

Profile

By Patti Martin Bartsche

50 Years and ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Going Strong

By all accounts, 1969 was a big year.

It was the year of Woodstock, the first moon landing, “The Brady Bunch” and the birth of the internet. The laser printer was invented by a young researcher for Xerox, the Beatles played their last public performance on a roof ... and in New Paltz, New York, a young woman began a job that – 50 years later – still brings her to work each day.

Kathy Williams might not have realized it but taking a part-time job at a funeral home doing office work and bookkeeping in 1969 would be the start of a five decades long (and still counting) career in funeral service.

For Williams, co-owner, chief financial officer and secretary/treasurer of the New Paltz-based American Funeral Consultants, the years have flown by. While times have changed, Williams’ passion for her job and funeral service remain as strong as the day she walked into Van Pine’s Pine Funeral Home.

We recently had a chance to talk with Williams about her career, changes in funeral service and her what’s next.

What was your dream job growing up?

I don’t remember actually having a “dream job” as a child ... but in high school, I decided I’d like to teach French, and majored in it in college. Unfortunately, at some point I realized that while I could read and write it, I had a terrible accent and couldn’t speak it very well. So, I switched to elementary education.

You were a recent high school graduate when you began working part time for American Funeral Consultants founder Van Pine in 1969. What made you take the job in the first place?

After graduating from high school in 1969, I took a job as a clerk in a drug store. I was planning to work part time through college – I was attending State University of New York, New Paltz, right in my hometown. In August, Van Pine called my high school guidance counselor for a reference for someone to do some office work and bookkeeping for him at his funeral home. When I received the call, my

first reaction was, “I don’t know if I want to go to work for some little old funeral director”... he was 32 at the time! In the end, I thought it would be more interesting than working the cash register at the drug store.

Did you have plans to stay on the job long term?

When I started the job, I expected to work there for a while and hoped it would last through my four years at college, but then I planned to look for a teaching job after graduation. In 1973, I was hired to teach third grade in Coxsackie, New York, and just weeks prior to starting the job, my husband and I got married. I taught for just one year and decided it wasn’t for me. I had been helping Van out in his office during school vacations, and he asked if I would go back to work for him. So, in July 1974, I began my full-time career with him.

When did working at AFC go from being just a job to something more?



Kathy Williams celebrates 50 years with American Funeral Consultants.
(Photo courtesy of Kathy Williams)

I think that I realized how much the job meant to me when I was ready to leave it after college graduation to start my teaching job. I said goodbye to Van and cried all the way home!

What – if anything – did you know about funeral service when you started out?

Everything I knew about funeral service had been learned at family funerals. My parents took me to the funeral of my great-grandmother when I was about 4 – and that was followed by funerals of grandparents and numerous aunts and uncles over the next several years. It became a

very familiar process to me – shopping for a suitable dress, a car ride of four hours to Pennsylvania where all our relatives lived, and spending the next three days at visiting hours, the funeral and the luncheon afterward. The result was that I had no fear of funeral homes or of viewing the deceased.

What did you learn from Van Pine?

Van Pine shaped my entire career. He became a licensed funeral director at his family funeral home following the untimely death of his 48-year-old father. Subsequently, he went back to college and earned his Ph.D. in

sociology. One of my first tasks was to type several versions of his dissertation on “Caretaker of the Dead: The American Funeral Director” on an IBM Selectric typewriter. That led me to a thorough understanding of what funeral directors do and how they do it. Subsequent books that he wrote or contributed to dealt with grief and bereavement, the sociology of death and social and psychological issues about death. All of this knowledge that I was able to absorb from him and his work gave me an insider’s perspective of the importance of funerals to society and the bereaved.

Can you talk about what led to you and Melissa Drake purchasing American Funeral Consultants from Van in 2007?

