

AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

SEASON 2: EPISODE 2: Heather Campbell Hill, Funeral Director. Raleigh, North Carolina

ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: Mississippi John Hurt: "Pay Day."

NANCY GROCE (Host): Welcome to *America Works*, excerpts from longer interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library's American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce, and today's *America Works* episode features funeral director Heather Campbell Hill of the Renaissance Funeral Home in Raleigh, North Carolina. She was interviewed on behalf of the Library by folklorist Sarah Bryan, who received an Archie Green Fellowship from the American Folklife Center to document Funeral Services Workers in the Carolinas.

Although relatively new to her profession, Heather's dedication and compassion to help people during, as she says, "the worst times of their lives," is reflected throughout her Occupational Folklife Project interview. A note to listeners: although not explicit, Heather's interview does include discussions of death, bereavement and funerals.

INTERVIEW

Heather Hill: I've been here at this funeral home for three years. I've been licensed almost exactly a year this month. So I've been licensed a year, but I did a two-year apprenticeship. And I came here—I actually used to be a web designer, and then I got tired of doing web design and I was on one of those career-builder websites one night, and typed in all my answers to the responses, and "funeral director" came up. And I slapped my head and said, "Oh yeah! This is awesome."

I've had other careers in the past. But this is—I started off as a bank teller, then I was a chiropractic assistant, then I was a vet tech, then I was an x-ray tech. And then I became a flight attendant.

Sarah Bryan: So a lot of those, it sounds to me, are caring professions, and working with people and helping people.

Heather Hill: I guess that's what I'm drawn to, and that's why the web design thing didn't work.

Before I started school, I came to this funeral home to speak to a director because I'd never been in the business before. A lot of people are raised in the business and this is their life, so I came and talked to Joe—Joe the third. His father is also a funeral director. And I said, "Give me the ins and outs. I'm about to start school; I don't know anything about this career." And he said--gave me the good and the bad. He said, you know, "You're going to be rewarded by helping people, but the hours are really crazy, and you see a lot of things that are hard."

So I think it helped. They were—I think they had in mind they were looking for a female. So I was at the right place at the right time, 'cause apprenticeships are hard to come by in this area. So I was really happy to stay on here. A very high statistic of the people in school now are females.

My classes -- I went through Fayetteville Tech, which, for those in the business know, in North Carolina, you can do either funeral director or embalming. And I started off doing just funeral director, then I moved to embalming. But in a small funeral home I'm able to at least assist. I don't need to stay up front and be just with the families, or stay in the back and be just with bodies. So I like being able to do a little bit of everything.

When I worked as an x-ray tech I worked in the hospital. And I watched some autopsies, and it was fascinating. It was really fascinating to me. Not in a morbid way, but in an anatomical way. I had to x-ray somebody who had died, and that was the first time I'd actually touched a dead body, and that was when I was in my 20s.

Sarah Bryan: I'm so interested in the Death Café and that phenomenon. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Heather Hill: Yes! The Death Café is— you first tell people, Death Café. "What the heck is that?" It is a conversation. It's basically a conversation that brings up every aspect or whatever anybody wants to talk about, whether it's planning for your own death, preparing the documents that you need, or dealing with somebody that's dying. Grief. Ghosts. Afterlife. We talk about it all. We don't all have an agenda.

Sarah Bryan: Did that originate here?

Heather Hill: No. Death Café is an international project started by, actually, a gentleman who just died. His name is John Underwood. In London, I think, it actually originated. It's, it is worldwide.

Our society doesn't want to think about death or be cognizant of the fact that we're all going to die. It doesn't make you morbid. It doesn't make you Goth. It doesn't make you odd. It makes you curious about your own death. And by being faced with death, you're able to live the best life that you can.

I think you have to really feel people, which sounds kind of, um, basic. But you really need to know when somebody needs to talk about something. I mean, of course, being a good listener. But you have to move things along. But if you're making arrangements, once the arrangements are done, then you sit and talk. And that conversation can lead to so many different things.

Usually I'll meet somebody at the door. And then, you know, when you first start out with meeting with somebody I've found what works with me is you need to build their trust. They're not going to instantly

pour out everything, or know that you're a good person and not out to take them for all your money. And so I usually start out talking about the vitals first.

And then, after the vitals are done and you've already got a little bit of rapport, then you start talking about service and what you can do for them. Like, "Well, let's personalize this. What do you think of this? And we can do slideshows. What do you think of this? And show me your favorite picture of him." And then things start to open up.

Usually then it moves on to the type of service. And that I can make this picture, and I can make this picture pretty. And that you don't need to choose an urn right now, let's decide that later, because you guys have a lot going on right now.

Sadly, funeral directors have a bad rep, a lot of them. You know, because of all the—Jessica Mitford book, and a lot of the—which is still relevant, you know--being just a business; that we're here to make money. And I think a lot of people come in already challenging you on things.

Like, once they know that you're not trying to get them [laughs]—sadly, thanks to past funeral directors—or that you really are there, there's...There's an actually--you feel it, in the conference, when you actually gain their trust. Then once you gain their trust, then it's two ways the whole way. That happened today. I met with a family this morning and I actually felt that turn. She was kind of snippy in some of her responses to me—"Well, that's not what we want to talk about right now"—and then it turned.

I had a Jewish funeral yesterday. We've done non-denominational funerals. I've got a Christian funeral coming up. The family that owns this is Catholic, so we do a lot of—I'm an honorary Catholic, by the way. We've done Indian Hindu funerals, and creative things, and I love the diversity in this area, and I love the different traditions.

Green burial is the quick—no embalming, no vault. And there's two cemeteries in Raleigh that do green burial. And I love the green burials. I think it's beautiful. I love the idea that it's more hands on, that it's more interactive. I think it's healthier. That's my opinion and I'm sticking by it! [laughs]

I personally don't know what's on the other side. And I figured if I saw something here that would change my mind, then I would feel better. But I never have noticed anything odd here. And I love to hear what people say. Most of it is at the time of death, like, "She was waiting until somebody came," or "The second we stepped out, this happened," or "Right afterwards, my phone died," or...

I remember, I was taking an urn to the church one time, and I was just driving my own car, and I sat the urn down beside me in my seat, and a ladybug came and landed on the lid. I said, "Well, hello. You're coming with me." And then I got there and I told the family. I thought it might be nice. And they're like (gasps), "You're kidding! That was her favorite. That was her visiting." So I love that story. And I'm open to it, and I love hearing about it. I just wish I would experience it.

Whatever happens when we die is the greatest mystery, and we're not supposed to know until it happens. Well, maybe someday we'll all know. Maybe we'll all be back together again someday. If I only had proof. A notarized statement would be nice. [Laughs.] I wish.

It's an honor to be with somebody when they're going through the worst day of their life. That's as vulnerable and as honorable a thing that you could do. I'm really thankful to be able to do that.

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: Mississippi John Hurt: "Pay Day."

NANCY GROCE (Host): You've been listening to North Carolina funeral director Heather Campbell Hill, who was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center by folklorist and Archie Green Fellow Sarah Bryan as part of the Library's Occupational Folklife Project.

To listen to the complete interview with Ms. Hill, and hear hundreds of other interviews with contemporary American workers, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife -- or just search online for the Occupational Folklife Project.

For the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov