



Undertaking the Family Business

Neil O'Connor moving family
mortuary business forward

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Neil O'Connor, president and CEO of O'Connor Mortuary, works on educating the public about his profession and providing top service to grieving families. Photo by Danielle Johnson

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Undertaking the Family Business

Neil O'Connor strives to be a mortician for a modern age

By Cory Saul
The Capistrano Dispatch

Sometimes when we think about death we think about the ones we love, or about what we're leaving behind. We might wax philosophical about what it means to die, or reassure ourselves with what we believe comes after. But, more commonly, we set thoughts of death aside in favor of more pleasant thoughts. Maybe one without a period at the end.

But then there are people who have no choice but to face death every day. They can't turn their backs or plug their ears and say "la-la-la" because they work in the business. Neil O'Connor grew up in it, and as a mortician, death is an everyday part of his life.

It's an old practice, the career of an undertaker. There aren't many things older than death. But that doesn't mean it can't be pushed forward.

The O'Connor family has provided mortuary services to Southern California residents since 1898, when Patrick J. O'Connor and Thomas J. Cunningham started directing funerals in Los Angeles. The company, which has since moved its main facility to Laguna Hills and houses arrangement centers in San Juan Capistrano and Irvine, serves more than a thousand families per year. President and CEO Neil O'Connor represents the fourth generation of the family business and aims at bringing the community into a better understanding of the mortuary world through outreach and social media.

Well, somebody has to do it, you suppose. But that isn't how O'Connor looks at it. He gets to be a mortician. "Service is service is service," he says. It's important to look at this job as one of service to a family, he asserts. "Even though we only spend four to six days with a family, we really have the opportunity to build personal relationships."

The career is something O'Connor, who had aspirations to become a Navy Seal, has grown in to. An early injury set him back, and he decided to enter the family business. He started from the ground up, making flower deliveries and keeping the place clean. Today, O'Connor takes a much more administrative role, keeping track of the books, working the marketing side of things and—his favorite part—educating the community.

"People don't really know what we do," he says. Because of this, O'Connor has set up a tour titled "Unmasking the Mysteries," inviting members of the board and care, religious and medical



The executive team at the O'Connor Mortuary Arrangement Center in San Juan Capistrano: Jeff Turner, Joe Fitzgerald, Patricia Kolstad, Neil O'Connor and Chuck Ricciardi. Courtesy photo

professions, as well as the general public to learn about the mortuary and to see its facility. "We found out that there weren't only people who want to learn about what a mortuary offers, but that they were willing to see our preparation room where embalming takes place, and our crematory."

O'Connor shows visitors a room of coffins, urns and gravestones on display for families and individuals to choose from. He goes into the embalming room before allowing guests in, to make sure it isn't being used, then coaxes them into the sterile formaldehyde lab with two stainless steel tables, each big enough for one. He fields questions about the process of embalming, and takes the liberty of describing (not showing) the two industrial walk-in refrigerators, one big enough to store 40 bodies at once. Then O'Connor shows his visitors the cremation room, a stuffy and hot room filled almost entirely with one big oven. It is usually running at about 1,300°F, equal to the temperature of lava flow.

O'Connor doesn't show his visitors absolutely everything, but he will show them what he can.

It's a desire for transparency that brings O'Connor out into his community. A San Juan Capistrano resident, he is a member of the Chamber of Commerce, serves on various local boards and is an avid member of Saddleback Kiwanis International. "My parents taught me to get involved in the community, and it's something I take to heart."

Mortuaries often seem distant, mysterious and just downright creepy, an image O'Connor is determined to shove aside. People are usually surprised when they discover that he's a normal guy. He plays beach volleyball and has practiced yoga for 25 years. He and his wife Lisa have a 6-month old son, Jesse Joe, and

three German shepherds. Spiky hair and square glasses, he is easy-going and personable.

Nevertheless, O'Connor says this job has an effect on people. "It's different for every person, but for me being a mortician shows me we only have so much time," he says. "There are only so many days and so many hours in a day so I really try to appreciate everything I have. Sometimes I think a lot about the impact I have on my community, or the legacy I'm leaving. I focus on my relationships and the good things in life."

O'Connor Mortuary works to highlight the good things with its Heart & Soul Awards. Monthly, an event is held honoring an individual in the Orange County community who goes above and beyond the call of service. "So much of the news is driven by negativity and taken up by people who morally don't deserve so much attention," O'Connor says. "So with the Heart & Soul Award we try to call attention to someone who is really making a difference in our community." Those awarded include senior citizen educator Denise Welch, Junipero Serra High School senior and volunteer Courtney Avila, and Capistrano Councilman Larry Kramer—before he was elected.

For the Heart & Soul Awards and other efforts, O'Connor Mortuary was a nominee for the 2011 Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year.

O'Connor is working on moving the mortuary business forward. Though it has a rich history, he is not afraid to bring the family business into the modern era. O'Connor Mortuary has its own Facebook and Linked-In pages, and a Twitter account. For family members who can't make memorial services, there is the option to have it streamed online, or recorded to keep on a DVD.

O'Connor encourages people to break away from traditional view of memorial services. "Your funeral should be as unique as your life."

"When we are called by family members of someone who recently passed, the question they always ask is 'How much do you charge?'" O'Connor says. "Not because money is the biggest concern, but because they don't know what else to ask. So what we always do is ask them if they would like to hear how we are different, and they're often surprised that one mortuary is different than another mortuary."

While O'Connor admits that his family's mortuary is by no means the cheapest route—a traditional funeral plan starts at \$4,645, not including coffin—he argues that the commitment and second-to-none personal attention more than makes up for it. "You get what you pay for," he said. "If you are looking to have a memorial service where money is the biggest factor, there are other mortuaries for you, but if you are looking for a mortuary that can have the honor of serving your family, we'd love to do that for you."

Being a mortician is a tough, and often thankless, job. "So many people walk through those doors, and we can't heal them, unfortunately. We can only hope to create a memorable, lasting experience."

Much of O'Connor's work involves speaking at conferences and events, promoting pre-planning, in which an individual plans his or her own funeral services. He urges his listeners to consider the options of burial or cremation, or where they would like their remains spread. "This can take a heavy weight off of family members during a time of crisis," he says. "It's nice to know that whenever somebody does pass, there is a plan of action." O'Connor says about 20 percent of the mortuary's services are pre-planned, and since he has started speaking out and promoting the strategy, that percentage is rising.

O'Connor encourages family members to talk to each other about their wishes when they pass. "Death is not taboo," he said. "It's something that everybody needs to talk about and not push off."

He thinks about it all the time, death. He doesn't have much of a choice. But when he thinks about it, one might be surprised where O'Connor's mind goes. "When I think about death, I think about life," he says. "I reflect on the importance of relationships and how we only have so much time left. Lately, I have been thinking about my mortality, and it really forces me to look inward and reassess what I have to offer in the time I have left." **CD**