

Faces of Death

By Michael Frejik

Ian Maynard has sewn people's heads together with a needle and thread. This young mortician has seen hundreds of faces of death.

There are many faces of death, and at the ripe age of 24, he has seen them all. Freak accidents; the inconvenient rendezvous between a bullet and a belfry; the aftermath of the war against cancer, which has left the battlefield so transparent you can see through skin.



His name is Ian Maynard, and he is an intern mortician.

Like the blacksmith or the farmer, this undertaker has come from generations of funeral directors.

"It's what I've been around my whole life," he says. "To most people, it seems weird and crazy and to me it is completely normal. I have always hung out in a funeral home with my dad. I'm doing what nobody else can do, and I feel a great amount of responsibility doing it."

His family migrated to the valley from Shinnston, W.Va. in 1990 when Maynard was 8. By the age of 9, he earned money by painting the "prep room" and performing other maintenance duties. At 14 he was wearing a shirt and tie, opening the door at funerals. Then it gets interesting.

Consistent with other 17-year-olds, Maynard was planning his education. He returned to his homeland as an agricultural education major at West Virginia University, while at the same time mastering reconstructive work in the prep room. "I would have to physically sew people's heads back together with a needle and thread," he says. "I knew the embalming process, and seen the consequences of an autopsy. In the old days, embalming was for preservation. Now there is a movement for people to become better embalmers instead of preservationists. If someone died in an accident or committed suicide, does that mean we just close the casket? No!" Like Vito Corleone speaking to Bonasera over Sonny's mangled body in "The Godfather": "I want you to use all your powers -- and all your skills. I don't want his mother to see him this way." Maynard understands this.

"I've seen some extreme cases where people are missing half their heads, and we reconstruct them, and they're viewable," he explains. "The family can have some peace."

"I am an artist, and my canvas is a corpse," he adds.

"The biggest compliment I have received is when the family comes up to me after first viewing and they say that the person looks like they are sleeping, and it's wonderful because they looked so terrible towards the end of their life," he continues. "It's touching because after the funeral they give you a hug and they cry on your shoulder with gratitude and it truly makes their process of grieving a little bit easier."

"It is an art form; there is tuition and science involved. In some cases, we can make a person look better in death than in life. The families that see their loved ones in a displeasing way, it scars them for life, and we get families from other firms because of that. The Christian belief is that the afterlife has complete peace and everything is wonderful, and the work that we do reinforces that because they see them peacefully."

One would be correct in assuming that this was a difficult thing for a 17-year-old to be doing. Maynard says that the first cases are the ones that haunt you. "I was 17 and I had to go to Pittsburgh Airport with the coach (which is the industry term for hearse) to pick up a 14-year-old girl who died in a boating accident."

"The ride home with her in the back was hard," he continues. "I kept talking to her, as if she was sitting in the next seat. We got her on the table to add some more cosmetic work [artwork] and she was lying there, and she was naked. A beautiful girl so close to my age, this could have been someone I could have had a relationship with. I didn't know her, but I knew some of her friends, and there she was lying there dead in front of me."

"There were times in that case where I wanted to vomit."

Maynard cautions that if you are looking for a nine-to-five job, this job is not for you. "The lifestyle I have to live as an apprentice funeral director is very tiring and very unpredictable. Some weeks I'll only work 30 hours, but the next week I'll work that in two days and end up with a 70 hour week."

One might think that this would be a laid-back business, not life and death. On the contrary, when that call comes there is a huge sense of urgency. In some cases, such as liver failure, if you don't embalm them within a few hours of death no matter what you do, they will look horrible and you will need a ton of make-up, and it shows.

"If I get a phone call in the middle of the night I have to answer it because it could be a death call," Maynard says. "If I'm with my friends or my girlfriend and we get a call, I may have to leave that second and go to work."

"The first thing we do is talk to the family," he continues. "We ask them if they intend to have a viewing or if they want an immediate cremation. If they want a cremation, then we have the body removed to our facilities. We take a picture of the body for ID purposes, as required by law, and then we send them to the crematory."

