

ANATOMY OF THE STORY: NARRATIVES OF MORTUARY SCIENCE  
LEARNERS AND GRADUATES

by

José Luis Moreno, M.A.

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Committee Members:

Clarena Larrotta, Chair

Jon Lasser

Jovita M. Ross-Gordon

Megan L. Trad

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## **DEDICATION**

A mi familia,  
por acompañarme en esta jornada  
llamada aprendizaje.  
¡Sí pudimos!  
Son y seguirán siendo mi fuente de inspiración.

*Me es grato darles a conocer  
Las señales y maravillas que  
El Dios Altísimo ha realizado en mi favor.*

Daniel 4:2 (NVI)

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## **ABSTRACT**

Using the anatomy of the story as a framework (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010), this qualitative study reports the narratives of nine Mortuary Science learners and graduates from an accredited two-year Mortuary Science program in Texas. The research questions are: (1) What can we learn from the narratives of Mortuary Science learners and graduates? (2) What are the learning journeys of nine individuals currently enrolled or graduated from an accredited two-year Mortuary Science program? (3) What challenges and successes have they experienced during their residence in the program, their internship, and the process of obtaining a license? Data collected for the study include pláticas (conversational interviews), artifacts, documents, and the researcher's analytic journal. Data analysis was multilayered and included several phases. First, MAXQDA software served to code the data using a priory codes (navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs) as the study framework. Next, the coded data were retrieved into a separate Word document to code it again for triangulation purposes. Narrative analysis techniques (story as data collection and data analysis) were at the center of reporting study findings to be faithful to storytelling and the anatomy of the story framework.

This dissertation is divided into four main chapters plus Appendix. Chapter I, Anatomy of the story, presents the research questions and the guidelines for the anatomy of the story to guide the reader on what to expect in this dissertation. Chapter II, Visualizing the main characters of the story, provides a rich description of the study

participants—the navel. Chapter III, The main elements of the story, presents the heart, mind, hands, and legs of the story in separate sections. Chapter IV, Stories harvested for new beginnings, discusses the main learning product of analyzing the collective story of learners and graduates. The Appendix section of the dissertation includes important pieces explaining the elements that are expected in a traditional dissertation such as relevant literature and overall study design.

Using the human anatomy as a metaphor, study findings are presented through navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs. The study participants represent the navel. A rich description of nine Mortuary Science learners and graduates and their career journey is provided. The heart represents the values that professionals in Mortuary Science seek to instilled in learners and practitioners: empathy, care and respect for the dead, investment and satisfaction with a job well done, confidence, and eagerness to learn. The mind speaks to the critical analysis of the story to dismantle stereotypes held by learners (e.g., performing autopsies and minimum interaction with surviving relatives). The hands mold ideas and values to develop a new identity for the individuals involved. Here the participants identified the need for team development, relational learning, and on-the-job training. Finally, the legs provide mobility to the story to create an impact beyond the story teller and move people to action. This metaphor symbolizes the eagerness and good disposition of the study participants to create legacy to pave the road for the next generation of Mortuary Science professionals. Finally, recommendations for practice, tensions and challenges, ideas for future research, and concluding thoughts are provided.

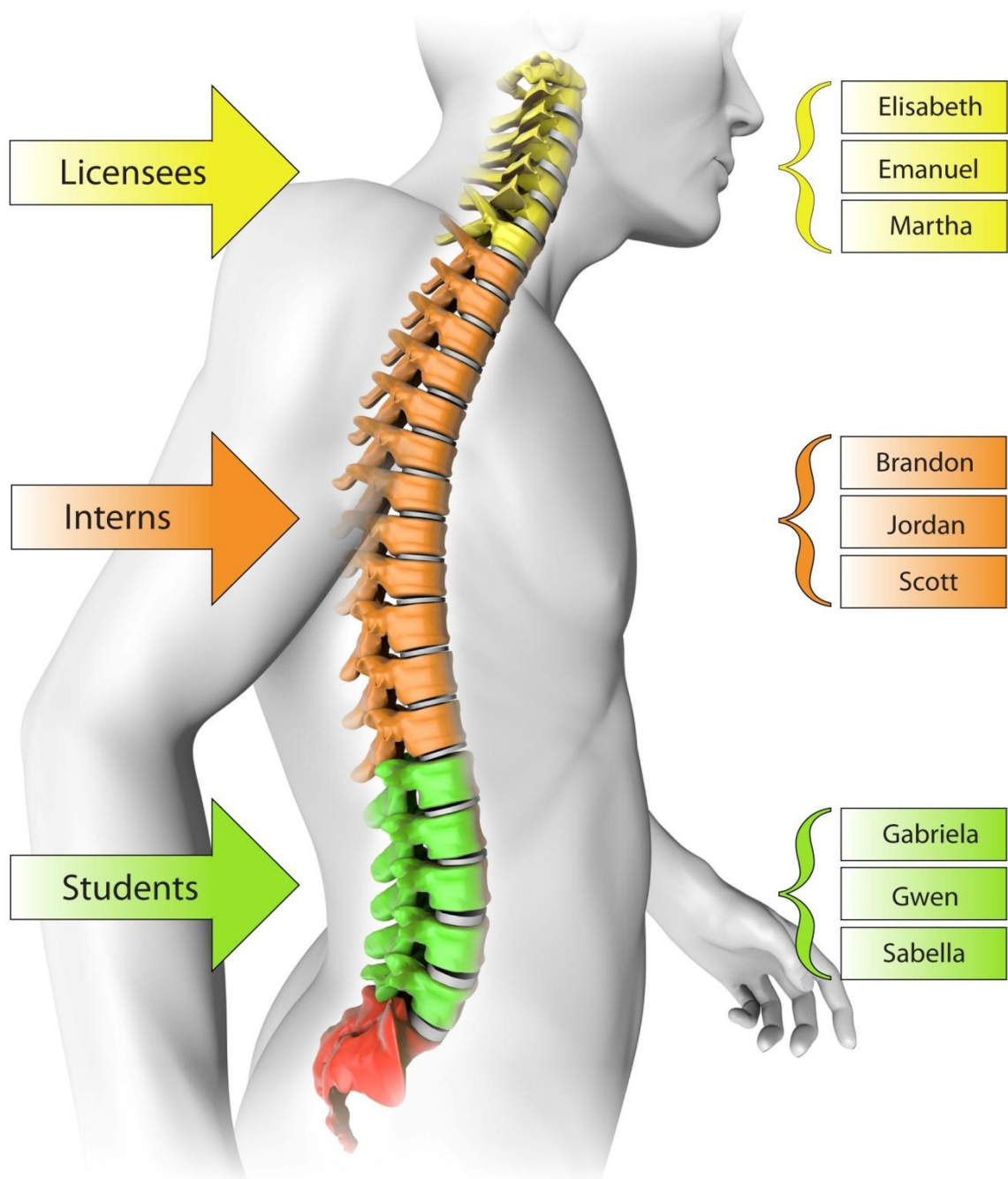
# CHAPTER I

## ANATOMY OF THE STORY

Mortuary Science learners become involved with the field of anatomy to gain knowledge about the structure of the human body. Although it is possible to study anatomical structures individually, they are all related. That is, their function depends on the assistance of other structures of the human body. Therefore, utilizing the metaphor of the *anatomy of the story* as described by Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) is appropriate to the field of Mortuary Science; these authors explained that the story should have navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs.

Conversely, the vertebral column depicts the structural organization among students, interns, and licensees in the Mortuary Science program (see Figure 1). The vertebral column represents the axial support of the story. This support must be extended throughout the different stages of this career and depends directly on the interaction and flexibility of all the parties involved—the vertebrae. The lack of interaction, communication, and cooperation among students, interns, and licensees could result in an abnormal vertebral structure producing a restricted mobility and an atrophic growth in the Mortuary Science field.





*Figure 1. The Vertebral Column of the Study*

Funeral directors learn early in their careers how to memorialize the deceased from the stories told by the bereaved while making funeral arrangements. These stories allow funeral directors to create a meaningful funeral service for the surviving relatives and those attending the funeral ceremony. It is also through these stories that most of the obituary notices are published to recognize that a death has occurred and to notify relatives and friends about the plans to honor the life of the person who has died. Based on this familiarity with storytelling, this study made use of *harvesting the story* (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, p. 93) as a way to create a common narrative about the experiences of Mortuary Science learners and graduates. Harvesting the story served as a tool to share knowledge with those currently involved in the field of Mortuary Science and those considering Mortuary Science as a career.

The story serves as a method for analysis and as a tool for promoting change (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). In this study, story as a method for analysis allowed the researcher to gain understanding about the participants' experiences and their journey in the Mortuary Science field. Story as a tool for promoting change provided voice to the participants and created a third space for them to be reflective and imagine a better future. As previously stated, the story should have navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). Using anatomy as a metaphor, the *navel* symbolizes the fundamental component of the story while the *heart* represents the passion of the protagonists that motivated them to be part of the narrative. The critical analysis of the story takes place in the *mind* that provokes the disruption of stereotypes among participants. The hands of the story mold ideas and values to develop a new identity for the characters involved. Finally, the legs provide

mobility to the story to create an impact beyond the story teller and move people to action.

Using pseudonyms, the key informants in this case study included three current students enrolled in their third or fourth semester (Gabriela, Gwen, and Sabella), three serving their internship and in the process of obtaining a license as funeral directors and embalmers (Brandon, Jordan, and Scott), and three who graduated within the past two years, are currently licensed, and are practicing as funeral directors and embalmers (Elisabeth, Emanuel, and Martha). All the participants combined represent the three stages of a career in Mortuary Science. They tell the collective story that looks at the heart, mind, hands, and legs of the mortuary field.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to describe the journey of Mortuary Science learners and graduates to provide insight into the field. The study provides a rich picture of the learners and graduates and the type of learning that is taking place during their residence in the program, their participation in internship, and the processes of obtaining licensure. The main goal is to gain a deeper understanding of their learning experiences so as to allow stakeholders (e.g., accrediting and licensing agencies), faculty, graduates, and learners to envision possible learning opportunities to promote change. The analysis of the participants' narratives adds to the literature in Mortuary Science and serves as an opportunity for educators to get a better understanding of the status of the field.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study documents the narratives of Mortuary Science learners and graduates guided by the process of harvesting the story (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010).

Study participants were nine Mortuary Science learners and graduates from an accredited two-year Mortuary Science program in Texas (see Figure 1). The research questions guiding the study included:

1. What can we learn from the narratives of Mortuary Science learners and graduates?
2. What are the learning journeys of nine individuals currently enrolled or graduated from an accredited two-year Mortuary Science program?
3. What challenges and successes have they experienced during their residence in the program, their internship, and the process of obtaining a license?

### **Mortuary Science Curriculum**

The curriculum for students pursuing a career in funeral service is outlined by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE). Students achieving the standards for the curriculum are conferred the Associate in Applied Science in Mortuary Science degree by the college and are eligible for state examination by the Texas Funeral Service Commission (TFSC), the National Board Exam (NBE) by the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards (ICFSEB), and provisional licensure registration with the state (TOC, Chapter 651.302-303). The educational institutions must offer not less than 60 semester hours or 90 quarter credits consisting of at least 25% of general education, non-technical courses (ABFSE, October 2013, p. 9-6). However, the manner of delivery of instruction is left to the discretion of the accredited institution.

Three important stages in the Mortuary Science Program are defined by the Texas Occupation Code (TOC), Chapter 651 as described within the governing laws of the Texas Funeral Service Commission (The Commission).

**Residence in the Program**

A Mortuary Science student refers to the individual that declares Mortuary Science as his or her major course of study. The student should be enrolled in courses covering the scientific, professional, and practical aspects of Mortuary Science. Consideration is given to accepted practices of the care, preparation for burial or other disposition of a dead human body.

**Internship (Provisional License Program)**

A provisional license holder means a person who holds a provisional license issued by the Commission and is engaged in learning the practice of funeral directing or embalming under the instruction, direction, and personal supervision of a funeral director or embalmer. As of the time of the study, the internship period must be at least twelve consecutive months but not more than twenty-four consecutive months. The Texas Funeral Service Commission issues a provisional license to practice funeral directing and/or embalming if the intern is at least 18 years of age, enrolled or has graduated from an accredited school or college of Mortuary Science, employed by a funeral establishment or commercial embalming facility, and agree to a criminal background check before submitting an application for a license (TOC, Chapter 651.302).

**Licensure**

This stage includes the two types of licenses (e.g., funeral director, embalmer) recognized by the State of Texas in the field of Mortuary Science. A student seeking a dual license should complete the requirements for an associate degree in Mortuary Science. However, the Mortuary Science schools in Texas also offer a certificate program for those students who want to limit their practice only to funeral directing.

Dual licensees have the option to practice funeral directing, embalming, or both. Thus, the Texas Occupations Code provides a clear definition for each license:

1. “Embalmer means a person licensed under this chapter who for compensation, wholly or partly, disinfects or preserves a dead human body by using chemical substances, fluids, or gases, including by introducing those substances, fluids, or gases into the body by vascular or hypodermic injection or direct application into the organs or cavities to . . . preserve a dead human body or to restore body tissues and structures” (TOC, Chapter 651.001(4), p. 1).
2. “Funeral director means a person licensed under this chapter who engages in for compensation, or represents to the public as being engaged in for compensation, the preparation, other than by embalming, of a dead human body for burial or other disposition” (TOC, Chapter 651.001(6), pp. 1-2).

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

Following the guidelines suggested by the work of Guajardo and Guajardo (2010; 2016), this dissertation focuses on harvesting the story of Mortuary Science learners and graduates. Therefore, this book is divided into four main chapters. **Chapter I**, *Anatomy of the story*, sets the tone for the story introducing the research questions and the guidelines for harvesting the story. **Chapter II**, *Visualizing the main characters of the story*, provides a picture of the main characters of the story—the navel. The stories of the nine study participants are presented using the following structure: a visual map of their individual journey, an account of their story, a discussion of an artifact they selected to talk about their connection to the Mortuary Science field. A summary highlighting their profiles also appears after presenting each group of participants (i.e., students, interns,

licensees). **Chapter III**, *The main elements of the story*, presents the heart, mind, hands, and legs of the story in separate sections. Each of these sections includes a description of the part of the story to be discussed followed by an anatomical illustration with quotes taken from the participants' narratives. Next, a table presents the emergent themes and these are subsequently expanded with narratives obtained from individual and group *pláticas* with the study participants. These vignettes detail the experiences of the participants during their journeys as learners and graduates aiming to obtain licensure as funeral directors and embalmers. At the end of each section a visual map is presented to summarize the emergent themes and focus the section discussion. **Chapter IV**, *Stories harvested for new beginnings*, discusses the main learning product of harvesting the collective story of learners and graduates. This part also presents a discussion about recommendations for practice, tensions and challenges related to the study, ideas for future research, and concluding thoughts.

In line with the concept of the inverted dissertation (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), the **Appendix** section includes important pieces portraying the elements that are expected in a traditional dissertation (e.g., relevant literature, methods). In an effort to present the dissertation findings using the guidelines of harvesting the story framework, it was important to start telling the stories of the participants and presenting the parts of the story (navel, mind, heart, hands, and legs) without delay. However, the literature providing a context for the dissertation and the overall study design are fundamental pieces in explaining how the data were collected and analyzed. Therefore, the appendix section of this dissertation includes the following elements: Appendix A, Relevant literature, presents a brief history of the Mortuary Science field, seminal works in

Mortuary Science, contemporary dissertations, adult learning theory relevant to the study, and gap in the literature. Appendix B, Curriculum overview, outlines the different curriculum areas, the minimum number of credit hours, and the content areas mandated by the American Board of Funeral Service Education. Appendix C, Methods and overall study design, presents relevant elements of the study methodology such as statement of the problem, researcher's roles, study setting and participants, data collection and analysis, developmental questions for anatomy of the story, ethical considerations, and delimitations. Appendix D, Researcher's personal and professional journey, presents the personal and professional story of the researcher and his journey in Mortuary Science. Appendix E, Relevant terms, provides explanation of important jargon related to Mortuary Science. Appendix F, presents the consent provided to study participants to obtain their permission to participate in research. Appendix G, Sample topics for individual *pláticas*, outlines the topics and structure for individual conversations with the participants. Appendix H, Sample topics for group conversation, presents the protocol used for organizing the group conversation held with the participants.



**CHAPTER II**  
**VISUALIZING THE MAIN CHARACTERS OF THE STORY**

**The Navel**



*Figure 2. Mortuary Science Learners as the Navel of the Story*

The *navel* represents the central component that feeds and balances the story. The core message and the questions that emerge from the story are elements that spring from the navel and are essential for developing the core purpose of the story (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). For this qualitative case study the central component begins with the narratives of each of the participants and the lessons learned from their personal experiences as Mortuary Science learners and graduates.

The picture of the learners working as a team during one of their anatomy laboratory sessions (see Figure 2) represents the beginning of their journey in the field of Mortuary Science. This picture aims to acknowledge that without them, the main characters, there is no story. Without students, Mortuary Science programs will not exist, and I would not have the central component that feeds this narrative research. Mortuary Science learners and graduates are the center of this dissertation that aims to provide a venue for them to share their stories. The participants' journeys are grouped into stages to show the sequence of events to be completed by an individual wishing to become a licensed funeral director and embalmer.

The narrative begins by introducing the participants in their respective groups (i.e., students, interns, licensees). Then, a graphic appears to map out the journey of each individual and presents chronological events related to their involvement in the Mortuary Science field. In addition, during the individual *pláticas* (conversations), the study participants were asked to bring an artifact that highlighted specific events in their journey and represented their involvement in Mortuary Science as a career. The use of these artifacts creates a visual for the readers and helps them make connections to the learning journeys, challenges, and successes of the Mortuary Science learners and

graduates participating in the study. Finally, I provide verbatim pieces of data obtained from both *pláticas* and information shared by the participants during the group conversation session. As stated by Guajardo and colleagues (2016) “The stories originating from first personal point view are critical to the development of the self” (p. 66). Each participant’s account is presented in first person to allow the reader to visualize their journey becoming a funeral director and embalmer. By retelling the participants’ stories, more than providing voice to their experiences, this exercise provided them with an opportunity to claim ownership of the lived experiences (Guajardo et. al., 2016); the study created a space for teaching and learning, reimagining the future, and building community within the profession.

## **Mortuary Science Students as the Navel of the Story**

This section presents the career journey of three of the study participants who, at the time when the study was implemented, were enrolled in their third or fourth semesters in Mortuary Science. Table 1 serves as a quick reference to the first group of study participants (Gabriela, Gwen, and Sabella), and presents their status as students in Mortuary Science and their motivation to seek a career in this field. The color of the table corresponds to the color assigned to each group in the vertebral column (see Figure 1). Participants are listed in alphabetical order and all the names are pseudonyms.

Table 1

### *Profiles of Three Students*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Motivation Seeking Mortuary Science</b>
Gabriela	20 +	Female	Change of major Realizing that this career was a challenging and rigorous program.
Gwen	60 +	Female	Desire to help others Previous deaths in the family
Sabella	35 +	Female	Funeral involvement through church choir

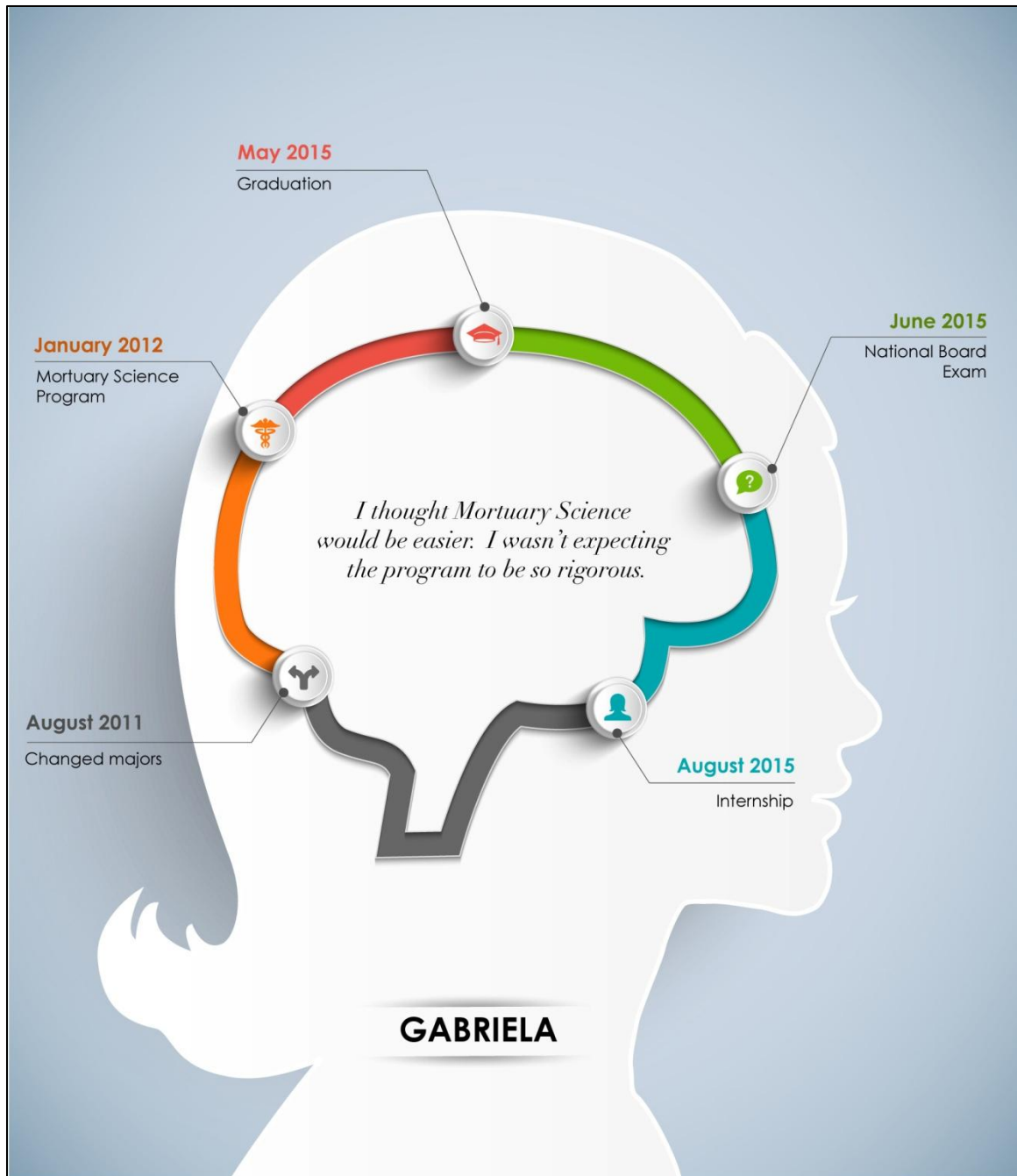


Figure 3. Map of Gabriela's Journey

## **Gabriela**

*I am the youngest of three kids. My parents are both from Puerto Rico; so I grew up with bilingual parents. I'm the only girl. I have two older brothers and that kind of changed the way I am. I've been in Texas most of my life. We were in Florida for a few years, but I was really young and I don't remember much about that period of my life. Since then I've been in Texas and we have stayed in the same house even though my dad was in the Army. He did all the moving, and we stayed in the same place.*

*At the present time I am enrolled in the fourth semester of Mortuary Science and employed part-time as a funeral assistant at a local funeral home. After graduation I am looking forward to begin my internship period, and if possible I would like continue working in the same funeral home as a full-time employee (see Figure 3). As a personal goal I plan to complete the required internship case work within the minimum allocated time of twelve consecutive months and become a licensed funeral director and embalmer.*



*Figure 4. Gabriela's Artifact: Make-up Brush*

*My artifact is a make-up brush which represents one of the reasons I selected Mortuary Science as a field of study [see Figure 4]. When I first considered Mortuary*

*Science as a career, I thought it was more on cosmetizing. I believed funeral directors' and embalmers' sole responsibility was to apply make-up on the decedents and make them presentable to the bereaved family. Of course that was a misconception from my part! I don't even know where I got that idea. I guess it was from a movie that I saw where the actors were applying make-up to a dead person, but I am not positive about it. One thing that I am certain about is that I immediately told myself, "Oh that's it, that's how they do it! I can do that!" Now I know that there's a lot more that goes into the job than I originally thought, but not in the bad way. So far, I like everything.*

*When people ask me how I got involved in Mortuary Science, I normally reply that I needed to graduate quickly because I had been wasting my time with another degree. Even when I had gotten close, more than half way to getting a bachelor's, I stopped there. A degree in Mortuary Science would take two years and that appealed to me. It was really what I wanted, so I went online and I Googled for degrees that I could finish quickly. During my search Mortuary Science came-up as an option. It sounded interesting and really cool and I decided to try it out. In addition, I discovered that the money wouldn't be horrible at the end. The Mortuary Science program is rigorous and has high expectations for us. The first semester, I found out about the amount of work I had to do and I wanted to quit. I took four classes and only ended up passing one of them. So at the end of the semester I questioned myself "What am I doing here?" I should just go back to what I was doing before, but later I thought about it and I said, "You know what? I can't let one bad semester be the reason I don't continue." Even when it was not what I initially had in mind, I decided I was going to finish the program. I decided to take the challenge and stay enrolled.*

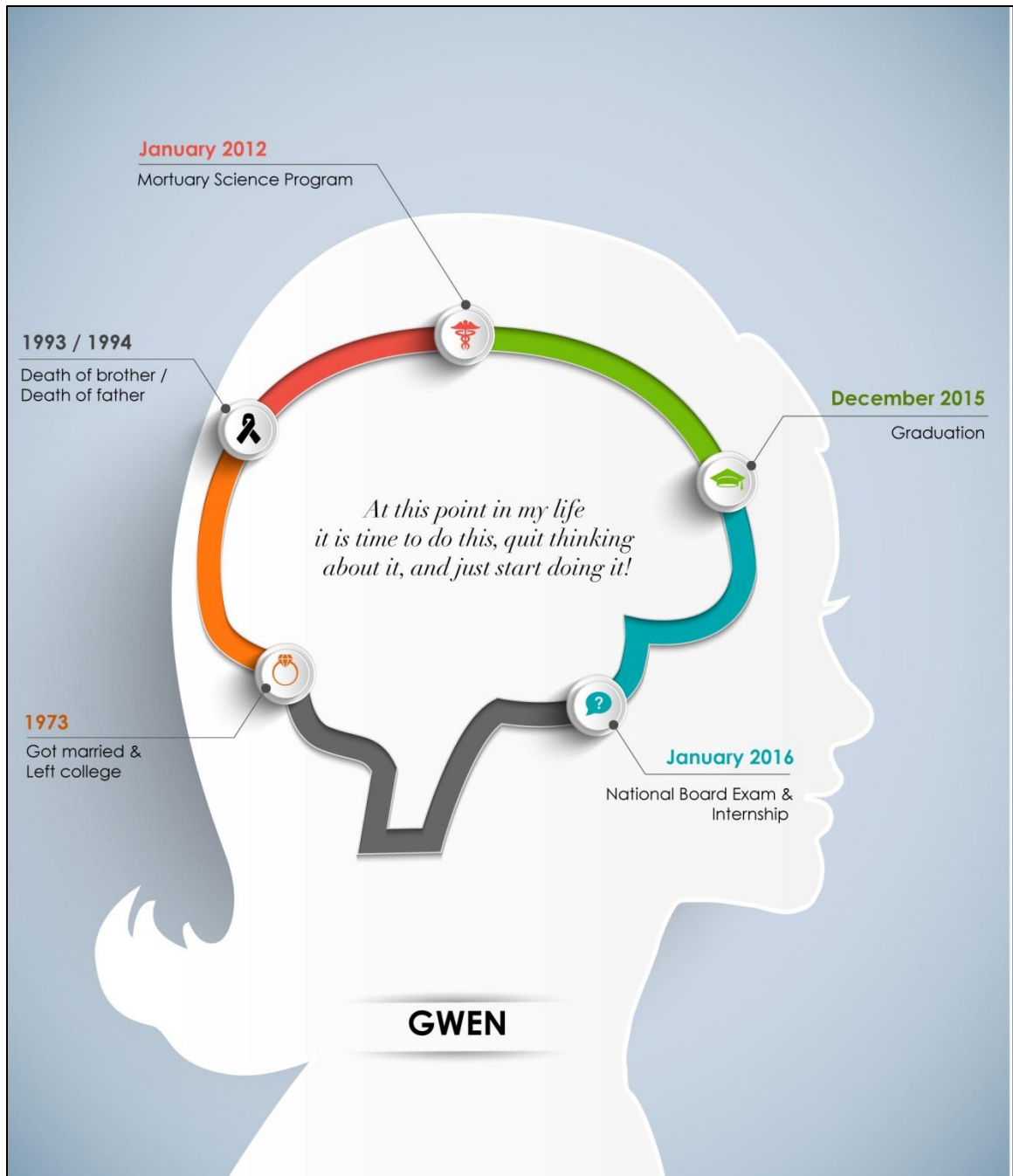


Figure 5. Map of Gwen's Journey



## **Gwen**

*I was born on an Air Force Base in Florida. My family moved around frequently due to my father's commitment to the Air Force. Furthermore, I married someone who joined the Air Force just a couple of months before we got married. We have been married for almost 42 years now and moved around a lot. I actually came to this college in 1973 [see Figure 5]. I only stayed for about a semester and a half, taking typing and shorthand classes. As a result of my husband's enlistment with the Air Force, we moved around and I did not get a chance to come back until now. Currently, I am in my third semester in the Mortuary Science program. My aspiration to become a funeral director and embalmer has been present for over twenty years. However, I had to place my career goals on hold until I finished raising my children. Now I am a part-time student, and I would like to keep that type of schedule until I graduate. I have decided to finish all these courses at my own pace and then seek employment at a funeral home to begin my internship caseload. One of the most difficult parts after I decided to come back to college is to fulfill the expectations that others have about me. Many of my friends and relatives think I should be taking more classes, maybe four or five courses each semester. I know myself; I know I am not up for that. I feel I have to do what works for me.*

*My desire to become a funeral director and embalmer began after experiencing the tragic death of my brother and the subsequent demise of my father. These experiences taught me many life lessons and confirmed my aspiration of helping bereaved families. I feel that I know what it feels like to be on the other side of the desk in a funeral home. That's why I feel I have something to offer to other bereaved families.*

*My artifacts consist of two photographs of my deceased relatives [see Figures 6 and 7] and speak to the reason I selected Mortuary Science as a career.*



*Figure 6. Gwen's Brother*



*Figure 7. Gwen's Father*

*My brother died in 1993. He was electrocuted by a high voltage power line. The picture I shared with you is great! It shows how happy he was. He was a surveyor; unfortunately, the metal pole that he was holding didn't make actual ground contact. It was a morning when the humidity was very high and the power arc crossed from the voltage line to the metal pole that he was using to survey.*

*The other one is a photo of my dad. He passed away from liver cancer a year and a half later, in the middle of 1994. My dad grew up on a farm and this picture shows how he really was. He got a pan of green beans, long green beans; he's shelling beans, the way he used to do growing up and he's just happy doing it. These are two really strong men in my life; they mean a great deal to me and are the reason I'm enrolled in Mortuary Science. When my family and I lost both of them we were assisted by a really good funeral director that helped us during the funeral arrangements. Now I feel like I could help someone else who is going through a similar situation.*

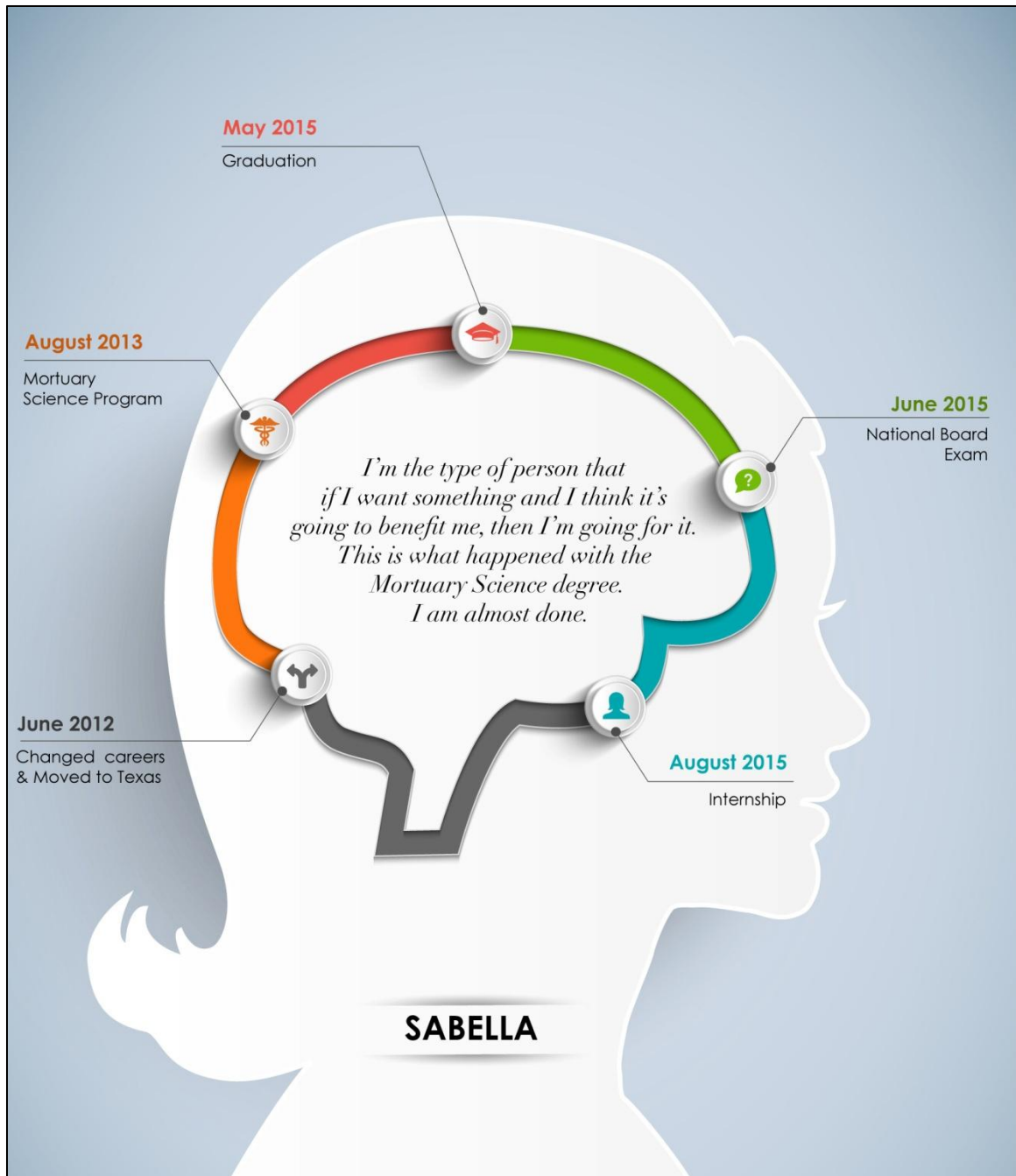


Figure 8. Map of Sabella's Journey

## **Sabella**

*I grew up in Louisiana and my culture is African-American or, as I say, Black. I have an associate degree as a surgical technician. After completing the associate I went back to school to pursue a nursing degree, but I decided not to continue because I didn't like it. Most people who were in the surgical tech field consider that the next step would be nursing, but personally the nursing field wasn't fulfilling to me, so I decided to quit and search for something else. Ever since I was around twelve years old I became interested in Mortuary Science, but I didn't want to seem weird and I took a different education path... and put off my desire to explore an education in funeral service. As I grew older, I changed my way of thinking, and now I really don't care how people perceive me. I think the public in general is fearful of the unknown, but Mortuary Science is an occupation just like any other. It just takes a special person to do it.*

*Now after commuting to the Mortuary Science program for almost two years I am almost ready to graduate [see Figure 8]. My immediate goal after graduation is to begin my internship with the funeral home where I've been training while attending college. For the duration of the program I've been alternating between my clinical training requirements and my part-time job as a surgical technician. I am now ready to have free time to spend with my husband and the rest of the family.*

*I chose to bring a choir gown as my artifact [see Figure 9]; it reminds me that I'm committed and capable of doing anything that I set as a goal. As a member of the church choir I was exposed to funeral services at an early age. I had the opportunity to sing during funeral services for church members and for other people that I knew. My*

*curiosity about the process involved in the preparation of those individuals for a public viewing motivated me to seek a career as a funeral director and embalmer.*



*Figure 9. Sabella's Artifact: Choir Gown*

*The black choir robe reminds me of those Saturdays when we went to church and helped the grieving family celebrate the life of their loved one. Our goal was to uplift the family in their time of need. We would always sing songs that could comfort them. I never forget that as a choir member my job was to uplift the grieving family and provide ministry through music. When the church choir sang in a funeral service, we all sang from the heart. We wished that the surviving relatives could feel that warm, care, and sympathy that we were offering them. I plan to keep this choir robe as long as I can. Looking at it reminds me of where I came from and where I'm going. I will definitely keep it.*

To summarize, this section described the journey of Gabriela, Gwen, and Sabella as Mortuary Science students. These study participants provided information about how they became involved in the program and their motivation to become funeral directors and embalmers. The findings obtained during our conversations were compared to the national statistics provided annually by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE). The ABFSE is the sole accrediting agency in funeral service and Mortuary Science education and provides an annual directory identifying all accredited programs or institutions. This directory also includes the demographic changes experienced by each of its accredited programs. According to the 2013 directory, over the past few generations there have been significant changes in the profiles of both the institutions offering funeral service education and the students studying to become funeral directors and embalmers. The ABFSE (2013) informs that two generations ago, funeral service education was offered almost exclusively by private institutions and for the most part the students were sons of funeral home owners. Over 90% of the students were White. Currently White students make up approximately 75% of the mortuary student population, while African Americans are 15%. Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans compose 6% and 2% identify themselves as from other ethnic backgrounds. However, as a college designated as a Hispanic-serving institution, the population of the study setting differs in the ethnicity representation from the above demographic distribution of Mortuary Science learners in the United States. This study included three African Americans (33.3%), four Hispanics (44.4%), and two Whites (22.2%). Prior to their enrollment in a Mortuary Science program the participants did not have a consanguine relationship with a funeral director/embalmer and had no

employment history in a funeral home. Gabriela came into the field without previous experience and having a misconception about the duties and responsibilities of funeral directors and embalmers. On the other hand, Gwen's exposure to the field is based on previous experience with the death of two family members. Lastly, Sabella's narrative demonstrates that her exposure to Mortuary Science was limited to participation in the church choir during funeral services. Prior to her enrollment in Mortuary Science she had never been involved in the care and preparation of a dead human body.



