Science and their Egyptian exhibit is about “Wow we found something that has been preserved through time and on an archeological dig, we found this.” To them it’s history... to us, it’s our industry. So we have a different sense of value and respect for the Egyptians and why we showcase them in the manner we do in our exhibit.

AB: Do you plan to bring back the embalming lab?

GK: Oh yeah. It’s... right before we went into the Victorian Vignettes between Dr. Holmes there that becomes the embalming lab.

AB: Is it going to be a stationary exhibit or is there going to be somebody in there demonstrating how this works?

GK: Stationary and then there’s a television there that is informational. The television really explains how it all began with the Egyptians and Thomas Holmes and it shows you how the modern day embalming takes place.

AB: Can you tell me a little bit about the demographics of your visitors are they primarily older or younger individuals?

GK: Older. When I first started going to school here I was amazed at how many senior busses came, senior tours, it was primarily senior tours. I was amazed at that and I thought “Gosh” to me I thought “Gosh if I’m an old person I don’t want to go through and know that this is where I’m going to be in a couple years or less.” But very rarely do we see kids, very rarely. But I think now that I’ve been here I’ve been seeing more

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schools as in high school comes here because it is a potential profession, nursing schools because it's anatomical, it's death, it's... in nursing they are going to embrace death, they are going to have death so I think they bring them here for that matter. Then, of course, we have the funeral students that come through here. But primarily it's the student, the younger adult students that we see and the elderly. Then we do have people who are travelers, tourists that come in and we get them from all over. But I think with the museum being opening now to the Popes we are going to get a whole new breed of people. We are going to get a lot of church groups, which we didn't have before. We are going to get a lot of culturally driven, heavy Catholic based population in retrospective, I just learned myself that some Philippines, the Filipinos are heavy Catholics and I didn't know that and I was like "Oh wow now we are going to get a lot of Filipinos and stuff." I think by embracing the fact that the Catholic religion is so wide spread culturally, I think it is going to intertwine very well with the international themed portion of our museum. With that, once I start doing my research and observation of the different types of groups, then I want to cater to the different international groups that come through and I want to showcase some of their customs and traditions off of that. So there is still a lot of growing that I have to do.

AB: Is there any correspondence or collaboration with any other funeral themed museum such as the Museum of Funeral Customs in Springfield, Illinois to name one?

GK: There is we don't do a lot. Every now and then they call us for information. We don't do, we don't really work hand and hand or anything like that. We are not affiliated with them, they are not affiliated with us. They don't have any of our items, we don't have any of theirs. We just kind of... "Oh there's another funeral museum" type thing. I

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just learned of a new one that opened in Holland and they had called, or emailed me and said that “they were opening up a museum and would we send them some of our literature?” Of course it was so that they can properly display some of their items as well, to see how ours were displayed.

AB: I would like to talk a little bit about the funding in the museum. Could you tell me about the Heritage Builder Program and what members can expect to receive from this program?

GK: The Heritage Builder was a program that was pre-me, it was before I ever came. But since I have been on I have learned that is no longer a program of ours that we have. We do have the fundraising program of the bricks and the tiles that are in Heritage Hallway, that is one of our fundraisers. We do plan on creating a new program. I just have not created it at this moment. You know something for members, do a membership type program. I think it was just due to the lack of interested in the Heritage Builder Program and maybe the time that it was needed to dedicate we just didn’t have the staff for it, to really promote it and get it to where it could possibly have been. Then our other fundraising, we have annually a golf tournament every year and that is our main fundraiser.

AB: As director do you find yourself attending several social events in search of additional museum funding?

GK: I have attended one since I have become director. Unfortunately my time is very limited as you can see. But once I get the museum up and going then I will be networking and affiliating myself with a lot of others. I have gone down to the museum district. We are not considered in the district because we are outside the two mile radius,

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but they still...nonetheless they invite us to attend so I have gone to theirs and networking with them. Now a lot of those, I don't know if you are familiar with a lot of the museums down in the district now have put satellite museums up here in the suburbs because they are realizing that a lot of people are not coming downtown anymore. So it looks in the future that we will probably be creating a district, if you will, for the smaller museums up north.

AB: What kind of donations are you seeking?

