

The Prep Room is the Instrument Education is the Music The Student Becomes the Maestro

Duncan Stuart Todd, with David Martin



Michael Ford (right rear), Piedmont graduate and adjunct lab instructor, leads a class.
(All photographs courtesy of Piedmont Technical College)



As a good instrument is to an aspiring musician, a proper preparation room is essential to the hands-on training of an aspiring funeral director and embalmer. A place to learn the required skills and arts of embalming and an environment in which to learn, practice and, yes, perform – these are the ABCs that ensure today’s students a successful educational experience and rewarding career.

Selecting the Instrument

Without a well-tuned instrument, the concert will most likely be a flop. And the audience – the families you serve – will not receive all they were promised. So it is important that fledgling embalmers learn their art with a 21st century instrument that mirrors the best of the real world.

What is a proper preparation room – this instrument we’ve chosen to play?

- One that works.
- One that is OSHA compliant.
- One that has safe air quality.
- One that is supplied with modern equipment.
- One that has safeguards for the practitioner.
- One with ventilation and plumbing

safeguards that protect the facility’s occupants.

- One that is ergonomic.
- One that is a pleasant and comfortable place to work.

Piedmont Technical College, located in Greenwood, South Carolina, selected Duncan Stuart Todd Ltd., the Preparation Room Specialists, to craft its instrument when the school embarked on a renovation program to offer students an advanced learning environment for preparation arts. David Martin, PTC funeral services director, says, “We were determined to have a first-class, top-of-the-line setup.”

Dedrick Gantt, science curriculum instructor, played a major role in the development of the lab as a functional and OSHA-compliant preparation room. Pointing out the essential components of the lab that enhance students’ education opportunities, Gantt noted, “The new lab is fully functional, OSHA compliant and has a complete HVAC system. In addition to the requisite table and embalming machine, the lab is outfitted with custom cabinetry and a full complement of preparation room equipment, including a specialized morgue table receptor, a water control unit and safety equipment,

such as an eye wash and drench shower. Plumbing safeguards were installed to prevent contaminated water from entering the main facility. We also have a dressing room, storage area and body cooler.”

An extra instrument asset to the lab is a high-tech broadcasting system, which enables the school to broadcast out to the main classroom. The lab is equipped with two cameras – one over the embalming table and another from the side. There is also a camera in the main classroom. This system allows the instructor and students to have two-way audio-visual communication between the rooms. If there is an interesting or unusual case, a lab can be conducted that allows interaction from the whole class.

This arrangement has also been a great advantage when having guest embalmers work from the lab. The embalmer can conduct the entire seminar from the lab while the class is comfortable in the classroom. The new equipment not only provides educational instruction for the students but continuing and advanced training opportunities for funeral directors and embalmers. PTC is now in the process of setting up embalming continuing education opportunities using

Dedrick Gantt (left), Piedmont science curriculum instructor, and David Martin, PTC funeral services director, in the school's embalming lab.



The OSHA-compliant embalming lab features a complete HVAC system, the requisite table and embalming machine, custom cabinetry and a full complement of preparation room equipment.



the same broadcast system. This system can even broadcast from this lab to any other technical colleges in South Carolina, thus easing the travel requirements for embalmers taking part in training.

On With the Music

It is universally agreed that the education of future professionals in funeral service is a top concern for the industry in general. Mortuary schools throughout the country are dedicated to offering students a comprehensive education in all phases of embalming. The American Board of Funeral Service Education is the accrediting agency for mortuary schools and it mandates, at a minimum, that a school must provide embalming training to the student on at least 10 cases in the funeral home setting or school lab.

"In the past, PTC funeral students did all of their cases off campus during one of their last three semesters," said Martin. "But now that we have a functioning lab on campus, students are active in the lab the entire year."

PTC also offers students training in in-depth restorative arts. In addition to working with plastic skulls and modeling wax, students can apply the same techniques to the bodies from the lab, making it a much improved learning experience.

The funeral industry is going through major changes, the likes of which have never been seen before. But even with these changes, the core element of embalming is still a major force of the pro-

profession. That's why learning the fundamentals of embalming arts is and will continue to be an important and necessary component to funeral service education. Without the music of education, the lab as instrument would be silent.

In September 2010, PTC became a qualified donee organization for the receipt of human remains for the advancement of educational and research purposes. This anatomical gift program works on the same principle as donations to medical colleges and universities. Students are placed in a rotation and actively work in the lab several times each semester. "What is unique with the anatomical gifts program is that we are not restricted by time. We have the opportunity to work with a body for days rather than hours. We are able to try new or difficult techniques that would be impossible to do on funeral home cases. Students in our lab are more hands-on, with no consequences if things don't go as planned," said Martin.

From Student to Maestro

Piedmont is also fortunate to have graduates return to work as adjunct lab instructors. For instance, a graduate of several years ago, Taylor Searles, now handles all arrangements with funeral homes, coroners and families. Another recent graduate and independent trade embalmer, Michael Ford, who excelled in the lab setting while in school, has seamlessly made the transition to instructor.

Says Ford, recalling his experience as

a student: "The availability of a first-class embalming lab is invaluable to a student. The ability to participate in hands-on exercises far exceeds anything that can be taught in the classroom. Even though I had plenty of prep room experience, the lab allowed me to use equipment I had never used before and hone the skills that are so vital to our craft. I love being back at PTC as an adjunct lab instructor – it gives me a chance to pass on to others the knowledge that I was given, not only from my apprenticeship but from the time I spent at PTC as well. I now own and operate Ford Professional Services, a trade embalming and preparation service serving primarily Aiken and Edgefield, South Carolina, counties, but I will go anywhere in the state that I am needed."

Performance – and the Music Flows

With the lab as instrument and education the music, the student as maestro steps into the profession, ready for the performance. And that is music to our ears. ★

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