## Mortuary Science Interns

This section presents the career journey of the second group of study participants. The group was composed of three individuals, Brandon, Jordan, and Scott, who at the time when the study was implemented had begun their internship period. As interns or provisional licensees, these participants were all working under the direct instruction and supervision of a funeral director or embalmer. Their places of employment varied, to include a family-owned funeral home, a large conglomerate of funeral homes, and an embalming care center. Furthermore, these participants were also at different stages in completing their internship period. Table 2 presents the three interns indicating their motivation to seek a career in Mortuary Science.

Table 2

### *Profiles of Three Interns*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Motivation Seeking Mortuary Science
Brandon	25 +	Male	Curiosity Hands-on aspect
Jordan	20 +	Male	Interest in the field since high school Motivation by cousin
Scott	25 +	Male	Inspired by the work of a funeral director



Figure 10. Map of Brandon's Journey

## **Brandon**

*I would like to start by saying that I am a graduate of the Mortuary Science program and currently completing the required internship casework to obtain my license as an embalmer [see Figure 10]. I was born in Riverside, California and lived there until I was around four years old. My stepfather was in the Air Force, so I got to see a little bit of the world. I have lived in Guam, Italy, and in several states of the United States. We spent a few years in Idaho, enough to consider it my home state. It was in Idaho where I grew up and where I got into a lot of trouble, but had a lot of fun as well. From the age of 15, I was out of my parents' house. I obtained my GED at 15, the high school equivalency at 16, but I didn't have additional school work until I got in the Mortuary Science program at the age of 29 years old. I'd been roaming around several states, but as an adult I moved to Tennessee, where I met my wife and started my own adult life. Later, I decided to join the Army in Las Vegas, but things fell through with them and I ended up in Texas. I tried to enroll in college in a Radiology Tech program, but since I had been out of school for a long time it became hard to continue. Afterwards, I signed up for the Mortuary Science program and discovered that it was a rough degree. It took me a little longer to graduate than most conventional students because I had a family to support and the responsibilities of a full-time job. Many of the recent high school graduates came into the program and they were out before I was done. It's just because they didn't have as much on their plate, so they were able to take more courses each semester. If that wasn't enough, I have to add that I hadn't been in school since I was 16, and there were several prerequisites to get out of the way. Those remedial courses added time to the degree plan and became one of the main reasons for the delayed graduation.*

*It took me almost four years to complete a two-year program. I had extra academic requirements plus I didn't take the recommended full course load. I would take a few courses here and there and skipped every summer to spend with my family. For me, it was trying to find time for college and work and struggling to find time to spend with the family, especially a new family that was just blossoming. I was getting acclimated to being a dad. It was a difficult situation because when I was in the classroom all I was thinking about was getting home. Then, I was at work and all I was thinking about was getting to school. Every time I was in one place I was thinking about the responsibilities I had in other places. It was tough; it really was. In order to work for me, I ended up taking night shifts, 12-hour overnight shifts. I would get off work and go straight to school. That was a little difficult at first. Luckily, the faculty members here always combined their teaching with stories about their own professional experience. It was a plus having professors that were funeral directors and embalmers that teach from experience than just go through the lectures. Those stories motivated me and helped me understand the application of the learned material. Above all, the life stories kept me awake during class.*

*When I finally graduated, a new story began with the internship program. I had a little bit of a criminal history. Consequently in order to get into the provisional program there were a few hoops that I had to jump through. I had to get all of the paperwork from everything that I had done in my life and send it to The Funeral Service Commission. The commissioners reviewed my case, and they scheduled a date for me to appear before them. The commissioners went over everything; I seriously believe this is one of the most strenuous situations I've ever been through in my life. The fact is that they had so much*

*pull over the future in my Mortuary Science career. I don't even know how to describe that experience. I was one of the last petitioners to go before the commissioners. As the last person I observed the success or the failure of every single individual before me. I saw some petitioners that did not get the approval of the commissioners to move forward with their vocation as funeral directors and embalmers. I could see either anger or devastation in their faces, and I was wondering about the outcome of my case. Luckily, the commissioners were fine with the documents I presented for their review. They approved my case; otherwise I wouldn't be able to begin my internship period. After all these events, I began the internship, but once again due to family obligations and full-time job responsibilities at the embalming care center, I decided not to pursue simultaneous licensure as a funeral director and embalmer. Once I finish my embalming internship I plan to seek employment at a funeral home and begin to complete the required internship caseload to obtain my license as a funeral director. I am a proud father of three children, and my family takes priority over my education and professional life. My current educational goals are to transfer to a university to obtain a baccalaureate degree as well as to assist my wife in completing her college education.*

*I decided to bring a custom-made pocket watch as my artifact [see Figure 11]. This was a special gift from my wife upon graduation from the Mortuary Science program. The watch itself doesn't really relate to the Mortuary Science field, it was the reason behind the gift. This is a unique watch; she picked the hands, the gears and all the materials to make the gears, the actual casing, and the metal frame. She picked each individual piece. Sometimes I think that she could just obtain it from any store. It was much easier, but now I know that she wanted something special for me that reflected my*

*style and the uniqueness of our family situation. I spent time in college obtaining this degree, but I have to acknowledge that without the time that she dedicated to support me during the achievement of my academic goals I will not be here.*



*Figure 11. Brandon's Artifact: Custom-Made Pocket Watch*

*I realize that my wife decided to give me a custom-made pocket watch as a reminder of the time that I had invested in the program and for everything that I've done for her and our children. She feels that I've allocated my time wisely between my education and family responsibilities. I never perceived what I do for my family as anything really significant, but to her it means a lot. I always conduct myself the way I do because I'm supposed to take care of my family. I have children and I take care of them. I have her and I will be there for her. It has always been a natural reaction to do what I do.*

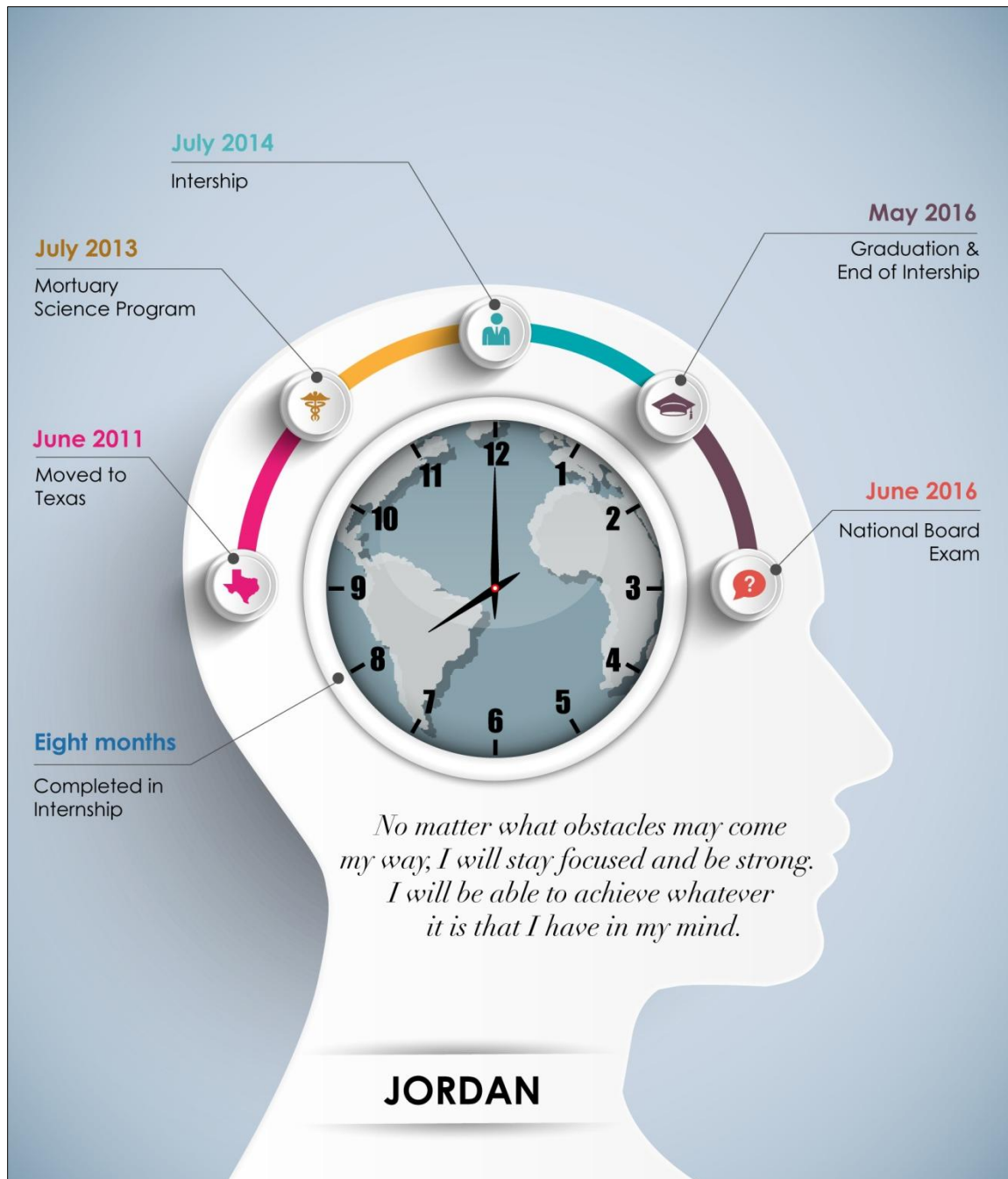


Figure 12. Map of Jordan's Journey

## **Jordan**

*I am from Arkansas. The place where I grew up is very small; it is a rural area with lots of farm animals. When I moved here it was a big change from my hometown. It was not an easy transition, and it took me a while to get used to the new environment. Back home we move at a slow pace. We don't have traffic; we don't even have stop lights. Probably what I still miss the most is being able to see my family on a daily basis, but other than that I don't regret moving. When I moved here to pursue a career in Mortuary Science, I didn't know exactly what to think or what to expect, but so far everything has been good. The journey has made me more confident. I've learned to talk better and hold conversations with people without shying away. I've learned how to keep eye contact and introduce myself with a firm handshake. Now I believe this change in my life has made me a better person, and I like the person it has turned me into.*

*When I told my parents about my interest in Mortuary Science they were very supportive with my decision even when I had invested two years in a degree in Coaching and Physical Education. This reaction from my parents motivated me to begin searching for mortuary schools, and I decided to choose this program after reading good reviews from different people. Here, the professors are very helpful and they know me by name. In my previous college if the professors saw me in the hallways or at the store they didn't acknowledge me. In this program if I see one of my professors out or in a hallway, we'll stop and talk. We don't necessarily talk about school; we talk about just everyday life and family. Being away from home I value the personal relationships with my professors. I never liked the idea of becoming just another number in class. For instance, when the tornado came and hit back home I just felt guilty because I was here away from my*



*family. I even thought about going back home and not coming back to Texas, but my professors were very supportive. While in Arkansas, they kept checking on me to make sure I was doing fine. That really stuck out to me. Their support made me feel like I was in the right program.*

*Since the tornado, I think everything happens for a reason. God puts things in your path to make you a stronger person. Before the tornado, I was just barely getting by and just going through the motions. After this tragedy I reevaluated my life, refocused on my goals, and made myself realize that Mortuary Science is what I really wanted to do. Unfortunately, the tornado took the life of my grandmother and this event totally changed my life. She was always by my side supporting my decisions and represented a big part of my existence. I think my desire to honor her memory is what keeps me going. When I started my internship, I felt as if it was an additional step towards my goal of becoming a funeral director and embalmer. I know this accomplishment will make my grandmother proud of me. She wanted to see me grow up and become a productive citizen.*

*For my internship I decided to take advantage of an early job offer at a funeral home and chose to begin this period of my career during my last year in the program. My goal is to graduate with an associate's degree and finish the internship simultaneously [see Figure 12]. After obtaining my license as a funeral director and embalmer, I would like to stay at the same funeral home where I have been employed as a funeral assistant. If this plan does not work, then I will look for other job opportunities in this area. I have decided not to go back to my hometown. I have adapted to the life in a big city and firmly believe that there are more work opportunities either here or in the surrounding cities. I had too many life lessons during my relocation that had made me a*

*stronger individual, and I would like to be able to apply what I learned, where I learned it. I don't think it will be the same back home.*



*Figure 13. Jordan's Artifact: Name Tag*

*My first artifact is a name tag from my former employer [see Figure 13, actual name was changed for the pseudonym]. It represents the time I had to wait to join my chosen career. It also symbolizes the difficult times I had to face during the adaptation process away from home. The second artifact is a business card that I received from the funeral director that encouraged me to visit the funeral home he managed and to apply for a position as a funeral assistant. [The details of this artifact are not shown to conceal the name of the funeral director and the funeral home information]. These artifacts symbolize my personal and professional growth. Both items reflect important transitions in my life. After receiving the business card, I was able to leave a job that was not in my field of interest and entered into a career that represented the reason I left my family, friends, and hometown. I think the reason I saved these two artifacts is to remind me about the time I almost gave up my academic dreams, but most importantly to appreciate the positive influence this funeral director had in my life.*

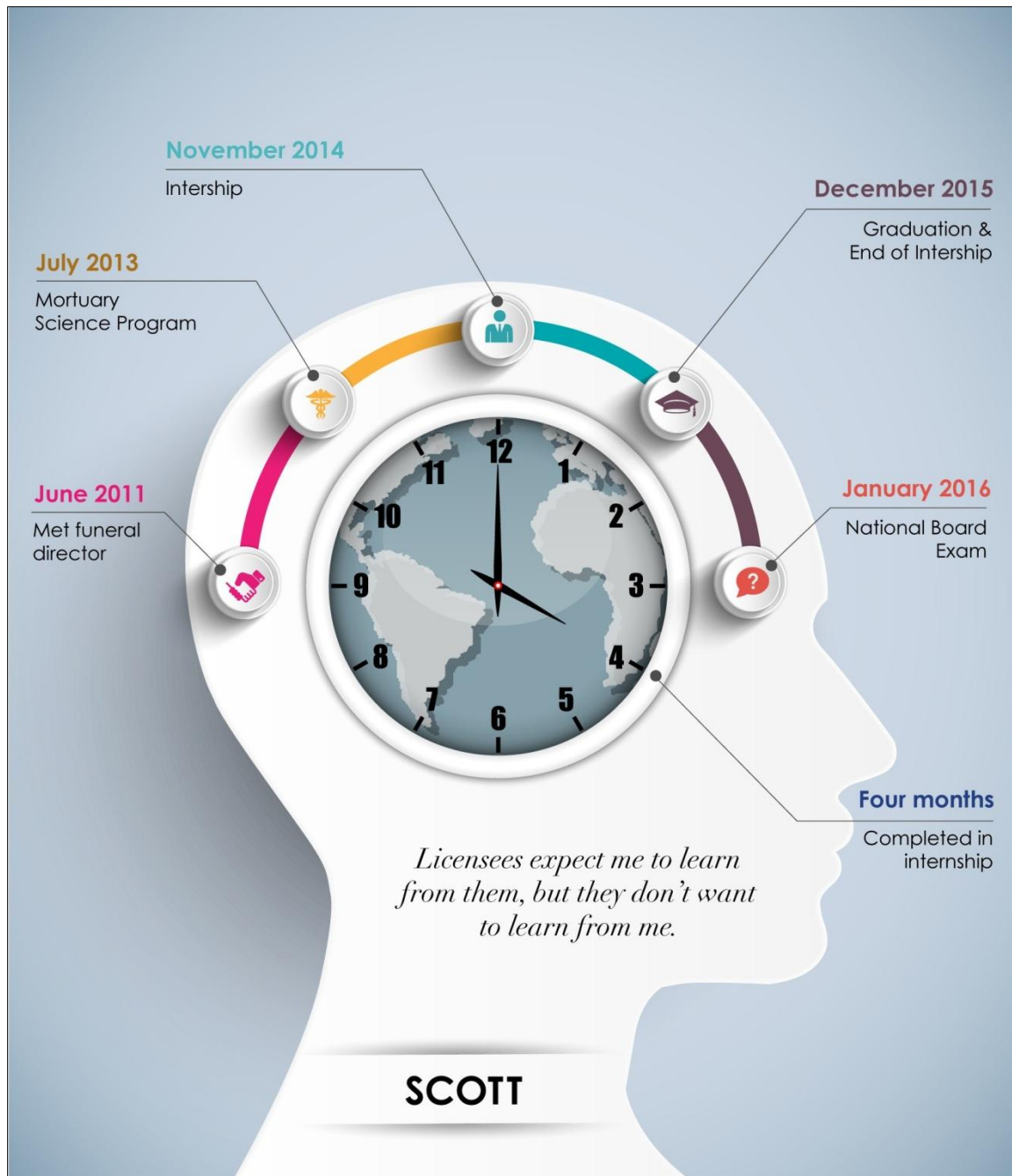


Figure 14. Map of Scott's Journey

## **Scott**

*I was born and raised in this city. I attended high school, but due to some issues I got kicked out during my junior year. Despite that, I continued with my education and was home-schooled for the remaining of my high school instruction. I was able to test out and graduated a year early and decided to join the armed forces. I was in the Army for four-and-a-half years, active duty, and then did two years in the Reserve. Upon my return from the U.S. Army, I opened my own landscaping business, and it was during this time that I met my ex-girlfriend's father who was a funeral director/embalmer and owner of two local funeral homes. It was due to this interaction that I got curious about the mortuary field and began to ask questions about the type of work performed by funeral directors and embalmers. Once I got serious about pursuing a career in Mortuary Science I began to investigate about the different school options in the state. I wanted to compare their National Board Exam pass rates and the possibility to use my veteran benefits to pay for my college education. When I started the program I noticed that my previous interest for science was helpful in this program. I passed thanatochemistry with flying colors; I didn't have to do much to obtain a good grade. On the legal aspect of this field, when I had to take jurisprudence I didn't have too much of an issue either. I guess I kind of remembered some of the terminology due to personal experiences and some of the problems I had as a teenager. However, not all courses have been easy. Human anatomy was a little tougher due to my limited knowledge about the subject. I had to push myself harder to learn the material. Even with all these responsibilities as a mortuary student, I decided to look for a job in the field. Fortunately I was able to start working at a local funeral home a few weeks after I began the program. Thanks to this*

*employment, completing my internship requirements has not been complicated at all. However, now that I am working at a local embalming care center, some of the younger licensees seem to have issues with me because of my age and my military background. They seem to believe that I have a “military attitude.” I don’t think that I’m better than anybody else, but some of my coworkers perceive that I feel that way about myself. I guess this is probably because they know I like to voice my opinion and immediately assume that since I was in a leadership position in the Army, I will have a difficult time going back to work as a civilian. I have noticed that when I had voiced my opinion in the past, it was automatically perceived as insubordination because of my status as an intern. Once the perception of insubordination came into play, I have always heard the same statement from my licensed coworkers: “We’ve got a license and you don’t! You are an intern; you still a student and you are here to learn from us.” I guess it’s an adaptation process for all of us. Licensees expect me to learn from them, but they don’t want to learn from me. At the moment, I am happy to say that I am almost done with the Mortuary Science program [see Figure 14]. Even when it has been rough due to the high standards of the program, I have pushed myself harder because I would like to graduate and finish the internship requirements at the same time.*

*The artifact I selected is a book of notes from the funeral director that kind of got me started in looking into the mortuary field. The pages in this book are kind of yellowish already, and some of them have water stains. To me this artifact is a unique treasure that was created around 1961 [see Figures 15 and 16]. It’s everything my mentor had from the beginning of mortuary school to the time he graduated. His notes are either handwritten or generated with an old typewriter.*



Figure 15. Scott's Artifact: Binder with Mortuary Science Notes from the 1960s

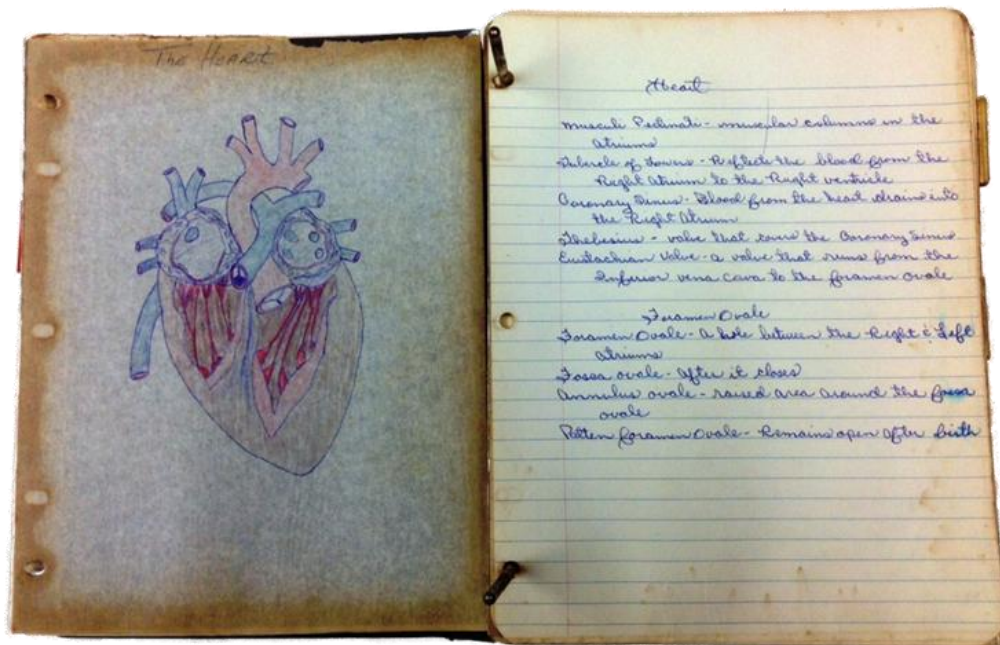


Figure 16. Scott's Artifact: Binder with Freehand Sketches and Handwritten Notes

*This book contains everything that he transcribed during class including freehand sketches [see Figure 16]. It is the Mortuary Science curriculum as taught fifty plus years ago. I still remember the day I obtained this notebook. The funeral director threw the book at me. It was heavy when he threw it in my lap and told me, "Here, read it!" So I did and that kind of got me hooked. I was always curious about what he did, and by reading his notes and glancing through the pictures I got more interested in this career. Eventually I want to own a funeral home, and I plan to display this notebook in a glass case. This notebook is literally what got me started in the path where I am today.*

In summary, this section presented the journey of Brandon, Jordan, and Scott as they complete the state requirements for their internship in Mortuary Science. These study participants provided detailed information about different aspects of their mortuary education experience combined with their hands-on training as interns at local funeral homes and embalming care centers. Based on the data obtained from the narratives, it is evident that these three participants feel more at ease with Mortuary Science as their career of choice over their previous major or former occupation. In the case of Brandon, he considered joining a Radiology Tech program. Yet, after the interview with the department coordinator he changed his mind and decided to select something related to death care. Once in Mortuary Science, he noticed that his responsibilities with his work and family prevented him from advancing in the program as fast as those students without similar commitments. However, he is pleased that even at a slower pace he has achieved most of his embalming internship requirements and plans to continue with his funeral directing caseload. In the case of Jordan, his previous academic work was

towards obtaining a baccalaureate in Coaching and Physical Education, but lost his passion after the completion of his second academic year. Joining a Mortuary Science program required for Jordan to move out of his home state and begin a new life living on his own. He expressed that even when he did not regret moving, the process of adaptation was not easy. It became harder when he had to face a natural disaster in his home state which caused the death of his grandmother. Jordan has been working steadily and is seeking concurrent completion of his internship and college requirements. Lastly, Scott's journey presents his challenges as an intern in Mortuary Science whose previous leadership experience in military positions and as an owner of a company are affecting his interaction with coworkers as well as his current goals of becoming a licensed funeral director and embalmer. His veteran benefits had allowed him to dedicate time to complete his academic work and combine it with the hands-on experience offered by the licensees at his internship site. One common aspect among these participants is their desire and commitment towards licensure as funeral directors and embalmers, either at the end of their degree plan or by combining the academic work with the internship requirements.



## Mortuary Science Graduates

This section presents the career journey of the last three study participants who had graduated within the past two years and had already obtained their license as both funeral directors and embalmers. The group was composed of three individuals, Elisabeth, Emanuel, and Martha, all of them currently employed at local or nearby funeral homes. These three study participants' career stories inform about their experiences in the Mortuary Science field. In sharing the narratives of Elisabeth, Emanuel, and Martha, I introduce each of them using a map of their journey illustrating significant events in their goal toward licensure as funeral directors and embalmers. This group includes participants who have completed all three stages in the Mortuary Science program (i.e., students, interns, licensees) and who have attended the same Mortuary Science program as the previous six participants. I also use the artifacts they provided during our *pláticas* (conversations) to highlight specific events in their career. Table 3 presents the licensees indicating their motivation to seek a career in the field of Mortuary Science.

Table 3

### *Profiles of Three Licensees*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Motivation Seeking Mortuary Science
Elisabeth	30 +	Female	Employer motivation
Emanuel	25 +	Male	Second career Parent's advise
Martha	20 +	Female	Suggested career by brother Curiosity about the field

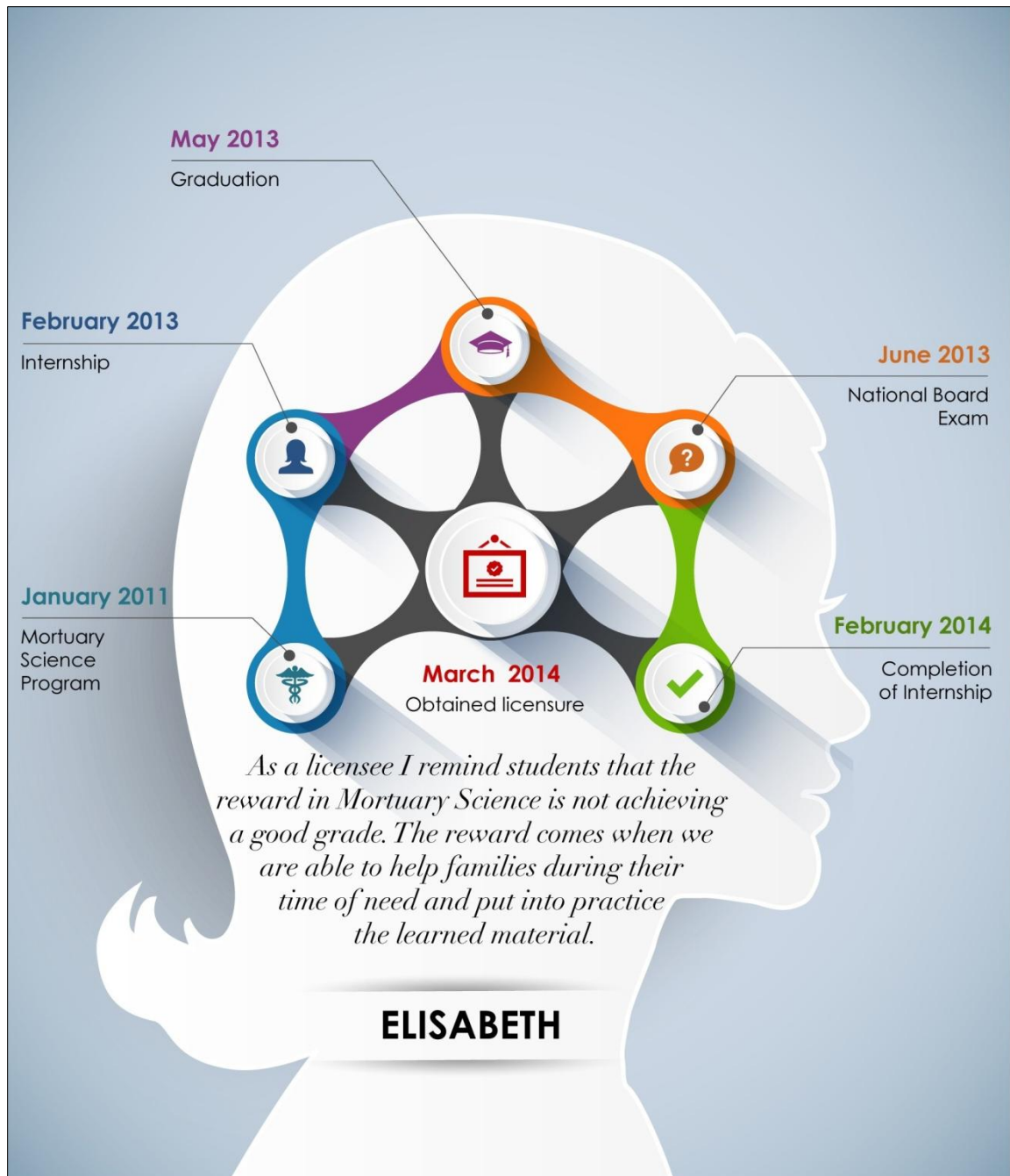


Figure 17. Map of Elisabeth's Journey

## **Elisabeth**

*My name is Elisabeth (pseudonym) and I was born and raised in Mexico City. I moved here with my family when I was fourteen years old. After I graduated from high school I began to take the prerequisites for the nursing degree and started working part-time for a funeral home. A few years later, my employer suggested for me to consider a career as a funeral director and offered to pay for it. I thought about it for a while and requested information about the program. However, it was not until I discovered that my nursing prerequisites were going to transfer almost in its totality that I decided to switch majors and pursue a degree in Mortuary Science [see Figure 17]. My employer has always been very supportive with my academic obligations. Throughout the course of my studies in the program they adjusted my working schedule around my academic agenda. Additionally, the director-in-charge of the funeral home attended the same program, and that helped me to become familiar with the requirements and expectations of the Mortuary Science Department. I attended college in the mornings and went to the funeral home in the afternoons or during the days I did not have classes. As a Mortuary Science student I quickly discovered that the goal here was to learn and put into practice the material, not just memorize it. I guess the program was harder than expected because I had to work full-time and attend college. I don't even know how I combined both responsibilities, but I managed to do it. As an intern, I realized that there were procedures that were not going to match the textbook. I had to learn those skills on the march, when faced with actual funeral home situations and while working side-by-side with the funeral director or embalmer. I also learned that I had to be flexible with my work schedule in order to get cases towards my internship. That implied that sometimes I*

*began my workday at 8:30 a.m., but I could never anticipate what time I was going home. Every personal activity had to be rearranged if a family who experienced the death of a loved one walked in a few minutes before my scheduled time to be off. There were times that I had to assist in removals in the middle of the night. It was during this time period that I realized that it was going to be a challenge trying to keep up with my work assignments at the funeral home and the internship requirements.*

*Currently I have been licensed as a funeral director and embalmer for almost a year. I am still employed at the same funeral home where I began working as an office administrative assistant twelve years ago. Prior to this experience I had not been exposed to documentation related to funeral arrangements. Now as a licensed funeral director I have had very rewarding experiences with the families I have served. I normally share my experiences with students seeking a career in Mortuary Science and recommend them to reflect about their willingness to help others in their time of need because this time could be outside regular business hours. Even when I am willing to help students, they need to know that I will show them the way I make funeral arrangements and how I conduct funerals. However, they must be aware that each funeral director has his or her own way of presenting suggestions for funeral arrangements. Personally I have experienced that some older funeral directors don't think that new licensees know how to perform the duties of a funeral director. Probably their vast experience doesn't let them see that students and interns are willing to learn the field work from them. I think these experienced directors respect interns because they know the high expectations of the Mortuary Science program, but they still see newly*

*licensed directors as kids who still have several lessons to learn and the task of proving themselves in the field.*



*Figure 18. Elisabeth's Artifact: Distinguished Graduate Medal*

*My artifact is a medal that I received from the college as a distinguished graduate of the Mortuary Science program [see Figure 18]. Each year, the academic programs at the college recognize one outstanding graduate. As a distinguished graduate I received special recognition at the commencement ceremony by wearing a cord and the medal to signify my status. This distinction was also indicated in my diploma and my name as the distinguished graduate was inscribed on the department's plaques. The distinguished graduate medal represents a big accomplishment. It represents the time that I spent in college working towards obtaining a license as a funeral director and embalmer. It is also important because I am the first college graduate in my family. Receiving this award and graduating with honors made me happy, but seeing my family cheering for me and feeling proud of my accomplishments is beyond explanation."*

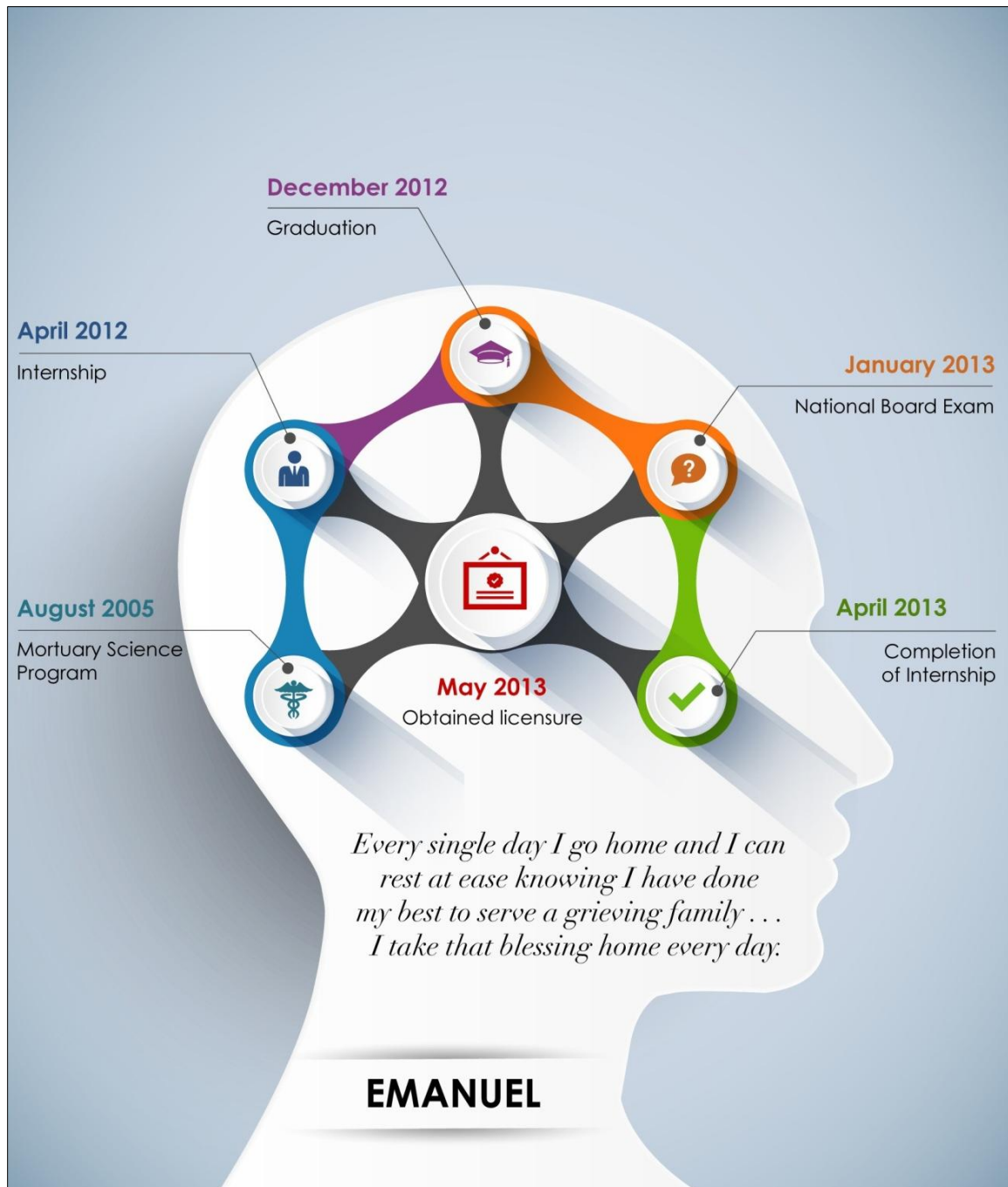


Figure 19. Map of Emanuel's Journey

## **Emanuel**

*I was born in North Texas, but the majority of my youth was spent in a very small community in the South Central part of Texas. My interest in Mortuary Science developed from the visit of a funeral director during a career day in my high school. I liked the idea of achieving an affordable college education in a reasonable amount of time. I also realized the college was nearby and I would not have to move or leave home. All of those were great positives to begin a career in funeral service. Yet, I think it took approximately eight years before I considered a college education. During those years I worked in construction until my parents advised me to look for a less-labor intensive career that had a retirement possibility. So, thus education came back into the scene. I inquired in my early twenties and spoke with one of the faculty members and kind of got the basis on the actual requirements for the Mortuary Science field. Unfortunately due to my working schedule at that time, I wasn't able to keep the same pattern followed by younger students. I actually started and then stopped, then went back a second time. I finished the program during my second attempt with the assistance and motivation of a faculty member in the program. During my second try I actually devoted myself one-hundred percent to school, had a better retention, and accomplished so much more. I honestly think that during my first attempt the academic work was the greatest challenge, but I almost feel like it became a challenge because of my personal ways of operating. At the present time, most of the funeral industry is not a challenge to me. I have adapted to the unusual working hours, I am adequately prepared to assist bereaved families, and support my coworkers when needed.*

