

CLAIRE HALLIDAY speaks to people who have chosen to care for the dead.



MY

"I DON'T HAVE A FASCINATION WITH DEATH ... I HAVE RESPECT FOR IT AND THE WAY PEOPLE ARE TREATED."

PICTURES \ SHANNON MORRIS

CAREER

Depending on religious beliefs, death can be seen as an end, or a new beginning – a night between two days. Some find it frightening, and when it comes too soon, or with unexpected violence or trauma, it is seen as a tragedy beyond words or even tears. For the people who work around it, though, death isn't just an inevitable part of life – it's also part of a livelihood. As an industry, many say, it chooses them. It also changes them. Sometimes for the better.



Upper left: Allan Jones is just one of three people in Melbourne who cut letters by hand.

Left: Trish Goulet has seen the funeral industry change dramatically over her career.

Peter Guerin \ TRAUMA CLEANER, BIO-CLEAN

As a police officer for 30 years, Peter Guerin always had an appreciation for the wonders of fingerprint powder. In his current role as owner of Bio-Clean – a company that bills itself as Melbourne's only full-time professional trauma-cleaning company, whose work involves cleaning up after crime scenes, suicides, accidents and decomposed bodies left or forgotten for too long – Guerin, 53, sees things differently.

"Fingerprint powder? That black shit sticks to everything," he says. Blood can also be difficult to remove.

"With blood, people think they've got it, but then you lift the carpet and it's gone through to the underlay, and if it's a decomposed body that's been there a while, you're pulling up floorboards because the fluids just go right through. We once removed 33 kilograms of contaminated soil from under a house. Anything porous can be a problem."

With more than \$100,000 of chemicals and specialised equipment (including a wet/dry vacuum he has nicknamed Vampira), Guerin started the business with his then wife in 2004 and now works with one other full-time staff member (another former police officer he has known since the academy) and a team of four casuals.

Of the 500-600 jobs he attends each year, 50 to 60 are deaths. A recently advertised vacancy with Bio-Clean attracted about 60 applicants, but Guerin has learnt to be wary of the ones who seem to love it.

"People have their own agenda. One told me she was a white witch," he says. He didn't hire her.

"I don't have a fascination with death," Guerin says of his own pull to the job. "I have respect for it and I have respect for the way people are treated."

Above: Peter Guerin has made a career out of attention to detail.

Think of a high-profile murder case, suspicious death or violent crime and there's a good chance Bio-Clean has been there, including a clean-up of the prison cell where Carl Williams died.

As he goes about his work, with the job of returning a property to its previous state, Guerin has learnt not to ponder the "why?" of what can seem so brutally unfair.

"I don't ask those sorts of questions any more. It's too hard," he says. Having undertaken specialist studies in the US, Guerin has an obvious pride in the thoroughness of his clean-ups and says his is one of a handful of companies called upon by the Victoria Police – Victim Advisory Unit to help families deal with the practicalities of what is already such an emotionally messy business.

"Police know that if we're finished, there's not a chance they're going to get anything else out of the scene," Guerin says of his attention to detail – ensuring that future residents of a property can live there without visible reminders or fear of contaminants. "We're that thorough. My thing about blood is, if there's one drop left, that's one drop too many."

Allan Jones \ MONUMENTAL LETTER CUTTER

In the suburban cemetery, on the edge of Melbourne's winter, it will take Allan Jones two eight-hour days to create the 200 characters that will mark the formal sum of this dead person's life. As a monumental letter cutter – a livelihood reliant on the passing of others and someone's desire to remember them – Jones spends his working life surrounded by gravestones.

"It's all I do, all day, every day," he says. He was 17 when he left his NSW home for Warrnambool, looking for an apprenticeship. He'd thought he might be a carpenter but his father had some old fishing mates who were stonemasons, and they took him on. Taught him the trade.

Back then, there were about 15 similar businesses operating across Melbourne. Today, Jones, 54, says he is one of just three blokes in Melbourne who do it the old-fashioned way – cutting the letters into the gravestones at the cemeteries with a hammer and chisel. Just chipping away.