In 2004, after a long and difficult illness, Van’s wife, Pat, died. Van and Pat had spent several previous years traveling the nation to various hospitals in pursuit of treatment for a rare disease. During his long absences from the office, Melissa and I had to step up and take on more responsibilities. While we had been handling the “back room” work for years, we started dealing more and more with the clients on a daily basis, a role that Van had always filled. After Pat’s death and as Van neared retirement age, the three of us came up with a plan for her and I to take over the business. Once we decided, the transaction was completed within a couple of months.

What were the pros and cons of purchasing AFC?

The pros far outweighed the cons. We had both been very well trained by Van, and the transition was seamless. Van remained in an advisory capacity for a period of time and was very accessible. Whenever we needed his help, he was there for us. Melissa and I enjoyed our autonomy and dealing with our clients on a more personal level. The main “con” was that Van had big shoes to fill, and he was known nationwide as the expert resource on

all aspects of funeral service, including business issues. We were worried that it would take a while for funeral directors and others in funeral service to recognize that we were now the new “faces” of AFC.

As someone who handles all aspects of sales transactions between funeral home sellers and buyers for AFC, did this expertise help you when it came time to purchase the company?

Even though our own business is quite different from funeral home businesses, our experience with working with funeral homes in purchases and sales did prepare us for the purchase process and the negotiations that routinely take place for a transfer of a business.

What is it like working with Melissa and how lucky were you to find each other?

Melissa joined AFC in 1991 as a graduate of State University of New York, New Paltz. She had served as a teaching assistant for Van, and being impressed with her abilities, he offered her a job. Like me, she didn't plan on making a career of it, but during the past 28 years as co-workers, and the last 12 years of ownership, she and I have built a solid partnership. Not only have we become close friends, but also working together is effortless for us.

What is the secret to success of your partnership with Melissa?

I think that there are several reasons why Melissa and I have built such a strong relationship. First, we respect each other and our skills and abilities. Second, we each have our own strengths and we each depend on the other to apply those strengths to every aspect of the business. Third, we feed off of each other's knowledge and proficiencies to provide the best possible service to our clients. Fourth, we have worked together for 28 years of our adult lives, but we also have been involved in each other's personal lives, providing support during the hard times and sharing joy during the

good times. We also have an unspoken agreement that I will rid the office of any spiders, and she will eliminate any bats and mice that may show up. It's the perfect arrangement for both of us!

ability to relate to funeral directors on a more personal level.

Many of Melissa's strengths overlap with mine in that she also is excellent with clients, is highly organized, and contributes excellent



Van Pine recently joined Kathy Williams (left) and Melissa Drake for lunch to celebrate Williams' 50th anniversary in funeral service. (Photo courtesy of Kathy Williams)

What are your strengths? What are Melissa's?

My strengths lie in my ability to connect with clients and provide assurance to them that they're not just another “account,” but rather that they are important to us in their own right. Also, my writing and editing skills (crucial to the preparation of our reports and articles) are strong, thanks to my seventh grade English teacher, who just recently passed away before he could be invited to our upcoming 50th class reunion. Third, my organizational skills allow me to handle many different tasks and help me to juggle the varying needs of clients. Fourth, because of my background and long involvement in funeral service, I have a solid understanding of the field and those who work within it. I feel that this has given me a unique perspective and contributes to my

ideas to our writing assignments. Perhaps the most important contribution that Melissa brings to AFC is her knowledge and understanding of the financial side of funeral homes. She is adept at “forensic accounting” when she tackles difficult tax returns and other financial information of clients. She has an in-depth understanding of the fiscal aspects of funeral businesses and can provide substantive advice to our clients regarding their pursuit of economic success. Between the two of us, we offer the best possible services to our clients that fit their unique and specific needs.

When you were starting out, there were few women working in funeral service. How were you treated? Did you find yourself working extra hard to prove yourself to clients?