*The practical experience was a very exciting period. The application of knowledge was the exciting part of the internship. In my mind I knew what to do and what things were called, but applying the knowledge was a different experience. I actually loved my clinical and internship periods because of all the hands-on activities involved. Due to these activities, I was lucky to get employed with a funeral home before my actual internship period started. So I was able work under direct supervision of my director and put into practice everything I was learning in school. Once again, due to my obligations outside of college, I had no choice but to extend my internship period to about a year and a half. When I became fully licensed, it was a sigh of relief. Once the National Board Exam was out of the way and once the internship period was completed, I knew the paperwork was going to be checked by the State Commission before granting the license. Luckily enough I was employed before being licensed, and it felt nice to have my manager and owner of the funeral home walk up to me and say, "Now that you are licensed, we want you to stick around. We appreciate your work." At that moment it was a huge sigh of relief. I knew in my mind, in my heart, my body that I could accommodate to what the industry needed from me. So far it has been eighteen months since I obtained my license as a funeral director and embalmer [see Figure 19] and I already feel accomplished. My affection for small towns took me to the Texas Hill Country area where I am currently working in a family-owned funeral home. My goal after graduation was to move to a small town similar to the place where I grew up. I feel more comfortable knowing the members of the community where I reside and want to have a connection with the grieving families I serve.*





Figure 20. Emanuel's Artifact: The Bible

*The artifact I selected is my personal leather-bound Bible [see Figure 20]. For me this Bible represents the source of inspiration and the enlightenment that I need to fulfill my responsibilities as a funeral director. I treasure and feel a personal connection to this Bible because my name was taken directly from it. I have my Bible open in one of my favorite section which is the book of the prophet Ezekiel. I would like to emphasize and read Ezekiel 32:7 [NKJV]: “When I put out your light, I will cover the heavens, and make the stars dark; I will cover the sun with the cloud, and the moon shall not give her light.” This Bible verse is important to me because it represents my desire to assist the bereaved during their time of need. This verse is so significant to me that I decided to put in on one of my arms. [This tattoo is not shown to protect the participant’s identity]. Having it on my body has been a source of comfort and guidance throughout my personal and professional life. I permanently tattooed this portion of the Bible so I can always glance down on my own skin whenever I feel lost. I want it to be a reminder of why I’m here and what I’m supposed to do.*

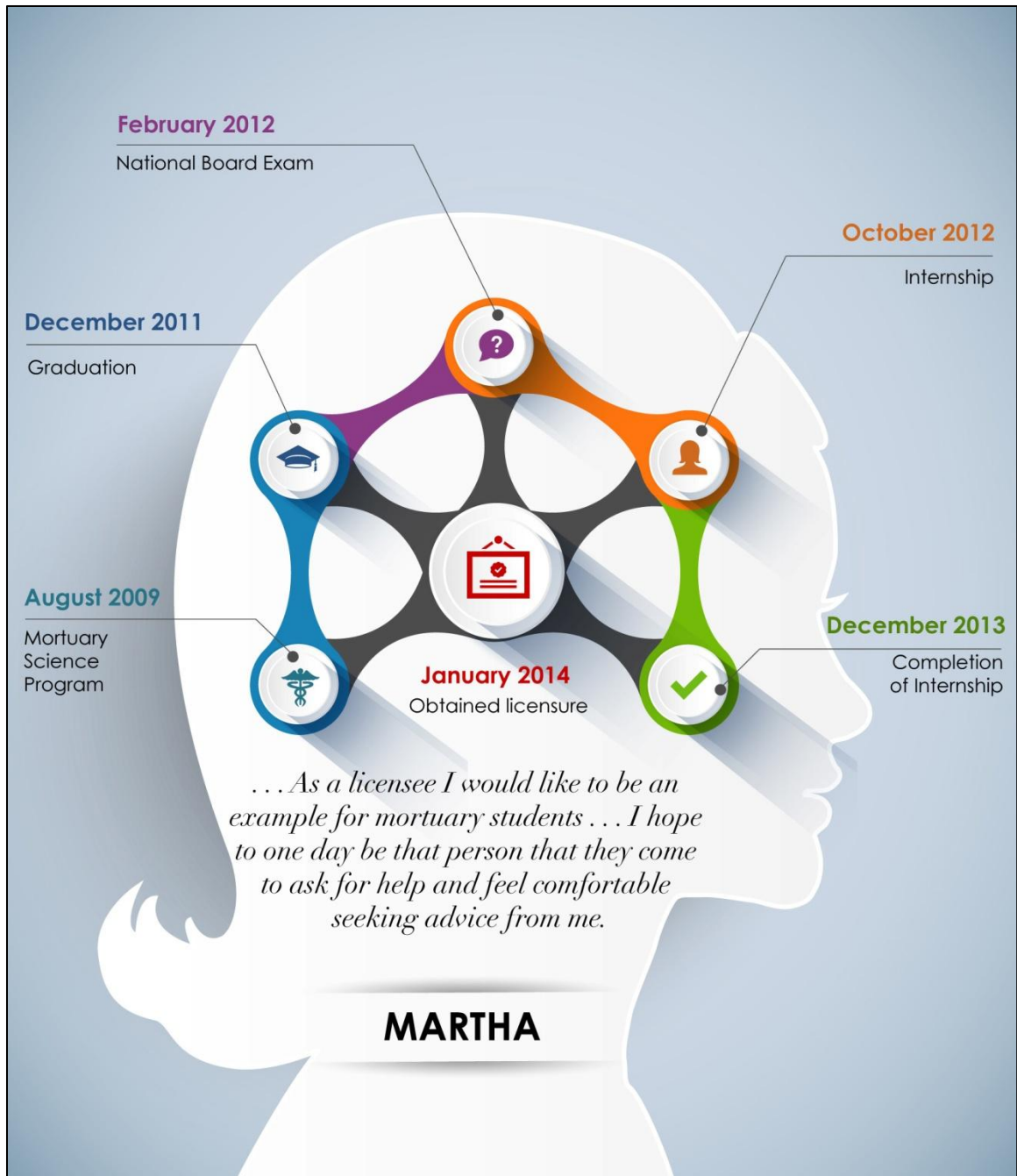


Figure 21. Map of Martha's journey

## **Martha**

*I'm originally from a small town on the border between the United States and Mexico. I was a couple of months old when we moved from Alpine to South Texas and lived there until I decided to enrolled in the Mortuary Science program. At the beginning I didn't know exactly what I was getting into, but I thought I would give it a try. I came to Mortuary Science straight out of high school based on what I had heard or acquired through my brother about his experiences in the program [see Figure 21]. My constant conversations with my brother about his mortuary assignments increased my curiosity. After a couple of semesters I decided to undertake a career in Mortuary Science even after my brother decided to change majors. Talking about this reminds me about how scared I was during my first semester. I didn't know where to start since it was also my first time away from home. Towards the middle of the program I approached one of my professors and asked him to serve as a reference because I wanted to apply as a funeral assistant at one of the local funeral homes. I was also kind of timid because I have heard that the funeral home where I applied was very meticulous. However, once I started working there and got a little experience, everything went very well. Throughout the different stages of the program, the professors were very helpful in being able to make us understand, or having us develop experience in Mortuary Science. I feel that I learned a great deal when they sent us off-campus during the course of the semester to visit several funeral homes and cemeteries. Personally I got to realize and find out if I could handle the responsibilities that come with becoming a funeral director and embalmer. Now as a licensee I would like to be an example for others, for the students that are coming up and barely getting into the Mortuary Science program. I hope to one day be that person that*

*they come to ask for help and feel comfortable seeking advice from me. As of today I can proudly say that I have been licensed for the past fourteen months. Also I am very satisfied of my professional growth from a student to a funeral assistant, then an intern, and finally for being able to take a position as a licensee in one of the largest family owned funeral homes in town. I am glad that I was able to continue my career with this funeral home. Working there I noticed that due to their high expectations not all interns are hired after the completion of the internship. Other interns decide to move on their own due to the same reasons.*

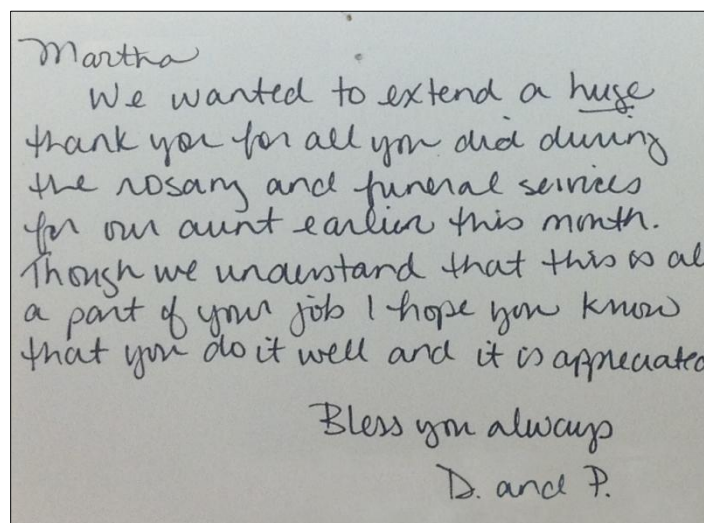
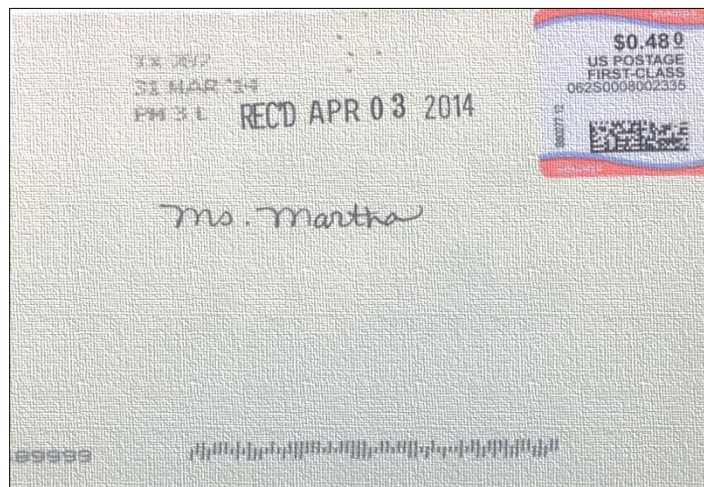


Figure 22. Martha's Artifact: Acknowledgment Card

*My curiosity about Mortuary Science became a career, and now as a licensed funeral director and embalmer I decided to use several acknowledgements cards and appreciation letters as my artifacts [see Figure 22]. These are cards and letters that I have received in the past fourteen months as a licensee. They were sent by families who wanted to show their appreciation for the assistance I provided during the planning and supervision of their loved one's funeral service. The letters vary in length from those containing a few words of appreciation to full letters describing in detail the gratitude of the bereaved family. This type of letters gives me the energy and motivation to keep assisting families who have experienced the death of one of their relatives. I have some of these letters displayed on the wall around my desk. If at any time I need to look back at them and remind myself as to why I do this, I still have them available and accessible to do just that. I think this specific acknowledgement card was one of my very first families. I remember being with them for almost four hours. I was newly licensed and a little nervous, but everything worked out and the family was pleased with the funeral arrangements. There were so many details into this specific service that made me really anxious to the point that I checked and rechecked all the service details multiple times. I was glad that at the conclusion of the funeral the family was satisfied and pleased with all the aspects of the funeral service. It was at that moment that I realized I was doing something right and how much an acknowledgment letter meant to me. Especially when each of those letters represents surviving relatives, that even when they are grieving, they still took the time to send me a note of appreciation.*

To sum up, this section presented the career journeys of the remaining three study participants who at the time of the study were Mortuary Science graduates and are currently licensed as funeral directors and embalmers (see Table 3). The licensure period of Elisabeth, Emanuel, and Martha ranged from thirteen to twenty-two months. During our conversations these participants vividly described their previous experiences as Mortuary Science students and interns, but were also willing to share their challenges and successes as newly licensees in the field. Elisabeth, Emanuel, and Martha were able to recall in detail the good experiences throughout their journey in Mortuary Science. As recent graduates they also wanted to acknowledge the faculty members and the licensees who served as their preceptors and whom they considered essential components to describe their journey. All the participants agreed during our individual conversations, that the dedication and willingness of these preceptors transformed their lives as students, interns, and new licensees. On the other hand, it was also evident that these participants equally remember their feelings of confusion, nervousness, irritation, and in general the bad incidents that they faced during their visits to several funeral homes while completing their clinical work and internship requirements. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that these licensees coincided in their goal of transforming those negative journey episodes into positive experiences for the new generation of funeral directors and embalmers. Elisabeth believes that communication with the students and interns is essential to the success of the clinical and internship programs. She added that it is important to begin with the basics and avoid assumptions with all incoming students. Elisabeth recommended that funeral directors and embalmers should take the time to get to know their new students and inform them about the responsibilities and expectations of

the funeral home and the community they serve. In the case of Emanuel, he added that standard funeral customs and procedures for the licensees may be totally unfamiliar to the student or intern. It is for this reason that as a licensee he now plans to assist his students by training them and slowly to develop a similitude in working styles. Martha described that everything was a learning experience during her internship. She plans to implement with her future interns the training methods employed by the preceptors who were willing to assist her. Similarly, she emphasized that those limited negative incidents in her Mortuary Science journey also taught her how not to train her future colleagues. These experiences have encouraged her to assist students and interns to be successful and achieve their goal of becoming licensed funeral directors and embalmers.

### **Summary**

The participants in the three groups (e.g., students, interns, and graduates) shared the story of their journeys up to this point. When viewed collectively the data provided a wide view of the field of Mortuary Science in all three stages. It is important to note that these participants shared their journeys describing their involvement with family-owned funeral homes, large conglomerate funeral homes, and embalming care centers. The individual stories of the study participants helped to describe the uniqueness of the students, interns, and graduates in the field of Mortuary Science. Even if they entered the program holding misconceptions about the career, they discovered passion for the field when they decided to stay.

It is also important to mention that all nine participants have shared that one of the significant aspect of their learning process in the Mortuary Science program involved the hands-on training during their clinical and internship work. This highlights the

importance of mutual support and continuous involvement of Mortuary Science educators and current funeral practitioners. Each of the participants shared positive and negative experiences during their regular visits to funeral homes, and there were many similarities among the examples given. The group of recent licensees involved in this study has plans to reduce the negative experiences for future students and would like to serve as initiators of a new internship prototype promoting an environment of mutual support among interns and licensees.

In the course of data analysis it became evident that the participants valued the combined teaching methods of faculty members and licensees. They also acknowledged that the differences between theory and hands-on learning experiences create a thought-provoking learning environment where they can apply and adapt theory into actual funeral home situations. The participants felt that theory application allowed them to expand their learning by incorporating the community in which they were serving their clinical work or internship. Others mentioned that actual funeral home experience allowed them to corroborate Mortuary Science as their career of choice. These narratives represent a unique opportunity for Mortuary Science learners and graduates to give voice to their stories as a way to connect all parties involved in the Mortuary Science education.

The stories of these nine participants also reflect uniqueness among them and their group. There is not a clear path about the characteristics of a typical Mortuary Science student. They all came from a diverse background including age, gender, ethnicity, past experience with funeral services, and motivation to complete a career as a funeral director and embalmer. Even when all nine participants talked about career pride and professional identity, several of them at some point felt weird or embarrassed about



their chosen career. However, after they became more involved in the field all of them developed career pride and indicated that now they talk to friends and relatives with assertiveness.

The data made it evident that the majority of the participants (e.g., Gwen, Sabella, Brandon, Scott, Elisabeth, and Emanuel) were non-traditional students. All of these participants had family and job responsibilities that prevented them from following the prescribed two-year degree plan. Some of them had to attend college on a part-time basis while others either extended their internship period or decided to serve their funeral directing and embalming internships during two separate time frames. The ABFSE (2013) reported that the average age of the new student has remained relatively constant over the past decade; with 17 to 30 years old making up approximately two-thirds of new students, and those 30 to 70 years old making up approximately one-third. It is important to notice that one of the age categories (e.g. 21 to 25 years old) established by the ABFSE to classify Mortuary Science students includes a mixture of traditional and non-traditional students. This classification differs from the literature in the field of adult education. In particular, Kasworm (2014) explains that being over the age of 24 has been the defining characteristic for considering a student to be classified as a “nontraditional”. Thus, for the purpose of this study, I used the age of 24 to distinguish between traditional and non-traditional learners. From the nine study participants six (66.7%) were between the ages of 20-30, and three (33.3%) were between ages 30-65.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF THE STORY**

#### **The Heart of the Story**

Anatomically, the *heart* is the organ that pumps blood through veins and arteries. However, it is considered by many as the place where emotions are felt. As Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) explain: “The human heart gives the body ultimate meaning, and is the source of human passion; in the same way, the heart of the story is typically its meaning, and even its passionate quality” (p. 95). Thus, this section describes the different forces that drive the learners and graduates participating in the study. “The passion is shaped by the values that guide the efforts that fuel action. These values include the emotional, moral, and rational ways of knowing the story” (Guajardo & Guajardo, p. 95). Likewise, to describe the heart of this study, the participants tell stories about their commitment to the career, their desire to continue learning, their love for Mortuary Science, and the rewarding experiences they have had when serving bereaved families (see Figure 23).

## THE HEART OF THE STUDY

*Although Mortuary Science can be very demanding, it doesn't feel that way because it is something that I want to do.*

Sabella

*I didn't know how comfortable I would be once I got into Mortuary Science. I became really fascinated by it . . . I've already committed to this career and this is what I like.*

Brandon

*I did not start this journey to quit. I started this journey to finish and that's where I am going. I learned that I'm not too old to continue learning.*

Gwen

*There are a lot of jobs that I could have done, but I chose embalming. As weird as it may sound, I love what I do.*

Scott

Elisabeth

*The funeral directing is very rewarding to me, especially when the grieving family comes after the funeral service to let me know that they are thankful to me for helping them during their difficult time.*

Martha

*I definitely love what I do! During hectic days I sit down and take a look at the letters and postcards sent by the families I've served. Those letters are my treasure; they reenergize me.*

Figure 23. Participants' Comments Illustrating the Heart of the Story

Data analysis sorting the emotions and feelings communicated by the study participants illustrates the different pieces that constitute the heart of the study. Thus, six emergent themes related to the heart of the study include: empathy for the bereaved, experiencing a second career, care and respect for the dead, satisfaction with a job well done, developing self-confidence, and eagerness to learn and apply skills (see Table 4). Each theme is illustrated using selected data that come from both the individual *pláticas* and information shared during the group conversation when all study participants shared their opinions. Each emergent theme is described in detail by using the stories provided by the individual participants. Collectively, their stories help create the heart of the study. These themes overlap and sometimes repeat; however, for the sake of synthesis, I purposefully highlighted what was most meaningful to the study participants.

Table 4

*Emergent Themes Related to the Heart of the Study*

<b>Emergent Themes</b>	<b>Participant Examples</b>
Empathy for the Bereaved	<p><i>I have experienced the denial stage and a similar pain after facing the death of relatives and friends. During my difficult time I was guided by a caring funeral director. Now I want to learn how to assist others and make them feel that they are in good hands.</i></p> <p>Gwen (student)</p>
Experiencing a Second Career	<p><i>As a surgical technician I just wondered: What happens to the patients after they have been taken off life support? What happens at the funeral home? The combination of my curiosity about a unique career and the discontent with my current job drew me towards becoming a funeral director and embalmer.</i></p> <p>Sabella (student)</p>
Care and Respect for the Dead	<p><i>I knew that I was going to help the grieving parents. As a father, I felt I could provide the best care for their son/daughter and try to alleviate their pain.</i></p> <p>Brandon (intern)</p>
Satisfaction With a Job Well Done	<p><i>I mostly work in the preparation room . . . it is the most gratifying experience to see the families transformation. When I first walk into their house, they're crying because I am taking their loved one away . . . when they come to the funeral home they're in tears again, but this time it is because they are thanking me for what I've done. Nobody else will ever be able to experience that. It's an ultimate high!</i></p> <p>Scott (intern)</p>
Developing Self-Confidence	<p><i>I love Mortuary Science! But I have a hard time telling other people what I do because they look at me kind of weird, but this is what I want to do . . . I believe this is a change in my life and it has made me a better person and I like the person it has turned me into.</i></p> <p>Jordan (intern)</p>
Eagerness to Learn and Apply Skills	<p><i>The application of knowledge was the exciting part of the internship. I actually loved the hands-on experience obtained during my clinical and internship periods. Now as a licensee, I am extremely pleased and confident in the fact that I can offer my knowledge, skills, and experience to the families I serve.</i></p> <p>Emanuel (licensee)</p>

## **Empathy for the Bereaved**

The exposure to the different manifestations of grief is an everyday component of the work of Mortuary Science learners and graduates. The first example comes from the conversations with Gwen. Her story is representative of the data indicating the significance of having experienced grief, death, and bereavement prior to enrollment in the program. For Gwen experiencing the death of two close relatives was a major motivation to pursue a career in Mortuary Science and a major source of empathy for the bereaved:

*. . . I think that if I combined my personal grief experiences with my current education I could be of assistance to other families going through what I experienced in previous years. Unfortunately, I had been to several funeral homes as a client. I have lots of friends who have experienced the death of their spouses, for one reason or another. I just felt like I had something to offer and thought that it was time to make a decision about the career I always wanted and to act on it. I just felt an inner push that I needed to do it. I am happy I made the decision, because I am comfortable and I feel like this is where I am supposed to be right now. Based on personal experience, I can say that during the period of grief no one can think straight. I vaguely remember that something needed to be done after the death of a family member, but I didn't know where to begin or what direction to take. The staff at the hospital kept on asking about my family's decision for the proper disposition of my father. If that wasn't enough, the rest of the family and friends also inquired about funeral services, but I was numbed. I knew I had three or four days to make very important decisions, and I was*

*clueless. It was not until I met the funeral director, a well-mannered and courteous gentleman, someone who knew what to do. He immediately made me feel that everything was going to be all right. It was an experience of relief just knowing that my father was going to be in good hands and that I was going to be fine as well. After I experienced this situation with my father and several others with close friends, I firmly believe that I have something to offer. I feel like I could help someone else who's going through a similar situation. I can be conscientious, caring, and able to put the grieving family first, their concerns and what's important to them just the way that funeral director took care of my father, my family, and me. I realized that every family is going to have different issues that are going to be important to them. My goal as a future funeral director is to help families get through the experience of grief. Based on personal experience, I could say that there's no such a thing as "closure," I'm not sure who came up with that word. I think that for the surviving relatives is recommended to try to get through the grief experience and then make the best of their future. Someone told me that all those feelings after the death of a loved one were normal, my new normal. I think it is the best phrase I have ever heard.*

Although not all participants had experienced the death of a loved one prior to their enrollment in the Mortuary Science program, Gwen described how she was able to rise above her grief and develop a desire to assist others undergoing similar experiences. Even though prior experience with death-and-dying issues is not a requirement to join the program, it is important for students to be able to talk and tolerate talking about these topics with bereaved families. Most of the study participants lacked experience with

death-and-dying issues at the beginning of their career. These study findings match with current literature indicating that many students enrolled in undergraduate health care profession programs have never had a personal experience with death or chronic illness (Newsome & Dickinson, 2000; Trad, 2012). For the majority of the students, their initial exposure to death is during their first semester in the Mortuary Science program while taking an orientation internship course focused on funeral service. During this course the students are required to visit several funeral homes, crematories, and cemeteries to observe the daily activities performed by funeral directors, embalmers, crematory operators, and ceterians. Having these experiences help the students start developing empathy for the bereaved. According to Trad (2012) empathy is the ability to recognize and consider the feelings and special circumstances that a person is going through and at the same time be able to identify with these feelings as if they were their own. Gwen asserts that she believes she has something to offer to the bereaved families because she has experienced the death of a loved one. As stated in the literature, another role of the funeral service professional is to console the bereaved (Kelly, 2012).

### **Experiencing a Second Career**

Sabella's background as a surgical technician and organ donor procurement coordinator gave her the opportunity to gain experience interacting with dead human bodies and their surviving relatives. Her motivation went further to learn about the process to prepare the deceased for final disposition. Sabella is almost ready to transition to her second career and begin working at a local funeral home.

*. . . I owe my future career as a funeral director and embalmer from singing in a church choir. As a kid growing up and being in the church choir, we would have*



*a lot of funerals, and I had many questions that most adults did not want to answer. Therefore, this curiosity drew me towards becoming a funeral director and embalmer. However, I guess, you could say I pushed away that idea until I got older. Based on personal experience, I could say that some of the individuals in my social network had an idea that morticians are weird people. Now I can assure each of them that funeral directors/embalmers are not weird. We love what we do. Even if it sounds strange to my friends and relatives, we do our job because we like to help people in their time of need. We can deal with the deceased as well as the surviving relatives. It is amazing that I didn't pursue a career as a funeral director/embalmer earlier in life just because I didn't want to be considered weird. At this time I'm the type of person that if I want something, and I think it's going to benefit me, then I'm going for it. So, I'm a go-getter. I'm a hard worker and at this moment in my life I really don't care how people perceive me about the choices I make regarding my personal and professional life. My curiosity opened many doors and expanded my learning. I've come to realize that anything that interests me is really not a job. It's more of a learning experience.*

Sabella's story is similar to other learners, interns, and graduates in the Mortuary Science field for whom this is a second career. Several participants indicated that even when they were interested in becoming a funeral director and embalmer, they postponed their studies for a variety of reasons. These included their obligations to others, dissatisfaction with their current occupation, lack of finances to switch careers, concerned about been labeled as weird due to their academic interest, and anxiety about going back to school as

an adult. These reasons for career transition are in accordance with Plimmer and Schmidt (2007) who suggested that the intentions of a career change typically begins with a state of dissatisfaction about their current professional status. Moreover, the authors indicated that dissatisfied adults who make major career changes generally become more satisfied than those who did not. In other words, the ones who remained in their first career continued to be unhappy and those who made the change found the job satisfaction they were seeking. An example is found in this reflection from Sabella:

*. . . I've had some people ask me the reason I decided to switch careers. Most of them immediately bring up the issue about my salary and remind me that I make more money doing what I do now. I normally reply that even when they may be correct about my finances, I'm not happy with my current profession. I may be able to buy whatever I want with the money I make, but I believe that if I am not happy doing what I am doing, I will eventually make others as miserable as I feel with my current situation. Fortunately, I'll be transitioning to a funeral home and do something that I enjoy as opposed to dreading having to get up and go to work.*

The possible selves theory (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007) helps understand the many career or workplace identities that an individual might develop due to personal and career changes. The realization that one can adopt or create different workplace identities may help experience a sense of liberation when feeling trapped or restricted; and may provide an escape route from current realities and constraints (Markus & Nurius, 1986). From this narrative it becomes evident that Sabella's achievement of a second career will help her become the professional she dreams to be. In her own words: "I am now looking

forward to begin my internship and desire to educate others about my current field and the duties of a funeral director and embalmer.”

### **Care and Respect for the Dead**

Next, in Brandon’s narrative he presents himself as a young father determined to assist other parents who had experienced the death of a child. His desire to help others is evident when he puts himself in the position of the parents and reflects on what would happen if the deceased child was his own. At the same time he speaks about the need to care for and respect the dead body of a human being:

*Just last year I’ve dedicated extra time to work on many babies. Having my own firstborn biological child helped me explore different possibilities to embalm an infant. I took a little bit more time making sure that the babies were like how I felt they should be, similar to my own son. I took my time to make sure that their little facial features were set as well as I could make them. I always make sure that these babies were embalmed thoroughly to the best of my abilities. I didn’t want a baby to be over- or under-injected with the chemicals we use to achieve a temporary preservation. I wanted each of those babies to be firm enough, but still to keep the characteristics of a baby. So, I knew that what I was doing was helping the mother or the father that had experienced the death of their child. Every time I embalm a baby, I’m thinking to myself that I couldn’t possibly imagine if something was to happen to my child. If it did, then I believe that I would expect the embalmer to treat my son with the same care and respect that I am treating these babies. Thinking this way helps me to become better in what I do; I tell myself if this was my son, I would want him to be in this condition, to*

*look this way, to feel like a baby. My main objective has been to let the parents be in contact with their baby and try to make that moment as special as possible. This has been probably one of the most fulfilling experiences for me, knowing that the work I do is allowing grieving parents to have a special last moment with their child. It is a moment that they could share with family, friends, and those who want to show their support to the grieving parents. This is why I continue to do what I do.*

Similar to Sabella, Brandon speaks to the importance of empathy when providing care for the deceased and their families. However, I want to focus attention on the values of care and respect for the dead that are also illuminated in his story. Brandon's story aligns with Kelly's (2012) assertions about funeral service education being more than just the study of death and dying, but rather a field that focuses on sustaining the image of life for the living. Mortuary Science learners and graduates should seek the creation of a good memory picture (i.e., an acceptable image of the deceased). Thus, Brandon's work embalming infants goes beyond showing empathy for the bereaved parents to also illustrating the extra care and respect that the dead bodies of these infants deserve. Likewise, Kelly's (2012) work goes beyond the preconceived idea that funeral service professionals enter the business because of "their preoccupation with death when in reality funeral service professionals choose to work in the industry because they seek to serve the living by creating a memory picture that depicts the perceived image of the deceased" (Kelly, 2012, p. 6). The embalmer has the opportunity to assist the living remembering their loved ones by providing that image they used to have when their loved one was alive.

## Satisfaction with a Job Well Done

Scott described his passion for the field increased once he was presented with academic challenges in the program. He added that these challenges motivated him to think and apply the learned skills while helping bereaved families. Now that he has been involved in assisting funeral directors and embalmers during his internship program, he has been able to observe how the surviving relatives appreciate the work he has done with their loved one. When Scott speaks about challenges he is acknowledging that all cases are different when practicing embalming:

*. . . For me it all goes back to challenges. That's the way I work. If you present a challenge to me I'm going to strive to push through it and solve it. Currently, I work in the embalming care center, and there's not a single case that's going to be the same. There's no way that I can pre-mix an embalming solution before I completely analyze the condition of the deceased. I have to evaluate every single case accordingly. So every day it's a new challenge. These challenges help me strive to better myself in my job and my field. With every new challenge I can only do better, and then I'll learn from my own mistakes and keep on going forward. There had been a few times where I go to the reposing room or chapel just to see the initial reaction of the family the first time they see their loved one in the casket. Most of the times they're just all surprised. They see a big difference from the last time they saw the deceased to the time they come to the funeral home for the initial viewing. When people die, there may not be a pleasant appearance. I normally pay attention to the face of the surviving relatives from what they look like during the removal where they're crying because they're sad, and then I see*

*the same family during the service where they walk up to the casket and they're crying but they also resemble a smile on their face. So they're actually happy with our work and skills. That's probably the only time I've ever seen where I made a difference. These moments are very rewarding and the gratification experienced while assisting these families is beyond explanation.*

This narrative describes one of the many work experiences in which Mortuary Science students get involved while serving their internship period. Scott speaks to the fact that all students strive to do excellent work and practice what they have learned in the classroom. At the present time the Texas Funeral Service Commission (TFSC) has two paths to becoming a licensed funeral director/embalmer in Texas. The first path is through the TFSC's internship program which is followed by all Mortuary Science students in Texas. The goal of this program is to allow individuals, like Scott, to get practical experience under the direct and personal supervision of a licensed funeral director and embalmer. The second path is to reciprocate an active license from another state. The Mortuary Science program serving as the setting for the study has as its central goal to recognize the importance of funeral service personnel as members of a human services profession and to guide students to be sensitive to the responsibility for public health, safety, and welfare in caring for human remains. For students like Scott, experiencing the satisfaction of a job well done is an incentive to continue in their effort to become a better self (Ibarra, 1999; Rossiter, 2009). It is important for each student to recognize that their dedication in their job will not only benefit their career but will also assist the bereaved during their time of need.

## Developing Self-Confidence

Jordan's enthusiasm to be involved in the Mortuary Science program motivated him to leave everything behind in his birthplace and relocate to Texas to pursue his goal. Yet, only close relatives and friends knew about his aspirations to become a funeral director and embalmer. Similar to Sabella's narrative, Jordan indicated that he continued with his chosen career even when people close to him perceived his career goals as something atypical.

*. . . The reason I am passionate about this field is because it has transformed me. I'm becoming more confident in a lot of areas including my personal demeanor. I feel more confident just because I work at a funeral home, and that's what I wanted to do since high school. Now that I am completing my internship at the same time that I am finishing my degree, every time I learn something new at school I can apply it to what I'm doing at work. It is a great experience to be able to learn more about my field through hands-on activities because I normally learn better when I am doing something related to what I read in the lecture notes. I feel like I'm maturing a lot more than when I was back home. My dad told me when I moved here, "You got to be your own person, be your own man. Don't let anybody, tell you to do something that you're not or something you don't want to be. Go out and be yourself." I feel like I'm becoming more mature and being my own person. I didn't know exactly what to think, or what to expect when I moved from Arkansas to get involved in a career in Mortuary Science. So far everything has been good, even when it was kind of difficult at the beginning. During my internships orientation, there were a bunch of older people that I guess have been*

*in the field for 50 or 60 years and I didn't expect to get pessimistic comments towards my career from individuals working in a funeral home. Their comments and questions were very similar to what people were asking me back in my hometown, "Why are you doing this?" "You're too young; you got to live your life." "Get out while you can." I don't understand why they said that to me. I love what I am learning, and I enjoy what I do. I love this career in general. It's not something that I was born into, but I am glad I am part of the field now.*

The Mortuary Science learners and graduates in the three different stages of the program are very similar when it comes to their professional identity. The study participants were aware of the need to develop credibility and trust with the bereaved families before they can actually be perceived as competent in their roles as funeral directors and embalmers. Most of them indicated that meeting with the surviving relatives to discuss funeral arrangements and speaking in front of a room full of grieving individuals caused them nervousness. However, all of them seem to be willing to face the challenge and imitate the approach employed by the preceptors during their clinical or internship periods.

Jordan's story represents an ample change from his personal demeanor to his professional identity as a funeral practitioner. According to Ibarra (1999) individuals build a repertoire of possible selves based on role models displaying the role identity they were attempting to assume. They observe how role models used a diverse set of elements, from physical appearance and demeanor to their skills and interaction styles to convey competence, personal credibility, and trustworthiness (Ibarra, 1999). It is for this reason that the Texas Funeral Service Commission (TFSC) and the Mortuary Science program work together with funeral homes to create off-campus learning opportunities.



The goal of the internship program is for these learners to practice their skills in actual funeral homes under the direct face-to-face supervision of licensees. During this period of time the interns are able to select the methods that fit their personal style and may also imitate their preceptors' style or develop their own based on a combination of the different approaches learned while completing the licensure requirements. This is how individuals like Jordan are able to develop a strong professional identity.

### **Eagerness to Learn and Apply Skills**

Emanuel (licensee) considered that the hands-on experience offered by the Mortuary Science program is one of the most important aspects of the field. He explained that having the opportunity to practice since the early stages in his chosen career was one of the factors that attracted him the most. Emanuel shared that the process of embalming and restoration of the deceased were his preferred areas of the practice. Based on personal experiences during his journey towards licensure, he is looking forward to work with future students and share some of his restorative art skills.

