

Interview with Ross Blount

For **HUM 2504**: Introduction to American Studies, Prof. Emily Satterwhite, Fall 2011

Occupation: Funeral Director, McCoy Funeral Home, Blacksburg, VA

Time and Place: Saturday, 15 October 2011, residence of Ross Blount, Christiansburg, VA

Interviewers: Carmen Fields, Communications; Tony Forlini, Interdisciplinary Studies

CF = Carmen Fields

RB = Ross Blount

CF: What is your name and your official job title?

RB: My name is Ross Blount and I am a funeral director at McCoy Funeral Home in Blacksburg.

CF: Okay. And what is your age?

RB: I'm 40.

CF: Okay. And are you married?

RB: Yes.

CF: Okay. When did you know that you wanted to become a funeral home director?

RB: Uh. When I was fifteen or sixteen, somewhere in that area.

CF: Okay. And why did you want to become a funeral home director?

RB: I don't really know, I just remember working, I was already working there part time and it was a job and I enjoyed it and I just kept doing it. So.

CF: Okay. Do you ever question your profession?

RB: Oh yeah, sure...

CF: Do you ever want to maybe change and do something different?

RB: I don't know that I wanna change, I know I think about, well, other things I'd like to do. But whether I'd wanna start all over again and quit what I do now... 'cause everything takes education now to be able to get back to that point. You know. Where I'm at now.

CF: Right. And how does the schooling work to become a funeral home director? What kind of schooling is it?

RB: Well, when I, when I went through it... through, before I was licensed, to be licensed, you had to serve a 24 month apprenticeship and at the time you only had to have a diploma and funeral service education, which was only a year, but it was a solid year, not a semester type thing. We were on quarters instead of semesters. Now, it's an 18 month apprenticeship and at least a two year associate's degree to be able to do it. But, and, but I was grandfathered in.

CF: So you didn't have to go back?

RB: I didn't have to go back. Now, we do have continuity that we have to do. Still, now, 10 hours a year. Which is kind of stressful.

CF: Right.

RB: Not stressful, it's just hard time to find the time to do it and do your other stuff, and that's mild compared to other professions, so...

CF: Right. Okay. I have read that directors for funeral homes are the people that embalm the bodies. Is this true?

RB: Um. Well. There's two. You can be a funeral director and or an embalmer.

CF: Okay.

RB: Now, I'm both.

CF: Okay.

RB: Now, like a, uh, you can also, 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. Uh, but, uh, yeah, I'm both, I do both. I mean, uh. Most, well, I do, uh, well, used to be I do more embalming than I did funeral directing and now I do about the same with each, so...

CF: Okay.

RB: Yeah.

CF: Do you pick up the bodies from the crime scenes?

RB: Yes.

CF: You do?

RB: Yes. We go to the scenes and, well, I mean, it's up to the police department who's over the jurisdiction, whether it be state, county, or local agency. Um. It's up to them who picks up the person. Uh, but if it's in Montgomery County, especially on the, on the, uh, western side of Montgomery County, we 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. So, a lot of it, yes.

CF: Okay. Does that ever bother you that you have to go to these crime scenes, or...?

RB: Uh, I mean, you know, 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, but... no, not anymore, I have, unfortunately, I have been doin' it long enough now that it's pretty...

CF: Routine?

RB: Well, kind of. You know, it's more of, well, and at a crime scene, 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... uh, if there is, if it's a, you know, a traumatic crime scene, where, uh, you know, 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... you know... doing the legal... uh... uh... what do I want to call it? Investigation and all. So, but yeah, that would... there's... there's bad ones, I mean, children, anytime. I mean, they're always, 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. So, you know.

CF: Right. Sure.

RB: But... it... yeah... that, they're the worst.

CF: Definitely. What is your work schedule like? Are you on call 24-7?

RB: Pretty much. Yeah. I'm uh, like, normally I work a seven day swing. And like, I start normally at Monday on midnight, like, like I'm off this weekend, so, come midnight Monday, or, excuse me, midnight Sunday, however you want to say it, at 12:01 AM

Monday morning, I go on call. And I'm on call from then until 12:01, or, 12 o'clock next Sunday. So it's seven day shift, 24 hours a day.

CF: Wow.

RB: But, you know, I mean, I don't have to be there that whole time, I'm just on call during that timeframe.

CF: Right, so they can call you whenever a death...

RB: Right, mhm, and then we work, we work seven days and then we're off like two days during the week, normally Monday and Tuesday, and then we work Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, and we are on call, If I'm working Wednesday, Thursday and Friday on my short week, I'm on call Wednesday night and Thursday night, and then I work off at 5 o'clock on Friday, and I don't go back until... actually back into the office until 8 o'clock Monday morning, but I do go back on call, like I said, at midnight.