When I first started out working with funeral professionals, I was both very young and a woman – which could have been double jeopardy! But Van always made it clear to clients that I was professional, competent and could be trusted to help them. Melissa and I accompanied him to many client meetings and conventions, and it became apparent to others that he considered us more than just “the girls in the office.” When Melissa and I took over the business, our biggest challenge was to be recognized as the “face” of AFC, and that took some work on our part to be accepted as such. Today, we are proud to be the only women who own and operate a funeral service consulting company that provides the types of services that we offer.

How has working with funeral professionals changed you?

Working with funeral professionals has been so rewarding – they are some of the greatest people one could ever want to meet. I have developed great admiration for what they do, and for what they give of themselves each and every day. Working with them has solidified my belief in the importance of funerals to society and in helping bereaved people begin to work through their grief. Most people don't realize the sacrifices that are made every day by funeral directors in order to serve their families during the most difficult time in their lives.

How has funeral service evolved over the past five decades?

Over the past five decades, funeral service has changed immensely in many ways. First, the “traditional” funeral rites have come to be viewed as “old-fashioned” and have lost their importance to society. The baby boomers, Generation X and the millennials no longer find the previous practices to be relevant to their beliefs. Instead, they have their own ideas for what is meaningful to them, and consequently, they have different demands of funeral service. Second, the presence of the body during

funerals is less important to many, and the result is often a memorial service rather than a traditional visitation and funeral. Third, cremation has dramatically increased over the years for several reasons, only one of which is affordability. Fourth, the importance of organized religion has decreased, and as a result, more funerals are held in the funeral home, and often with a celebrant rather than a religious figure. All of these changes and more have affected the way funeral directors do their jobs and they must constantly search for new ways to provide their families with solace and meaningful funeral practices while adapting to the ever-changing demands.

What services does AFC provide – and how is business?

The primary services that AFC provides are business appraisals, buy/sell intermediary services and succession planning. We work exclusively within funeral service and carry out appraisals of businesses for various reasons, including succession planning, estate planning and settlement, divorce and other contentious situations, sales and purchases and a myriad of others. Our buy/sell intermediary services involve full-service representation of either the seller or buyer of a funeral home and are comprised of a full gamut of services for a sales transaction, including a valuation of the business, locating sellers/buyers, negotiations, document reviews, assistance with lending, the preparation of closing documents and attendance at the closing. As part of this service, we prepare a very comprehensive informational prospectus, which provides details and an in-depth description of the firm. We've been told frequently that our prospectuses are among the best out there in the industry. We also offer customized services such as business/feasibility plans, minority stock assessments, general consulting, and speaking engagements and presentations. Business continues to be very strong and our list of clients continues to grow. Many of them return to us time after time for updated valuations and other such issues.

Who is AFC's ideal client?

Our ideal client is someone that needs our services, is willing to work with us toward addressing and solving their problems and trusts us to help resolve their issues. Our ideal client will encourage their other advisers (e.g., attorneys, accountants and lenders) to work in collaboration with us to provide the best possible services to them. We work with firms of all sizes throughout the United States, and we enjoy working with all of them equally. A bonus for us is those clients who keep good records and provide reliable information to us.

Has cremation hurt or helped AFC?

I would say that cremation has neither helped nor hindered AFC. But it has become an increasingly important aspect of funeral service that needs to be addressed. It's our goal to help clients successfully navigate their business through the issues that affect them because of the rise in cremation. This involves encouraging creativity and “thinking outside the box” for solutions and ways to augment revenues that are lost due to the increase of cremation, especially direct cremation. It also involves encouraging funeral directors to educate their families about the options available to them to commemorate the death of a loved one, despite the means of final disposition.

What challenges will funeral professionals be facing in the short term? In the long term?

Funeral directors will increasingly face challenges that arise due to the increase in cremation and the changing demands of the families served. Some are facing changing demographics in their communities and need to adapt in order to survive. Other challenges will involve financial issues that will become more perplexing regarding the expense of supporting and maintaining what often are beautiful and spacious facilities that are now under-used because of the decreased demand for traditional services. Hopefully, funeral

directors will see the benefits of enlisting experts and consultants in the field to help them navigate through the current and future trials and tribulations that face them.