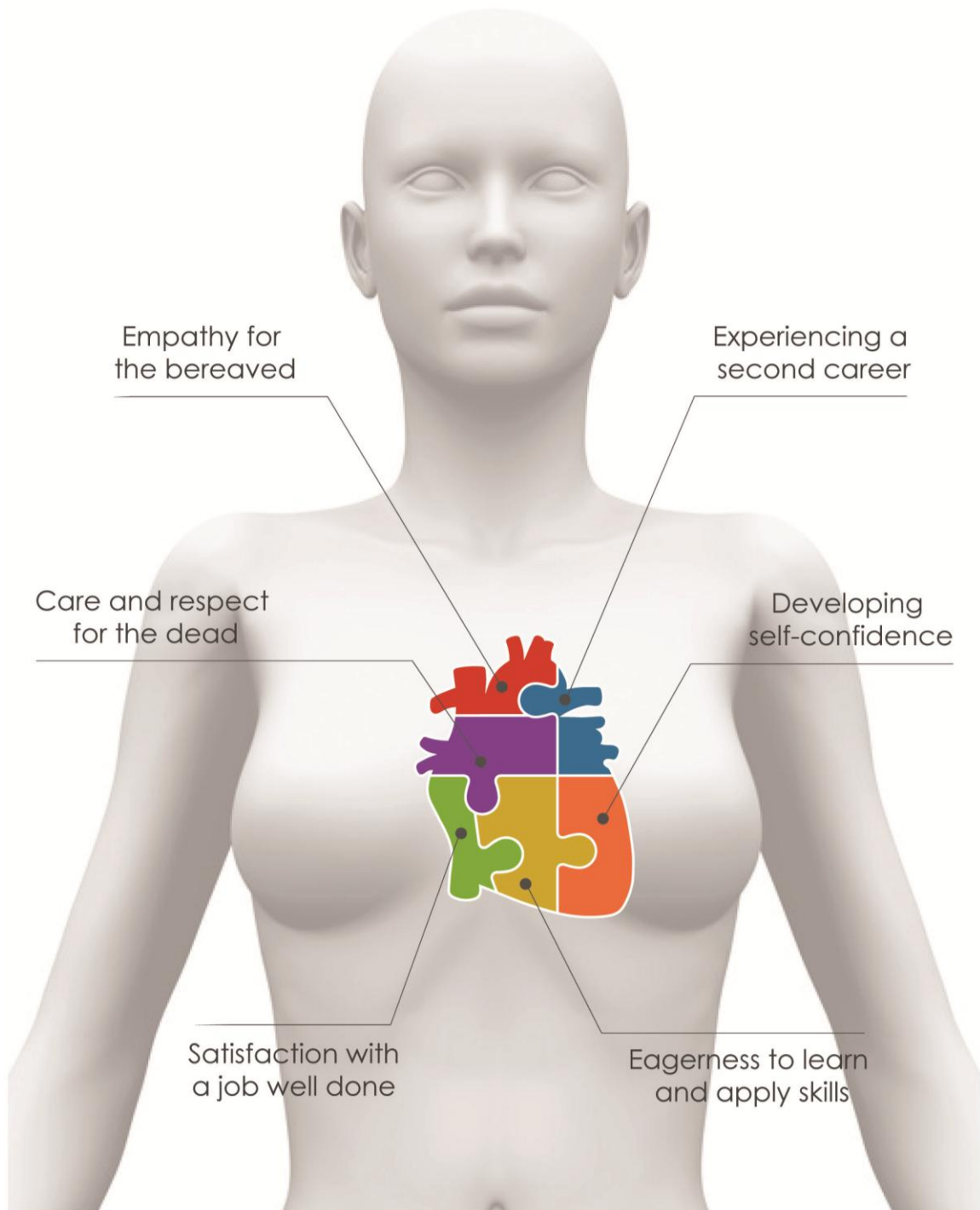
*... Everything within the actual internship period I felt was recapping of the material learned in college. Just as I said previously, the application of knowledge was the exciting part of the internship. It is an important matter to add the application to the definition. I enjoyed the clinical and internship periods because they both provided a great opportunity for hands-on experience during the course of my stay in the program. For me the provisional period was very smooth, very painless. I really enjoyed the experience and will replicate it with future students when the time comes for me to be the supervising funeral director/embalmer. I feel fortunate that during my internship period I met the*

*individual who wanted to keep me down and keep me into a small place so I didn't come up and take his job. It was a great learning experience, I learned how not to be like this director. Immediately after I met the director who wanted to teach me everything he knew. I also met the embalmer who showed me, more than once, the hands-on application of what I learned while attending college. This period of time allowed me to develop new skills and improve my own. I definitely think, based on personal experience, that the hands-on aspect of this field is what keeps students interested and willing to continue assisting bereaved families.*

Emanuel's story relates to the concepts of situated learning and context-based learning as described by MacKeracher (2004). This author states that situated learning refers to how individuals acquire professional skills, participating in apprenticeship, and other activities promoting membership in a community of practice. "In situated learning the quality of learning is dependent on the quality of the relationships among the members of the group (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 140). Similarly, context-based learning applies to the students in the field of Mortuary Science since they are expected to engage in hands-on learning and within the context of the occupation through subject matter such as clinical work and laboratory practice. Thus, the college involved in this qualitative case study requires first semester students to enroll in a semester-long clinical orientation course. In addition to classroom attendance, each student is required to work side-by-side with a funeral director and embalmer by visiting five funeral homes and one cemetery for a total of 48 clock hours at the completion of the rotations. The main purpose is to expose the new student to the activities performed by funeral directors and embalmers during their daily

endeavors. At the end of the semester, based on their hands-on work (contextual and situated learning), the students are expected to make an educated decision either to continue or to withdraw from the program. Another important aspect is that these rotations also expose the students to future colleagues and the funeral traditions of the community in which most of them will complete their internship program.

## THE HEART: DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT THEMES



*Figure 24.* Summary of the Themes of the Heart of the Study

The heart of this study is composed piece by piece by the passion for the Mortuary Science field shared by the participants. Each emergent theme represents a piece of the puzzle putting together the heart of the story (see Figure 24). Therefore, the heart of this study is composed of six important themes: empathy for the bereaved, experiencing a second career, care and respect for the dead, satisfaction for a job well done, developing self-confidence, and eagerness to learn and apply skills. In the examples presented, Gwen, Sabella, Brandon, Scott, Jordan, and Emanuel shared multiple reasons of why they decided to join or stay in the program even when some of them were faced with difficult circumstances or lack of understanding from their families and friends for selecting a career in funeral service.

Their stories recognized that **empathy for the bereaved** is essential when working with grieving individuals (Trad, 2012). As represented by the data, the study participants have been able to recognize the feelings of the bereaved and be able to identify with those feelings as if they were their own. The data also revealed that an important part of the heart of this study is the fact that most of the participants found an interest in Mortuary Science even when they already held a degree in another discipline or had a position in a different occupation. The participants' stories provided insight into the factors that influenced their decision to **experience a second career** (Ibarra, 1999).

All study participants talked about their aspirations to seek satisfaction in their place of employment and be able to assist those experiencing the death of a loved one. When analyzing the narratives it became evident that these learners and graduates were paying special attention to the **care and respect for the dead**. The work of Mortuary Science learners and graduates goes beyond the study of death and dying to focus on

sustaining the image of life for the living (Kelly, 2012). Accordingly, Brandon and Scott described their passion for the field and their dedication to a challenging job which provides them with only one opportunity to be precise either while working with the deceased or the surviving relatives.

Additionally, the licensees were also focused on transmitting their passion and dedication for the job to the incoming students and interns. Job satisfaction refers to how people feel about their job, also known as affective job satisfaction (Thompson & Phua, 2012). As current funeral practitioners, the graduates desired that their stories will transmit their **satisfaction with a job well done** and hoped to motivate future learners to continue working toward obtaining licensure and have a rewarding career. Locke (1976) defines job satisfaction as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (p. 1304). This is what Sabella and Brandon illustrate in their narratives.

Next, several participants indicated the need to **develop self-confidence** and visualize themselves as funeral directors and embalmers, able to arrange and direct funeral services, as well as to have the ability to speak in public with knowledge and conviction. Rossiter (2007, p. 5-6) refers to this idea as *possible selves*, in other words, the various components of the cognitive sense of self, the ideal self, who a person would like to be, who they can become, or who they might be afraid of becoming. "Possible selves reflect a constructivist orientation to identity in which the self is seen as dynamic, contextually interactive, and evolving, rather than fixed throughout adulthood" (Rossiter 2009, p. 61).

The last emergent theme describing the heart of the study relates to the participants as **eager to learn and apply their skills**. The goal is to maintain the passion for the field and strengthen relationships among learners, interns, and graduates. By the second year in the program the learners are ready to enroll in internship, which is a perfect time for participation in “authentic practices through activity and social interaction in a way that is similar to traditional craft apprenticeship” (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 140).

### **The Mind of the Story**

The *mind* as the center of all analytical thinking brought critical analysis to the story and provided ideas, imagination, and action (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, p. 95). The learners’ and graduates’ efforts to critically evaluate their learning experiences played a critical role in the process of revealing the mind of the story. It became evident that for the study participants, learning was a constant struggle and a positive challenge (see Figure 25). For example, they spoke about the importance of going beyond memorizing facts, the central role of learning through a hands-on approach, and looking at each embalming case as a unique learning experience. Learning from the stories of Mortuary Science learners and graduates has potential to “inform, support, or disrupt stereotypes and myths” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, p. 135) about their roles and work in this field.

## THE MIND OF THE STUDY

*The Mortuary Science Department cannot provide the actual funeral home experience. Therefore, it is not until the students get to work at a funeral home that they learn how to deal with the grieving manifestations of a bereaved family.*

Elisabeth

Sabella

*I don't think we'll ever stop learning in this field. The diverse causes of death will always present a challenge; we have to learn how to adapt to the undertaking that is right before us.*

Scott

*Whenever we have embalming cases, I ask a lot of questions to make sure that I understand the standards. The embalming procedures aren't necessarily the same so it's a learning experience with each case.*

*Mortuary Science is not a program where you can just use your mind to memorize lecture notes; you have to get your whole body into it. All those learned procedures will help us create for the family a nice image of the deceased.*

Gabriela

*There was more learning with this program than I expected, but it was a plus. That was one of the reasons I stayed in the program. I love learning and I enjoyed the hands-on experience.*

Brandon

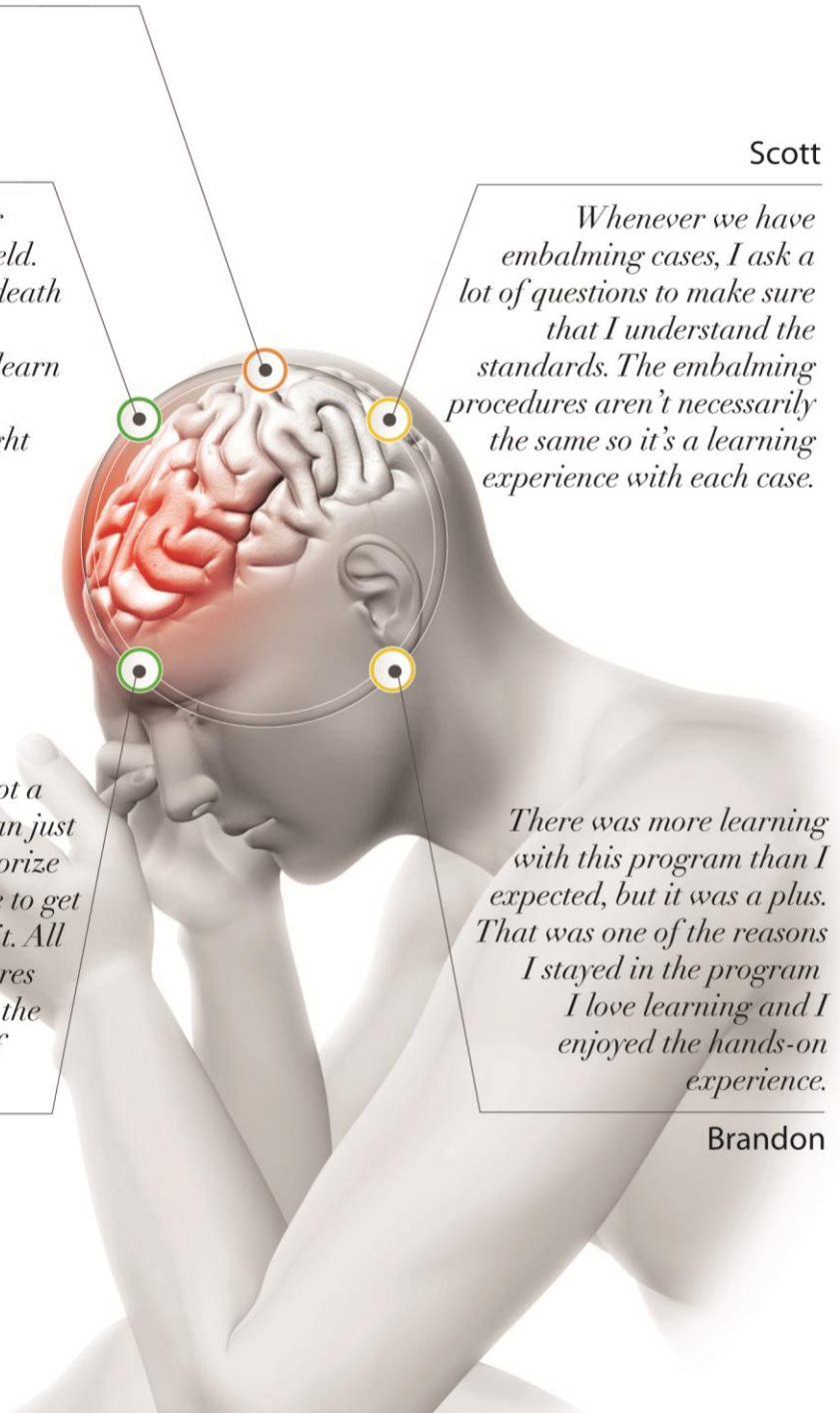


Figure 25. Participants' Comments Illustrating the Mind of the Story



After having examined the narratives of the nine participants, several of their stories bring to light findings about the mind of the study (see Table 5). These stories reveal how a program in Mortuary Science has equipped them with tools to do a good job as reflective learners and practitioners. Thus, four themes emerged: stereotypes and misconceptions, take the time to teach, hands-on learning, and somatic learning. Each of these emergent themes is described using data extracted from both the individual *pláticas* and sections of the group conversation session. The sum of the themes symbolizes the collective mind of the story of Mortuary Science learners and graduates.

Table 5

*Emergent Themes Related to the Mind of the Study*

Emergent Themes	Participant Examples
Stereotypes and Misconceptions	<p><i>"Oh, they're just funeral directors." I thought they just meet with the grieving families and make funeral arrangements. I was so wrong! Now I am aware that as a funeral director I have to know the right thing to say and the right thing to do. I also discovered that there are all kinds of legal ramifications . . .</i></p> <p>Sabella (student)</p>
Take the Time to Teach	<p><i>Some funeral directors and embalmers need to stop and think that if they are patient with us and take the time to teach us, it will prevent mistakes that could get the whole funeral home in trouble . . .</i></p> <p>Jordan (intern)</p>
Hands-on Learning	<p><i>I enjoyed all my classes, but the one I liked the most was gross human anatomy. I could go to the textbook and read about the human anatomy, but I had the advantage that I could also study and hold the actual human organs in my hand.</i></p> <p>Elisabeth (licensee)</p>
	<p><i>This program is very hands-on, which is good. This program, this career, isn't for everyone, so the fact that we have hands-on experience from the first semester is the best part of the program. It helps students realize if Mortuary Science is for them.</i></p> <p>Martha (licensee)</p>
Somatic Learning	<p><i>I have to put more effort in everything that I do in Mortuary Science, it is not only your mind to memorize the lecture notes; you got to get your whole body into the program.</i></p> <p>Gabriela (student)</p>
	<p><i>Seeing something in a book does not have the same impact as walking into the preparation room and getting the first hint of a smell . . . A smell can make you or break you!</i></p> <p>Scott (intern)</p>

## **Stereotypes and Misconceptions**

During the early stages of the study, some of the participants indicated that they began their degree in Mortuary Science with limited knowledge or misconceptions about the duties and legal responsibilities of a funeral director and embalmer. However, they also indicated that during the initial interview and group orientation with the Mortuary Science personnel and all incoming students, those questions and misconceptions were clarified by the faculty members. In the course of the conversations, almost all study participants described a sense of pride when talking about their career and their duties with the community they serve. For example, Sabella talked about her initial misconceptions about the field and her current desire to educate others utilizing her new perception about Mortuary Science as a career. She also discussed the extensive preparation that each prospective student must go through in order to achieve their goal of becoming a funeral director and embalmer.

*I didn't realize it was so much involved in becoming a funeral director. It took more time than I was expecting. I guess, in my mind I was thinking, "Oh, funeral directors just meet with the grieving families and make funeral arrangements." I was so wrong! Now I am aware that as a funeral director I have to know the right thing to say and the right thing to do. I also discovered that there are all kinds of legal ramifications that I have to consider before getting involved in some of the aspects of planning and conducting a funeral. If the funeral director or any of us as students or interns don't follow protocol, the funeral home and all of us could be in serious trouble. So, it was a lot more in depth than what I thought. The embalming aspect is very similar. It's not just embalming a dead*

*body. It's making sure that each body is embalmed properly after a careful analysis of the condition immediately after death. It is just a lot, but it makes me feel proud of what I do, yet anxious when I hear people say, "Oh, they're just funeral directors." If you only knew how much we as funeral directors have to go through, what we have to learn, what we have to know to be able to assist you in your time of need, then you wouldn't downplay it as much. I now think that with proper information about the field, people in general will not make statements that give funeral directors a lower profile. In my opinion to be able to do what a funeral director does is awesome. Funeral directors work during one of the hardest moments in the life of an individual, yet they are able to take emotions in consideration as well as the legal ramifications involved in the planning of a funeral or other celebrations to honor the life of a loved one. I now have a lot more respect for funeral directors and the mortuary field. I am proud that I will be a licensed funeral director and embalmer in the near future. It is with great pleasure that I will take it upon myself to educate others about Mortuary Science and prevent future mistaken opinions about the duties of all of us involved in the field.*

Sabella's account illustrates a common theme among the participants telling about stereotypes they held and misconceptions they had upon entering the program. However, once they obtained enough knowledge about their career and decided to pursue the degree, most of them were willing to educate others to prevent the general public from having similar misconceptions about the field.

Sabella's story coincides with Mezirow's fundamental concepts about transformation of a learner's point of view and the role of critical reflection to make learning possible. Mezirow (1997) clarified that a transformative learning environment allows learners to become critically reflective of assumptions, become empathetic and good listeners, and be willing to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view. This author examined the idea of helping learners transform their point of view about their world by helping them evaluate their frames of reference and place reflection at the center of any educational experience. Transformational learning occurs when there is a change in our beliefs or attitudes, or a transformation of our entire perspective. This process makes individuals more open to change when reflection guides their actions (Mezirow, 2000). As stated by Boucouvalas and Lawrence (2010), "This process results in individuals being permanently changed. We can never return to the way we were" (p. 41). In addition, Mezirow suggests that personal transformation may lead to alliances with others of like mind to work towards effecting necessary changes in relationships, organizations, and systems. Sabella asserts that she has a new viewpoint as a funeral practitioner and has embraced the responsibility to share her educational experiences and current knowledge about Mortuary Science as a career.

### **Take the Time to Teach**

The academic work in the Mortuary Science program is enhanced with the voluntary participation of local funeral directors and embalmers that are willing to share their time and create an extension of the classroom learning environment at the funeral home. It is during this time that licensees work with students and interns to show them

the application of the material covered in the classrooms and laboratories. Jordan's narrative describes his internship experience with his mentors.

*I consider myself lucky because most of the licensees where I work are willing to help me. There is one embalmer in particular that is more of a teacher to me. I trust him and feel comfortable when he shows me different things about embalming. We have developed a good working relationship. When we are in the preparation room, he normally tells me "Hey, I'm going to show you how to do it this one time, and then I'm going to let you do it by yourself." He would begin by demonstrating how to make the incision, then show me step by step how to raise the artery and the vein, including the details about what they look like, what to feel for, then he'll let them go. After all that he would back off and say, "Now you go find the vessels." When I am able to find the artery and the vein I feel a sense of accomplishment. It is an exciting moment and we celebrate together. Every time he acknowledges that I did it correctly it motivates me to learn more and to do a better job. I discovered that I learn better with people like him who has the patience and dedication to teach me everything he knows. However, I also work with other funeral directors and embalmers that are not good mentors. They are good people, but they do not have the patience to teach. Probably because they're so used to do things their own way or getting it done in a specific amount of time. I don't blame them; I know that when they teach somebody new, like me, it's going to take them longer than when they do it by themselves. That is one of the reasons why I appreciate funeral directors, embalmers, and professors who had been willing to show me different ways to*

*succeed in this career. I will always be thankful for their patience and dedication with those of us that are beginning this career. On the other hand, I believe that some funeral directors and embalmers need to stop and think that if they are patient with us and take the time to teach us how to do things the right way, it will prevent mistakes that could get the whole funeral home in trouble. Training is very important and will benefit all of us, including the licensees. So I think patience might be a big factor to consider every time they get new students and interns at the funeral home.*

Jordan's story speaks about the experiences that interns may encounter while making the transition from college to the funeral home setting. He described the benefits in the learning process when preceptors take the time to begin a new teaching relationship while creating a suitable environment for learning to occur. Jordan presents an analysis of the teaching style that best fit his learning, and that process has made a difference in his life as an intern and future funeral director.

Health professionals in communities of practice should support each other in the learning process and use the opinions of their peers to validate their own self-directed learning (Parboosingh, 2002). Mortuary Science students and interns receive constant feedback from different sources. Students receive an evaluation from each clinical or internship site, the instructor assigned to the course, and the laboratory instructor. The objective is to provide the learners with useful information about their successes or simply to identify areas of possible challenges. "Capability is enhanced through activities such as feedback on performance and learning from experience that naturally occur when trainees and practitioners learn and practice together" (Parboosingh, 2002, p.

233). In this case, students participating in the embalming process should receive feedback from the instructor as well as the funeral home in charge of the deceased. Occasionally, the funeral director in charge of the funeral arrangements and who is in constant communication with the bereaved family also calls the embalming instructor to provide feedback from the bereaved family and motivate students to excel in their embalming skills. Jordan is a good example of the positive impact that mentoring relationships provide to students and interns as they complete the orientation and internship stages of the Mortuary Science program.

### **Hands-on Learning**

As students shared their stories, they all seem to agree that it is the exposure to the different hands-on activities in the Mortuary Science program that motivated them to continue constructing meaning in their chosen career. The first example comes from the conversations with Elisabeth who shared her point of view about the combination of traditional classroom setting and hands-on activities in the laboratories and internship sites.

*Learning human anatomy with cadavers is the best hands-on experience that I've received from this Mortuary Science program. I enjoyed it very much; it was just amazing to me. The knowledge acquired in the anatomy class allowed me to enhance my skills in the embalming side of this career. The access to cadavers made my education a unique experience. The hands-on activities allowed me to learn and retain the material a lot better when compared to the traditional lecture teaching style. I cannot say that I remember every single part of the human anatomy, but I still remember the anatomical regions which allow me to locate*



*the structures needed for the embalming process. The knowledge stayed with me along with the satisfaction of having been able to learn from actual anatomical human structures and organs. I think when it's just theory I might read the material and memorize it, but when I get the unique opportunity to read about it, see it, and feel it, the material stays with me better.*

The second example comes from Martha, another licensee, who also recalls the benefits of having hands-on learning activities during the early stages of her career. These activities gave her ample time to reflect about her decision of selecting a career in Mortuary Science and let her come to a resolution that the program was the perfect match for her academic and professional goals.

*This program, this career isn't for everyone. So the fact that we have hands-on experience from the first semester is the best part of the program. It helps students; it helped me, realize that Mortuary Science was the profession where I wanted to be. If the hands-on activities are not appealing, then all of us as students can explore what portion of Mortuary Science attracts us more, whether it is the funeral directing or the embalming side of this career. As students, we get to realize and find out if we can handle the responsibilities that come with becoming a funeral director and embalmer. We can determine if we like and enjoy this field by the different activities in which we get involved during the clinical and internship stages. So I think just the fact that this program was heavy on hands-on activities gave us the sense that we were learning something that was applicable and could help people in need. Another helpful aspect about this Mortuary Science program was that the professors were willing to share their*

*personal experiences and stories as funeral directors and embalmers. Personally, this method of teaching helped me develop a good interaction between the professors and all of us as students. That was extremely helpful to me. When I began in the program I had very limited knowledge about the field and was unfamiliar with the job duties of a funeral director or embalmer.*

Elisabeth and Martha shared their perspective about the benefit of learning from activities in which they could explore on their own and expand the material covered by the professor. In Elisabeth's case it was an academic benefit that helped her retain and enhance the material learned in the classroom. Martha openly shared her story to let future students know that the hands-on activities gave her the opportunity to explore the field and determine if it was an appropriate career for her. Both of these stories coincide with authentic learning, the type of instruction aiming to engage students in using their minds to improve the quality of instruction and student achievement. "This instructional approach allows students to explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships in contexts that involve real-world problems and projects that are relevant to the learner" (Donovan, Bradsford, & Pellegrino, 1999, p. 31). The stories shared by Elisabeth and Martha are also consistent with Newmann and Wehlage's (1993) concept on *depth of knowledge*, which describes how students construct meaning and produce knowledge. Knowledge is considered deep when students are able to "make clear distinctions, develop arguments, solve problems, construct explanations, and otherwise work with relatively complex understandings (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993, p. 10). In both cases the participants were able to develop deep knowledge based on their hands-on

activities that helped them have a clear decision about their career and understanding about their future duties as funeral directors and embalmers.

### **Somatic Learning**

In the case of Gabriela and Scott, they shared how their learning experiences in the program included the engagement of their mind, senses, and body reactions. They both included personal observations where they used their body as feedback to determine if Mortuary Science was the right choice for them. For Gabriela and Scott the sense of feedback arising from their body was a determining factor to pursue a career as a funeral director and embalmer. Gabriela begins by describing her initial experience in the program.

*I never had to study as hard with any of my previous classes! Everything here has been new knowledge. There was nothing that I have learned before that I could pull from to help me with my current academic requirements. I have to put more effort in everything that I do in Mortuary Science. It is not only using my mind to memorize the lecture notes; I discover that I have to get my whole body into the program. I guess the first semester I got here, I wasn't used to the amount of work I had to do and I wanted to quit. I got tired and overwhelmed really fast. During the first semester I took four classes and only ended up passing one of them. So at the end of the semester I questioned myself: "What am I doing here? I should just go back and continue with my teaching degree." I thought about it for a while and I was like: You know what? I can't let my body get lazy on me. This program may take longer than expected, and it will definitely put me to work harder than my previous degree, but those will not be the reasons for me not to*

*continue. So I decided to take the challenge and stay in the Mortuary Science program and so far I think that I made the right decision. Now I enjoy what I do and I don't feel overwhelmed or as tired anymore.*

Similarly, Scott's narrative also presents his experience and observations while working with new students at his internship site.

*Seeing something in a book does not have the same impact as walking into the preparation room and getting the first hint of a smell. I've seen several students walk through our doors after we have received a case in advanced stages of decomposition. Once these students catch that first hint of the smell, they go pale, get sick, and immediately walk away. It's not something that they were expecting. I firmly believe that they have to get their bodies trained to tolerate some of those cases in which the odor of the decedent could become offensive. I also learned the hard way, and that is one of the reasons that I normally tell new students that in this field a smell can make you or break you! Students have to realize that if it is not the odor of the deceased person, it is going to be the smell of some of the chemicals employed during the embalming process. These students have to learn that their body also needs training to work in this type of environment. Some of them may discover immediately after their enrollment in the program that they may have an allergic reaction to the chemicals, or that their body simply cannot tolerate the working environment. Whatever the reason may be it is always a good learning experience to discover your body's reaction during the first semester and not after the end of the program.*

As described by the participants, their body responses toward the different activities involved in the Mortuary Science program let them determine if they were going to be able to continue with their desire to obtain a license as a funeral director and embalmer. Merriam, Cafarella, and Baumgartner (2007) explained somatic learning as knowing through the body. It is directly related to our physical being and our senses, such as a gut reaction to a comment, or a physical response to a difficult or exciting situation (Merriam et al., 2007). Stinson (1995) added that somatic learning has to involve thought “something that occurs throughout the body, not just above the neck” (p. 46). In other words, learners develop knowledge and specific skills through training their body and through using their senses, not just the brain. In the case of Gabriela, she described that her learning went beyond the memorization of facts and required the involvement of her body to enhance her learning experience and reduce stressful situation. Similarly, Scott learned to adapt to the Mortuary Science environment using somatic learning. For him it was important to analyze his body reactions during the different scenarios involved in the care and treatment of a dead human body. His intention was to determine if he could physically handle the demands of this career.

Furthermore, MacKeracher (2004) highlighted the fact that most adults are engaged in some form of learning that involves physical skills (i.e., maintaining physical fitness, learning to use technological devices, dealing with age-related changes, and coping with newborn or elderly relatives who need physical care). Likewise, Mortuary Science learners become involved in diverse physical activities including techniques in body mechanics to learn how to prevent injuries and muscle fatigue during the performance of the daily activities at a funeral home. These activities are related to

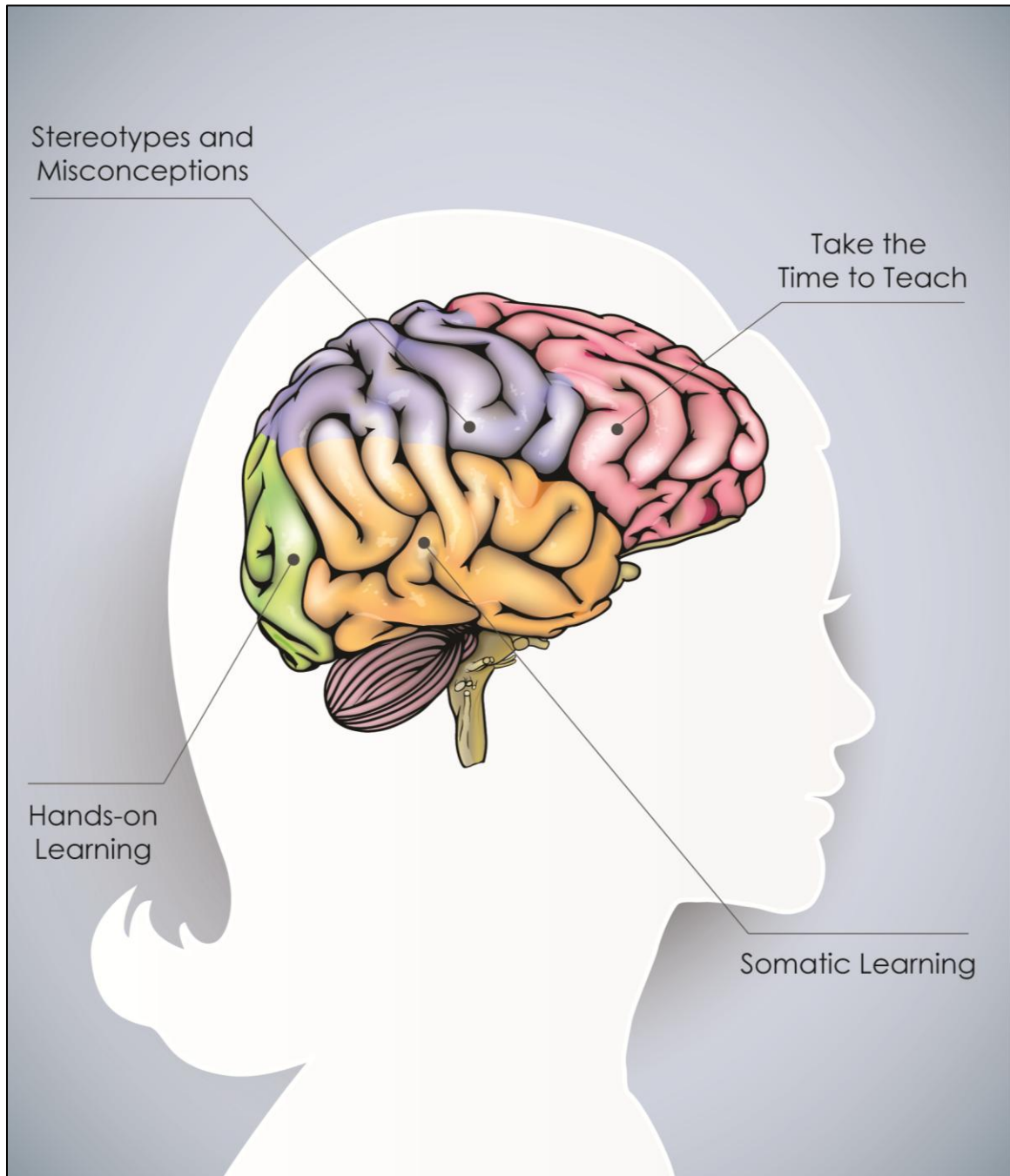
posture, coordination, and physical movement of the funeral directors and embalmers during the transportation, care, and preparation of a dead human body. Most of the participants mentioned that these activities are learned during their first semester in the program while enrolling in the clinical orientation course. The proper application of body mechanics allows these learners to take care of the entrusted human remains while they learn how to take care of their own body.

According to MacKeracher, there are at least three basic methods for facilitating somatic learning: (a) letting learners figure it out for themselves by providing opportunities for trying the skill with the necessary resources and giving feedback about results, (b) demonstrating the skill that, if followed, should lead to skilled performance, and (c) learning to perform an activity under supervision (e.g., “cognitive apprenticeship”), which includes five phases: modeling, coaching or scaffolding, fading, solo performance, and reflection and discussion (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 147).

Within Mortuary Science studies, somatic learning manifests itself during the embalming and anatomy laboratories, as well as internship activities in which the students are presented with different safety measures to comply with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

Additionally, they learn how to recognize the postmortem condition of the deceased (e.g., discoloration, texture, and odor) by participating in case scenarios where they employ the skills learned in lecture. Once the skill is mastered theoretically, the student participates in a laboratory setting under the direct and personal supervision of the instructor in embalming and gross anatomy dissections. Through somatic learning, Gabriela and Scott were able to learn and develop a response that allowed them to reduce stress and enjoy their chosen career.

## THE MIND: DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT THEMES



*Figure 26.* Summary of the Themes of the Mind of the Study

The *mind* of this study as the center of all analytical thinking is composed progressively by the critical analysis expressed by the participants. Each emergent theme represents an element that collectively composes the mind of the story (see Figure 26). Consequently, the mind of this study is composed of four essential themes: stereotypes and misconceptions, take the time to teach, hands-on learning, and somatic learning. The critical analysis is presented through multiple perspectives using the stories of the nine study participants focusing on Sabella, Jordan, Martha, Gabriela, and Scott. During our conversations all participants had an opportunity to reflect on the diverse experiences that formed their story and the possibility to look at that story and determine how to impact future generations of Mortuary Science learners, graduates, and educators.

Their stories began by disrupting **stereotypes and misconceptions** as a vital element of the mind of the story. As demonstrated by the data, the study participants were able to reflect and challenge stereotypes and misconceptions that they had about the mortuary field prior to their enrollment in the program. Recognizing these mistaken views promoted the desire among all participants to educate the community about Mortuary Science and the diverse duties of a funeral director and embalmer. The objective of these participants is to clarify assumptions about the mortuary field and disrupt the development of further myths and stereotypes about funeral practitioners. This critical analysis and continuous desire to clarify misinterpretations about the story is what Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) described as the part of the story challenging assumptions that may have otherwise gone unquestioned. Therefore, “the mind, or the critical analysis part of the story, is what helps us look at our stories through multiple dimensions by asking questions and determine if there are congruencies or incongruences



between the story and the community and its people” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, p. 135).

A second important element of the mind of the story, as identified by the participants, was recognized as **take the time to teach**. This element gave the participants an opportunity to reflect about the current off-campus activities where they work at local funeral homes side-by-side with licensees. When analyzing the stories, this topic was identified by learners and graduates as essential in their learning process. They all acknowledge that when licensees were willing to spend time with them as clinical students and interns the learning process was much easier. Some students also added that when licenses take the time to teach future funeral practitioners, the benefit encompasses the licensees themselves, the learners, the funeral home, and most importantly it benefits the bereaved families being assisted by these learners.

Another emergent theme described by Elisabeth and Martha is the value of **hands-on learning** in the Mortuary Science program. To this effect, Parboosingh (2002) explains that “. . . interactions and relationships with others facing the same challenges and tasks comprise the major source of learning that enhances practice for most practitioners” (p. 230). Study participants indicated that hands-on-activities on campus and at local funeral homes provided crucial opportunities for learning. According to their narratives, hands-on learning activities let the students adopt the skills that better fit their working style. The participants also indicated that upon graduation their own practice reflects an amalgamation of techniques learned from preceptors who taught them during their clinical practice and internship.

Furthermore, learners and graduates agreed that a field such as Mortuary Science requires more than the traditional classroom learning experience. According to the information obtained during our conversations, most participants have the same opinion about **somatic learning**, indicating that in order to be successful in this field it is necessary to use more than the mind to memorize information. It is essential for the learner to involve the senses, emotions, and the whole body in the learning process.

### **The Hands of the Story**

In this section learners and graduates reflect on the necessary changes to improve professional development. The *hands of the story* refers to the possibilities for change to grow and develop for the public good (see Figure 27). Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) stressed the importance of the *hands of the story* as a way of allowing individuals to reflect about the present situation of the story and develop strategies for change.

The *hands* massage and help mold the values, ideas, message, and the rhythm of the story. This negotiation of the message is a complex and sophisticated process, and it accounts for environment and tone of the delivery. This is the stage where the story is told and retold until the choice of language, the nonverbal element, and the message are all coordinated and delivered (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, p. 95). Examining the hands of the story helps to identify the changes that need to take place for creating a better professional setting for the Mortuary Science program. The students, interns, and graduates shared their points of view about their learning experiences with the assigned preceptors during their clinical and internship learning activities. The intention of the participants was to assist current funeral practitioners become aware that funeral directors and embalmers continue to play an important role after graduation in training the next generation.

## THE HANDS OF THE STORY



Figure 27. Participants' Comments Illustrating the Hands of the Story

Examining the data it became clear that the participants valued the supervision and training provided by current licensees. However, they also acknowledged the need for positive changes to happen. Therefore, three themes emerged in looking at the hands of the story: team development, relational learning, and on-the-job training (see Table 6). The narratives provided by learners and graduates support each of the emerging themes. The collective narrative represents the hands of the story and illustrates the areas identified by the participants where the hands need to take action molding the areas where improvement is needed.

Table 6

*Emergent Themes Related to the Hands of the Study*

<b>Emergent Themes</b>	<b>Participant Examples</b>
Team Development	<i>The older funeral directors don't think that I know much because I just graduated . . . to a certain extent I feel that they have not accepted me as part of the team. Their vast experience doesn't let them see that I have the skills to be a funeral director. They still see newly licensed directors as kids who still learning.</i> Elisabeth (licensee)
	<i>Some funeral directors act like we are there to take their jobs and behave in a very defensive manner. Like if they are intimidated by the younger generations. We're here to work together. At the end of the day we all work together to serve bereaved families.</i> Martha (licensee)
Relational Learning	<i>Even now as an intern, I still hear it a lot. Students don't get their cases because funeral directors and embalmers don't work with them. Sometimes funeral directors turn students and interns into secretaries. They use students to clean the cars, the preparation room, the funeral home, and on some occasions students are also asked to mow the lawn. I feel that some funeral directors are not treating students and interns as future colleagues, a future embalmer, or a future funeral director.</i> Brandon (Intern)
	<i>Some of the directors at the funeral homes I visited during my clinical orientation class had me pretty much sitting in a corner cutting up papers. It seemed like they did not have time to be bothered by me, so I accepted that. I was verbal and I was assertive and asked "Is there something I can do?" "Can I watch?" "Can you explain?" But I could almost tell that I was either just being put off or in their way taking their time.</i> Gwen (student)
On-the-Job Training	<i>The second I got my license there were directors that thought I knew it all or that I was supposed to know it all. I guess they overlooked the fact that as a new licensee I still need on-the-job training . . . They were so quick to get mad at me when I did something wrong.</i> Martha (licensee)
	<i>For those interns that have not worked in a funeral home during their time in college, there is no transition. They graduate from the program and have to go directly to the funeral home. There's no in-between. The interns have to get into it and hope licensees are willing to work with them, which I guess, a lot of times, funeral directors and embalmers won't do.</i> Brandon (intern)

## Team Development

Based on the conversations with all nine participants, they emphasized the importance of being considered team members at the funeral homes where they currently work or serve their clinical or internship. All of them value the idea of feeling included and working side-by-side with their preceptor. However, when this does not occur or when these interns get assigned unrelated duties to their academic curriculum they questioned their inclusion as a team member. For example, Elisabeth described her experience as a new licensee with a group of experienced funeral directors and embalmers at her current place of employment.

