

Narrative: Ross Blount, Funeral Director, McCoy Funeral Home

Blacksburg, Virginia

Interviewers: Carmen Fields, Antonio Forlini

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My name is Ross Blount and I am a funeral director at McCoy Funeral Home in Blacksburg. I'm 40 years old and I am married. When I was fifteen or sixteen, somewhere in that area, I was already working at McCoy part time and it was a job and I enjoyed it and I just kept doing it.

You can be a funeral director and...or an embalmer. Now I'm both. It used to be you could, you know, be just a funeral director or just an embalmer, or both. Now you have to be both, as far as the education nowadays, but there's a lot of funeral directors out there that are not embalmers, still yet that are grandfathered in under that clause. That was changed in the... [pauses] I wanna think somewhere in the mid '80s or early '80s where you had to have both. I'm both, I do both. I used to do more embalming than I did funeral directing and now I do about the same with each.

I'm pretty much on call all of the time. The hours are horrible, sometimes. If I could change two things about my job, one would be less federal and state regulation. And I realize they have to do some, because people take advantage of people. And then, but number two, my job hours, definitely. Working weekends didn't bother me before we had children but now that we do... I wouldn't say it bothers me, I just... I try to make the most of when I am off, with them, and, you know, it's definitely changed our lifestyle as far as having children. The government is pretty strict on us about what can and can't be done, how you say things. They're very strict on us when we are pricing things to people. You have to do it at a certain time, and to me... They do that because there are bad eggs in any business, but, unfortunately, ours, when something goes wrong, it looks really bad. If somebody dies at home and they haven't made any arrangements at all, and we go to the home and we pick the person up, and they ask me one question about, well, how much does this cost, or something like that, if they say that, by law, I'm required to hand them a general price list at that time, which lists every price that we have. And to me, that's one of the coldest things you can do, right then. But, by law, I'm required to do that. I say, "Well, since you've asked, by law, I have to hand you this. It's up to you whether you want to look at it or not right now." And I tell 'em, I say, "Now, please don't take this

offensively, I have to do this.” And it’s just not the right time to be doing something like that. You know.

We go to the [crime] scenes. It’s up to the police department who’s over the jurisdiction, whether it be state, county, or local agency, it’s up to them who picks up the person. But if it’s in Montgomery County, especially on the western side of Montgomery County, we get everything on our side of the county. There is a funeral home here in Christiansburg, as well, that picks up everything on the eastern side. But we do probably.... oh, I’d say 70 percent of the work as far as crime scene stuff in the county. At a crime scene you gon’ see the worst, a lot worse stuff than you do if you’re going to a hospital or a nursing home or a residence. When we go to a scene, that’s a different world than it is when we’re going just to pick up somebody who died of natural causes. We have to be careful. If it’s a traumatic crime scene, where a lot of blood or anything like that, we have to protect ourselves, number one. Number two, we have to protect that body ’cause they don’t want it contaminated with anything else other than what it’s already contaminated with because of the investigation. There’s bad ones, I mean, children...that’s always a crime scene if one of them dies, and... if I never have to do another one of those, it won’t bother me.

The weeks following the Virginia Tech shootings were the worst two weeks of my life, as far as doing my job. The police department called me that Monday afternoon and asked me how many body bags we had. And I told them that we had probably... I don’t know, 34... we went and counted ’em and it was 34 or 35 or something like that. And I asked him how many he needed... and he said possibly as many as fifty or better. And we thought, “Holy Cow.”

And then, from there on, the next two weeks, still, is kind of a, I remember every service that we had, but it was, it’s kind of a blur of what all happened. They didn’t start releasing the people who were killed until Wednesday night. That happened Monday, they didn’t start releasing the bodies till Wednesday evening. I went in Wednesday morning at 8 o’clock. I didn’t come back home until Thursday evening at 7 o’clock. I worked 24 and 12... 36 straight hours. I came home at 7 o’clock that night, ate something, went to bed at probably 8:30. Slept from 8:30 till about 1:30 in the morning, got up, took a shower and went back. And it was just, nonstop, like that for about two weeks, until we got all that situation... resolved and... but it was just, it was horrible, it was absolutely horrible... crime scene, it was horrible. Every... just...everything about it was a horrible situation.

They had so many rescue squad vehicles there, because of the circumstance, that they loaded 'em there and took them to Roanoke and we went to Roanoke and got 'em. Roanoke is where the local medical examiner's office is, where they do autopsies. The medical examiner's office out of Richmond, which is your main headquarters, I don't know if they flew her up here or drove her up here or what the circumstance was, but the chief medical examiner for the state of Virginia at the time was Dr. Fierro, and she was on campus that afternoon. And she delegated what happened and where they went and all that, she was the chief over any crime scene, she has full jurisdiction over... all law enforcement, all anything, when that, if something like that happens. They came and got the body bags from us...and then they transported, they had probably fifteen ambulances at their disposal. You hate to see something like it... hate to see that happen anywhere, but, you know, now you hear...when you say something about Virginia Tech to people, it's either two things come to play naturally, always, number one, had always been football, and number two now was "wasn't that where the shooting was ... where the massacre was?" You know, something like that. And that's what we're known for, unfortunately. Not all the other things, you know, the agriculture stuff, and everything else that goes on there.

It was a bad, bad time. We would have huge services, for all these folks, on campus or in a large, the biggest church in town, and just have, you know, a couple thousand people at each one. And then we would take 'em back to the funeral home, or to their churches, if they were some of the professors, we took them to their churches in town, but we would have most of the services either on campus or in the Presbyterian church 'cause it was the largest church in town. And then we'd take them to wherever else and have more of a private service just for the family and more of the religious type thing for 'em. And it was so many different faiths and nationalities that we dealt with there and then because, you know, it wasn't like they were all... you know... American Catholics or American Presbyterians, it was, I mean, we had people Egyptian, Indonesians, Indian. It was just such a vast...scope of all nationalities and faiths. And that's what was definitely different about... than what we do every day.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.