



James Bass - Making a Difference in Funeral Service

Funeral Director-Embalmer James R. Bass, managing partner of Emerald Coast Funeral Home, was called into funeral service early in his life. The path to achieving his dream, however, contained as many wicked twists of fate as there were important mentors, beginning shortly after his birth in McAllen, Texas, a city bordering Mexico in the Rio Grande Valley.

"When I was a few weeks old, my mother put me in a shoebox, gave it to a neighbor boy and told him to take it to Mrs. Brown, a woman who lived a block or two away," the director began.

Despite his birth mother's desperation, fate smiled on little James that day.

"My mother – like my father, whom I rarely saw – had become disabled during the time she served in the U. S. Navy, he explained, and sent me to live with The Browns, a wonderful Christian couple, they took me into their home and raised me until I was 5. At that time, I went to live with my maternal grandparents, who gave me a good home."

By age 12, he was washing dishes in a local restaurant and then began working with large catering service. By age 16 he had left home and was catering thru out the entire Rio Grande Valley, with a large catering service.



But even in his early teens, Bass knew he was still drawn to funeral service and that he would find a job in a local funeral home.

He met "Fred McCaleb Sr. who had a funeral home in Weslaco, TX, Fred was a charter member of the Kiwanis Club that I catered for, and I had asked many times to come help him and he always said no, I knew he had stomach problems, so I started taking him soup and Jell-O's from the restaurant, finally I endeared myself to him and he finally asked me if I was truly interested and if I was I could come over that day & help him, I stayed that day until midnight and then began helping out at the funeral home on services and practicing embalming,," Bass remembered.

When McCaleb saw the boy's dedication and determination to work in funeral service, he offered him a job and encouraged him to go on to mortuary school.

"Mr. Fred never hesitated to share what he knew about funeral service, and he was an outstanding role model," Bass said. "I am fortunate to call him my mentor because he was honest man, fair, trustworthy and a true professional." And always reminded me what I saw in the funeral home stayed in the funeral home, and that funerals were for the living.

Later, when a death occurred in his James's' family, Bass was at the hospital, waiting on a loading dock, and saw Mr. Fred drive up in his Cadillac hearse.

"I knew Mr. Fred would take care of everything," the director said. "I felt a heavy burden lift when he arrived because he was there to take over."

The young man's determination to become a funeral director remained, even as his career made several detours due to life's circumstances, but Bass finally was able to enroll in Commonwealth College of Mortuary Science in Houston and work full time at Hyde Park Funeral Home to support his family.

"I attended class during the day and worked nights, making removals for the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office, and attending visitations," he said. "It wasn't always easy, especially my chemistry courses, but, since I had done almost everything else during my time at McCaleb's, the rest came easily."

Earning his licenses in 1975, and, after working at several South Texas funeral homes, Bass heard of an opportunity at the historic Corley Funeral Home in Corsicana, TX.

"Mr. John Corley, an older gentleman, was looking for someone to help relieve him of some of the load, and, for some reason we bonded, he liked me," Bass said. "Once again, I was fortunate to have a strong mentor and, once again, fate was on my side."





He said the one funeral he'll never forget occurred at Corley's.

"A woman – very attractive and very nice – came in to make arrangements for her aunt," Bass remembered. "She had moved back to Corsicana to take care of her 2 aunts.

There was definite chemistry, maybe even fireworks! After a courtship, and a proposal at the Richland Cemetery, Bass proposed – and Janice accepted.

At Corley's, very little about one's time off was sacred.

"If there was a death, you were on duty," the director remembered. "However, when it came time for us to travel to Dallas to select Janice's ring, I asked Mr. Corley for the day off. Since it wasn't scheduled, I was flatly declined – until I explained my purpose.

"Well, why didn't you say so? Of course you can go," Corley said. "And be sure to see Mr. Smith my jeweler at Smith Jewelers, 'I'll call ahead and tell him to expect you two. He'll give you a good deal."