"These days, most of it's done by machine and sandblaster, with a stencil printed out from the computer. It takes a few hours," he says. "When they want the old-style lettering they get silly buggers like me who'll sit here and do it, even if it takes two or three days. You've got to have patience in this work. I've got plenty of that."

Jones brings his own battered cushion to kneel on and his Staffordshire bull terrier, Smudge, grunts at his feet. Before Smudge, aged seven, there was a Dalmatian and before that, another dog.

"Cemeteries are lonely places. You sit there talking to yourself all day, listening to the radio, trying not to go insane," says Jones.

This job will earn him about \$800. His Monday-Friday working week is spent between four cemeteries – Springvale, Kew, Box Hill and Lilydale. His hand-cut letters might not have the faultlessly clean precision of modern techniques but Jones says they are still sought after.

"It seems to get busier and busier," he says. Without the spectre of religious beliefs hovering above his Akubra-ed head, Jones says the cemetery environment doesn't particularly bother him.

"Dead people don't scare me," he laughs. "It's live people who worry me."

Sometimes, though, the sadness is like a cloud. "You see people in here every day, crying and mourning. You'll read the script as you're cutting it and it will get to you – especially if it's a baby. I'm getting a bit old and sentimental. Other days, I cut a whole stone and don't actually read the words. Sometimes it's best."

When it comes to memorialising his own, eventual, death, Jones has recently changed his outlook.

"I used to not care – cremate me, scatter my ashes wherever you want," he says. "Lately, though, I can see maybe it's a good thing to have a stone to recognise that you were alive once. What would I put on my stone? 'Allan Jones: whinger, moaner.' This job turns you into that. I don't do this because I love it. Just because it's all I know how to do."

Trish Goulet \ FUNERAL DIRECTOR, WHITE LADY FUNERALS

When Trish Goulet was growing up – a Catholic girl in country Victoria – death seemed simpler.

"You went to the church, had the funeral, you went to the grave. That was it," she says.

With 25 years' experience in the funeral industry, Goulet, 63 – now a funeral director and regional manager for White Lady Funerals – has spent her career watching the subsequent evolution.

"The funeral industry," she says, "has changed dramatically."

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Although she doesn't have statistics handy, Goulet seems sure that cremations outnumber burials.

"Sometimes cost is an issue, so I would say to people 'cremation is less expensive'. For cremation it is \$718. For burial, if you need to purchase a grave, it's over \$3000," she says.

Then there is the coffin. At the initial meeting, Goulet, or one of the 23 women who make up the staff across White Lady Funerals' nine statewide offices, will sit patiently while the family flips through the catalogue and negotiate the difference between casket and coffin (a coffin is wide at the shoulder and narrow at the foot, while a casket is rectangular and more expensive because of its solid-wood construction), mahogany over pine, metal versus particleboard or perhaps, if budget allows, custom-painting (your football team's colours can be added but expect to wait a couple of extra days).

There are other decisions, too: floral options; whether to view the body; favourite clothing or shrouds; religious or non-religious; the size or placement of newspaper announcements; the venue for the service.

"We've organised funeral services at Ripponlea Estate, at wineries on the peninsula, the rotunda at St Kilda Botanical Gardens, at the beach, at churches. It's up to the family. I've done a child's funeral in someone's backyard. I always just give them options. I don't want them to think I'm taking over," says Goulet.

Despite emotions so freshly exposed, she says it is rare to have everyone in the room distraught.

"People snap into something. There are decisions to be made."

For the service, Goulet works with staff to ensure the venue is set up, the hearse arrives, the coffin is in position, the sound system works, the refreshments are available and the mourners are shown to their seats.

Afterwards, there is the paperwork to lodge, to ensure the disposal of the body has been correctly registered.

To be with grieving family and friends after a death is something Goulet sees as a privilege.

"I find it amazing how they react, because they're in grief and you think they've got a lot of other things to think about but they really are so grateful and thankful," she says. "We have a system where we call the person a week later – just to say 'hello'. They say 'are you ringing about the account?' and I say 'no, we're just ringing to see how things are.'"

