

The New York Times

September 1, 1999

TELEVISION REVIEW: And the Customers Never Talk Back

By WALTER GOODMAN

Been dying to meet the graduating class of the San Francisco College of Mortuary Science? Here's your opportunity. "The Business of Death" introduces several students who are mastering the art or craft of embalming, cremating, grief counseling and coffin-selling on their way to becoming funeral directors. What has attracted these young men and women to a trade that has been much mocked and exposed but not fundamentally reformed since Jessica Mitford wrote "The American Way of Death" in 1968? One student credits God with leading him into the work. Another says he loves big funerals; they cheer him up, although he has found that potential dates do not always share his enthusiasm. A woman asserts, "I can make a difference." And yes, there is the man who says, "Someone's got to do it." So there they are, serving their apprenticeships in funeral homes where they practice basic and benign chores like removing a body from an old-age home and pausing to assure a roommate of the departed in the next bed that her friend has gone to a better place. A student who tells of having been fascinated with embalming since he was a child describes how he goes about making the victim of a messy automobile crash presentable. A couple of trainees are confronted with some decomposed remains of an unpleasant color and odor, not to mention maggots. No public viewing is planned. And then there is an egalitarian aspect to the job.

A student who was at first curious about each cause of death now takes a more populist approach: "You treat everyone the same." Well, not quite, since marketing considerations figure in the mortuary science curriculum. As one aspiring practitioner observes, "There's nothing wrong with making money." So we learn that "alternative containers," which might be mistaken for cardboard boxes, serve in "lower-cost situations." On the other hand classy coffins, with their highly polished woods, plush interiors and cunning extras, are on tempting display. A proprietor explains: "We don't sell caskets. We provide a room that has caskets in it for families to buy." Another instructor admonishes the student salesman, "I don't want to hear the word 'cheap.'" Bill Kurtis, the host of "Investigative Reports," who makes harmless comments between the commercials, announces cheerily, "The future looks bright for the business of death." Useful tips are offered through the hour. The one I took away with me is to be sure if you're doing a cremation that you have the right body.

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTS: The Business of Death A&E, tonight at 9; Bill Kurtis, executive producer; Paul Schwartzreich, producer; Rick Smigielski, senior producer; Jeffrey Tuchman, supervising producer; Laura Fleury, A&E coordinating producer; Michael Cascio and Steven Rosenbaum, A&E executive producers.