GK: Any kind of donations, artifact donations and monetary donations. We welcome any type of donation that can be rendered to us. A lot of our donations come from the funeral industry itself from a lot of the businesses and the industries that support the funeral industry, like the casket companies and the embalming fluid companies and stuff like that. Things that we do business for them, they give back unto us type of thing.

AB: How often is the museum visited?

GK: Daily.

AB: How many visitors on a weekly basis would you say?

GK: Probably about anywhere from 100 to 200.

AB: Do you have several volunteers on a regular basis?

GK: No but I have to start working on that.

AB: Do you offer internships here?

GK: Yes we do.

AB: And what do you hope to teach the students who are interning here.

GK: Right now I have to say that the program is not really structured. I just have to say that they have done it in the past and I don't know what they have done for them. I

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would like to maybe find somebody that would be an intern and would know what they would want out of it. It is only because of lack of experience on my part of providing an internship program and the lack of experience in the museums, we really don't have anything structurally set up. It's offered but nothing really established because the demand wasn't there.

AB: What do you think the future holds for the museum?

GK: I think the future is really bright for the museum. I really am... I'm excited. I have a lot of energy and so I think the museum is going to get really big. One of the next goals is to create traveling exhibits and take the Pope exhibit and take a couple of our other exhibits around the world.

AB: What is the most important thing that you want people who have never come to this museum to know?

GK: To know that death is not something to be feared but something to be embraced and that it is a tradition, it is a custom and it should be celebrated by everybody.

AB: What are some of the changes you would like to make to the Funeral Museum, if any?

GK: I think some of the main changes are perception of who we are and what we represent. I want to change our perception to the public.

AB: Do you think that will be accomplished more through the way you market the museum...?

GK: The way that it is marketed and I think by the way people will be able to spread their emotional response when they leave here. I think it is going to be more a word of mouth type of thing and that's the way... the funeral industry is very, very... it's kind of

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a tricky thing. You have to...you can't really advertise the way a normal person would advertise. It's more of a word of mouth and the museum kind of takes the same structure and it's all out of respect.

AB: What do you find is the most rewarding about being the director here?

GK: Being able to create new exhibits and really let people know that I don't know, that death is normal, death is natural, death is okay. I have a very positive outlook and aspect on it and I think that it is healthy for people to see... that is the most rewarding thing to know what I could potentially do with this to the public, for the public. I think that is the most exciting thing.

AB: I'd like to know a little about you and your background. Can you tell me a little bit about your background and what first sparked your interest in the museum field?

GK: Well I never really had an interest in the museum field. It just kind of presented itself to me. My interest was always with the dead and the dying. I was in the military and I was in the medical field for 19 years and got out of the military to change my profession because, just as it was, I was stationed in Germany I had the privilege of being able to take care of families when their family member passed away. They told me that I was really good at it, that I should pursue it and I embraced it and grew with it and got out and became a funeral director. They needed hanging lights in the museum one day. So I said, "Okay I'll help, I'm not afraid of heights" and got up on the scaffolding and was helping hang lights and before I knew it I had done the Pope's head for my restorative art project in school and it was our final project for... it was our final for Restorative Art and I chose John Paul II because it was his year of death and he was well known and if people couldn't recognize him through my work, recreating him then I

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didn't do my job because I want my family members... I want them to be able to recognize their loved one. So I chose John Paul II because I would have a vast audience to be able to tell me whether I did a good job or not. It was my first affiliation, I did a lot of research on Pope John Paul II so I could get his facial features exact and then this Pope exhibit came up and I was working with Mr. Beddicer and he said, "Hey I heard Pope is " I would love to help you. Because I had a sparked interest in it already and it just kind of grew from there. Before we knew it the project became bigger than life and he needed a director to come in and help and he had already known my work ethics and he had seen what I could do and he said, "You'd be great for the job." And here I am. So...

AB: How do you feel about being the Director of a Funeral Museum?

GK: I feel honored. I feel honored, I feel excited. It's got a lot of potential and a lot of rewards. Because I am a funeral director and to be able to showcase tradition and I'm artistic. So I get to be... create exhibits to show the world and at the same time I get to hold on to the tradition of the death and dying that I hold true to my heart.

AB: Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview?

GK: No I think we've pretty much covered it all. We did a good job hu?

AB: Well thank you so much.

GK: You're welcome.

End of Interview