*The older funeral directors don't think that I know much because I just graduated. I guess in a way they respect me because they know I am done with the program and have passed the law and national board exam, but to a certain extent I feel that they have not accepted me as part of the team. Their vast experience doesn't let them see that I have the skills to be a funeral director. They still see newly licensed directors as kids who are still learning. Some directors exclude themselves from typing an obituary notice or calling a doctor's office to check on the status of a death certificate. They consider these responsibilities too simple for their level of experience, but once I complete the task for them the funeral directors take credit for it in front of the bereaved family. I don't think that there's trust on their part, and sometimes I feel that I have to prove myself to let them know that I am capable of taking care of a bereaved family and represent the funeral home up to their expectations. I always do my best and try to think ahead of what needs to be done. Sometimes what I do while directing a funeral*

*service works better than I anticipated, but when it doesn't I received multiple suggestions from my colleagues. I sincerely wish that all of these fine suggestions had come prior to my oversight and not after the event happened. The suggestions are always great, but sometimes they come a little too late. I wish we could work as a team and prevent future misunderstandings.*

As suggested by Weber and Herter (2007) a growing number of studies have demonstrated that individuals can increase their effort when working in a group compared to working individually. Similarly, management and psychology scholars suggest that teams show a higher performance when they have greater team cooperation (Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008). Thus, Elisabeth would like to be included as part of the team and be provided the respect she deserves as a licensee. In the same manner, Martha has experienced comparable circumstances at the funeral home where she is currently employed. Martha also obtained her license as a funeral director and embalmer within the past year.

*During my early stages in this program there were some bad experiences because I had that label of "just being a student." Based on personal experiences during my clinical and internship periods, I can say that sometimes students and interns don't get the respect they deserve or even the attention from funeral directors and embalmers. Throughout my career, I've had excellent help from some licensees, but at the same time I've encountered other directors who weren't as helpful. Now as a licensee, when I see a funeral director or embalmer that is not willing to help a student, it bothers me. It bothers me because at the end of the day we are all doing the same job, and everybody involved will benefit if we could work as a*

*team. It is sad and unfortunate that some funeral directors are unwilling to help our future coworkers. Some funeral directors act like we are there to take their jobs and behave in a very defensive manner, like if they are intimidated by the younger generations. We're here to work together. At the end of the day we all work together to serve bereaved families.*

As previously noted, Elisabeth and Martha emphasized how important it is for students and interns to feel included in the daily activities of the funeral home. These study participants also recommended the development of a better interaction with licensees in order to emphasize a sense of team work between the learner and the preceptor. In the same manner, Kidd (1960) described that “it is important to develop a relationship to satisfy the learner’s need to establish a sense of belonging within the learning environment by developing connections to other learners and to the facilitator” (Kidd, 1960, as cited in Mackeracher, 2004, p. 151). Thus, based on the data, it is apparent that interpersonal relationships during the clinical and internship programs are necessary for students, interns, and licensees to develop a sense of teamwork.

### **Relational Learning**

All Texas Mortuary Science students are required to complete an internship period prior to obtaining licensure. They are required to work under the personal supervision of a licensee for a minimum of 60 cases; a case in Mortuary Science refers to a dead human body. The internship is intended to support student success, create a sense of confidence in their abilities as learners, and develop a collaborative relationship with those funeral directors and embalmers supervising their work as interns. Relational learning emerged as a theme based on the learning partnership among the students,



interns, and licensees. In this respect, even when Brandon and Gwen described the positive impact of their work activities within funeral home settings, they both highlighted the importance of strengthening interpersonal relationships among the learners and preceptors. In the case of Brandon, he shares the following:

*. . . Sometimes some funeral directors and embalmers just push the students aside. It's not that the students don't know anything. It's that funeral directors are not willing to show students any of their ways. While visiting some funeral homes I noticed that some funeral directors currently employed at funeral homes with agreements with the college aren't necessarily willing to assist the visiting students. Some were very vocal and indicated their unhappiness upon our arrival: "Today we are very busy and we don't have time for you." "We don't have time to tell you anything." "We don't have time to teach you anything." Even now as an intern, I still see the same pattern at several funeral homes. Students don't get their cases because funeral directors and embalmers don't work with them. Sometimes funeral directors turn students and interns into secretaries. They are kept in the office answering the phones and never get a chance to assist in the preparation room, make funeral arrangements with a family, or be out in the foyer helping visitors during the viewing or religious services. Other duties assigned to students sometimes include cleaning the cars, the preparation room, the funeral home, and in some occasions they may be asked to mow the lawn. I firmly believe that some funeral directors are not treating students and interns with the respect a team member deserves. We are not even seen as future colleagues, as future embalmers, or future funeral directors. Due*

*to this lack of support, by the time we get our license, by whatever means we obtain it, we will have limited knowledge about the daily activities of a funeral home. I have heard some funeral directors that just tell new students, "Good luck to you!" "We will sign off on your cases," but sadly they are not willing to train anybody. So, if I ever hear funeral directors saying that we don't know anything and that we are not prepared to assist a family when we finally obtain our license, I'll immediately reply that it is because they didn't teach us anything when they were supposed to take us under their wings. They need to see us as the incoming generation of funeral directors and embalmers and not as the new cleaning crew. I must also say that I am not afraid of the cleaning responsibilities. I know how to do that type of job, but I went to college to improve my skills and try to get a better job.*

In the same way, Gwen also presented her experience describing a day as a clinical student visiting a local funeral home.

*. . . If I could modify the learning environment at the funeral home and if I was the funeral director responsible to introduce new students who are participating in their clinical orientation, I would definitely spend more time with them. I would not put them in a corner cutting up papers, which happened to me at one funeral home. I would definitely do a lot more introducing them to every facet of being a funeral director within the rules and regulations that are allowed. I understand that students are not yet licensed as funeral directors/embalmers. They are not supposed to be back in the preparation room doing things that they are not permitted to be doing. I understand that completely, but there are a lot of other*

*functions at the funeral home that could be explained to mortuary students but it is not. Unfortunately, at least in my case I found that to be true. There were a few directors and embalmers that were very good and took me around and explained a lot of things. They even introduced me as the visiting student to the rest of the employees, but the majority did not. Some of the directors at the funeral homes I visited during my clinical orientation class had me pretty much sitting in a corner cutting up papers. It seemed like they did not have time to be bothered by me, so I accepted that. I was verbal and I was assertive and asked "Is there something I can do?" "Can I watch?" "Can you explain?" But I could almost tell that I was either just being put off or in their way taking their time. I felt like I was put off in that corner and nobody wanted to talk to me. Nobody wanted to show me. Nobody was willing to explain or help. I was eager, eager to learn everything I could. The only way I learned anything was because I was a pain and kept on asking questions. I think they were glad I was gone at the end of the day. I never could figure that out, maybe they were busy. Maybe they did not have time to work with me that day, because I remember hearing in class that funeral homes have things going on. Nevertheless, when the directors are not busy they could take the time to explain things to the students, but in my case they didn't. So maybe I just got them on a bad day.*

Both narratives described two main concerns of the participants while completing their clinical or internship requirements. On the one hand they were worried about not being able to complete their clinical or internship case load and as a consequence lack the work experience that they were seeking. On the other hand, they felt that sitting at a desk or

doing other duties not directly related to funeral directing and embalming activities were not creating the interpersonal relationship that the program had intended to develop during their interaction with the preceptors. Most participants indicated that their goal was to put into practice what they learned in college and be able to transition out of the student status and be incorporated as a colleague in the mortuary field. However, some of them felt that their presence at the funeral homes was seen as a burden to the funeral directors and embalmers who were in charge of supervising their work. As noted by Holloway and Alexandre (2012) in order to support student success, “it is necessary to create communities of mutually beneficial and respectful learning as opposed to programs based on peer competition and isolation” (p. 89). The data revealed that the expectations of the participants while working at the funeral homes correspond with the authors’ holistic approach highlighting that a welcoming community is essential to come together as equals during the learning experience even if there are different roles and responsibilities among participants. Holloway and Alexandre (2012) highlighted that the emphasis should be placed “on learning effectively together and creating a shared community identity” (p. 89). In the case of Brandon and Gwen, they both reflected on their past experiences and acknowledged the dedication and effort of those funeral directors and embalmers who were willing to create a working relationship. They both agreed that the collaboration of the licensees allowed them to come together, learn from each other, engage, and form professional relationships with experienced individuals in the mortuary field.

## On-the-Job Training

The Mortuary Science program involved in this study requires for all its students and interns to get involved in on-the-job training incorporating funeral directing and embalming activities. The goal is to expose the learners to funeral home daily tasks that cannot be replicated in school. During our conversations, the participants shared their learning activities with local funeral homes and embalming centers as well as their experiences with the licensees involved in their off-campus training. Furthermore, they also talked about the challenges they encountered while trying to incorporate the activities required by the program to their own schedule. The participants also stated that sometimes the expectations of the funeral home and embalming centers go beyond their work experience as students, interns, or recent graduates. For instance, Martha described her experience and interaction with her fellow funeral directors at the first funeral home where she holds a position as a licensee.

*. . . It is not realistic for veteran licensees to expect new funeral directors to graduate one day and know everything about the funeral field the next day. I've tried my best to be able to meet the expectations, but there are details about this career that I can only learn at the funeral home. I noticed at my current place of employment that the second I got my license, there were some funeral directors that thought I knew it all or that I was supposed to know it all. I guess they overlooked the fact that as a new licensee I still need on-the-job training. Unfortunately, every time I make a mistake or don't do something the way they would do it, they are quick to get mad and are always eager to correct me. This is the type of feedback that I expected when I was an intern. I don't understand why*

*they expect for me to do something their way when they didn't train me first. Again, I'm not going to know everything. Even to this day I still make mistakes and I'm learning as I go. There are a lot of things in this industry that we're going to have to learn from our mistakes because we handle it as it comes. We're not going to be able to learn the whole thing in school. We have to learn on the job through our clinical and internship programs or even after we get licensed. Unfortunately, some funeral directors and embalmers think students and interns should learn the hard way. Now that I obtained my license, I normally share my story with the new apprentices, and I tell them that as a student I decided that I was going to learn from the directors that didn't want to work with me. Those directors refused to assist me when I needed the most help, but their attitude helped me to develop a new character and avoid repeating their behavior with new students. I promised myself that I was going to do my best to help students with their training at the funeral home, and I have done it so far. So, in a way I also thank those funeral directors because their attitude made me a stronger person.*

Likewise, Brandon's narrative also presents a similar experience during the beginning of his internship period.

*As far as I know, there is no job where you leave school one day and know exactly what to do in a company. It's up to the people in the job market to further train the new employees, expand the skills they learned in school, and get them to the point where the company wants each entry level employee to be. For whatever reason, some funeral directors and embalmers have lost touch with reality. I*

*always say that we got our theoretical knowledge from the Mortuary Science program. We learned what we needed to learn from school, but it's also up to the funeral establishments and their directors to further that knowledge. There are some things that we can only learn at the funeral homes, and I think that the treatment we receive is unfair at some of these locations. I tell new interns that haven't worked in a funeral home during their time in college that there is no transition. They graduate from the program and have to go directly to the funeral home. There's no in-between. The interns have to get into it and hope licensees are willing to work with them. I know students that are still working on their internship and had to prolong it because they are not getting their entire funeral and embalming cases, which doesn't make any sense when interns are working at a funeral home. Due to the lack of cooperation from some funeral directors, some interns have to find a second location and volunteer time out of their regular working schedule to embalm either at the same funeral home or a different location. Now interns have to work two jobs instead of working just one, which puts even more stress on them.*

Lastly, Sabella was also emphatic on recommending on-the-job training for all new employees.

*I think funeral homes should have a more organized on-the-job training. We as new interns need it. After graduation I know I will be able to perform most of the activities expected of an entry level funeral director and embalmer. However, any funeral home hiring recent graduates may take the time to make us aware of their expectation, hopefully before we make a mistake. My concern is that even when I*

*may know my duties, I may just know them according to my previous employer and they may not be in compliance with the expectations of my new supervisor. But then again, I may only know my responsibilities according to the textbook and the manner in which my professors taught me. So, if there's a specific way to conduct funerals, embalm, dress, or cosmetize a body, I hope the funeral home will train all new employees on their manner of doing things. We as incoming interns need the training because we have practiced under the supervision of many funeral directors and embalmers and even when they all do the same thing, they have their own particular style and eccentricities. So, to be on the safe side, each funeral home needs to teach their way to all new employees.*

The findings from this study present data regarding the value learners and graduates attribute to the clinical and internship requirements of the Mortuary Science program. The off-campus activities as described by the participants are also defined by Matsuo (2014) as on-the-job training:

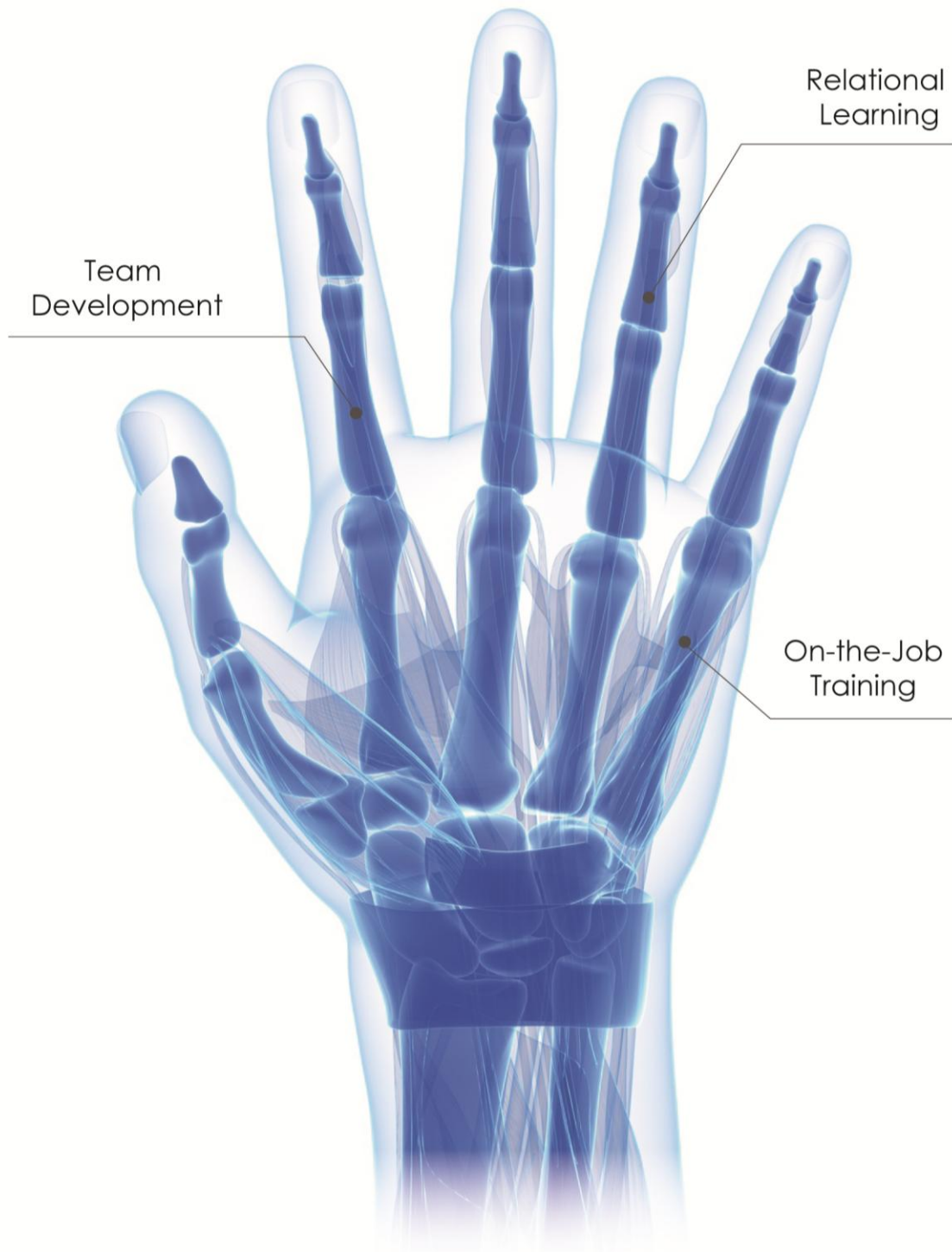
A form of instruction that occurs at the workplace during the performance of a job usually involving a novice-to-expert approach in which the required skills are identified, the novice and expert are paired, and a way to move the novice closer to the level of expert is determined (p. 226).

Most participants described these off-campus activities as actual funeral home experiences that combined theory with workplace practice. In contrast, other students and interns identified these activities as challenges in their career. These struggles were due to the lack of disposition of funeral directors and embalmers to assist learners in their goals of completing the required internship caseload and attaining licensure.



As a case in point, Jacobs (2003) categorized on-the-job training (OJT) as structured and unstructured. “Structured OJT refers to the planned process of developing competence on units of work by having an experienced employee train a novice employee in the work setting or a location that closely resembles the work setting” (Jacobs, 2003, pp. 28-29). In contrast, he added that unstructured OJT has a number of problems to include “unplanned buddy training or do-it-yourself training where the desired training outcomes are rarely, if ever, achieved, and when it is, all trainees rarely achieve the same outcomes” (Jacobs, 2003, p. 23). In Mortuary Science the requirements for the internship period is regulated by the Texas Funeral Service Commission and in compliance with the Texas Occupations Code (TOC, Chapter 651.001.14). Therefore, this internship can be considered as a structured experience and an on-the-job training experience. Under specific guidelines the internship allows the learner to get practical experience under the personal supervision of a licensed funeral director and embalmer. Until all case work is completed, the learner will hold a provisional license as a funeral director and/or embalmer. Upon completion of the on-the-job training, the funeral director or embalmer along with the intern will submit documentation stating the provisional licensee has completed all requirements and is ready to exit the program.

## THE HANDS: DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT THEMES



*Figure 28.* Summary of the Themes of the Hands of the Study

Analyzing the study findings and looking at the *hands* of the story provided a medium for allowing individuals to reflect about their present situation, identify areas where improvement was needed, and develop strategies for change. As a result, the hands of the study are composed of three fundamental themes: team development, relational learning, and on-the-job training (see Figure 28). The molding of the story is presented based on the opinion of nine participants concentrating on Elisabeth, Martha, Brandon, and Gwen's narratives. The individual *pláticas* and group conversation gave these participants the opportunity to talk about their multiple experiences and mold the message that eventually will be transmitted to new generations of students seeking a career in funeral service.

Even when some of the participants began their stories by describing unpleasant experiences at their clinical and internship sites, they quickly began to reflect on the idea of using their own stories to grow as a professional and to give themselves the opportunity to change for the benefit of future generations of funeral directors and embalmers. Consequently, during the analysis of the participants' responses **team development** surfaced as the first theme of the *hands* of the story. Recognizing these unpleasant experiences allowed the participants to think about the need to promote and enhance the work of those preceptors that have developed a team relationship with their interns. As demonstrated by the data, the study participants requested on several occasions to be considered part of the working team assisting the bereaved families and not as individuals obstructing the daily activities of the funeral directors. These study findings are congruent with the literature supporting the need to restructure the workforce into working teams; the belief is that employees are more productive and motivated when working in a team rather than individually (Li, Kirkman, & Porter , 2014). It was evident

that learners treated as colleagues became motivated to complete their internship requirements and assumed the responsibilities of a licensee at the same location where the internship was completed. The participants also agreed that when the preceptor works in collaboration with the intern, the team become stronger and it benefits the working environment at the rest of the funeral home or embalming center.

The second major theme focused on the participants' **relational learning**. This element permitted the clinical students and interns to recognize preceptors' feedback as a positive influence to continue their work towards licensure and develop a sense of confidence in the field. Brookfield (2013) indicated that "most adult education programs attempt to empower the adult learner by providing information and opportunities for the development of new skills so they can take matters into their own hands" (p. 3). However, the authors also added that "empowerment is not something teachers, professional developers, or leaders can give to students, colleagues, or followers; it's something students claim" (Brookfield, 2013, p. 11). Therefore, when licensees provide the climate where learners could develop their skills and perceive themselves as team members and future colleagues, the learners and practitioners are able to empower themselves and create a better learning environment.

The third theme that surfaced when analyzing the participants' responses was **on-the-job training** (Matsuo, 2014). All the participants recognized that the internship period is crucial to develop their practical skills as funeral directors and embalmers. However, there is a sense of frustration among these learners when they encounter licensees unwilling to teach students and interns during their on-the-job training. Furthermore, the participants also showed their concern when they discovered that, upon

achieving licensure, they were expected to be proficient in dealing with the deceased and the surviving relatives without considering the quality of the period of internship.

Finally, the *hands of the story* demonstrated how the study participants at all levels of the Mortuary Science program (i.e., students, interns, and graduates) analyzed their story to mold their position as future funeral practitioners. After the story was told from different perspectives, they agreed that their experiences, successes, and challenges could be used to promote change for the success of the next generation of learners.

### **The Legs of the Story**

Anatomically, the *legs* are the lower limbs that give humans the ability to move from one place to another. The metaphor of the *legs* will continue in this section to share the stories of the participants with future generations of funeral practitioners (see Figure 29). Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) stressed the importance of the *legs of the story* as a way of allowing individuals to promote change.

If a story has longevity, if it impacts others beyond the storyteller, it probably has legs. A story with legs is one that lives and moves, could be passed down from generation to generation, and may just stand the test of time. The story with legs also begins to contribute to the identity of place, people, and organizations. The story with legs moves people to action provokes new questions, and helps identify the work that is connected to the story. Stories with legs also help individuals and groups develop the necessary agency to push, resist and amalgamate the outside forces to allow for the creation of a new reality for the self, the group, and the community in which we live (p. 95).

Likewise, the study participants manifested their desire to pass on their learning when it is their turn to train others. Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) added that giving legs to a

story is about telling the story publicly and finding if it has traction with audiences (p. 135). The data for this section revealed that students, interns, and licensees desired their stories to have mobility and to be heard by those involved or interested in the Mortuary Science field.

## THE LEGS OF THE STUDY

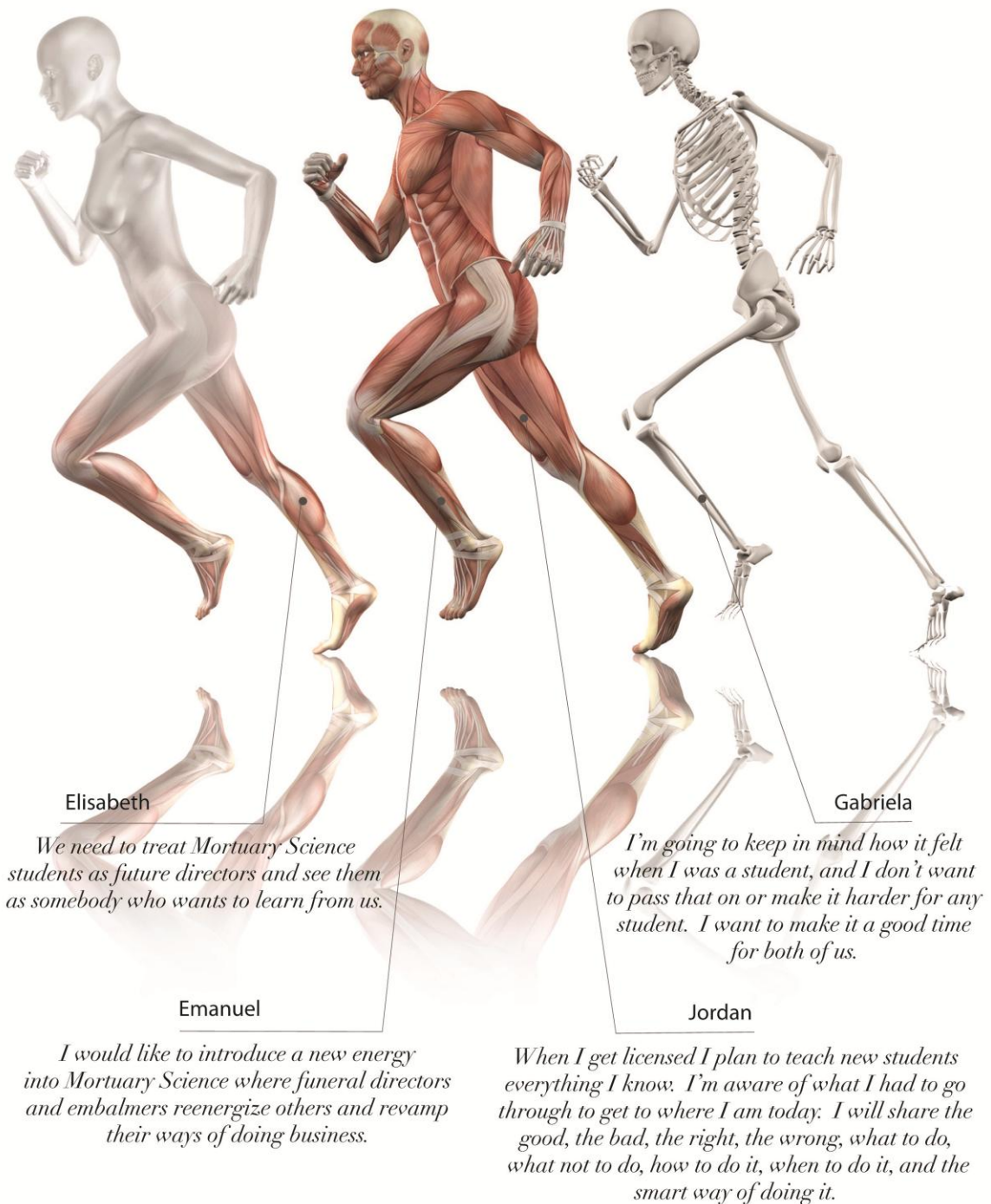


Figure 29. Participants' Comments Illustrating the Legs of the Story

While sharing their respective stories, all participants recognized the value of learning from veteran individuals who were willing to share their experiences in the field. During our individual and group conversations, those participants who had the opportunity to talk to a licensee prior to their enrollment in the program indicated that they were able to clarify questions and doubts about Mortuary Science as a field of work. They also spoke about the need for new students to investigate the field prior to enrolling in the program. A common piece of advice to future learners was to be goal-oriented and inquisitive. Thus, four themes emerged in this section: career motivation, career development, passing on the wisdom, and from protégé to mentor (see Table 7). These emergent themes are described in detail by using the most relevant narratives of the participants. Together, the participants seek to impact current and future students in their journey to become licensed funeral directors and embalmers and to create legacy.



Table 7

*Emergent Themes Related to the Legs of the Study*

<b>Emergent Themes</b>	<b>Participant Examples</b>
Career Motivation	<i>I would tell those interested in Mortuary Science “Make sure it is what you want. Don’t just do it because your friend is doing it! But if this is what you want don’t let anything stop you.”</i> Sabella (student)
	<i>I would advise future students to do their homework and research, find out about the hours, the requirements, and the dedication needed for this career.</i> Gwen (student)
Career Development	<i>As future funeral practitioners, they need to learn how to be detail-oriented . . . learn what needs to be done at each of the stages of the funeral where they are scheduled to participate.</i> Elisabeth (licensee)
	<i>I want them to enjoy their career . . . the longer our professionals stay within their local setting; the easier it will be to gain the trust of their community.</i> Emanuel (licensee)
Passing on the Wisdom	<i>Sharing my experiences with students has enabled them to trust me as their preceptor and be more supportive of me while taking care of the daily activities of a funeral home.</i> Martha (licensee)
	<i>I will share my errors in the field as well. Hopefully students can learn without having to make the same mistakes. I will be up front and be straightforward with the future Mortuary Science students.</i> Sabella (student)
From Protégé to Mentor	<i>Later, when I have interns . . . I’ll provide them enough guidance and information so they are able to make appropriate decisions for each case as future directors and embalmers.</i> Scott (intern)
	<i>I will definitely be someone positive that is willing to help students, interns, and newly licensed funeral directors.</i> Martha (licensee)

## Career Motivation

From the narratives it became evident that the study participants had important pieces of advice to share with students seeking a career in Mortuary Science. Most of these participants indicated during our conversations that the guidance received from licensees with years of experience in the field was essential in achieving their goals in joining or finishing their career as funeral directors and embalmers. For that reason, they now want to pass along those recommendations enhanced with their own experience. Sabella is a student who emphasized during our *pláticas* important points that she considered worth sharing among those seeking a career in funeral service.

*I would tell those interested in Mortuary Science, "Make sure it is what you want." Don't just do it because your friend is doing it! But if this is what you want don't let anything stop you. It isn't always easy, but you should work for it. It will give you a great sense of satisfaction every time you complete a course, pass the state law exam, begin the internship program, and finally accomplish the goal of being fully licensed. I believe anything worth having is worth working for. So, don't give up! If you get knocked down, get back up! If you failed a class, take it again and do things in a different manner. Don't use anything as an excuse as to why you didn't finish the program. Now, if you're not sure about joining the program, I invite you to explore all your options. When I began exploring Mortuary Science as a career, I consulted with people in the field, talked to the professors, visited some of their classes, and then talked to some of the current students. I just wanted to make sure that the stories matched among all of those already involved in this field. Whatever you decide to do, make sure*

*this is what you want. This career is not an easy task, but it's worth it. Last but not least, I must add that if Mortuary Science is what you want, make sure you select a program that is concerned about you and your learning. I can honestly say that the professors that I've had in this college had definitely helped me in the theoretical and application process of this career. They don't just care about filling the seats. They are available and care about you and that you're actually learning the necessary skills to be successful as a funeral director and embalmer. So, if you're going into a Mortuary Science program, make sure they're there to help through the entire career.*

Gwen also wanted to share her academic experience as a returning college student after more than four decades of dedicating her life to rearing a family. She emphasized that it is never too late to begin what one really wants in life.

*I gave it a lot of thought before I made the decision to return to college and get enrolled in Mortuary Science. It's something I just wanted to do. However, I was so scared starting off because I hadn't been in school for over 42 years. I really didn't know if I could do what was going to be required of me, but I thought if I don't try I will never know. I was not going to allow myself to die without knowing that I at least tried to get involved in a funeral service career. Now I can say that I went from home to the funeral home and feel that this is the field where I belong. I would advise future students to research and do their homework, find out about the hours, the requirements, and the dedication needed for this career. I would ask myself: Am I prepared to make this commitment and be completely involved with my future career as a funeral director? In addition, I would really*

*recommend students considering a career in funeral service to invest as much time as needed to be sure that they are ready to begin the journey. Once the commitment is there, I will not let anything stop me. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other and keep a passion for the field. That's the way I did it. Always be committed; don't let things in life derail you. You will get there if you want it bad enough. I think that's a determining factor how bad do you want it.*

As previously noted, Sabella and Gwen described their approach to assessing their goals and motives that engaged them to pursue a career in Mortuary Science. They described in detail the different steps they took in their career decision process to determine if this field was for them. Based on the level of satisfaction with their career accomplishment, now they both wanted to use their story to advise future students and prevent them from selecting a career based on inaccurate information or stereotypes about the field.

According to existing literature, “effective goal-setting behavior clearly is important in career decision-making, a complex process often requiring delay of gratification, careful prioritizing and planning, and personal action” (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008, p. 23). In the case of Gwen, she speaks about her dedication to academic work and the way she prioritized personal life events to be able to achieve her goal of graduating from the program.

*I have learned to prioritize and say no to some people to who kept on inviting me to participate in activities that I used to do often. Before I enrolled in the Mortuary Science program I never declined an invitation to a social gathering. I think it took a while for my family and friends to learn my new role as a student and to accept my academic responsibilities. It was hard to say: "No, I cannot go,*

*I have homework tonight.” “No, I cannot do that tonight, because I have a test tomorrow.” It took them a while, but they finally adapted to my school schedule.*

The previous narratives suggest that career motivations vary according to the personality of the learners and their individual characteristics. As documented by London (1983), career motivation involves multiple dimensions of the individual such as: *career identity* consisting of job involvement, commitment, and ability to delay gratification. This is followed by *career insight* that identifies the person’s realistic perceptions about the field, and *career resilience* to describe the person’s resistance to career disruption in a less than optimal environment.

### **Career Development**

The study participants, especially interns and licensees, recognized during our conversations that funeral home employees could benefit from an organized career development approach. They wished to improve the interest among funeral home managers in developing the talents of students and interns visiting during their clinical rotations or serving their internship at the funeral home. The licensees believed that a mutual gain could be obtained if the funeral home staff worked harder to match the licensure goals of the interns with the funeral home needs of maintaining licensees employed for longer periods of time. Elisabeth shared that most learners possess the academic training but lack awareness about the demands of the field. She has taken upon herself to assist students and interns in developing a better understanding about the career demands and consider the possibility of employing them as licensed directors and embalmers after the completion of their internship requirements. Elisabeth explained that:

. . . Students and interns need to know that the job of a funeral director could be stressful at times. Also as future funeral practitioners they need to prepare themselves and be open to the idea of working odd schedules. The normal business hours of a funeral director will be whenever there is a need for their services. If the directors are scheduled to work 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., that doesn't always mean that they're going to get off right at 5:00 p.m. This career has a high demand of being able to accommodate grieving families. We are here for them. We don't have control if a family walks-in a few minutes before the scheduled time to get off. Any funeral home will expect funeral directors to stay after hours or be on call when necessary. It is during situations like these that funeral directors demonstrate they are willing to assist families even when the assistance needed is not during traditional business hours. I also lay emphasis on the need to learn how to be detail-oriented while listening to what the surviving relatives are telling the director making funeral arrangements. Future funeral directors must be willing to assist the bereaved and make them feel like they are the only family being helped at the funeral home. Furthermore, funeral directors are expected to fulfill the needs of the family, not because they have to, but because they want to assist those facing the death of a loved one.

I also believe that there are several activities that licensees need to explain to students and interns before allowing them to assist in a funeral arrangements conference. As a funeral director, I normally explain to every student and intern what needs to be done at each of the stages of the funeral where they are scheduled to participate. We also need to explain the purpose of every question

*funeral directors ask the surviving relatives. Students need to know how to explain to families which questions are necessary in order to obtain information for the death certificate and which questions are used for the planning of the funeral ceremony. Funeral directors also need to clarify to students what documents must be signed by the immediate next-of-kin. I normally train these students and interns to help them obtain their license because I enjoy the interaction we have during the internship period and because I consider it my duty to the profession. Now I just hope that some of them will consider staying with us after they become fully licensed. If they decide to begin their career as licensees somewhere else, I can feel confident that I did my best while they worked with me.*

In a similar manner, Emanuel presented his point of view describing his duties while training future funeral directors:

*During my daily interaction with Mortuary Science students, our future staff members, I frequently converse with them and let them know that they have control of what can be done in the field. I assure them that we want them to stay and not come and go. We don't want to lead a revolving door. I highlight that they must decide how much they want to participate. I want to motivate them, I want them to come to the field, and I want them to enjoy their career as a funeral practitioner and not come and go. In my opinion, the longer our professionals stay within their local setting, the easier it will be to gain the trust of their community.*

*These interns need to realize that it's not just a job where they work with the deceased. It's a service career where they also attend to the needs of the living at times that could be outside the traditional business hours. I talk about all of these aspects to prepare them for a lifelong career in funeral service. Ultimately people like me want to keep the recently licensed, especially those trained by us. We want the community we serve to become familiar with us as individuals. We want to make our community feel safe and calm when they call the funeral home. Families who call upon us are familiar with the kind of service we offer to our fellow citizens and appreciate a familiar face. When they call that number they know who is coming to help them out.*

These licensees are employed at two different sites: Elisabeth working at a metropolitan funeral home and Emanuel at a rural location, both of them had taken action to help future funeral practitioners obtain their license. Moreover, these licensees indicated that the internship period serves as a dual dialogue where the employers analyze the dedication of the interns and the future practitioners evaluate the working environment offered by the employer. As recent licensees, Elisabeth and Emanuel recognized the importance of guiding interns towards a clear understanding of their own skills and determine how these talents relate to the demands of the funeral home. The aim of these licensees is to foster a career development environment in which both the employee and the employer support each other even after the end of the internship period. A number of researchers have explored the reasons workers prefer a career development culture and revealed that these employees usually viewed career planning and development as an opportunity toward upward mobility (Conger, 2002; Muratori & Smith, 2015). These



include highly qualified personnel “whose career concerns need to be addressed in order to have a positive career development culture” (Conger, 2012, p. 372). Comparable to the training activities of Elisabeth and Emanuel with the students and interns working at their funeral homes, Conger (2012), adds that career planning and development is very helpful to the advance of employees in their chosen career. This also coincides with the goal of the licensees who aim to motivate learners to consider staying in the same field with the possibility of ascending into managerial positions instead of seeking a different employer or a second career.

### **Passing on the Wisdom**

According to the Texas Occupations Code (TOC, Chapter 651), the Texas Funeral Service Commission prescribes and supervises the course of instruction received by the Mortuary Science learner while participating in the internship program. It is during this period of time that the less experienced individuals learn under actual working conditions from veteran, more experienced preceptors. This stage of the Mortuary Science program allows licensees to share their knowledge with incoming funeral practitioners seeking to put into practice the embalming and funeral directing theory that they learned in college. Martha is a recent licensee who has worked with students and interns and shares her experience as a preceptor in the mortuary field.