If the bodies are going to be viewed, then they have to first be embalmed.

"We start by cleaning the body, closing their eyes and mouth," Maynard explains.

"After we are happy with the way their mouth is formed, and their eyes are closed, we make a 2-inch incision at the base of the neck and begin to inject embalming fluid, which is formaldehyde, into the vascular system of the body. Then we begin the cavity embalming, which is injecting fluid into the vital organs of the torso. Then we sew our incision(s) shut and dress them. Lastly, they are placed in the casket."

"Some embalmers get blood all over," he continues. "That disgusts me. I pride myself in precision work. I get no blood anywhere and take great efforts to be as neat and non-intrusive as possible. I can embalm without getting any blood on my gloves." Cleanliness is a matter of respect and of safety. Even though they are working with people that are dead, it is possible to catch tuberculosis, Hepatitis A, B, or C, AIDS, or Staphylococcus.

Most people have a fear of death, whether from nature or nurture; Maynard doesn't have that fear.

"I've almost died several times. In all of those moments I realized that I didn't care about it. What I mean is, in those moments you are too busy or the moment moves so quick that you don't have time to realize what is happening. Death is easy, and for many people, rather quick and peaceful. I fear a slow death from disease or my body just slowly falling apart. I fear getting old, but not death."

Despite what Maynard and other morticians actually do, it is a business. The funeral industry is both a family business and corporate. There are companies that own hundreds of funeral homes, and there are people that support their family through the funeral business. In fact, some companies, such as Disney, have thought about getting into the funeral business. Costco sells caskets and urns.

Working for your family takes this business to a whole new level. He is the company's ambassador to the public. Never off the clock. Like priests, judges, and police officers, he must hold himself to a higher standard.

“Anyone in the public eye who can be judged by society is going to live by another set of rules,” he explains. “You have to worry about what kind of car you drive, for example. You have to worry about it being American made, being big enough and pricey enough so that people don't think that you're going broke, which they do talk like that sometimes, but at the same time it can't be too expensive, either, because people think you shouldn't be making too much money doing what you do. It can't be a sports car; it has to be a four door and a respectable color. All areas of our lives are like this. It can be very exhausting.”

His business also affects his social life to some extent.

“I get a lot of questions,” he says. “It's usually like this interview every time. I'm tempted to start saying I'm a plumber or something so people leave me alone! People aren't disturbed by meeting me and knowing what I do, they are just very curious.”

Most people are only in funeral homes a handful of times in their life; friends of a funeral director spend more time there than most people.

“I live on top of one of our funeral homes,” he says. “At first, some of my friends were apprehensive. Now it doesn't affect them that much. My girlfriend thought it was weird for a while but now she doesn't really care at all.”

The building has about six different doors in it, so friends can come straight to the apartment without stepping into the funeral home.

“Living here doesn't seem all that different to me,” Maynard says. “Seems like living anywhere else to me. The first night or two were a little unnerving, but after that, it's no big deal. I don't see any ghosts or anything.”

As someone who frequently deals with death, he doesn't view this valley as dying. He sees the empty buildings and steel mills as opportunities for new endeavors. Maynard would like to pioneer a new industry to the area. He has a strong belief in plastics, and would love to speak with local leaders to see what could be done.

His passion is for creation. He spent time as a ceramic arts major, and is a talented potter. One of his fondest career moves was a one-season stint on a local farm. He planted the seeds, and tended to the crops until they were all harvested. He vows to own a large chunk of land, and to tend his own fields one day.

“I am just an average guy doing an unusual thing,” he says. “Don't think of me as anything but a man. I'm not above anyone or anything any more than a banker is. I'm no different than any other human beings and I don't want people to think I am.”

As someone who is obviously an expert in death, what is his advice on life?

"Live every moment as though it could be your last. Love your friends and family and be kind to them as well to strangers. Do what you can in this moment to make the world a happier place and the people around find some peace and comfort in your company because you never know when one of those freak accidents or medical issues that I see all too frequently is going to happen and who it might happen to."