CF: Does it ever bother you that you have to work weekends?

RB: You know, it didn't 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. Beforehand, the weekends didn't bother us as much, you know, but now it's... I wouldn't say it's harder, I mean, you know, they and, thank goodness Elizabeth's good with them, I don't have to be here one hundred percent of the time, I mean, you know, so...

CF: Right. Exactly.

RB: But, yeah. Yeah. I wouldn't say it really bothers me, I like the days off in the week, cause I can get a lot of things done that I can't on weekends... but the weekends bother me for the purpose, that I'm not here with them when they are home. So, you know.

CF: Right. Exactly. How does your spouse feel about your job?

RB: Um. I mean, probably like any others, but there are times when we're busy and I'm gone several nights in a row or something to that effect, then she's, naturally, frustrated and everything else, but there's, I would think most of the time, she's okay.

CF: Right. Okay. I read in the newspapers that your funeral home dealt with many of the bodies of the Virginia Tech shooting...

RB: Mhm.

CF: ... Could you tell me a little bit about that experience?

RB: It was the worst two weeks of my life, as far as doing my job. Uh, the police department called me that Monday afternoon and asked me how many body bags we had.

CF: Wow...

RB: 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".

CF: Wow...

RB: 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.

CF: Wow.

RB: I worked from, so, from, 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.

CF: Wow.

RB: And it was just, nonstop, like that for about two weeks, um, 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.

CF: Did you have to go on campus to get the bodies, or did they bring them to you?

RB: No. The... uh... 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.

CF: Okay.

RB: Where they do autopsies.

CF: Okay

RB: So we went down there, and they, they, the medical examiner's office out of Richmond, which is your main headquarters, they actually, 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 in Richmond, and she was on campus that afternoon.

CF: Wow.

RB: And she delegated what happened and where they went and all that, she was the chief over any crime scene, she takes, she has full jurisdiction over... all law enforcement, all anything, when that, if something like that happens.

CF: Wow.

RB: And we would have done it, they came and got the body bags from us... and then they transported, the rescue squads like I said, they had probably fifteen ambulances at their disposal, so, they just loaded them there and took 'em to Roanoke, and then we went to Roanoke and picked 'em up and brought 'em back. And did what we had to do. So. But yeah, it was... you know... it was... 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, and 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.

CF: Right.

RB: Not all the other things, you know, the agriculture stuff, and everything else that goes on there.

CF: Exactly.

RB: So. You know. But... but yeah, it was a bad, bad time, we had so many... we would have huge services, for all these folks, like, you know, 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 another church where they were... to their churches, if they were like some of the professors, we took them to their churches in town, but we would have most of the services either on campus or, like I said, in the Presbyterian church 'cause it was the largest church in town. And then uh, but we'd have one there, 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, uh, Indian, you know, from India uh, it was, ah, 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.

CF: Right. Would you embalm a body of a family member?

RB: No. No. We try our best not to. Um, just for the purpose of... I wouldn't say I couldn't do it, I'd just rather not. I mean it's not anything so... grotesque or anything to that effect, but it's just a... I dunno, it'd just be kinda... strange doing that. Yeah. No. No, and I, and, well, when you say family member there, though, that's a little different, I mean, I would say immediate family, 'cause, oh yeah, I've embalmed people that are kin down the line, you know, to me, but...

CF: People that you know?

RB: Yeah.

CF: All the time?

RB: Several people, oh yeah, probably at least a couple a week that we know. And our friends that we've known well for a while, and all, but you know as far as doing a direct relative – grandmother or, you know, aunt, or something to that effect. No, I don't think so. We have, luckily we have enough people there that can do that... that if I'm kin to one, like on our side of the family, then one of the other guys will take care of that. Whereas if one of their people dies, I would take care of his. And, most of the time, like, if it is a family member of some one of the guys that works there, then, uh, like, if it Mike, who's one of our other directors, if it's one of his family members [video cut 15:20] and the funeral. Then he can be involved with his family. And the same vice versa, with us. You know, with me. So. And that's the way we do it, we just swap it back and forth. So. But...

CF: Okay. Do you enjoy what you do on a daily basis in your job?

RB: Mhm. Yeah.

CF: You're very satisfied?

RB: Yeah, I do. I like it. It's fun. The hours are horrible, sometimes. That's the only... if I had to complain about anything about my job, number one would be hours and number two would be the... you know... the government regulations. And that's with any job.

CF: Right.