*I normally talk to several of the students employed at the same funeral home where I work and encourage them to ask me as many questions as they may have. I urge them to try to sit in the office with different funeral directors while they are making funeral arrangements. I firmly believe that these students need to be assertive and try to figure out how to work funeral files and learn how to*

*complete all the necessary forms. Normally the students get surprised when I share my story and let them know that I have been licensed for less than two years. I share this with them to let them know that not too long ago I was that person that didn't know what was going on or what to expect on a funeral service. I assure them that I know that feeling, because I was also a student. In addition, I also let them know that it may be a little chaotic until they get used to the environment. Sharing my experiences of the students has enabled them to trust me as their preceptor and be more supportive with me while taking care of the daily activities of a funeral home. I have noticed that once they see that I am willing to train them, they get a much needed sense of confidence to progress in the journey of obtaining their own license.*

During our group conversations, Sabella also talked about her plans to use her experience in the program as a way to benefit future students and interns. Her main goal revolves around being honest when sharing her story. She wants to be able to portray the positive aspects of the Mortuary Science field as well as the less attractive phases confronted by those seeking a career in funeral serve.

*I can only tell new students about my experiences, what I've learned, what I'm learning, what I want or what I choose to learn. In my opinion all students should set a goal for themselves. I will tell them the truth, without sugar coating my story. I will be up front and be straightforward with the future Mortuary Science students. The important part is to let them know that we don't have to pretend to be a perfect person who doesn't make mistakes. I tried and failed miserably, but this is going to give me the opportunity to share what I learned from pretending to*

*be picture-perfect. I will share my errors in the field as well. Hopefully, students can learn without having to make the same mistakes. I guess I will also speak to them about what I've learned during my time as a student and the multiple requirements that I had to fulfill. The main thing, I think, is to stay focused and ignore the multiple distractions that will be along the way. This career requires dedication and concentration in every single class. I always remember one of my professors telling me: "We only have one chance to get it right. Do no harm!" He was right! Since then I stopped complaining about the high scores required to pass each course and decided to apply myself and study harder. Now I want to transmit the same feelings to my future colleagues. I don't know if my professor still uses the same phrase, but if he doesn't I will adopt it as my own. It affected me in a very positive way and focused my career as a funeral director and embalmer. Now, every time I have a bad day I remember the phrase and immediately change my attitude by aiming to get everything right on the first try without causing pain to the families that I am serving. My co-workers and future interns will know about my story. I have to share my learning experiences because I know that at least one student will benefit from hearing it.*

These excerpts show the different manners in which Martha and Sabella are currently sharing their experiences in an effort to pass their wisdom to the next generation of funeral practitioners. Both study participants discovered that sharing personal experiences, related to their journey in the Mortuary Science field, permitted them to develop a better work environment when working with less experienced funeral practitioners. MacKeracher (2004), suggested that using the method of "*telling stories*

encourages learners to *articulate their strategies* by verbally stating what they are doing and why, thus helping them better understand their thinking process” (p. 140). Even when not all funeral practitioners were willing to share their personal stories about their experiences in the field, Martha and Sabella still wanted to expose learners to different points of views and techniques used by funeral directors and embalmers. Nevertheless, they both insisted that *telling stories* helps individuals become independent learners and aids them in learning skills in simulated or real-life situations (MacKeracher, 2004).

### **From Protégé to Mentor**

All study participants considered that the clinical and internship work in the Mortuary Science program were the most valuable experiences in their career. It is for this reason that they have taken as a personal commitment to either enhance the experiences they had with their preceptors or to develop a new plan to move licensees to action and create a supportive learning environment for future students. During the individual and group conversation, new questions were raised by the participants to determine a plan of action and encourage the collaboration of licensees to assist learners in their goal of becoming a funeral practitioner. After the conversations, they all decided that the best way to impact others is by setting the example and begin treating the incoming students as they wished licensees had treated them during their clinical work and internship.

As an intern, Scott is already planning how to enhance the internship experience for future learners. Even though he is currently not a licensed funeral director/embalmer, he enjoys working with clinical students and shares his past experiences with them.

*Later, when I have interns under my supervision, I would tell them the steps in the preparation room don't have to be done necessarily in order . . . I'll elaborate and give them enough information for them to be able to determine the best treatment for each embalming case. I will actually answer the questions and give them information they could use later in their career as embalmers. Something besides the typical "because I say so," or "because you are the student and I am the director." As an intern, anytime my preceptor assigns me to work with visiting students, I give them a general idea of what is expected of them. I'll make sure to let them know that if they have any questions, comments, or concerns, they can either come to me or any of the licensed staff. If time allows I normally assist them with whatever it is that they need to do to complete their clinical requirements. I usually ask them about their expectations so I can plan a day where they can learn the most, either at the funeral home site or the preparation room.*

Likewise, during our conversations, Martha was enthusiastic and ready to describe her personal experiences working with funeral practitioners who voluntarily allowed her to practice under their supervision. However, she also mentioned that not all funeral directors were willing to assist her. As a result, she decided to become the mentor she wished she would have had during her time as an intern. She strongly affirmed that she has changed the training approach some funeral directors and embalmers used while she was completing her internship requirements. Martha stated:

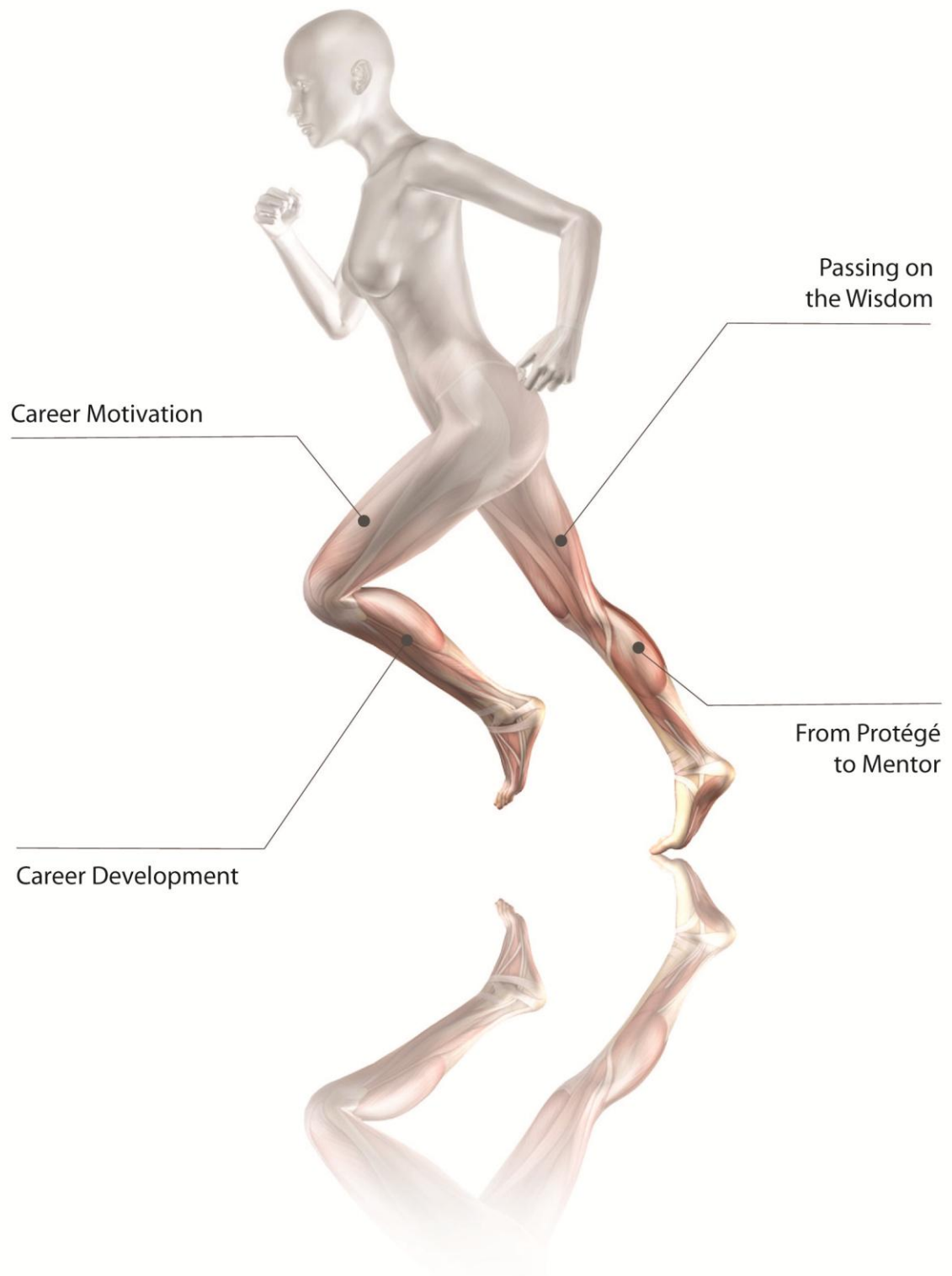
*I will definitely be someone positive that is willing to help students, interns, and newly licensed funeral directors. So, definitely I will encourage students and*

*interns by making them aware that knowledge is going to come with experience, not to be discouraged by what they see or what they hear from veteran funeral directors. I know I was fortunate to have good people that did help me throughout mortuary college, my program, and my internship. I want to be that same helpful person. I don't want to be anything other than positive and encouraging to my new colleagues. I would tell current Mortuary Science students not to get discouraged until they experience the daily activities of a funeral director/embalmer by themselves. Don't get discouraged by what you hear in school if you haven't worked anywhere, and even then, I started off with no funeral home experience. My first job was where I started my internship, and I am still working there. So, I honestly didn't have much experience other than what we would do during college years. That alone is not anything that should scare someone from getting into the program. I don't have family in the business, but that didn't stop me for seeking this career. So, without doubt, I would encourage individuals interested in becoming funeral directors to continue pursuing their dream and avoid any undesirable comments that could affect them negatively. They need to fully experience the field and know whether it's for them or not.*

Scott and Martha are able to see themselves as mentors. They use their former experiences to inform a positive practice in their new role assisting others succeed in the profession. Their narratives also demonstrate that the working relationships among licensees, interns, and students are important and seem to have a long lasting effect for all of those involved in the training process (Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000). A

theoretical framework related to this learning process is social learning theory (Bandura, 1986). Social learning theory involves the concept of modeling, or learning by observing others' behaviors and attitudes. Bandura defined three types of modeling stimuli where protégés learn from their preceptor through a *live model* in which the actual person demonstrates the behavior to be learned, *verbal instruction* where the preceptor gives detailed instructions and descriptions about the behavior, and *symbolic* where modeling occurs by the behavior presented by characters in books, films, videos, radio, or online media (Bandura, 1986; Hergenhahn & Olson, 2005; Meriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). In the case of the study participants, it is evident that the observation of the behaviors presented by their preceptors during the internship period remained with them. Their goal now is to evolve from protégé to mentor and become a role model to enhance the learning experiences of incoming generations of Mortuary Science students.

## THE LEGS: DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT THEMES



*Figure 30. Summary of the Themes of the Legs of the Study*



While analyzing the narratives of the study participants, it became evident that they were willing to share their story and transmit their experiences with future learners in the Mortuary Science field. In view of that, the *legs* of the study are composed of four essential themes: career motivation, career development, passing on the wisdom, and from protégé to mentor (see Figure 30). The *legs* manifest through the participants' desire to move people to action and to provide an environment in which future students and interns will feel comfortable during their clinical work and internship involvement. This section focused on the narratives of Sabella, Gwen, Elisabeth, Emanuel, Martha, and Scott as they described their experiences in the different stages of the program. Moreover, they also shared plans about how to motivate a greater number of licensees to be willing to work and provide supervision to incoming learners.

Although not all the participants had an enjoyable experience during their clinical and internship periods, they all agreed that a negative experience is also a learning opportunity to transform the environment for those that are following their steps. Based on these encouraging factors **career motivation** arose as the first theme of the *legs* of the story. Reflecting on the collective experiences gave them the idea to develop a plan to involve veteran and newly licensed funeral directors and embalmers to create strategies in which current students, interns, and licensees commit themselves to establishing a professional relationship with incoming learners. These participants wanted to share their stories, including both effective and less pleasant experiences, to serve as an exploration support for students seeking a career in Mortuary Science. The term “career motivation is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct internal to the individual, influenced by the situation, and reflected in the individual’s decisions and behaviors” (London, 1983, p. 620). In other words, career motivation is influenced by internal and external factors.

According to London (1983), this term goes further to include motivation associated with searching for a job, seeking training, and trying to accomplish career goals.

Next, the **career development** theme refers to obtaining appropriate training and learning the secrets of the trade. Instructors and practitioners should work in collaboration to assist students and interns develop their talents during clinical work and internship. Muratori and Smith (2015) suggest job shadowing and talking to others as effective strategies to serve this purpose. Therefore, when licensees take the time to assist first semester Mortuary Science students during their clinical visits, these learners obtain the necessary information to make a decision either to continue in the field or to seek a different career.

The third theme included **passing on the wisdom** or as referred by MacKeracher (2004) “the process of helping individuals become independent learners, by assisting them in acquiring skills in simulated or real-life situations, and to ensure that each understands the contextual meaning of the knowledge and skills being learned” (p. 140). Recognizing that not all practitioners were helpful, the study participants wanted to replicate the positive learning experiences and pass them on to the next generation of students.

Lastly, the fourth emergent theme **from protégé to mentor** illustrates how the study participants are aware of their future role as mentors. They are willing to help others and to assume their new role as licensees. These ideas are congruent with the work of Bandura (1986) who focused on the cognitive process involved in the observation of the behavior to be learned. Additionally, the author added that this type of learning accounts for both the learners and the environment in which they operate. The end goal is to create a suitable learning environment for future students and interns.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **STORIES HARVESTED FOR NEW BEGINNINGS**

The main goal of the study was to document the narratives of learners and graduates of a two year Mortuary Science program in Texas. Gaining a better understanding of their journeys may assist instructors, practitioners, and program administrators to better prepare future funeral directors and embalmers. The collective story of nine study participants is told utilizing the anatomy of the story—the navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). The navel represents the study participants which constitute the central components of the story. Without participants there would not be a story to tell. These participants included three current students enrolled in their third or fourth semester in the program (Gabriela, Gwen, and Sabella), three serving their internship and in the process of obtaining a license as funeral directors and embalmers (Brandon, Jordan, and Scott), and three who graduated within the past two years and are currently licensed and practicing as funeral directors and embalmers (Elisabeth, Emanuel, and Martha). The combined participants represent the three stages of a career in Mortuary Science (students, interns, and licensees).

This section of the dissertation discusses the elements of the story in light of study findings and reflection questions to move the story forward (see Table 8). In addition, this section presets recommendations for practice for instructors, practitioners, and program administrators. Next, tensions and challenges related to the implementation of the study are provided followed by ideas for future research and concluding thoughts.

## Reflecting Back on the Elements of the Story

In writing these paragraphs I have in mind instructors, students, practitioners, and program administrators in the Mortuary Science field. The following table summarizes the emergent themes presented in the previous three chapters of the dissertation (see Table 8). The goal is to discuss relevant questions that can help the reader gain a clear message about the current status of the Mortuary Science field as portrayed by the study participants.

Table 8

### *Summary of Study Findings*

Element of the Story	Emerging Themes	Reflection Questions
<b>Heart:</b> Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy for the bereaved</li> <li>• Experiencing a second career</li> <li>• Care and respect for the dead</li> <li>• Satisfaction with job well done</li> <li>• Developing self-confidence</li> <li>• Eagerness to learn and apply skills</li> </ul>	<p>What core values do we want to instill, teach, and practice in Mortuary Science programs?</p> <p>How will these values impact the Mortuary Science community for change?</p>
<b>Mind:</b> Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stereotypes and misconceptions</li> <li>• Take the time to teach</li> <li>• Hands-on learning</li> <li>• Somatic learning</li> </ul>	<p>How will the study participants' story help disrupt stereotypes?</p> <p>What are the incongruent aspects and tensions between learners and instructors/practitioners?</p>
<b>Hands:</b> Shaping Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team development</li> <li>• Relational learning</li> <li>• On-the-job training</li> </ul>	<p>How will the stories told help Mortuary Science learners and graduates grow and change?</p>
<b>Legs:</b> Mobility of Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career motivation</li> <li>• Career development</li> <li>• Passing on the wisdom</li> <li>• From protégé to mentor</li> </ul>	<p>What is the impact of these stories on future generations?</p> <p>Who benefits from telling/documenting these stories?</p>

The reflection questions that appear in the previous table are inspired by the developmental questions provided by Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) in their work describing the process of harvesting the story (see Appendix C, p. 191). Next, I present a brief discussion of study findings following the sequence of the main elements of the story (heart, mind, hands, and legs) and addressing the reflection questions formulated above.

### **Heart: Values**

As manifested by the study participants, some fundamental or core values to be instilled in Mortuary Science practitioners include: empathy, care and respect for the dead, investment and satisfaction with a job well done, confidence, and eagerness to learn. All these values can be modeled, practiced, and learned through the courses students take and through their clinical work and internship in the program. By teaching these values any Mortuary Science program will be creating individuals with strong work ethics. This type of practitioner would provide a more humane service to the surviving relatives and will be aware that they are handling human remains that still are someone's relative or friend. As a result of teaching these values, Mortuary Science programs would be instilling self-confidence and lifelong learning skills in their graduates. So, they can present themselves with self-assurance and the understanding that every case/bereaved family served will constitute a new learning experience.

In addition, the heart of the story relayed the diverse motivations that learners and graduates brought with them when they became involved in the program as well as their plans to continue in the field. Some of these participants are now planning to share what they know about their new career and educate friends and family members about the demands of the profession.

**Mind: Analysis**

The stories provided for the mind of the study revealed some of the stereotypes held by the learners upon entering the Mortuary Science program. At the same time, their narratives dismantled these misunderstandings by explaining the actual work and responsibilities of a professional in the field. Some misconceptions held by the participants included: working in a quiet place performing autopsies, preparation limited to dressing and cosmetizing the deceased, and having minimum interaction with the surviving relatives. The study participants themselves were able to reflect on the stereotypes they held and to come up with suggestions on how to prevent this from happening to others. Thus, from reading the narratives of the study participants future students can learn about the actual expectations if they decide to join the field.

In the mind of the story section, the participants also talked about the incongruences between the classroom pedagogy and the work environment. For example, they spoke about the lack of involvement from some funeral directors and embalmers assuming their role as models and teachers for interns and newly licensed individuals. The study participants described the need for hands-on learning and the importance of developing somatic learning. These are essential components in the Mortuary Science field preparation. Furthermore, as new licensees, the participants expressed their enthusiasm about helping students and interns to follow the good examples provided by veteran funeral directors and embalmers.

**Hands: Shaping Relationships**

In this section the participants reflected on the changes necessary to improve the profession. After looking at the values to instill in Mortuary Science learners and professionals, analyzing the incongruences and misunderstandings between classroom

practice and internship, the hands of the study examine the possibilities for change and growth. To this effect the learners and graduates talked about the need for team development, relational learning, and on-the-job training.

All the study participants agreed on the urgent need to work as a team to develop the necessary confidence and professionalism required of an individual pursuing a career in Mortuary Science. Working as a cohesive group that involves students, interns, graduates, and practitioners will make this a stronger and more engaging profession. There is currently the need to strengthen interpersonal relationships between learners and preceptors. The students and interns need to be offered real opportunities to complete clinical work and internship requirements. They need to be able to assume and perform the duties related to funeral directing and embalming to successfully transition from learners to graduates and professionals.

Another important point made by the study participants relates to on-the-job training. Several participants shared a concern about the need for room to continue learning on the job. They explained how some funeral directors expected that as graduates and new licensees they already know all aspects of the job. Therefore, these new licensees call attention for their colleagues to be more patient and to continue sharing wisdom until students and interns acquire the necessary experience and job proficiency.

### **Legs: Mobility of Story**

This metaphor symbolizes the eagerness and good disposition of the study participants to create legacy to pave the road for the next generation of Mortuary Science professionals. In this section learners and graduates spoke about career motivation, career development, the importance of passing on their wisdom and the need to plan for a

future where they are no longer protégés but had become effective mentors. Here the study participants narrate their experiences becoming professionals who learn from their own mistakes and wish to transfer their wisdom and practical knowledge in their new roles as mentors and models. They want to facilitate learning and welcome the next generation into the field of Mortuary Science. Thus, the participants propose to involve veteran, more knowledgeable peers, and newly licensed funeral directors and embalmers to create strategies for students, interns, and licensees to establish strong professional relationships with incoming colleagues.

In the legs of the story, the study participants are able to provide advice to future students encouraging them to research what the profession is about before venturing in such career. Another piece of advice relates to the importance of becoming a detailed-oriented individual who understands that becoming a funeral director requires acquiring specific knowledge. For example, learn how to assist bereaved families during the funeral arrangement conference as well as be proficient with rules and regulations associated with the disposition of human remains. A last piece of advice provided by the study participants relates to the importance of enjoying one's career and the ability to become established practitioners in their place of residence. Learners and graduates agreed that the longer one stays in a community the easier it becomes to gain their trust and a better service will be provided.



### **Recommendations for Practice**

This study was implemented in order to fill an identified gap in the literature on qualitative studies involving Mortuary Science learners. A large portion of the existing literature focuses on quantitative studies (Lubrant, 2013; Patterson, 2010; Shaw, 2005); the learning journeys and experiences of Mortuary Science learners and graduates have not been documented before. Recording the narratives of learners and graduates could be useful for drawing implications for practice to better serve these students and the communities they serve; accordingly, this study adds to the body of knowledge in the field of Mortuary Science education. Focusing on the narratives of the participants can assist Mortuary Science educators to draw implication for practice for accredited programs. Similarly, the study could contribute to the development of a plan of action to assist Mortuary Science learners in their efforts to become licensed as funeral service practitioners in their states of residence. Based on the data presented, the study participants have indicated the need to identify licensees and funeral establishments willing to undertake the task of training current students and interns. In other words, there is still a need to develop a team relationship based on mutual cooperation and continuous partnership with faculty members, licensed personnel, and learners.

### **Recommendations for Instructors**

Instructors in the Mortuary Science program should plan to incorporate the teaching of values as part of their established curriculum. As mentioned by the study participants, empathy for the bereaved, care and respect for the dead, job satisfaction and investment, developing self-confidence, and becoming lifelong learners are important values to be taught throughout residence in the program. Instructors have many

opportunities throughout classroom practices and assignments to be able to address the teaching of these values. It is important that instructors consider teaching the whole person. In other words, instructors are not just responsible to teach subject content, but they should also model and teach values relevant to the profession.

Another important aspect that instructors need to keep in mind in their teaching relates to the development of somatic learning—knowing through the body. The learning involves training the body to perform specific skills required in the Mortuary Science field. For instance, students and interns must be familiar with the safe level of chemical exposure during the embalming process and the development of possible allergic reactions. In other words, the instructors must take the time to caution the new students to be aware of possible sensitive reactions during their initial practices in the embalming and anatomy laboratories. Some examples include: finding a route to step away from the laboratories in case of experiencing difficulty breathing, excessive watery eyes, nausea, or vomiting. Simple instructions could include informing students to find a place to sit to take a short break until their body gets accustomed to standing for longer periods of time. Instructors should model the proper use of personal protective equipment to avoid direct contact with body fluids or embalming chemicals.

### **Recommendations for Licensees**

One of the most important implications for licensed funeral directors and embalmers is to offer hands-on training and on-the-job training to Mortuary Science clinical students and interns under their supervision. Having funeral practitioners that are willing to guide and support current learners is essential to their successful development in the field. On-the-job training is fundamental to expose students and interns to funeral

home daily activities that cannot be replicated within the Mortuary Science program. It is essential for licensees to model the expected behavior of a future funeral director/embalmer during funeral services and/or embalming activities. Providing immediate feedback to guide and encourage the learners will allow them to apply theory to actual work settings. Based on conversations with the study participants, they all considered this type of training as crucial to their development in the funeral service field. Their main goal is to work side-by-side with their preceptors in activities directly related to interaction with grieving families or the preparation of the deceased during the embalming process. It is important to keep in mind that this exposure will help students and interns gain knowledge and become familiar with the expectations of the funeral home and its clientele. When licensees are willing to pass on the wisdom, they are helping future funeral practitioners develop a sense of confidence in the field. Licensees will also have better chances to have positive impact on the life of future colleagues. These interactions also have potential for building a stronger bond between the preceptor and learner.

### **Recommendations for Program Administrators**

The study finding indicated that as a group, Mortuary Science learners and graduates appreciated the support provided by educators and current licensees. Learners and graduates value the orientation and career motivation for new students, subsequent gatherings early in their career, and the diverse field trips to state and national conventions. The administrative team of Mortuary Science programs should consider how to design and deliver extracurricular activities in which students and interns interact with current licensees during professional events. This type of relational learning

permitted clinical students and interns to recognize the positive influence of the administrative team. They felt empowered in knowing that administrators and educators work as a team to establish a program where they could learn inside and outside the traditional classroom setting.

Also, from the academic aspect of the program and since the internship period is intended to support student success, it is vital to establish active training for preceptors. The training should be focused on informing current and future preceptors about the learning outcomes of the clinical work and internship period. With proper approval and in collaboration with administrative agencies, this type of training for preceptors could count as continuing education units towards the renewal of their license as funeral directors and embalmers.

### **Tensions and Challenges**

The purpose of this section is to recognize and explain the challenges and tensions that took place while conducting this research. For instance, one of the challenges I encountered was that I knew personally each of the study participants according to their status in the program (e.g., students, interns, and licensees). In conducting this research, there were aspects in favor and against these existing relationships. The favorable aspects motivated students, interns, and licensees to get involved in the research project. Most participants were aware of my academic endeavors and my involvement with the Mortuary Science field. These aspects made it easier for them to respond to the recruiting email seeking volunteers to participate in the research study and helped them to be comfortable with me during the individual and group conversations. Furthermore, in an effort to prevent a conflict of interest with the study participants, I requested a

different teaching assignment during the year of data collection. In other words, I was not the instructor of record for the study participants. This permitted current students and interns to participate willingly without having a grade attached to their contributions. The challenge began when I had to present the data obtained and write about the negative aspects reported by the participants about a field that I feel passionate about. As an instructor and practitioner I always want to provide positive learning experiences to students and interns. Therefore, it was difficult to hear about the negative experiences reported by the study participants when they were completing their internship. However, my dissertation chair was extremely helpful in keeping me focused and assisted me to reflect about those negative aspects and transform them into learning experiences for current practitioners, administrators, and faculty members. Conducting this research also caused me to reflect about my own experiences as a former Mortuary Science student and intern. As a current educator and researcher, witnessing the enthusiasm of the participants to get involved in the study combined with their continuous monitoring about the progress of the dissertation had been an indicator that they are ready to be part of change in Mortuary Science.

Knowing about the field and keeping in mind who would be reading this dissertation was overwhelming at times. I know some of my colleagues would like to think that we are perfect and that we are providing good quality learning experiences for all. When making decisions about data analysis and where to use certain data to describe the parts of the story, this exercise was challenging. Some of the stories provided by the participants presented an overlap making it difficult to decide where to use those stories.

The solution was to provide transitions and make conscious and arbitrary decisions as the researcher.

Another challenge I faced while presenting study findings related to providing appropriate connections to the literature. The literature in the Mortuary Science field is somewhat limited, forcing me to look at other education fields to find literature to provide definitions of concepts and support for study findings.

### **Future Research**

This dissertation focused on only one Mortuary Science program. Currently, in the State of Texas there are four schools offering a degree in Mortuary Science; therefore, a larger study including all four institutions would offer a wider scope focusing on the experiences of Texas' learners and graduates.

Another idea for future research would be to conduct a comparative study between college-based and single-purpose institutions. This study should analyze learners and graduates challenges and successes as they complete the different stages in a Mortuary Science (student, intern, and licensee).

A different study could involve individuals who decided not to continue with the Mortuary Science program. It is important to determine if their decision to withdraw from their goal of becoming funeral directors and embalmers was by some means influenced by the academic requirements while attending college, the experiences during their clinical or internship visits, or due to personal reasons. Such study could also incorporate the participation of graduates who never completed their internship requirements, licensees who decided to seek a new place of employment other than a

funeral home, within a few years after obtaining their license, or those who opted to continue their education in a different line of work.

Finally, implementing a study that includes the perception of administrators in different Mortuary Science programs would be a good way to expand the scope of this dissertation. Their narratives could help evaluate current practices within the program and identify more effective clinical and internship practices with the local funeral homes. The interaction of administrators could help in the development of a best practices model that could be shared with licensees during a continuing education seminar that would give credit for their license renewal.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I embarked on this dissertation journey with enthusiasm and optimism seeking to learn about the learning experiences, journeys, challenges, and successes of Mortuary Science learners and graduates. I learned that stories educate, offer firsthand accounts and insight to the culture, and reveal a unique truth from the point of view of the protagonist. Stories can also impact and inspire change which is transmitted from one generation to the next allowing new generations to modify their present and direct their actions toward a better future (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016; Kim, 2015; Riesman, 2008). This dissertation represents the beginning of my research agenda and constitutes a contribution to the literature in Mortuary Science as a field of education.

As I work to finish the last chapter of this dissertation, I am aware of the continuous responsibility to carry on the work I started with Mortuary Science learners and graduates. This study has given me a greater respect for my students and their

dedication towards their goal of becoming licensed funeral directors and embalmers even when faced with challenges. Our time together during this dissertation was very short; yet, our time as colleagues just begins and it will endure long after this study comes to an end. Together we now have the potential to join forces and begin to work towards creating a better learning environment for those who come after us. This study has allowed me to reflect about my current involvement in the field and assess how much more I must do in order to strengthen the success of current and future Mortuary Science students, interns, and graduates.

As this dissertation comes to an end, it gives me personal and professional satisfaction knowing that the voice of Mortuary Science learners and graduates will be incorporated into the literature of the field. It is also gratifying to know that the study participants replied with eagerness to the recruiting email and were willing to share their experiences in their respective stages of the program. As an educator and funeral practitioner, I know I can have a greater impact on the Mortuary Science field by identifying new venues to bridge diverse generations of funeral practitioners. Together we can work towards the development of an environment in which we see each other as colleagues working to serve those experiencing the death of a loved one. It is the end of the dissertation, but the learning journey is not over yet. It barely begins.



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## **APPENDIX A**

### **RELEVANT LITERATURE**

#### **Brief History of Mortuary Science Field**

In the United States, the practice of funeral directing as an occupation was born during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Habenstein & Lamers, 2001; Kopp & Kemp, 2007). The need to care for the dead during the Civil War (1861-1865) created explicit demands for capable individuals to handle dead human remains and send them home for burial. Following the Civil War, funeral undertaking arose as an occupation (Prothero, 2001), and during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century funeral service education developed and matured (Habenstein & Lamers, 2001). The changes in the Mortuary Science field since the Civil War are numerous, from its name to the organization of the discipline. The field has received different names during the last 50 years to include: embalming school, mortuary school, and more recently funeral service education (Habenstein & Lamers, 2001). Likewise, the title assigned to the individuals in the field has also changed; they have been called undertakers, morticians, funeral practitioners, funeral directors, and embalmers. This continuous advancement has given funeral service practitioners the opportunity to go beyond the planning of the final disposition of the deceased and to move into death care education by extending their services to the surviving relatives. Other important advances have been the development of administrative agencies to regulate the academic activities of the Mortuary Science programs and a legislative body to oversee the activities of students, apprentices, and licensees (Habenstein & Lamers, 2001). The American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) was established in 1962 replacing the Joint Committee of Mortuary Education which was established in

1946. One of the important roles of the ABFSE is to serve as the national academic accreditation agency for college and university programs in Funeral Service and Mortuary Science Education.

Another change worth analyzing is the length of the preparation of the funeral practitioner. It has been modified to fit the education standards and current demands of society. In 1910 the average length of courses in embalming schools was about six weeks; fifteen years later in 1925 it was increased to eight weeks; in 1928 to three months; in 1930 to six months; in 1946 it was modified to nine months, and 1976 saw yet another change to a twelve-month curriculum. The American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) now requires each of its accredited schools to offer an associate degree program, or its equivalent, as the minimum educational standard as preparation for the funeral service profession (ABFSE Accreditation and Policy Manual, October 2013; Shaw, 2005).

Based on the evolution of funeral service education, it is evident that this field has improved due to the accreditation standards required by the ABFSE. The associate degree requirement of 1996 marked the integration of funeral service education into the realm of higher education. At the present time, seven of the 57 accredited college and university programs in funeral service education and Mortuary Science have gone beyond the associate degree to adopt a baccalaureate as their minimum requirement. These 57 accredited programs are composed of 44 public and 13 private institutions (ABFSE Directory, 2013, p. 7). The past century has witnessed the accomplishment of national accreditation recognition and an educational reform for funeral service education (Shaw, 2005).

## **Historical Literature in Mortuary Science**

This section provides a historical review of the literature to reflect the different issues that have affected Mortuary Science education during the course of the last seven decades. To begin, it is important to acknowledge that although the Mortuary Science field offers a terminal degree, most practitioners hold an associate degree. Few Mortuary Science educators continue their education and enroll in doctoral research programs. This shortage of researchers limits both the venues and the number of scholarly publications in the field. Most of the current research comes from faculty members who have pursued doctoral degrees and related their dissertation to an aspect of Mortuary Science. Because of the limited research specific to Mortuary Science, there is heavy reliance on seminal texts, which are included in this literature review.

In the late 50's Jackson published a study focusing on increasing understanding of what happens to people facing the death of a loved one. Jackson (1957) explored methods about how to prepare people for grief situations through pastoral care and religious education. As a minister and a psychotherapist, this author was interested in assisting other pastors and individuals in close contact with the bereaved. Furthermore, he discussed the relationship between grief responses and faith as a way to keep in touch with reality. The main goal of this book was to allow pastors and other caregivers to become familiar with their own feelings and those to whom they minister while facing death and dying experiences.

In 1961, a second edition of *The History of American Funeral Directing* written by sociologist Robert Habenstein and historian William Lamers was published. These researchers described for U.S. readers the history of the field of Mortuary Science. This

same work has recently been published as a 2014 edition. In reviewing the new edition, changes made to the original are not apparent. This same book appears in the literature as published in different years (1955, 1961, 1962, 1981, 1995, 1996, 2001, and 2014) as it constitutes an important piece of work since it is a historical resource.

Another important publication by Habenstein and Lamers appeared in 1963. This time the researchers covered funeral customs all over the world. They expanded on the meaning of death for each of the cultures studied, beginning with the expected care of the deceased, organization of the funeral service, mourning behavior, disposition practices, and post-funeral ceremonies.

### **Seminal Works in Mortuary Science**

As the field of death and dying became an acceptable subject for discussion, the groundbreaking work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) and J. William Worden (1982) has served as the foundation for death education and as essential pieces for current research. These works have assisted students, caregivers, and professionals involved with the dying and the bereaved. While it has been more than 40 years since Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' *On Death and Dying* described the experience of terminally ill patients, this work still assists students, caregivers, and professionals involved with the dying and the bereaved. Several years later, the work of J. William Worden incorporated the grief experiences of the surviving relatives after the death of a loved one. These two seminal works have been instrumental in educating professionals in the field of Mortuary Science as well as the general public about the death and dying aspects of life.

Kübler-Ross, a pioneer in psychiatry and counseling, is a well-known authority among death and dying educators. Her work with people who were dying allowed her to

discuss many areas surrounding the field of death, grief, and bereavement. In 1969, Dr. Elisabeth Küebler-Ross introduced her book *On Death and Dying* in which she presented her theory of the five stages of grief. Her work was based on data collected on the experiences of individuals who were diagnosed with a terminal illness. Based on her observations, Küebler-Ross presented the five stages of grief as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. For many years these stages were the expected behavior of a patient with a life-limiting illness or those who had experienced the death of a loved one. In 1982 Dr. J. William Worden introduced the first edition of his book *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, which summarized the grief work of the bereaved. According to Worden each bereaved person must accomplish four tasks of mourning: accept the reality of the loss, experience the pain of grief, adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing, and withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in another relationship. In contrast to the work of Kübler-Ross, this approach focused on the bereavement experience of the surviving relatives, not on the terminally ill patient. Although four tasks of mourning are discussed, Worden indicated that individuals move at their own pace through these tasks and in a different order. Some may skip a task until they feel comfortable to explore and complete it. Worden also emphasized that completing the tasks allows the bereaved to come to terms with their loss and achieve equilibrium.

### **Contemporary Dissertations in Mortuary Science**

Currently death education has been incorporated in many fields ranging from counseling, psychology, health careers, and Mortuary Science. These contemporary studies describe the experiences of students directly involved with the dying and the

bereaved. In some institutions, death education is now moving toward engaged partnerships with organizations taking care of the terminally ill patients, the deceased, and the surviving relatives. The following dissertations are presented in chronological order from the least recent to the most current research published.

Taggart (1989) created a survey to study the perceptions of educational preparation of Mortuary Science learners. He recruited participants who graduated from 39 existing programs at the time the study was conducted. Taggart sent a survey to 1,487 graduates living in the United States, and a total of 469 surveys were returned. The following areas were the focus of the study: (a) removing the deceased, (b) preparing the body for embalming, (c) injecting fluids, (d) the embalming process, (e) preparing the body for viewing, (f) arranging for the funeral, (g) conducting the funeral, (h) fulfilling administrative services, and (i) carrying out business administration (i.e., tasks identified by the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards). According to Taggart (1989) the analysis of the data revealed that the graduates' perceptions of educational preparation were highly influenced by their status within the funeral home employment structure, their rank within their graduating class, and their age. Based on his findings, Taggart (1989) concluded that "even when education must be broadly based to serve a wide spectrum of students, individuals' needs and personal characteristics should be considered" (p. 31).

An ethnographic study by Hyland and Morse (1995) described the affective role that funeral directors assume in comforting mourners. Some of the topics explored include the separation of the ceremonial aspects of funerals from the technical aspects of the embalming process. This separation was established by describing the "frontstage



and backstage” (p. 453) of a funeral home. The authors described this division as a way to control the frontstage of the funeral home with an environment of dignity, respect, personal comfort, and the mechanistic pacing of the funeral events. Furthermore, the backstage concentrates on the technical aspect to include embalming and restorative work on the deceased that enable the family to “view death as a peaceful state” (p. 453).