Goulet takes notes on the day of the funeral to remember each particular service, but there are some things she finds harder to forget.

"Oh, I've cried – absolutely," she admits. "It still does hit you, even after all these funerals, and it may not be something that's absolutely tragic, or a young child. Sometimes, there's no real reason but one will just have an impact. As staff, we talk with each other, deal with it and move on."

"I think a lot of people who come into the funeral industry think they are going to be looking after people and counselling. That's not our role. This industry needs people who've got life experience and who can divorce themselves – without being cold – from that part of it. If you took every family's sadness on board, you wouldn't last."

Dr Noel Woodford \ HEAD OF FORENSIC PATHOLOGY, VICTORIAN INSTITUTE OF FORENSIC MEDICINE

Of an estimated 30,000 deaths in Victoria each year, about 6200 are referred to the Coroner. Of those, about 5200 make it here, to the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine (VIFM).

"Some people do pathology to get away from patients," says head of Forensic Pathology, Dr Noel Woodford. "That wasn't it for me. I love the diagnostic side. Every day is a bit of a puzzle waiting to be solved."

As someone whose surgical skills are practised solely



"THE WHOLE THING IS JUST ABOUT DIGNITY ... EVERY PERSON ON MY TABLE IS MY FAMILY." - ANNIE COLLIS

bushfires, when staff were offered official debriefing to cope with the stress of what Dr Woodford describes as "sudden and unexpected, sheer numbers, long work hours".

His role in the death process can be, he admits, distressing, but Dr Woodford says he "can't afford to get too upset by cases".

"I don't think I've ever lost empathy about the job and I understand the consequences of each case and the effect this has on other members of the family but, really, you've only got so much emotional energy in the bank."

Annie Collis \ EMBALMER, LE PINE FUNERALS

When Annie Collis viewed the body of her dead father, she was shocked by his appearance – fresh from his hospital bed and arranged in his coffin without the care she had expected.

"I was looking at my father, thinking: 'He could have looked nicer'. It occurred to me then – your final image is one that stays with you. Now, when I think of my father I have to work at moving that last image, before I see him the way I want to remember him. I would have liked to have been able to do something to make my father look better," says Collis.

It's an experience Collis, 57, now an embalmer with Le Pine Funerals, doesn't want other families to go through.

"I think this is an industry that chooses you," she says.

Death was, she remembers, always close. Growing up in the small community of King Island, where "Johnny the builder" doubled as the funeral director, she used to watch the coffins being built.

Left: "The whole thing is just about dignity," says Annie Collis.

Above: To Dr Noel Woodford, there is a bit of a puzzle waiting to be solved every day.

She watched, too, as her mother, a nurse, helped lay out the bodies of the local dead for burial.

"It always interested me," Collis says.

More than once, she knocked on Johnny's door to ask him about how she could join him in his work, but he never answered.

"Then, when Johnny passed away and another gentleman stepped in, I asked him if he wanted a partner," she says. It was 1998.

With some formal study behind her and settled in Melbourne, Collis works on 25 to 40 bodies a week.

"Once the paperwork has been done, we take them into our care," she says, pointing to the mortuary fridges that can accommodate up to 98 bodies at a time.

Although not every body will be viewed, Collis treats each one as if it will be, removing clothing, carefully washing the body and the hair, disinfecting, checking tags for identification, relieving any rigour by gentle massage and movement of the limbs and surgically closing the eyes and mouth.

"People might say they don't want to view the body, then at the last minute, they'll decide they want to."

Men, she says, are shaved and some women, she adds quietly, may require it as well – tidying up the facial hair that can come with old age.

"The whole thing is just about dignity," says Collis. "At the end of the day, you're looking after the deceased. I think every person on my table is my family. I think you have to."

"Did you ever see *21 Grams*? 'Is that how much a soul weighs?' Fantastic. *What Dreams May Come* with Robin Williams. *Ghost*. *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. Beautiful. I'm a DVD fanatic," he says, his smile emerging from beneath his greying beard.