RB: But they're pretty strict on us about what can and can't be done, how you say things. You know. Uh, they're very strict on us when we are pricing things to people. You know, you have to do it at a certain time, and to me, you know, we, I think that, and they do that because there are bad eggs in any business, but, unfortunately, ours, when something goes wrong, it looks really bad. To whereas, you know, well, for

instance, 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 died of natural causes, I mean, you know, they have cancer, or, you know, some... some illness that's, you know, non-recoverable, and they go home and they're in hospice care, for instance. 'cause the family doesn't want them to die in a nursing home, or in uh, a facility of some kind. And we go there and they ask me one question about, well, how much does this cost, or, you know, uh, we won't, such, you know, we won't bad embalmed or something like that, if they say that, by law, I'm required to hand them a general process 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.

CF: Right.

RB: But, by law, I'm required to do that. So, and I just put it right back on the, on the state and the federal trade commission. 'cause they're the ones that tell us we have 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."

CF: Right.

RB: And, uh, and they don't, but still yet it's just not the right time to be doing something like that. You know.

CF: Right. Exactly.

RB: 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, uh, I would change it, and number two, as far as my job hours, definitely.

CF: Right.

RB: You know. Especially now that we have kids and we're... on the go the way we are.

CF: Exactly. Have you ever had an experience with a family that went sour or bad, or... just a bad experience, I guess?

RB: No, not... I mean, there have been some trying times with some of 'em, but I wouldn't say it ever really went bad... I mean, uh, my goal is to make 'em all happy. And that's my job, is to make them all happy. And sometimes we... you know, I tell people all the time, we'll do whatever it takes to make this a happy situation for you, if it can be made a happy situation for you...

CF: Right.

RB: ... as long as it's within the law. And, uh, sometimes that won't allow us to do that. And I know there's been people in the past, that, I wouldn't say they were unsatisfied, I think they wish could have done things differently. But, you know, the only reason they weren't allowed to do what they wanted to do is we couldn't do it for some reason or another. You know. But no, no, not as far as... I don't think, I don't know of really... anybody ever saying that we'd done anything wrong, per se. Now, you know, you're not gonna please everybody, I don't care. I don't care what you do, but you can try. But you're not gonna please them all. So.

CF: Do you get paid on salary or commission?

RB: No, no commission at all. All salary. Eh, well, I do make bonuses off of extra work, like, um, we have a, like if I embalm, 'course, when I embalm a body for our funeral home, that's part of my job. But there are local funeral homes that are... and,

and... one thing about being in this area in Virginia is... is just, not a real... like, the other funeral homes locally are just like us, they're family owned, but most of them don't even have extra employees, like it may be a father and a son that own it.

CF: Oh, okay.

RB: And, you know, they're out of town at a family function or something, and they need somebody to embalm a body for them. While they're, you know, like, uh... well, I don't wanna say any names, but there, you know, but there's a father... there's one, two, three, four... there's four father and son run funeral homes and there are several that are just independently owned by older folks, who just can't do it anymore. So they'll call us, or whoever, and if I embalm a body for them, then I make that money. Or, if we charge for it from the funeral home, then we normally split it with whoever does the embalming, so I make a little money doing that. But no, most of mine is all salary. No hourly. No hourly. And if I got paid hourly, I'd make twice or... three times what I do. So.

CF: Right. Are you happy with your salary...

RB: Yeah.

CF: Or do you think it should be increased, or...?

RB: Well, I mean, naturally, everybody would want more, but, I mean, it's not, I mean... we make a living, and... and, uh, you know, there's... we don't... we're not in need of anything. There's things we would like to have, naturally, that we don't, but I mean as far as... as far as just barely getting by, no, that's not of circumstance. So. You know.

CF: Right. Okay. Do you hope that your children will follow in your footsteps and become a funeral home director, or have they ever talked about it...?

RB: Well, they're not... not really there yet. They always say, yeah, they... "Yeah, we're gonna work for you, daddy". But they're... being three and six, that's a little bit different. But uh, yeah, I dunno. That's... that's a funny question. Naturally, if I get to where I own the firm at one point in time, which I would think is definitely gonna happen... I kind of... be a little greedy and say, yeah, I would like for one of them... or both of them to go into it. But on another manner, no, because I don't want them to work like I do... you know, at times. So, uh, I'd a lot rather them be a doctor or a lawyer or something like that, where they're making a lot more money and didn't have to work... quite as many hours. But... doctors and lawyers work a lot too, so... I don't know. I don't know, that's... that's a really good question. Yes, yes, for my greediness, no for... for them.

CF: Okay. Alright, well I think that concludes our interview.

RB: Excellent.

CF: Thank you.

RB: You're welcome.