Hyland and Morse conclude that the work of the funeral directors provide comfort in a unique way since they “provide genuine comfort by orchestrating a good funeral, easing the burden so that the family may get through this most difficult public ritual” (p. 473).

Cahill (1999) implemented an ethnographic study to describe how the students’ social lives normalize work with and around the dead. This author described how Mortuary Science programs immerse their students in the occupational culture of funeral directing, providing them an opportunity to create a distinctive and confident professional identity that they could carry elsewhere and into the future. Cahill described how Mortuary Science students’ intimate contact with the dead and with death is normalized not only by what they talk about, but also by how they talk about it, and how instructors talk to them. He suggested that this clinical language encourages students’ analytic transformation and preparation for the job.

Shaw (2005) explored a concern for employment shortages and employee turnover in the funeral service profession. This dissertation built on his previous research identifying and describing the work values of students enrolled in different funeral service education programs. For his dissertation, Shaw used a population sample comprised of 124 funeral service education students attending three different types of educational programs; a community college (35), a university (31), and a private

technical institute (58). The goal was to find out why, prior to 2005, fewer students were entering funeral service education and how these changes affected the employee turnover within the profession. Shaw (2005) searched for the relationship between the Holland's typology codes, also known as personality types, (i.e., realistic, intellectual, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional) and variables such as gender, age, education, second career opportunity, career specialization, family work history, and race. Shaw's study findings claimed that the primary focus of the funeral service profession, which has historically been embalming and disposition of the deceased, was shifting to a market-driven business. Shaw stated that due to the separation of duties among funeral directors and embalmers, job reclassifications must be addressed to correspond with this new reality. The results of this study suggested that the Self-Directed Search (SDS) is a valid measure of the occupational personality of Mortuary Science students. Shaw (2005) recommended the SDS instrument as a potentially useful tool to help screen students for admission into a funeral service education program and/or assist in counseling students regarding a specific focus within the program (embalming, management, and/or funeral directing) resulting in less attrition in the funeral service education program and greater success and satisfaction of graduates and employees entering the profession.

In similar fashion, a quantitative dissertation by Patterson (2010) focused on the performance of Mortuary Science students on the National Board Exam (NBE) as a condition of graduation. It examined the criticism from current funeral directors and embalmers about the quality of education found in Mortuary Science/funeral service programs stating that "graduates have a lot of book knowledge but lack practical skills required in the profession" (Patterson, 2010, p. 2). The author cross compared student

success of graduates who earned their degree online and those who earned their degree in a traditional face-to-face (F2F) classroom. Patterson looked into the quality of education students receive through internship, field placement, role plays, and simulations.

Patterson (2010) sought to evaluate and demonstrate that funeral service education properly prepares graduates to pass the NBE. Specifically, this dissertation aimed to describe topics such as: (a) demographic characteristics of the 2009 graduates of programs accredited by the American Board of Funeral Service Education, (b) the educational experiences of these graduates, (c) the statistically significant differences between the NBE scores (science section, arts section, and individual subjects) for students who completed the program online versus F2F and cohort versus non-cohort.

Patterson (2010) collected data through a survey design and explored issues such as: student demographics, work experience prior/during the Mortuary Science program, teaching methods, cohort options, full- or part-time status, and laboratory/clinical work.

A shocking finding from this study revealed the minimal exposure to hands-on experiences related to funeral directing and embalming. Patterson stated that this lack of vocational preparation is a factor in the national trend for many to quit the profession within five years of graduation and their struggle meeting employer expectations during the first years of employment.

A more recent qualitative dissertation by Trad (2012) indicated that students enrolled in Radiation Therapy and other undergraduate health-care profession programs have had minimal exposure to end-of-life issues, chronic illnesses, and death. “Learning to feel comfortable in communicating about sensitive issues such as death and dying are important skills that will reduce the stress of a radiation therapist when talking with their

patients” (Trad, 2012, p. 5). Trad stated that even when educators in the health professions understand the importance of teaching students communication and empathy skills, the teaching strategy most commonly used is lecturing (p. 26). In addition, she was able to identify a case of “oncologic nurses feeling confident to communicate with terminally ill patients about their treatments but unprepared to address the patients’ emotional needs” (p. 89).

The main research question guiding Trad’s (2012) dissertation was: How do radiation therapy students respond to the implementation of an engaged scholarship partnership with the local hospice in relation to educational gains, experiential learning, transformational learning, and professional growth? Data were collected through interviews, student written reflections, field notes, documents (e.g., course syllabus, hospice orientation agenda, patient information sheets), and researcher’s journal. Study participants were ten students enrolled in the introduction to radiation therapy course offered as part of their program studies. Trad’s work is framed as an engaged scholarship study aiming to create a learning setting out of the classroom for students to participate in hands-on activities where they can put into practice what they learned in lecture. Trad’s (2012) goal was to address an identified deficit in the course plan and provide real life hands-on experiences to the learners (p. 120). This dissertation provides an ample literature review showing multiple examples of how health professionals feel inadequate and under prepared when talking with their patients about terminal life issues. Study findings revealed that these students’ empathy and confidence and their communication skills addressing end-of-life issues increased as a result of participating in the hospice project. The students reported that in order to build patient-centered relationships they

needed to learn to actively listen to their patients' needs and acknowledge their feelings no matter how scared and nervous they felt about not knowing what to reply. After the study, the participating students declared that they had built meaningful relationships with a community with whom they previously indicated having nothing in common.

Another study (Kelly, 2012) addressed the fear that often inhibits individuals outside the funeral industry from understanding the funeral service environment. Kelly's (2012) dissertation explored the experiences (i.e., life stories, feelings, views, and perspectives) of funeral service students who were attending a college of funeral service. The goal of this dissertation was to go beyond the preconceived idea that funeral service professionals enter the business because of ". . . their preoccupation with death when in reality funeral service professionals choose to work in the industry because they seek to serve the living by creating a memory picture that depicts the perceived image of the deceased" (Kelly, 2012, p. 6). Grounded theory served as the framework for this dissertation as it explored the educational experiences of funeral service students. The purpose of the study was to create an open environment for the participants to express their experiences in the field of Mortuary Science.

The results of this research were obtained from a sample of 12 participants from a total of 43 self-identified students. The reduction of the sample was established through data saturation after interviewing the 12<sup>th</sup> participant (Kelly, 2012, p. 25). Study findings claimed that the grounded theory of *Sustaining the Image of Life* suggests that funeral service professionals seek to console the bereaved. The professional funeral services employees must be mindful, cultivate relationships, and construct the memory picture for the living. Kelly concluded that funeral service is not to be feared by the general public

as the study of death and dying but rather seen as an industry that focuses on *Sustaining the Image of Life* for the living.

A recent quantitative study by LuBrant (2013) analyzed the learning objectives established by the American Board of Funeral Service Education and documented the opinions of funeral practitioners to determine whether funeral service education prepares students to function as funeral directors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. LuBrant pointed out that the way Americans dispose of their dead has evolved with time. However, much of the current American Board of Funeral Service Education curriculum was developed during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time when earth burial was the norm for most. According to the Cremation Association of North America (2013) the percentage of deaths in the United States resulting in cremation had increased from 3.56% in 1960 to 43.20% in 2012. Due to these changes in the final mode of disposition for decedents in the United States, the most recent accreditation manual published by The American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE, 2013) has included new learning objectives and requires for all Mortuary Science programs to have learning resources specifically related to cremation. In his study, LuBrant (2013) stated that there is no empirical evidence either to support or refute the long-standing assumption that the learning objectives are relevant to the contemporary practice of funeral service. To come to this conclusion LuBrant looked into the evolution of the traditional 20<sup>th</sup> century American funeral along with the incorporation of the hospice movement as a citizen-initiated change in health care in North America.

The results of this research showed that of 19 curriculum content areas, the learning objectives for the curriculum content area of funeral directing are perceived by

practitioners as being the least adequate for professional practice (LuBrant, 2013, p. 156). In contrast, the curriculum content area with the highest mean score of perceived preparation is embalming, followed by (a) human anatomy, (b) Federal Trade Commission, (c) pathology, and (d) restorative art. These results indicated that the perception of preparation was more favorable to the science portion of the curriculum than the learning objectives. A limitation of this study recognized by LuBrant was that the opinions studied were only those of current funeral practitioners and no attempt to consult the point of view of the general public was made. Additionally, there was lack of participation of Texas practitioners; of the 238 participants, only four were from Texas.

### **Type of Adult Learning**

Knowles (1990) introduced the concept of *andragogy* or the art and science of helping adults learn. According to Boucouvalas and Lawrence (2010), andragogy is one of the most widely discussed and critiqued aspects of the adult education literature in the United States. Boucouvalas and Lawrence explained that an essential principle in andragogy is the important role of the adult's life experiences, in both quantity and quality, to the learning process. While explaining the scope of andragogy and his theory on how adults learn and how instructors can guide them into learning, Knowles (1990) presented a series of assumptions about the adult learner. These are:

1. Adults need to know why they are learning something.
2. Adults are self-directed and responsible for their own decisions.
3. They have a wealth of life experiences and knowledge.
4. They are ready to learn when there is a specific need.
5. They are goal oriented and learn about what is relevant to them.

6. They are motivated to learn when they think that learning will improve their life conditions.

Knowles's work forms part of a group of contributions to the "dissemination of andragogical ideas throughout the USA" (Savicevic, 2006, p. 20). Merriam et al. (2007) argued that there are a number of theories, models, and frameworks, each of which attempts to capture some aspect of adult learning. The following paragraphs address different theories and models of adult learning as presented by several authors in the field of adult education and that have potential relevance for the population I studied.

### **Contextual Learning**

MacKeracher (2004) emphasized the role of contexts in the lives of adult learners and refers to these spaces as where they must apply what they have learned in practical situations. This author explained the importance of situated learning and context-based learning, which are an important aspect for learners in Mortuary Science. MacKeracher (2004) presented several examples to describe situated learning experiences. For example, learning within a community in which newcomers learn from experienced individuals as in an apprenticeship, mentoring, or preceptorship program. The students also develop knowledge based on shared experiences among those working within the organization or the community in which the students reside. These situated learning experiences emphasize that the quality of learning within a community is dependent on the quality of the relationships among the members of the community. Moreover, these experiences describe the ability that the adult learner learns more easily in social relationships than alone. Context-based learning as described by MacKeracher (2004) applies to the students in the field of Mortuary Science since they are expected to engage



in hands-on learning and within the context of the occupation through subject matters such as clinical work and laboratory practice. Thus, the college involved in this qualitative case study requires first semester students to enroll in a semester-long clinical orientation course. In addition to classroom attendance, each student is required to work side-by-side with a funeral director and embalmer by visiting five funeral homes and one cemetery for a total of 48 clock hours at the completion of the rotations. The main purpose for these rotations is to expose the new student to the activities performed by funeral directors and embalmers during their daily endeavors. At the end of the semester, based on the hands-on work (contextual and situated learning) they have done, the students are expected to make an educated decision either to continue or to withdraw from the program. Another important aspect of this approach to learning and teaching is that these rotations also expose the students to future colleagues and the funeral traditions of the community in which most of them will complete their provisional license program.

### **Somatic Learning**

Merriam, Cafarella, and Baumgartner (2007) explained that somatic learning is knowing through the body. It is directly related to our physical being, our senses, “a gut reaction to a racist comment, an upset stomach as we contemplate complaining to a teacher or boss, or being drained and exhausted from an intense encounter” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 190). Somatic learning also includes positive learning experiences such as the excitement of acquiring new skills in dancing and imagining a pleasant fragrance when thinking of roses or a perfume. Merriam, Cafarella, and Baumgartner (2007) highlighted that just the way we see somatic learning taking place in a physical activity such as basketball or dance, we also need to consider that conducting research is a

somatic process. An activity that begins with a passionate connection to the topic one is going to research (e.g., data gathering, interviewing, and observing). They emphasized that neither culture nor language is the source of somatic knowledge. “Somatic knowledge is received from within the human being; cultural knowledge is received from without the human being” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 197). Stinson (1995) added that somatic learning has to involve thought “something that occurs throughout the body, not just above the neck” (p. 46). In other words, learners develop knowledge and specific skills through training their body and through using their senses, not just the brain. Furthermore, MacKeracher (2004) highlighted how more adults are engaged in some form of learning that involves physical skills (i.e., maintaining physical fitness, learning to use technological devices, dealing with age-related changes, and coping with newborn or elderly relatives who need physical care).

According to MacKeracher, there are at least three basic methods for facilitating somatic learning: (a) letting learners figure it out for themselves by providing opportunities for trying the skill with the necessary resources and giving feedback about results, (b) demonstrating the skill that, if followed, should lead to skilled performance, and (c) learning to perform an activity under supervision (e.g., “cognitive apprenticeship”), which includes five phases: modeling, coaching or scaffolding, fading, solo performance, and reflection and discussion (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 147).

Within Mortuary Science studies, somatic learning manifests during the embalming and anatomy laboratories, in which the students are presented with different safety measures to comply with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). It is during this time that they learn how to identify safety precautions, hazardous

chemicals, armamentarium, and the proper use of personal protective equipment.

Additionally, they learn how to recognize the postmortem condition of the deceased (e.g., discoloration, texture, and odor) by participating in case scenarios where they employ the skills learned in lecture. Once the skill is mastered theoretically, the student participates under the direct and personal supervision of the instructor in the embalming and gross anatomy dissections. Initially, the instructor will demonstrate the embalming and dissection procedures until students feel comfortable to try the learned skill on their own.

### **Self-Directed Learning**

Candy (1991) suggested that “a self-directed or autonomous person is able to invoke a coherent set of beliefs, values, and attitudes that views the self as autonomous and that serves a basis for exercising freedom of choice, using rational and critical reflection, and exercising self-restraint and self-discipline” (p. 125). Candy (1991) explained that self-direction is characterized by the will and capacity to complete any assignments without depending on others for support or encouragement. He describes the ideal self-directed learner as someone with control over the task to be mastered in the learning process, of working independently, by being methodical, disciplined, reflective, curious, persistent, venturesome, creative, and having knowledge about how to learn (Candy, 1991). In reference to the ideal self-directed learner attributes, MacKeracher (2004) advised that they represent “someone who may exist only in the hearts and minds of adult educators” (p. 46), not truly representing the entire population of learners that may include individuals with diverse backgrounds, to include persons with different abilities, different ethnic background, and socioeconomic status. Other authors have also

expressed their criticism to lists that describe similar attributes for the self-directed learner (Caffarella, 1993; Flannery, 1994; Pratt, 1988; Shore, 1997).

According to MacKeracher (2004) self-direction can be understood in three ways: (1) as an innate disposition, trait, or characteristic one is born with, (2) as an acquired quality developing naturally with increasing age; and/or (3) as a learned characteristic. MacKeracher (2004) goes on to specify that self-direction as an innate characteristic describes individuals with a natural predisposition to inquiry and thus, to go their own way. Also, self-directedness as an acquired quality leaves the facilitating activities with very little effect on encouraging development. In both of these cases, MacKeracher (2004) emphasized that the best a facilitator can do is to provide opportunities for self-directed persons to do their own thing. However, if self-directedness is a learned characteristic, then there is a possibility for the facilitator to encourage and support the learner in the development of self-directedness. According to MacKeracher (2004) one important aspect to keep in mind about self-direction in learning is that “the exercise of self-direction is affected as much by personal characteristics of the individual as by characteristics of the environment” (p. 46).

Other scholars recognize that self-directed learners have internal motivation, significant experience, and to be a problem-centered learner, with the need to know why they are learning what they are learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Merriam, et al., 2007). The Mortuary Science students who successfully finish the clinical orientation course are considered learners with discipline who have pursued their goal to assist the bereaved. The completion of the clinical course allows them to measure their desire to continue with their education and learn the necessary skills to achieve licensure

as funeral directors and embalmers. Merriam, et al. (2007) described self-directed learning as “a process of learning, in which people take the primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences” (p. 110). In discussing the goals of self-directed learning, the authors identify three main categories: (1) to enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed in their learning, (2) to foster transformational learning as central to self-directed learning, and (3) to promote emancipatory learning and social action as an integral part of self-directed learning (p. 107). The students in a Mortuary Science program are required to show initiative and learn some aspects of the funeral career on their own, especially when they visit a cemetery or go to a funeral home. It is important for them to take the time to learn their way around the cemeteries and become familiar with the different customs to memorialize a loved one. Visiting funeral homes gives them the opportunity to observe various funeral home operating styles and be exposed to cultural diversity when attending a funeral service.

### **Affective Learning**

MacKeracher (2004) tells us that learning is affected by the emotions we bring to the learning process—those that are generated during the learning process, and those we feel when we receive feedback about whether we have succeeded or failed in our learning accomplishments. She notes that at low to moderate levels, these emotions are helpful in the learning process. Conversely, emotions at high levels, either positive or negative can make learning difficult. This excess of emotions may create distress, information overload, and possible fear of failure which could also overwhelm the learning process creating information overload. “Emotions take us to places where words alone cannot,

thus elevating us to new levels of knowledge acquisition” (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010, p. 37). Boucouvalas and Lawrence defined the word emotion as the means to stir, move, or disturb the learners’ environment whereas emotionality extends their learning by involving feelings and imagining alternative realities. Emotions such as anger, sadness, joy, and confusion affect us in deep and personal ways that stir or shake us up in ways we cannot ignore. The teaching-learning process in Mortuary Science students is influenced by affective learning in both ways: by the response of the learner when receiving feedback on their performance and by the emotions experienced by the bereaved individuals they serve. Mortuary Science students receive constant feedback from different sources. Each student receives an evaluation from each clinical site, the instructor assigned to the course, and the laboratory instructor. The idea is to provide the learners with useful information about their successes or simply to identify areas of possible challenges. Students participating in the embalming process receive feedback from the instructor as well as the funeral home in charge of the deceased. Occasionally, the funeral director in charge of the funeral arrangements and who is in constant communication with the bereaved family also calls the embalming instructor to provide feedback from the family and motivate students to excel in their embalming skills. The combination of these emotions creates a unique learning environment for the Mortuary Science students during the course of their career. Additionally, in any given program, Mortuary Science students are exposed early in their career to feelings and emotions experienced by surviving relatives during the death of a loved one. This type of exposure provides a unique learning environment permitting the student to show empathy for the bereaved and determine the effect of grief in their personal lives.

MacKeracher (2004) offered a practical description of how adults accumulate experience and prior learning over their lifespan “the older they become, the more experience and prior learning they bring to bear on current learning” (p. 32). She discusses how life experiences are also used to develop skills and strategies that allow learners to develop their own model of reality. MacKeracher claimed that each model of reality is dynamic rather than static, and open to constant revision, expansion, and transformation depending on future experience and learning. Furthermore, she indicates that past experience is an essential component in learning and is a foundation for the ways adults will approach new experiences. The author believed that past experience of adult learners must be acknowledged as an active component in learning and accepted as a valid representation of their experience. Something to consider is that these past experiences can be both an enhancement to new learning and an unavoidable obstacle.

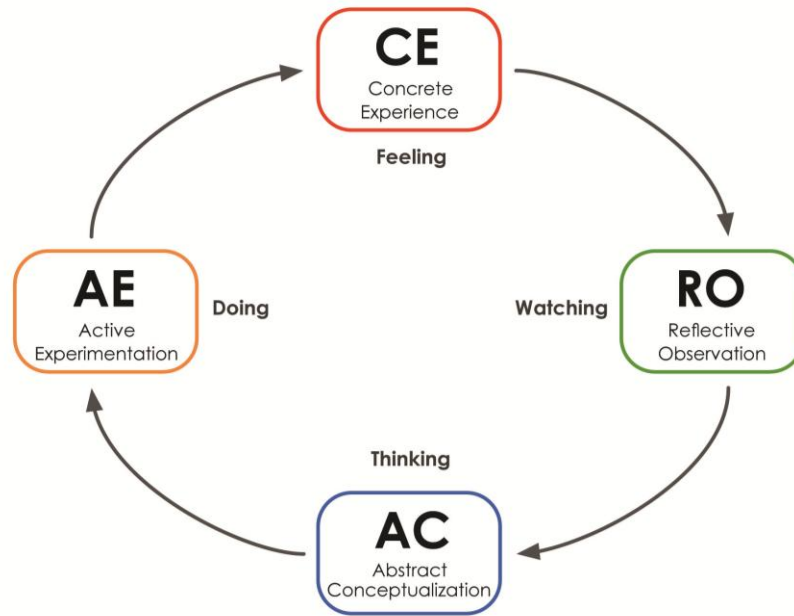
### **Experiential Learning**

Several authors have contributed to the development of the experiential learning framework (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Jarvis, 1987); specifically, Kolb (1984) defined learning as the process of creating knowledge through concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, and the transformation of the experience through reflective observation and active experimentation in a cyclical manner. Likewise, Mezirow (1997) presented four key concepts as fundamental for transformational learning to occur. These are: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action. More specifically, Mezirow and colleagues (2000) stated that transformational learning refers to transforming a problematic frame of reference to make it more dependable in our adult life by generating opinions and interpretations that are more justified.

The learning experience is at the center of this framework; however, critical reflection is crucial to be able to gain a new point of view and to acquire new knowledge. Thus, transformational learning is possible when there is a change in one's beliefs or attitudes (a meaning scheme), or a shift of perspective (habit of mind), making individuals more open to change when reflection guides our actions (Mezirow, 2000).

Although adult educators have acknowledged the connection between experience and learning, we are still learning about this connection and how to use it most effectively in both formal and non-formal learning situations (Merriam et al., 2007). Experiential learning theory can be traced back to the work of Dewey (1938); Freire (1970); Jarvis (1987); and Kolb (1984). This theory stresses the role that experience carries out in the acquisition of new knowledge. Dewey (1938) made meticulous explanations about the association between life experiences and learning. He explained that, "all genuine education comes about through experience" (p. 25). Dewey (1938) clarified that "... not all experiences are genuinely or equally educative" (p. 25). In the same way, learning experiences can also "mis-educate" and "distort the growth of further experiences" (p. 25).





*Figure 31.* Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model

In Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, portrayed as a cycle, two different ways of gaining knowledge through experience are possible (see Figure 31): Concrete experience (CE) and abstract conceptualization (AC). Also, two ways of transforming experience are identified: active experimentation (AE) and reflective observation (RO). According to Kolb, concrete experience provides the information that serves as the basis for reflection. From this reflection, the learner assimilates the information and forms abstract concepts. Subsequently, the learner uses these concepts to develop new theories about the world. Then, the learner actively tests these theories which in turn serve as a guide to create new experiences. In other words, through testing the new theories about the world, the learner collects information through experience, returning to the beginning of the process. Kolb (1984) suggests that, "learning is a continuous process grounded in experience. Knowledge is continuously derived and tested out in the experiences of the learner . . ." (p. 27).

## **Transformational Learning**

Mezirow, an American sociologist, introduced transformational learning to the field of adult education. His fundamental concepts about transformation can be summarized as a process by which learners redefine their taken-for-granted frames of reference including schemes, habits of mind, and perspectives. Mezirow (1997) clarified that a transformative learning environment is one in which the participants have all relevant information, are free from coercion, have equal opportunity to assume various roles, can become critically reflective of assumptions, are empathetic and good listeners, and are willing to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view. This author examined the idea of helping learners transform their point of view about their world by helping them evaluate their frames of reference and place reflection at the center of any educational experience.

Mezirow (2000) suggested that transformational learning takes place in one of four fundamental ways: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action. According to this theory, our past experiences play an important role on how we see the world. In light of this theory, after having a new educational experience the learner should engage in critical reflection to examine the validity of previous viewpoints and evaluate the new experience. After that, the learner is expected to participate in an exchange of ideas with other learners considering the new concepts derived from critical reflection and should be able to gain a new point of view. Finally, the learner is expected to take action based on the new level of learning and the newly acquired perspective. Thus, transformational learning occurs when there is a change in our beliefs or attitudes, or a transformation of our entire perspective. This process makes individuals more open

to change when reflection guides their actions (Mezirow, 2000). As stated by Boucouvalas and Lawrence (2010), “This process results in individuals being permanently changed. We can never return to the way we were” (p. 41). In addition, Mezirow suggests that personal transformation may lead to alliances with others of like mind to work towards effecting necessary changes in relationships, organizations, and systems.

### **Gap in the Literature**

The literature review analyzed in this chapter has provided evidence to support the need to incorporate the voice of Mortuary Science students within the research of this field. Among the Mortuary Science work published during the last seven decades, only a few have incorporated students in the study. Taggart (1989) presented the first study to include Mortuary Science learners and the development of practical skills in embalming procedures and funeral practices. Ten years later Cahill (1999) implemented an ethnographic study to describe how Mortuary Science programs immerse their students in the occupational culture of funeral directing. Shawn (2005) developed his dissertation focusing on employment shortages and employee turnover in the funeral service profession. Patterson (2010) sought to evaluate and demonstrate that funeral service education properly prepares graduates to pass the NBE. The most recent work is Kelly’s (2012) dissertation which explored the experiences of funeral service students who were currently attending a college of funeral service. The literature on Mortuary Science provides limited research about narratives describing the successes and challenges faced by Mortuary Science students.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **ABFSE CURRICULUM OVERVIEW**

The curriculum for students pursuing a career in funeral service is outlined by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE). Students achieving the standards for the curriculum are conferred the Associate in Applied Science in Mortuary Science degree by the college and are eligible for state examination by the Texas Funeral Service Commission (TFSC), the National Board Exam (NBE) by the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards (ICFSEB), and provisional licensure registration with the state (TOC, Chapter 651.302-303). The educational institutions must offer not less than 60 semester hours or 90 quarter credits consisting of at least 25% of general education, non-technical courses (ABFSE, October 2013, p. 9.6). However, the manner of delivery of instruction is left to the discretion of the accredited institution. Mortuary Science students are required to take courses from multiple disciplines that will take a student carrying a full-time course load approximately two academic years to complete. The curriculum (see Table 9) includes funeral service courses such as psychology of death and dying, accounting, management, and jurisprudence. “Science courses involve classroom instruction and laboratory activities—human anatomy, embalming, restorative art, microbiology, and pathology” (ABFSE, October 2013, p. 9.6). The goal of Mortuary Science institutions across the United States is to prepare the future funeral practitioners with the essential skills to assist the surviving relatives. Students are taught to be empathetic and to practice within the ethical and legal standards that govern the field.

Table 9

*American Board of Funeral Service Education Curriculum Overview*

<b>Curriculum Area</b>	<b>Minimum number of credits</b>	<b>Content Areas</b>
Public Health and Technical	14 semester credits or 21 quarter credits	Chemistry Microbiology and Public Health Anatomy Pathology Restorative Art Embalming
Business Management	14 semester credits or 21 quarter credits	Accounting Funeral Home Management and Merchandising Computer Applications Funeral Directing Small Business Managements
Social Sciences/Humanities	8 semester credits or 12 quarter credits	Dynamics of Grief Counseling Sociology of Funeral Service History of Funeral Service Communication Skills
Legal, Ethical, Regulatory	3 semester credits or 4 quarter credits	Mortuary Law Business Law Ethics
General Education	Associate – 60 (90 quarter) credits Bachelor – 120 (180 quarter) credits (where applicable)  At least 25% of curriculum must be in general education (non-technical) courses.	As described by each state or province/territory and institution

A current topic of discussion among different funeral service education programs is the incorporation of distance learning education in the curriculum. The ABFSE developed “electronic and distance learning guidelines” as part of the accreditation process for programs offering online courses (ABFSE, October 2013, p. E-1). A number of authors have presented research studies about this topic. Some of those authors stated that students learn better in traditional classroom setting (Ferguson & Tryjankowski, 2009), while others have reported that the incorporation of online courses increases the learning experience by allowing students to explore a variety of internet sources (Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006). For other researchers the difference between these two groups is not considered significant (Thrasher, Coleman, & Atykinson, n.d.). Currently, the faculty members at the college where I work share different opinions about the effectiveness of web-based instruction. Only two of five teach some courses completely online. Other professors utilize the online platform to give students electronic access to the course material, but the teaching component of the course remains face-to-face.

F. E. Solis, Past-President of the American Board of Funeral Service Education (personal communication, August 11, 2014) stated that since 1987 a new policy was instituted implementing annual reviews to make sure that each curriculum outline is updated at least every five years. These revisions aim to keep mortuary courses relevant and in touch with the changes of the funeral profession. He added that this process was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a strong point of the ABFSE during its last accreditation.

## **Adult Learning and Mortuary Science**

The American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE), as the sole accrediting agency in funeral service and Mortuary Science education, provides an annual directory identifying all accredited programs or institutions. This directory also includes the demographic changes experienced by each of its accredited programs. According to the 2013 directory, over the past few generations there have been significant changes in the profiles of both the institutions offering funeral service education and the students studying to become funeral directors and embalmers. The ABFSE (2013) informs that two generations ago, funeral service education was offered almost exclusively by private institutions and virtually 100% of the students were male and, for the most part, sons of funeral home owners. Over 90% of the students were white.

According to statistics provided by the ABFSE, currently there are over 5000 students enrolled in Mortuary Science education. Of those, approximately 2800 are enrolled in their first semester. The 2013 ABFSE report shows that 90% of these students come from the 31 states that currently offer a program. The same report also specifies that today female students make up a majority of enrollees. White students make up approximately 75% of the mortuary student population, while African Americans are 15%. Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans compose 6% and 2% identify themselves as from other ethnic backgrounds.

The ABFSE (2013) also reports on the age of current students showing that the average age of the new student has remained relatively constant over the past decade with 17 to 30 year olds making up approximately two-thirds of new students and those 30 to 70 years old making up approximately one-third. It is important to notice that one of the

age categories (e.g. 21 to 25 years old) established by the ABFSE to classify Mortuary Science students includes a mixture of traditional and non-traditional students. This classification differs from Jinkens' (2009) explanation describing traditional students as those younger than 24, and nontraditional students to be 24 or older.



## **APPENDIX C**

### **METHODS AND OVERALL STUDY DESIGN**

The study explored the narratives of nine Mortuary Science learners and graduates from an accredited two-year Mortuary Science program in Texas. As expected in the sciences, most of the research in the field of Mortuary Science has had a quantitative focus (LuBrant, 2013; Patterson, 2010; Shaw, 2005). Since qualitative research takes the researcher into the field and is based on interaction with the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2011), it was the most appropriate research method for the study. The goal of the study was to explore and document the experiences, challenges, and successes of the participants during three stages in the Mortuary Science program as students, interns, and licensees. Thus, the research questions guiding the study were:

1. What can we learn from the narratives of Mortuary Science learners and graduates?
2. What are the learning journeys of nine individuals currently enrolled or graduated from an accredited two-year Mortuary Science program?
3. What challenges and successes have they experienced during their residence in the program, their internship, and the process of obtaining a license?

This section presents the overall study design and includes a description of data collection procedures and analysis. It includes the following elements: statement of the problem, researcher's roles, study settings, research participants, data collection sources, data analysis, building trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and delimitations of the study.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Among the Mortuary Science work published during the last seven decades, only a few have incorporated students in their research. Taggart (1989) presented the first study to include Mortuary Science learners and the development of practical skills in embalming procedures and funeral practices. Ten years later, Cahill (1999) implemented an ethnographic study to describe how Mortuary Science programs immerse their students in the occupational culture of funeral directing. Shawn (2005) developed his dissertation focusing on employment shortages and employee turnover in the funeral service profession. Patterson (2010) sought to evaluate and demonstrate that funeral service education properly prepares graduates to pass the National Board Exam (NBE). The most recent work is Kelly's (2012) dissertation which explored the experiences of funeral service students who were currently attending a college of funeral service. The literature in Mortuary Science provides limited research about narratives describing the successes and challenges faced by Mortuary Science students.

The literature in the field of Mortuary Science is not prolific, and some of the existing research is outdated (Jackson, 1957; Küebler-Ross, 1969; Lamers & Habenstein, 1963). It is important to recognize that obtaining a Ph.D. degree is not the norm in this field, and this may be one of the factors for the scarce literature documenting issues relevant to the field. For example, the learning journeys and experiences of Mortuary Science learners and graduates have not been documented. Due to the uniqueness of the learning experience in the field of Mortuary Science, it is imperative to go beyond the quantitative data currently available (Lubrant, 2013; Patterson, 2010; Shaw, 2005).

Another concern relates to the fact that the field of Mortuary Science is not considered a profession by some authors (Cahill, 1999; Taylor, 2011). Taylor (2011) addressed this debate in her dissertation about the professionalization of funeral directors wherein she stated that an occupation does not become a profession accidentally or by natural evolution. Her study examined a period of approximately 50 years to demonstrate that attempts to attain a clear professional identity for funeral directors have been thwarted. Taylor explained there have been repeated failures to respond effectively to adaptive challenges. This author added that without professional status, funeral directors are less able to join the other professional groups helping citizens navigate death, dying, and bereavement. Adding to the debate regarding the status of the field as a profession is the level of required education for mortuary learners. The American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) requires each of its accredited schools to offer an associate degree program, or its equivalent, as the minimum educational standard for preparation for the funeral service profession (ABFSE Accreditation and Policy Manual, October 2013; Shaw, 2005).

Every year the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) provides the demographic structure of the student population enrolled in Mortuary Science programs across the United States. Part of the new demographics includes a mixture of what is defined as traditional and nontraditional students. Kasworm (2014) explained that traditional students within higher education have been frequently considered to be those less than 24 years of age, and nontraditional students to be those 24 years of age or older.

This change has presented the need for educators in the field of Mortuary Science to modify their teaching methodology and to become acquainted with the learning needs of both groups of students.

### **Researcher's Roles**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the qualitative researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. In her view, the researcher is a tool and an instrument filtering the information and maximizing opportunities for gathering and reporting findings. This author and others explained that the researcher plays many roles in qualitative research such as learner, researcher, and observer (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). As the researcher in this study, I believe my roles included those of a learner, researcher, observer, and educator.

#### **Researcher as a Learner**

An important role for me in this research study was that of the researcher as a learner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). One of the great rewards of being a Mortuary Science educator is the opportunity to learn side-by-side with my students. Every deceased individual who is brought into our care represents a bereaved family that is facing one of the most difficult times of their lives. Nevertheless, this type of environment portrays the daily activities of the Mortuary Science graduate creating a learning opportunity for the Mortuary Science student and a unique position to demonstrate empathy skills. In some instances when embalming is requested and authorization is granted, the students also get the opportunity to determine the best chemical treatment for the deceased. The challenge could be overwhelming at times, but the desire to learn from each other gives us the energy to accomplish our goal of serving

the bereaved families. As explained by Glesne (1999) as researchers we are expected to also be:

. . . a curious student who comes to learn from and with research participants.

You do not come as an expert or authority. If you are so perceived, then your respondents will not feel encouraged to be as forthcoming as they can be. As a learner, you are expected to listen; as an expert or authority, you are expected to talk. The differences between these two roles are enormous Glesne, 1999, p. 41).

During embalming laboratory activities, we are presented with dead human remains that are very different from each other. Each of these individual cases requires special attention according to the type of death and postmortem conditions allowing for critical thinking and discussion among students and instructor. It is during these discussions that students face unique learning experiences. My role during the embalming laboratory activities is to create a safe learning environment and to provide personal supervision as a licensed embalmer. However, it is also an opportunity for me to learn from my students and their experiences while we interact with each other. At the beginning of each semester, I mention that the best embalming techniques are yet to come and that we are there to learn as a team. The expectation is that their professional curiosity will allow them to be part of the development of new procedures and share new knowledge with the next generation of Mortuary Science learners. Similarly, as an emergent researcher I introduced myself as a learner eager to learn from the study participants and their experiences.

### **Researcher as a Researcher**

As an emergent qualitative researcher, this research study was so much more than fulfilling a doctoral academic requirement. I seek to add new knowledge to the Mortuary Science field and seek to gain a better understanding of the field through the experiences of current learners and graduates. According to Glesne (1999), as individuals embarking on research activities, it is crucial that in “All of the places in which you present yourself communicate to others how a researcher acts” (p. 41). In my role as a researcher, I explained to the study participants up front that the information and the activities in which we participated constituted research. From day one of their participation they knew that I was acting as a researcher and learner. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained the interests of qualitative researchers as understanding people’s experiences and how they interpret them, finding out how people’s worlds are constructed, and what meaning people attribute to their experiences.

As a researcher, I also believe that it is important to include the voices of the Mortuary Science students in the study. The aim is to develop an understanding among mortuary educators to continue their mission of preparing future generations of Mortuary Science learners. In an effort to be a good observer and researcher, I requested a different teaching assignment during the year of data collection. This prevented me from having a conflict of interest with the study participants. In other words, I was not the instructor of record for the study participants.

### **Researcher as an Observer**

As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated, “observation is a major means of collecting data in qualitative research” (p. 136). During this case study I was an attentive

observer deciding about what was considered relevant and meaningful during the data collection and analysis stages of this study. Patton (2002) also added that:

Training to become a skilled observer includes learning to pay attention, see what there is to see, and hear what there is to hear; learning how to write descriptively, acquiring discipline in recording field notes, knowing how to separate detail from trivia . . . and using rigorous methods to validate and triangulate observations (pp. 260-261).

It was of crucial importance to remain engaged and involved in the conversations with the study participants and when listening to their stories and narratives. I paid close attention to their body language and to the possibilities for follow-up questions and topics of interest so that I did not miss these opportunities.

### **Researcher as an Educator**

My interaction with mortuary students has changed throughout the years. Within my twenty years of experience as a funeral director and embalmer I have had the opportunity to work side-by-side with a vast number of learners in funeral homes. I have also assisted several interns to complete the state licensure requirements to become licensed funeral directors and embalmers. At the present time and for the past ten years, I have taken the role of a Mortuary Science educator and have witnessed the passion these students have when describing the path that brought them to this field. This passion is also reflected in their end-of-semester evaluations. Due to their feedback my courses have been enhanced and modified to fit their learning needs and petitions. I agree with Freire's (1998) assertion that the educator who does not reflect on his practice should not continue working in the classroom educating others. It is my professional goal with this

study to transmit the voice of the students and their experiences. This study could serve as a source of knowledge for me as a Mortuary Science educator and for other Mortuary Science professors and programs across the United States. I still believe that it is important to continue to listen to the students' inquiries and suggestions for improvement. Therefore, this dissertation provided the appropriate platform to look closer into the students' experiences and learning needs.