Finch is even more animated about the subject of

want someone to look as if they have gained 20 pounds."

If a woman wore a particular brand of lipstick or make-up, Collis encourages the family to bring it in and she will use it before a viewing.

"And we suggest people bring a favourite perfume, too. Smell stays with you," she says.

Collis works with other embalmers and says the conversation is the usual office water-cooler chitchat.

"We don't really talk about the people we're working on unless there is a problem and we need a hand," says Collis. "We talk about all different things. Sometimes we might have the radio on and all be singing along."

Collis doesn't believe death is the end, nor does she see it as something to fear.

"I see it now as part of life," she says.

Although her own daughter, a 21-year old dental nurse, has expressed interest in following her footsteps, Collis has dissuaded her, for now.

"I said 'no', wait until you're older," Collis says. "I want her to live before she surrounds herself with death."

Ephraim Finch \ EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT THE MELBOURNE CHEVRA KADISHA

At the moment of death, there is an increase in body temperature, which is beautiful." Ephraim Finch uses this adjective a lot, his voice rising warmly with the joy of it.

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Above: Ephraim Finch doesn't run a funeral parlour: "We're a burial society for a community."

death and his role at the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha.

"We're not a funeral parlour," he says emphatically. "We're a burial society for a community."

The Jewish way of burial, Finch explains, is that the community buries its dead.

"In a little country town, in the early days, the whole town closed down to bury that person. They couldn't do anything until they buried their dead. The burial society was formed so people could get on with their job and we could go on and do our bit," he says.

"We're like a country town within a metropolis."

Although this closeness can sometimes have a stiflingly intrusive side to it, the positive side, Finch says, is that the "Jewish grapevine" works brilliantly when really needed.

"The fastest we've ever buried anybody from the deathbed to the grave was 2.5 hours," he says. "There were 400 people there. You're part of a community. It's beautiful."

Including land and paperwork requirements, a burial organised here – whether it be a public holiday or Sunday – costs about \$6500.

"If a person does have problems paying it, we let them pay it off. If it's a person who has nobody, the community has to shoulder it," he says.

Finch – a former builder – motions to a spartanly furnished workshop where a row of simple pine coffins, built by one of his six children wait, side-by-side.

"As you can see, we're a no-frills organisation," he says. "We're not full of bullshit. People don't ask us to supply a Hugo Boss suit or fancy shoes. Even if the person owns Chadstone shopping centre, everyone gets buried the one way."

On the stainless steel table in the room next door, Finch helps prepare the bodies of the male deceased. Only women may attend the bodies of females.

With no embalming, the work is about returning the body to its purest state – cutting off extraneous garments, removing catheters or feeding tubes, then washing away any trace of blood, vomit, or faeces.

"They have to say prayers while they do it and they need to ask forgiveness if they have done anything that has embarrassed the body," he says.

Against one wall, a bath-like structure, known as a mikvah, is next.

"There's a hole there," Finch points out, "that collects rainwater. When you bring the body out, the body changes. I've seen it happen."

The body is returned to the table and dried, he says "in beautiful, soft towels" before being wrapped in the white shroud of cotton manufactured on-site.

Having converted to Judaism in the early days of his marriage, 33 years ago, Finch's fascination with Jewish traditions of life and death led to an unofficial apprenticeship through honorary work at the Sydney Chevra Kadisha before moving to Melbourne and taking on the formal, salaried role here 25 years ago.

During his time at Melbourne Chevra Kadisha, Finch has personally photographed the tattoos of numbers on the bodies of Holocaust survivors.

He then speaks to the family members to glean as much of the family history as possible – asking for names, birthplaces, places travelled to during the war, time spent in Auschwitz or elsewhere.

He sends one copy to Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust Museum, one to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and keeps one copy for himself, "because I don't really trust any other bugger."

As far as Finch knows, Melbourne Chevra Kadisha is the only one keeping such records. He feels sad for the history lost forever in the years before his appointment and he worries for the lost history of the future, when he will eventually leave the role to a successor.

"I could have done more," Finch says. "But at least I did something." \

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