"John Corley liked Janice and approved of our marriage," Bass added. "So we selected a nice ring from Mr. Smith and then waited until the ring arrived by mail. It was my job to go to the post office each morning, which I did, and once I returned to the funeral home, as Mr. Corley requested, I put every piece of

mail on his desk for him to go through.

"On the day the ring arrived, I noticed the box, but, as Mr. John asked, I dutifully put the box on his desk with the other mail. Mr. John said nothing for several days, so one morning, I told him I had noticed the ring had arrived.

"‘I thought you'd never ask,' said the old man with a gleam in his eye as he retrieved the box from the safe behind his desk and handed it to me.

"When I opened it, there was no invoice. Puzzled, I asked Mr. John if his friend sent his bill separately."

"It's paid for," Mr. John told the young director, and then returned to his reading.

"He had paid for the ring as his wedding gift to them and true to his style, wanted little said about it."

Later, when Bass was busy packing for his wedding in Las Vegas, he got a call. It was Mr. John, asking him to come over to the funeral home. When he reminded Mr. Corley he was getting ready to leave, Mr. John insisted he come.

"So we finished packing and went to the funeral home," Bass remembered. "Arriving in his office, admittedly frustrated, the older man greeted me, and, without much small talk, pushed an

envelope across his desk. Inside was a check for \$5,000. 'I thought you kids might need a little extra starting out, Mr. John commented casually."

Bass and his wife eventually left Corsicana, but not without emotional goodbyes.

"Mr. John treated me like a son, and I saw him as the father I never had," the director said. "In 1999, I was asked to be a pallbearer at Mr. John's funeral. It was truly an honor but also difficult."

Mr. John lived to be 97.

Invited to return to South Texas, by the Loewen Group he was eager to practice his long-sought-after profession at a newly-purchased funeral home and eventually was promoted to Market Manager for San Antonio and then all of South Texas back into the Rio Grande Valley again.

As his career gained momentum, he was led to the prestigious Jacob Schoen & Sons Funeral Home in New Orleans and stayed in the funeral home during hurricane Katrina for a week, and then boated out a week later. And then was approached by Stewart Enterprise in New Orleans to take a position of Director of Operations to manage Lake Lawn Metairie Funeral Home, All Faiths Funeral Home and the St. Bernard Funeral Home – in total doing 2200 calls annually between the three.





In his experience, Bass has arranged funerals for dignitaries, celebrities of every ilk and the loved ones of hardworking families. But in the process he also gained a reputation for his ability to assemble strong staffs of professionals and for the leadership skills to breathe new life into faltering firms.

When Emerald Coast Funeral Home in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, offered Bass a position several years ago, he jumped at the chance, not only for the challenge but also because he and Janice had children and grandchildren living on the Emerald Coast in Navarre, FL.

"We have become the leading firm in the area," said the managing partner of the Carriage Services-owned firm. "But we were housed in a building originally designed as a Delchamps grocery store. That changed in early December of last year, when we moved into our new facility, a spacious and inviting facility we believe will provide comfort for every family we have the privilege to serve and will assist us in continuing to provide the highest quality in funeral service."

Bass is humble in his role.

"Without the encouragement for entrepreneurship and the autonomy given by the Carriage Services leadership, none of this would have been possible. Carriage Services asked us what our community needed, and we provided the answers," he said.

Surrounded by a staff with the dedication and passion to match his own, the Texas-born funeral director remains grateful, first to his wife Janice, their family, his staff and the leadership at Carriage Services.

"We are given the leeway to respond to the needs and requests of the individuals who entrust us with their loved ones," he said, "and Carriage Services has made it possible for me to realize my dreams, not only professionally but as part of this dynamic community."

During the recent ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new Emerald Coast Funeral Home, the air was thick with excitement, but, if you happened to find a quiet place somewhere in the spacious new building, you may have heard the voices of the men who have served as mentors to a determined young director, all saying in unison, "Well done, James. Well done!"

850.864.3361
james.bass@carriageservices.com
emeraldcoastfuneralhome.com

