

Fun With Death at the Funeral Directors Convention

by Con Chapman

Undertakers convened in Boston to focus on changes and “fun” in their profession. “When funerals and death aren’t fun anymore,” said one, “I’ll get out of the business.”

Boston Globe



We were grabbing a beer after a plenary session of the National Funeral Directors Association convention—me, Chuck Schwaum from Schwaum Bros. Funeral Home in Mankato, Minn. (“Putting the ‘Fun’ Back in Funerals!”) and Todd Rentlick of Rentlick Funeral Home in Danville, Illinois (“Ask About Jello Shot Fridays!”). The afternoon’s topic—“Increasing Profitability Through Ancillary Food and Beverage Sales”—got us talking about some of the really great funerals we’d directed.



“I guess my favorite,” I said, “was the lifelong Red Sox fan who wanted to show his support for the team into and beyond the grave,” I said. “He bought the Red Sox Special coffin, and we filled it up

with his favorite brew—Bud Light—and a fifty-pound bag of crushed ice. It kept the body cool and firm on a hot August day.”

“What kind of margins did you get on the beer?” Todd asked.

“Let’s put it this way,” I said with a look that Thorstein Veblen characterized as the “physiognomy of astuteness.” “Fenway Park vendors have got nothing on me!”



Veblen: The man, the myth, the faculty philanderer.

“Attaboy!” Chuck said. “I find that if you offer mourners salty snack foods, like cheese curls and pop corn, they end up drinking a lot more.”

“You can say that again,” I replied. “And where the alcohol flows, the fun goes!”

“Say, have you ever tried a wet burial shroud night?” Todd asked. “‘Cause I’m thinking of doing it just to goose up my top-line revenue.”



Wet t-shirt tub.

"You know," Chuck said thoughtfully, "you've got to spend money to make money."

Todd and I nodded like those goofy chihuahuas people put on the rear window decks of their cars.

"Sure, you've got a pretty big initial outlay for advertising and the wet t-shirt tub," Chuck continued. "But if you market it right, you generally recover your costs by the second funeral."

"How about licensed-character themed funerals for kids who die young?" I asked, broaching a sensitive subject. "Do you think they're"—I hesitated for a moment—"a money maker?"



"Oh, definitely," Chuck said. "You're gonna pay about \$200 to get a guy in a Barney costume for the afternoon, but you'll make all that back with mylar balloons you sell."

Have a nice afterlife!

That was a sobering thought, so I took another sip of my beer. "You know," I said to my two new buddies, "fun is fun, but death has its serious side, too."

"Yeah," Chuck said somberly as he looked up at the Celtics game on the wide-screen TV over our heads.

"It's an unfortunate but inescapable part of our profession," Todd added, shaking his head from side to side.



"And there's really nothing you can do about it," I said, echoing the unspoken theme of Todd's lament. "Unless you get a major credit card number *before* you put somebody in the ground, they're going to try to stiff you for the limo and the flowers."

Available in Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection "Boston Baroques"—coming soon in print.