### **Case Study**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined case study as an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. A single entity where “I can fence in what I am going to study” (p. 40). Thus, a case study could be a single person who showcases a phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific piece of policy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Translating her concept to this study, the bounded system was the Mortuary Science program focus of the study, its students, and its graduates. In addition, Patton (2002) explained that a qualitative case study “can also be critical incidents, stages in the life of a person or program, or anything that can be defined as a specific, unique, bounded system” (p. 447). He also clarified that a case study is a “combination of many smaller cases—the stories of specific individuals, families, organizational units, and other groups” (p. 297). His view reflects how the study combined distinct stories from Mortuary Science individuals during three different stages in their career (i.e., as students, interns, and licensees).

### **Study Setting**

This study was implemented soliciting volunteer participants from a Mortuary Science program in Texas. The facilities of this college are ample, and a letter indicating



permission from administration has been obtained to conduct this research. The program is over 50 years old and serves an average of 250 students per academic year. Even though this institution offers most of its courses in a traditional classroom setting, there is an option for students to take some courses online. Laboratory work takes place on and off-campus to allow students the opportunity to develop work experience in actual funeral home settings under the direct and personal supervision of licensed funeral directors and/or embalmers.

### **Research Participants**

The key informants in this research consisted of a purposeful sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, Patton, 2002) of nine individuals enrolled or graduated from a two-year Mortuary Science program. In 2010, this Mortuary Science program conducted a self-study for reaccreditation by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE). As a result, it was reported that the student population ranges in age from 20 to 71 years of age with 52% of the student population between the ages of 21 to 30 years old. According to Patton (2002) purposeful sampling refers to a specific group that has information about or experience in the issue that is guiding the study. The selection criteria to participate in this study included current enrollment or graduation from the same accredited Mortuary Science program. They were involved in various stages of the program. Three were selected from the current group of students enrolled in their third or fourth semester, three were selected from the students serving their internship and in the process of obtaining their license, and the remaining three participants were selected from graduates within the past two years who had already obtained their license and were

currently employed. Thus, the nine study participants were selected from the first three who responded the invitation in each group (students, interns, and graduates).

### Data Collection Sources

The literature explains that qualitative data can be generated using a variety of methods to include interviews, observation, artifacts, and documents (Charmaz, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). The data collection sources for this study included *pláticas* (described below), harvesting the story, artifacts, documents, and the researcher's journal. All data collected were audio recorded and later transcribed. See Table 10 for a summary of data collection sources.

Table 10

#### *Data Collection Sources*

<i>Pláticas</i>	Artifacts	Documents	Group Conversation	Researcher's Journal
Two 1-hour individual sessions	Collected during <i>pláticas</i>	Program documents	One 2-hour group session	After each session
Conversations guided by topics	Rich visual information	Curriculum instructional material	Share/reflect on learning journeys	Observations, hunches, facts, and field notes
Flexible	Trigger stories	Existent data	Building the collective story	Preliminary analysis
Audiotaped	Photographs	Photocopies	Audiotaped	iPad Notebook

### **Pláticas**

*Pláticas* are informal conversations with potential for the participants to recall stories, teach values and life lessons, or to motivate others to have a conversation and build on what others have to say (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). *Pláticas* are

conversations inviting people to share and exchange ideas in a relaxed environment. Shor and Freire (1987) point out that dialogue is not a mere technique to achieve some cognitive results, but a means for people to “recreate knowledge as well as the way we learn” (p. 11). According to Freire (1998), “education takes place when there are two learners who occupy somewhat different spaces in an ongoing dialogue, but both participants bring knowledge to the relationship . . . to explore what each knows and what they can teach each other” (p. 8). It is important to experience a communication gap so that the participants in the conversation become truly engaged and invested in listening to what the other has to say. Maintaining this idea of dialogue and learning, the study promoted dialogue for discussion of generative themes or topics of crucial importance for Mortuary Science learners and educators. *Pláticas* served as the main source of data collection during the course of this research study. *Pláticas* allowed study participants to engage in conversation with the researcher and one another while sharing crucial learning experiences, challenges, and successes as students, interns, and licensees. *Pláticas* were a relevant collection tool for the study because they enabled participants to share their journey from the point of view of the protagonist. There were two individual *pláticas* with each participant with an approximate duration of 60 minutes and a follow-up session when needed. See Appendix G for sample topics explored during these individual sessions.

### **Harvesting the Story**

Narrative and storytelling are the main communication mechanisms that human beings use to share their experience, ordering them within a time frame and making sense of the world (Riessman, 2008; Worth, 2008). Narrative is the representation of an event

or sequence of events similar to the process of description and requires going beyond making a list of events to tell about a unified subject using a temporal structure (Worth, 2008). “Learning through stories is a multifaceted process . . . it involves stories heard, stories told, and stories recognized . . . Good stories transport us away from the present moment, sometimes even to another level of consciousness” (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 65).

As previously stated Guajardo and colleagues (2016) argue that through storytelling people are able to make sense of their own story and take ownership of their role as architects of their own destiny and become agents of change. In a previous piece of work, Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) provide a metaphor using human anatomy to describe the different components giving shape to the story through a process that filters data, organizes them, and puts information back out in a medium that makes sense—a story. The metaphor about the *anatomy of the story* resonates with the nature of the field of Mortuary Science and the jargon of the field. As explained in the following paragraphs, Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) suggest the story should have a navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs. See table 11 for a complete map of the anatomy of the story provided by these authors.

The *navel* represents the central component that feeds and balances the story. The core message and the questions that emerge from the narratives are elements that spring from the navel and are essential for developing the core purpose of the story. For this qualitative study the central component began with the narratives of each of the nine study participants and the lessons learned from their personal experiences as Mortuary Science learners and graduates.

The *heart* is considered the source of human passion. In the same way, the heart of the story revealed the passionate quality, the emotional, moral, and rational ways of knowing the story. The heart for this study was represented with the experiences of Mortuary Science learners and graduates, their passion for the field, and the emotional and moral aspects that motivated them to choose a career in the mortuary field.

The *mind* as the center of all analytical thinking brought critical analysis to the story and provided ideas, imagination, and action. These elements should be able to provide Mortuary Science educators with ideas to develop implications for practice from the point of view of the learner. Acquiring new knowledge from the experiences of Mortuary Science learners and graduates has potential to “inform, support, or disrupt stereotypes and myths” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, p. 135) about Mortuary Science education.

The *hands* mold values, ideas, message, and the rhythm of the story. They allowed for the story to be told and retold until the choice of language, the nonverbal element, and the message were all coordinated and delivered. The study participants told their individual stories and experiences from their own point of view; thus, the same story was told using a different perspective each time.

The *legs* provide mobility to the story. A story with legs will move people to action and will continue to exist and be passed down from generation to generation (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). This dissertation became a platform for Mortuary Science students and graduates to share their narratives with the incoming generations of funeral practitioners. See Appendix G and Appendix H for a list of sample topics discussed during the individual *pláticas* and group conversation.

Table 11

*Anatomy of the Story*

ANATOMY OF THE STORY				
Developmental Questions				
Parts of the Story	Context	Main Idea of Story	What is the Action	Reflection on Story
<b>Navel:</b> Core of Message	Where does the story take place?	Who are the main actors and what is the purpose of the story?	What is the message?	What have we learned from this process?  How does this story fit within the local history?
<b>Heart:</b> Values	What is the spirit of the place?	What do we want to reinforce as identity?	What core values do we want to share, instill or provoke to benefit the public good	What the core values we want to share, teach, espouse, and practice?  How will this impact community change?
<b>Mind:</b> Analysis	What will this story do to the place in which we live?	What are the (in) congruencies within the story?	How will this story inform, support, or disrupt stereotypes and myths in the community?	What are the (in) congruencies between the story and the community and its people?
<b>Hands:</b> Molding of Identity	What is the story that will contribute to the identity of people and place?	How can this story celebrate the success of local people and place?	How will this story help people grow and change for the public good?	How have we developed/changed from this process?
<b>Legs:</b> Action of Story	What skills do residents need that will contribute to the development of self and place?  How can we put private stories to public use?	What are the highlights and points the story needs to emphasize?  How will this act impact people in their development and as public people?	How can the story de-center/disrupt the existing power structures to benefit the common good?	What is the impact of this action for future generations?  Who benefits from this story?  How can we imagine the future if this story is effective?

Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) stressed that “humans have been storytellers since time immemorial and that, regardless of its form, all stories offer a glimpse into people's lives and souls during a particular time in history” (p. 96). These authors added that “a story is at its best when it is shared, when it becomes public, and when owned by the group” (p. 88). During my time as a bereavement therapist I have had the opportunity to conduct group sessions with grieving family members. Even when harvesting the story was not a counseling session, the setting was similar to what we know as *the circle of grief* at the bereavement center where I volunteer my services. This circle of grief allows the participants to share their story in an environment where they feel secure and free to share as much or as little as they wish and only when they consider their participation appropriate. This study emulated the circle of grief setting; however, it excluded the grief component since grief is not part of this study.

### **Group Conversation**

Eight out of the nine study participants gathered for a period of two hours in a central location of the college housing the Mortuary Science Program setting for the study. This centralized location allowed the participants to have easy access to the meeting area. The circle setting was used to foster a sense of belonging in the field of Mortuary Science among the participants and to join the group in the creation of a common story by contributing their experiences. Arrangements were made with the facilities department to reserve an ample room (e.g., the college dining room, conference room) to allow participants to feel comfortable, and to select a place appropriate for sharing a light dinner prior to beginning harvesting the story data collection stage. Conducting a group conversation (what some authors call “focus group”) allowed the

participants to become acquainted with their colleges and listen to each other's point of view. The study participants were at different stages of the Mortuary Science program (i.e., student, intern, and licensee), were employed at different funeral homes and embalming centers. Prior to this group conversation they rarely have had a chance to discuss relevant issues to their profession. This group conversation allowed collecting data on a discussion on the incongruent aspects and tensions between learners and instructors/practitioners and how learners and graduates could continue learning together and promote positive change to benefit them and future generations in the profession. These data would not have been possible to be gathered only through conducting individual interviews with the study participants.

### **Artifacts**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described artifacts as physical objects found within the study setting. She explained that “artifacts include the tools, implements, utensils, and instruments of everyday living” (p. 171). She also added that this type of evidence, “unlike the spoken word, endures physically” and becomes a potential source of information (p. 171). All study participants were asked to bring an artifact to the interview, an object that triggers memories associated with their experiences in the Mortuary Science program. With permission of the participants, each of these artifacts was photographed, and the pictures were included in the study. These artifacts will assist the reader to have a better understanding of the participants' narrative.

### **Documents**

Patton (2002) indicated that documents “constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs” (p. 293). Patton highlighted that



“documents prove valuable not only because of what can be learned directly from them but also as stimulus for path of inquiry that can be pursued only to direct observation and interviewing” (p. 294). Additionally, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) used the phrase “mining data from documents” (p. 162) to refer to the nature of documents as sources of data that “can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (p. 189). For this study, documents included the program mission statement, the degree plan, and program promotional material.

### **The Researcher’s Journal**

This was a combination of observations, field notes, facts, preliminary analysis, and thoughts related to the process of implementation of the study. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) defined journals as written documents that record the researcher’s personal reactions and concerns throughout the course of the study. In the context of this research project, I dedicated time immediately after each individual session to write my notes while the memories of the event were still fresh in my mind. The goal was to document any information that could be valuable, to keep an ongoing reflection practice, and to add clarity by recording details when listening to the audio recordings or reading over the transcripts of the recordings.

### **Data Analysis**

As recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) data analysis was a continuous process during the implementation of this qualitative research. Overall, narrative inquiry served as the method of analysis and the means to report study findings. Narrative analysis centers on the study of stories. Creswell (2013) explained that in narrative inquiry the researcher gathers data through the stories told by the study participants to

report on their experiences. Thus, once I was done with the individual *pláticas* I began to build the participant's profiles in terms of their personal background and journey into the field of Mortuary Science. These narratives are short and read seamlessly because I selected and assembled direct quotes from the individual *pláticas* and the group conversation in such a way that they could read as if the participants themselves were telling these stories. The process of *harvesting the story* also played an important role since it allowed me to collect, document, and interpret study findings. In this study, story was at the core of the process of data collection and reporting of findings.

Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003) indicated that all data, analysis, and interpretation are required to bring order and understanding. The steps proposed by these authors for analyzing qualitative data that have been collected through narrative should include the following steps: get to know the data, focus the analysis, categorize information, identify patterns, and interpretation.

*Get to know the data:* "Before beginning any analysis, consider the quality of the data and proceed accordingly" (Taylor-Power & Renner, 2003, p. 2). For qualitative analysis, this means to read and re-read the text or in case of the audio files to listen to them several times (Taylor-Power & Renner, 2003). This first step was easy to accomplish since I collected all data and transcribed the audio files myself. I read and re-read all the data several times. I also used open coding and read the transcribed documents several times to make sure I was getting a good sense of what the participants were reporting. This approach helped me develop follow-up questions to ask them during the second *plática* and group conversation.

*Focus the analysis:* Taylor-Power and Renner (2003), suggested using two approaches: (a) focus by question or topic, time period or event or (b) focus by case, individual or group. I kept in mind the study research questions and the theoretical framework of the study to focus the analysis. I printed the study research questions on large paper and posted them on the wall in the study room where I did most of the dissertation work.

*Categorize information:* Taylor-Power and Renner, 2003, recommended bringing meaning to words and categorizing information by (a) identifying themes or patterns or (b) organizing them into coherent categories. During this step I coded the data and looked for emergent categories aiming to identify possible answers to the main research questions.

*Identify patterns and connections within and between categories:* As data was organized into categories, either by question or by case, there were patterns and connections among the study participants.

*Interpretation—Bringing it all together:* Once all the data had been organized, categorized, and patterns and connections had been established, I was ready for identifying and reporting answers for the main research questions formulated at the beginning of the study. Taylor-Power and Renner (2003) suggested including quotes or descriptive examples during this final step to illustrate the main points of the study and “bring data to life” (p. 5).

Data for the study were collected through pláticas (informal conversations), artifacts, documents, and the researcher’s journal. Data analysis was multilayered and included several phases. The first phase of analysis was to utilize the MAXQDA

software to code data using priory codes established by the anatomy of the story framework (navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs). The second phase was retrieving the coded data into a Word document and coding it again to make sure the data were representative for each component of the story as suggested by the study framework (navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs). The third phase included reducing data to make sure that the data that were going to be used in the report were meaningful and relevant. Thus, story as a data collection and analysis tool was at the center of reporting study findings. The final phase of data analysis dealt with decisions made about how to write the dissertation to be faithful to the purpose of storytelling and the anatomy of the story framework.

### **Building Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggested that trustworthiness of a research study is important to evaluating its worth. According to these authors, trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to account for the worth and rigor of the research. Summarizing these concepts according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005), credibility speaks to establishing confidence in the 'truth' of the findings. Providing *credibility* speaks to the rigor, systematic planning, and implementation of the study and increases its usefulness. *Transferability* refers to showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts. *Dependability* implies showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated. *Confirmability* speaks to achieving a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not by the researcher's bias, motivations, or interests.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) advised researchers to answer the following questions to monitor for credibility of the study: (a) are the data sufficient to merit the researcher's claim? (b) are there strong logical links between the gathered data and the research's argument and analysis? and (c) has the researcher made systematic comparisons between observations and between categories? As a researcher, I referred to these questions as I implemented data analysis and as I started crafting the report of findings. I monitored that the study findings were well-supported by enough data and represented the participants' reality. I also included verbatim quotes from the participants to reflect their own voice and point of view.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described transferability as the ability to apply study findings to other similar situations and settings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized that transferability is addressed by providing "thick description" (p. 316). In this research study, transferability was accomplished by providing detailed narratives of the participants' experiences and stories. I hope other learners can relate to the experiences of the participants in the study and that other Mortuary Science programs benefit from these accounts and can transfer some of the lessons learned and recommendations provided.

A study is trustworthy when several efforts have been made to describe the participants' experiences and the quality of the data presented to support the findings. Data triangulation increases credibility and ensures that findings are more than just chance or the researcher's take of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2002) explained that triangulation can be obtained by using multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data, employing a variety of data sources, and combining both interviewing

and observations. Data obtained in this study were triangulated by using several data sources (e.g., pláticas, harvesting the story, artifacts, and documents).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered to the guidelines provided by Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the researcher requested and was granted IRB approval at both institutions Texas State University and the community college housing the Mortuary Science Program setting for the study. Ethical practice and participant confidentiality are important factors for this study. For example, all participants read and signed the consent form before deciding to participate in the study. I also explained the voluntary nature of their participation. All audio recordings were coded so that no personally-identifying information was visible on them. All data informing this study was kept in a secure locked file cabinet and password protected accessible to the main researcher only. These audio files were heard only for research purposes by the investigator and his research professor when needed. Another method to protect the identity of the participants was to assign pseudonyms and exclude specific details when reporting their narratives such as omitting the names of colleagues that they consider mentors, funeral homes where some of the participants had served or currently fulfill their clinical activities or internship, current and former employers, institutions attended, and name of places that could identify the participants.

Though there was very little risk associated with participating in the study, I recognized that study participants could become emotional due to recollections of bad memories associated with their participation in any of the stages in the Mortuary Science program. For that reason, during the review and signing of the consent form the

participants were notified of the local counseling services provided at no cost to the study participants. They were also informed that I would assist them setting the initial appointment and any follow-up visits if deemed necessary. However, none of the study participants had to use these services.

## APPENDIX D

### THE RESEARCHER'S PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY

The qualitative researcher is “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). This type of methodology allows for a flexible design and field-based data collection (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explains that “the focus is on the process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive” (p. 14). Accordingly, this section presents the narrative of the researcher looking at his personal and professional journeys leading to a career in Mortuary Science.

*At the age of three my family decided to leave Chicago, Illinois and relocate in Matehuala, San Luis Potosí, México. The intention was to take care of my maternal grandmother after she was diagnosed with cancer. These events altered my personal and geographic surroundings. Soon my car toys were substituted with ambulances, and my collection of superhero figures became ordinary toys. These toys later took the place of my imaginary patients to whom I normally prescribed the same medicines and dosages my grandmother had to take. At the age of seven I learned to spell the names of the medical instruments and the procedures performed by the doctor visiting my grandmother. As she began to receive intravascular medications, my curiosity to learn about the circulatory system and anatomical terms also developed. Unfortunately, my grandmother did not react positively to the treatment and died a few years after the diagnosis. The*



*motivation to learn about the structure of the human body continued after her death, and I was able to expand my knowledge about the human anatomy during my high school and college years. The desire to learn how to read my grandmother's prescriptions and the curiosity about anatomical structures affected by those medications guided my educational choices while attending college. Experiencing the death of my grandmother caused radical changes in the life of my family, and my parents decided to remain in Mexico.*

My grandmother's illness and subsequent death were critical events in my life as I was transplanted from one country to another, and my childhood was interrupted by a family-distressing event. These happenings were influential in decisions I made later in life in terms of my career and the implementation of this study. As a Mortuary Science graduate I began this study by presenting my own experiences as a human being, professional, and learner. The motivation to implement the study connects to my own life history and educational journey. In this section I present relevant life events as they relate to developing my identity, my journey into the United States, and my experiences as a Mortuary Science student and as an educator.

### **Developing a Mexican Identity**

My life in Mexico begins at the age of three, early enough for me to adapt to the country and develop a Mexican identity. As I recall memories of my childhood, everything that relates to those early years revolves around my immediate family members (see Figure 32) including my maternal grandmother (see Figure 33). Family unity has been an important part of my life since I can remember—weekly family reunions, birthday parties, quinceañeras, weddings, and some funerals. These events

were and continue to be an opportunity to reinforce family connections and to show mutual support to those members of the family facing a difficult time.



*Figure 32.* My Family (Front row: Pedro Antonio, Juan Manuel, and Isidra. Back Row: José Luis and Manuel).



*Figure 33.* Zenaida Hernández de Moreno, Maternal Grandmother.

It was this type of moral support that made the transition from the United States into Mexico a less difficult event for my family after my maternal grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. Since my arrival in Mexico, I received what most children

want—love and attention from multiple family members. Now that I am able to reflect back on this experience, I can see how that love, support, and motivation of all around us helped me to adapt to life changes and to what became my home during my infancy and teen years. Once my grandmother died and my parents decided to stay living in Mexico, I learned to adopt Matehuala as my hometown.

During my school years I was never alone. The adults of the family always managed to enroll all the children in the same school and sometimes even in the same classroom. It was not until the last years of high school that my cousins and I started looking into different fields of education and went separate ways. For fourteen years I was part of the community, and I had the opportunity to represent the schools I attended in different cultural activities (e.g., folklore dance) and academic contests (e.g., spelling, natural sciences, and math) at local and national levels (see 34). Unfortunately, during my first year of college everything was turned around after I was questioned about my citizenship. While trying to prove my Mexican citizenship, I discovered I had lived in Mexico as an illegal immigrant for fourteen years and that I did not have the proper documentation to continue with my education. At the time, attempting to obtain citizenship in Mexico was seemingly complicated and involved legal procedures that my family and I did not want to confront, such as serving in the military which offered dangers I was not prepared to face. As a result, my parents and I decided to consult with friends and family members living in the United States for possible venues to initiate my college education and begin a new journey away from Mexico.



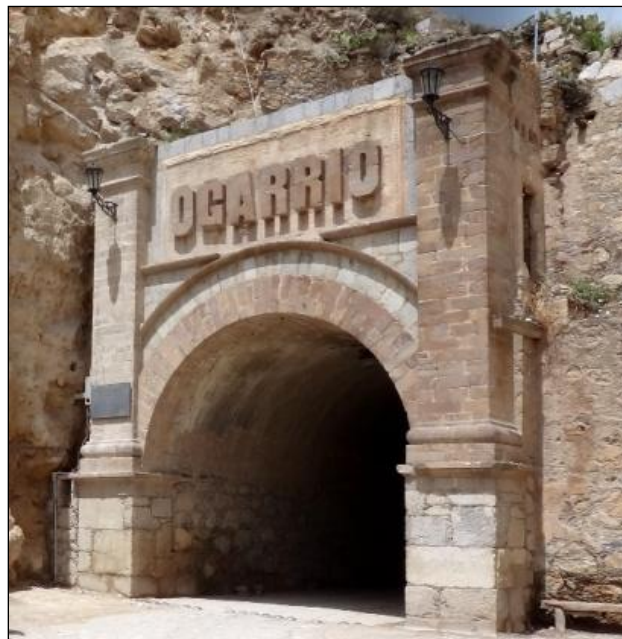
*Figure 34. Junior High Honor Roll 1986*

### **Journey Back to the United States**

Upon my return to the United States I took advantage of English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy centers and intensive language courses at local colleges and universities to begin the acquisition of the English language. Learning English was neither fast nor easy; this process took approximately a year. However, I did not feel comfortable with my English literacy skills until approximately two years after my arrival in the United States. While waiting for transcripts to be evaluated to initiate my college education in the United States, I also had to create my legal identity by obtaining identification documents that proved my United States citizenship.

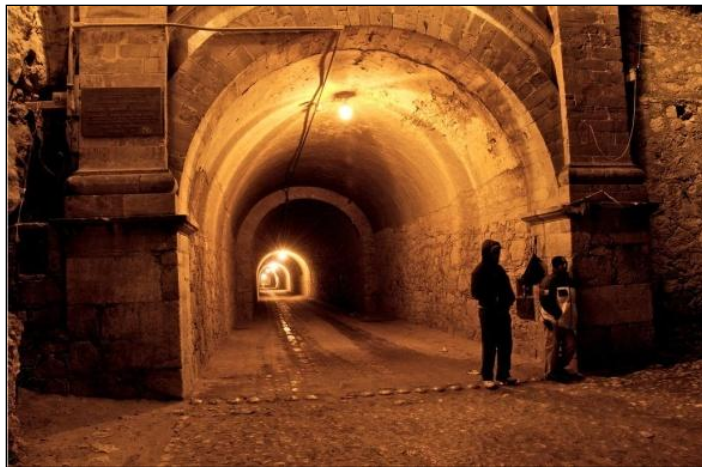
During the migration journey back to the United States, I packed my dreams, good parental advice, and priceless memories. I had to say good-bye to my family members and circle of friends in order to follow my dream to obtain a college education. In the process I literally emerged from “the cave” (Losing, 1996, p. 49), not Plato’s, but mine. The Ogarrio is a 1.5-mile long tunnel within one of the main mountains surrounding the region where I lived (see Figures 35 and 36). This tunnel connects the

historical part of the city with its new development. Plato's parable of the cave (Losing, 1996) talks about individuals unable to turn their heads and notice their surroundings. Plato later talks about the possibility for one of those individuals to explore a different environment, to be able to turn around towards the light and later to be forced out of the cave to perceive the world around him. I relate to this man emerging from the cave. What I knew about the United States before my immigration was only a shadow, a distorted image of reality based on TV shows and Hollywood movies. The turning of my head towards the light was the reality of immigration to the United States. Later I was exposed to the behavior expectations of this country which literally pulled me out of the cave into plain light. My introversion had no place in this new culture, and I had to be reoriented and be able to adapt to the new environment—the world outside and above the cave.



*Figure 35.* Ogarrío Tunnel, Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí.

Downloaded from <http://reydocbici.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/20r14.jpg>



*Figure 36.* Ogarrio Tunnel (West End), Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí.

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The analysis of my life in the United States has allowed me to realize that talking about my identity means to reflect about my family and culture. As a member of the Hispanic community I am part of a group-oriented society and therefore I think in a collective manner. Any personal successes are going to be considered accomplishments for the entire family that will eventually benefit my culture as a whole. Any obstacles will become an opportunity for my family to show how important I am for them. Even when I try to convince myself that as of today I have spent more years in the United States than in my adopted country, I still feel immersed in the culture and language of Mexico.

At this point in my life, I feel content that I have learned the expected behavior of both cultures, but sometimes switching between the two cultures is not an easy task. The language barrier has been reduced to a manageable point and even with my own particular way of speaking English, I now teach and assist others using two languages—English and Spanish. The language acquisition has given me the privilege to serve as a simultaneous translator for personal, religious, and professional events at local and international events.

### **Mortuary Science Student**

Since I had a late arrival into the United States' education system, I was never able to fulfill the characteristics of what is considered a traditional student. Yet, I feel relieved in knowing that I was learning even in difficult times during the acculturation process. This learning experience—from unassertive to self-confident—is a treasure that cannot be taken away, but can be shared with others wishing to follow my path. Upon arrival to the United States, I had a wish in the back of my mind to find a person, preferably a Hispanic outside of my family, to tutor me about the customs and social expectations of the United States. Thankfully I did not find only Hispanics, but a group of wonderful people from different ethnic backgrounds willing to guide me not only during my acculturation process but also in the professional environment. These dear friends were and have been the backbone that has sustained my dreams of achieving my education goals. Having these wonderful people in my life makes me feel thankful and increases my desire to follow their example and apply it with future generations of students.

Reflecting about the different events and the feelings I experienced during that period of my life, I can say that the help of my tutors made my life less difficult. I cannot say my life was easy because, even with all their support, I experienced growing and acculturation pain. All this has helped me appreciate not only the success but also the achieving process. With the passing of years, I decided to become more active with the international students in the college where I work. The aim has been to serve as a cultural mediator and assist new students in a similar manner as the mentors I had by my side when I needed them the most. I became familiar with the international students'

needs due to my own experiences as a former ESL student. Most of my ESL classmates are now current colleagues and friends who also serve at different levels as good acculturation sources for international students. I also believe my bilingual skills and prior experience in the international educational environment will be valuable for the incoming undergraduate students in my field of work.

### **Mortuary Science Educator**

As a Mortuary Science educator, I am grateful to have the opportunity to assist the new generation of funeral directors and embalmers while they accomplish the different academic and state licensure requirements. I am enthusiastic about education because I am a perpetual learner myself. I was fortunate enough since a very young age to learn from family members and dedicated professors who were passionate about creating the proper learning environment to inspire others to become learners. Throughout my years as an educator, I have tried to maintain this goal and try to assess the needs of the student and create a safe environment for learning (Vela, 2002).

In preparation to work as an educator in the Mortuary Science field, I have developed a strong background in distance education in addition to my coursework in psychology and counseling. Currently I use a variety of teaching methods in the classroom, with the ultimate goal of guiding students toward a functional use of the material presented. I have also incorporated computer-assisted activities for online and traditional courses, which have been accepted by most of the students. Technology has assisted me in the creation of a productive learning environment and to increase students' motivation regardless of their familiarity with current computer technology.



## **APPENDIX E**

### **RELEVANT TERMS**

Due to the diverse titles and vocabulary employed in different states when referring to individuals involved in the field of Mortuary Science, the following list of key terms and definitions is essential to the understanding of the present study design. All of the terms utilized are defined by the Texas Funeral Service Commission, Chapter 651 of the Texas Occupations Code (September 2011, pp.1-3). The goal of this list of terms and definitions is to provide a better understanding of this document.

**American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE):** Serves as the national academic accreditation agency for college and university programs in Funeral Service and Mortuary Science Education. ABFSE is the sole accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council on Higher Education Accreditation in this field (ABFSE, 2013).

**Embalmer:** A person licensed to preserve and disinfect a dead human body by using chemical substances or fluids (Sec. 651.001.4, p. 1).

**Funeral director:** A person licensed to engage in the preparation; other than by embalming, of a dead human body for burial or other disposition (Sec. 651.001.6, p. 1).

**International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards (The Conference):** The International Conference is a not-for-profit voluntary association providing examination services, information, and regulatory support to funeral service licensing boards and educators, governmental bodies, and other regulatory agencies (ICFSEB, 2011)

**Mortuary Science:** The scientific, professional, and practical aspects of the care, preparation for burial, or transportation of a dead human body (Sec. 651.001.11, p. 2).

**Mortuary Science student:** A person enrolled in an accredited school or college of Mortuary Science (Sec. 651.253.3, p. 26).

**Provisional license holder:** A person who holds a license to be engaged in learning the practice of funeral directing or embalming under the instruction, direction, and personal supervision of a funeral director or embalmer (Sec. 651.001.14, p. 3).

**Texas Funeral Service Commission (TFSC):** The state agency authorized by state law to regulate the death care industry in the state of Texas.

## **APPENDIX F**

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

This is an invitation to participate in a research study; IRB #EXP2015L732385A. The principal investigator, José Luis Moreno, will describe the study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below. Ask questions of anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to take part in the study. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your relationship with Texas State University or San Antonio College will not get affected in any way.

This project IRB #EXP2015L732385A was approved by the Texas State IRB on February 18, 2015. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 - [lasser@txstate.edu](mailto:lasser@txstate.edu)) and to Becky Northcut, Director, Research Integrity & Compliance (512-245-2314 - [bnorthcut@txstate.edu](mailto:bnorthcut@txstate.edu)).

#### **Title of research study:**

Anatomy of the Story: Narratives of Mortuary Science Learners and Graduates

#### **Principal investigator:**

José Luis Moreno, M.A., L.P.C.  
Adult, Professional, and Community Education Program  
Texas State University  
Telephone Number: (xxx) xxx-xxxx  
Email Address: [jl327@txstate.edu](mailto:jl327@txstate.edu)  
[jlmoreno\\_fd@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jlmoreno_fd@sbcglobal.net)

#### **Supervising professor:**

Clarena Larrotta, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Adult, Professional, and Community Education Ph.D. Program  
Texas State University  
Email Address: [CL24@txstate.edu](mailto:CL24@txstate.edu)

**Purpose of the study:**

Learn about, document, and report on the experiences, challenges, and successes of the participants during their role as Mortuary Science students, interns, and licensees.

**What is expected of you:**

- Participate in two one-hour long individual conversation
- Participate in a half-hour follow-up/clarification conversation if needed.
- Participate in a two-hour group conversation
- Share stories through an artifact. This is an object that has meaning to you personally and that helps you make connections with your experiences as related to Mortuary Science.

If you agree to participate in the research study, you are agreeing to let me use examples of your oral, written responses, interview responses, and visuals collected as information for my research. Your identity will be protected at all times; pseudonyms will be used for names of people and places.

**Possible discomforts and risks:**

There is very little risk in participating in this study. However, sometimes people become emotional or have recollections of bad memories related to a specific topic, in which case the participant will be referred to the Center for Health Care Service (3031 IH 10 West, San Antonio, TX 78201, Phone: (210) 731-1300, website: [www.chcsbc.org](http://www.chcsbc.org) serving the San Antonio area). I will help make an appointment and follow-up in case extra support is needed. There will be no deception involved on the part of the researcher. Participation is voluntary and participants will be able to withdraw at any point of the research study.

**Possible benefits:**

For you as a participant: You will be involved in dialogue with fellow students and/or current funeral directors and embalmers which could potentially lead to an enriched college experience and new or improved friendships. You will also have a chance to discuss each other's experiences in the field of Mortuary Science, and your contributions to the conversation can help improve funeral service education currently offered.

For the field of education: The findings from this study will be of benefit to higher education institutions, program directors, administrative agencies, and future Mortuary Science students. Study findings will add to the body of knowledge on teaching Mortuary Science. We can learn from your experiences, transfer/reproduce/enhance these efforts in subsequent initiatives, and enhance the experiences of current and future Mortuary Science learners.

**If you choose to take part in this study, will it cost you anything?**

No.

**Will you receive compensation or academic credit for your participation in this study?**

No.

**What if you do not want to participate?**

Participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate in the study, and your refusal will not influence your relationships with Texas State University or the researcher.

**How can you withdraw from the project?**

You are free to withdraw your consent and stop participation in this project at any time.

**How will the information collected through the study be protected?**

Your identity will never be disclosed. Your real name will never be attached to any of your actual words from written documents, your oral participation, or the interviews.

Your identity will not be revealed in any published form.

Any audio taped information will be coded so that no personally identifying information is visible on them. All data informing this study will be kept in a secure place (e.g., a locked file cabinet and password protected) accessible to the researcher only. These tapes will be heard or viewed only for research purposes by the investigator and his research associate (his supervising professor).

**Consent to Participate in Research**  
**Texas State University at San Marcos**

**Signatures**

As the principal researcher in this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks involved in participating in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
José Luis Moreno, M.A., L.P.C.  
Principal Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

You have been informed about the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks involved in participating in this research study. You have received a copy of this form. You have had the opportunity to ask questions before signing this form and you understand that you can ask other questions at any time. You also know that you can withdraw your consent and stop participation in this project at any time. Finally, you voluntarily agree to participate in this study and have your participation audio recorded. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **APPENDIX G**

### **SAMPLE TOPICS FOR INDIVIDUAL PLÁTICAS**

#### **Warming up to the topic**

- Please tell me about yourself
  - place of origin
  - culture
  - the community in which you grew up
  - family
- How did you become involved in the Mortuary Science field?

#### **Educational background**

- Please tell me about your educational background
  - prior to your enrollment in Mortuary Science
  - after graduation from the program
- How has been your experience in the Mortuary Science program?
  - as a student
  - as an intern
  - as a licensee

#### **Artifacts**

- Describe an artifact or artifacts significant to you and that have some connection to your involvement in the Mortuary Science field.



## **Present Experiences**

- Describe yourself as a student/ intern / licensee?
- Funeral service as a career could be very demanding. How do you combine these types of demands with your personal life?
- What is the perception you think funeral directors and embalmers have of you after your participation in the Mortuary Science internship program?
- Please talk about your successes in this career/profession (as a student, as a practitioner).
- What do you see as being your greatest challenge as you enter the funeral profession?
- What are the current demands of the work you do in the mortuary field?
  - What has been the learning curve like after graduation?
- Please describe any challenges you encountered in the process of completing your clinical or internship work.
- Describe a challenge you experienced while trying to obtain your license
  - How did you deal with this challenge?
  - Is there anything you would like to share that I have not asked you today?
- What is a significant experience as a funeral practitioner when you felt like you made a difference?

### **Looking at Past Experiences and Advice for the Future**

- Tell me about a significant experience you went through as a student in the program
- Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult situation as a student and how you handle it?
- What was it like for you when you began your internship?
- How has the internship program impacted, if in any way, your career in Mortuary Science?
- In retrospective, what can you say about your learning experiences from your journey in the Mortuary Science field?
- If it was my first day working at a funeral home, what would it be like? Please describe it.

### **Advice for Future Learners**

- What will you advise prospective students seeking a career in Mortuary Science?
- How will you employ in the future the knowledge gained during the difficult situations faced during your career as a funeral practitioner?
- What can be done to improve the teaching for funeral practitioners?
- What can be done to improve the conditions of the job as a funeral director and/or embalmer?

## **APPENDIX H**

### **SAMPLE TOPICS FOR GROUP CONVERSATION**

#### **Introductions**

Please introduce yourself; tell us your name, current status in the field (i.e., student, intern, and licensee) and any other information you feel is relevant.

#### **Getting Started With the Conversation**

- As Mortuary Science learners and graduates you are all considered successful. The students have finished their first year in the program, the interns are in the process of getting licensed, and the current practitioners have successfully passed the National Board Exam and obtained their license. What factors have contributed to your success?
- What motivates you to keep going and stay in this field?

#### **Talking About the Challenges**

- What are the career demands in the field of Mortuary Science?
- Based on your journey in the field what changes do you think need to happen

#### **Talking About the Future**

- What can be our legacy for the generations to come in the field of Mortuary Science?
- What will the future bring for the Mortuary Science field?

#### **Concluding the Conversation**

- How will you describe the ideal relationship between the licensed funeral director/embalmer and the students and interns?
- What is an anecdote that comes to your mind in relation to your experiences in the Mortuary Science field?

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