When you first started work, did you ever envision working at the same company for 50 years?

When I first went to work for Van Pine, I envisioned it as a four-year commitment to pay my way through college. Never did I imagine at the age of 17 that I would remain employed for so long, and even less did I imagine that I would ever co-own the company! That being said, I have absolutely no regrets and would make the same decisions today.

What is the best part of your job?

The best part of my job is helping our clients out of what can sometimes be difficult situations. My favorite part is when we negotiate a successful sale/purchase of a funeral home, which allows our clients to realize their dreams and goals, whether they be to own their own business or to retire after many years of serving families. When we transact a deal and are told that each party is right where they want to be, we feel that we've succeeded in serving those funeral business owners.

Your purchase of AFC was part of a succession plan put in place by Van Pine. Do you and Melissa have a succession plan in place?

Part of our succession plan involves an internal buy/sell agreement between us as partners. Our outside succession plan is a work in progress.

Fifty years is a long time – do you ever think about retiring?

I do think about retirement, but right now I'm exactly where I want to be. We're fortunate to have flexibility in our schedules so that I could easily scale back if that becomes necessary. But my desire is to continue to contribute my years of experience and knowledge to those in

funeral service for a bit longer. I hope that my good health will allow me to continue to do what I love into the future.

Looking back, what advice would you give your younger self?

Be yourself – if you're a round peg, don't try to fit into a square hole!

What is the best and worst decision you've ever made?

Probably the worst decision I ever made was to become a teacher. But on the flip side, the best decision I ever made was to leave teaching to pursue my current career. It took some courage for me to admit that I wasn't cut out for teaching, despite the fact that I had spent four years in college in preparation for the field (a round peg trying to fit into a square hole). But I've never looked back with regret.

What books would you recommend funeral professionals read, and why?

There are too many valuable books to list that have been written on various aspects of funerals, grief, and bereavement, but I would actually recommend to funeral directors that they go back to some of the old classics. Such works as "Caretaker of the Dead: The American Funeral Director" by Van Pine, "Acute Grief and the Funeral" by Pine, Klagsburn, Kutscher, et. al., and Howard C. Raether's book "Successful Funeral Service Practice" may seem outdated, but they offer valuable information and insights that are still relevant to funeral service today and emphasize the importance of a good funeral experience.

What would people be surprised to learn about you?

Most people don't know that my husband and I owned an old-fashioned walk-up soft-serve ice cream shop for 14 years between 1988 and 2002. After leaving the office each day, I collected our

daughters and reported for duty at "Mickey's Igloo" to serve up ice cream cones and sundaes. It was a great time of our lives but physically grueling!

If you could have dinner with anyone, living or dead, who would it be and why?

I would choose to have dinner with Michelle Obama. I have great admiration for her and for what she took on as first lady, and for her constant and unwavering support of her husband during his terms as POTUS. She had her own important accomplishments as an attorney, but also as a wife, mother, and first lady. In reading her book, I was extremely impressed that she is a very down-to-earth, intelligent, kind and compassionate woman.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

The best piece of advice I ever received was "always put your best self forward." I try to do that every day.

What keeps you awake at night?

Honestly, at age 68, my aches and pains are what keep me awake at night! I rest easy knowing that I've done my best that day at whatever I took on, and that tomorrow presents another opportunity to accomplish more to help our clients navigate through the issues that require resolution.

What has been your proudest moment at AFC?

While there is no one single "proudest moment" that I can think of, I take great pride in the fact that I have served 50 years in an industry that I love and think is so important to the welfare of bereaved families and society. Also, I'm very proud that Melissa and I have been able to successfully continue the legacy that Van Pine left to us – one of professionalism, expertise and compassion and knowledge of the importance of funeral service to our society. •