**Death in the Business**  *Published: Monday, September 24, 2007*

**Working With Death**

**What They Do Daily Would Creep Many People Out**

By [Rick Rousos](http://www.theledger.com/article/20070924/NEWS/709240309/1326)

Sonji Coney, Fay Butler, Robb Ragan and Tom Wheatley have something in common: death. No, they're all very much alive. But that can hardly be said for the people they work with. The four people in this story work in what they call "the death industry," and all have been doing so for several years. They don't think there's anything weird about their jobs. But they know most people think cashing in on the Grim Reaper is an odd way to get paid.

Sonji Coney, 41, has owned Coney Funeral Home in Lakeland for 20 years and has been in the business since she was a kid. Her dad dug graves and buried vaults. But when it came time to get paid, he sent his daughter into the funeral home business for the money. She became comfortable there. It's not the dead who cause problems for funeral directors; it's the living. Most funerals go smoothly, as planned, Coney says, but "death sometimes brings out different personalities" of the bereaved.

*Sonji Coney, owner of Coney Funeral Home in Lakeland, has been around the funeral business since she was a child, when her father, a grave digger, would send her into the funeral home to pick up his pay.*

Every funeral director has seen fists fly, sometimes at the worst possible moments. In a Lakeland church years ago, the coffin was occupied by a man Coney described as "a real man about town, a ladies man." It sat open, just inside the entrance to the chapel. His widow knew the identity of her husband's last fling. And she wanted no part of seeing that woman at the funeral. "That's where she drew the line," Coney said.

"The wife said, 'If she's got the nerve to come in here and goes by that casket - it is on.' And in she (the other woman) came, straight to the casket - and it was on." The fight was over quickly, she said, when the combatants were separated.  
  
When families fuss and feud, some of whom haven't spoken for years, Coney says she tells them to mend their past. Or at least put their disagreements aside, to honor and celebrate the person who has died. Many of the headaches about funerals come from this situation, Coney said: "Someone wants to call all the shots, all the details" of a funeral. "But someone else is paying the bill."

The aftermath of death can have its heartrending moments, too. Coney recalls a couple in Wauchula, married 45 years. In the morning they had breakfast. He sat on the porch. She sat on a swing under a nearby oak tree. That's where they ate and talked - every morning. When the wife died, her husband wouldn't put her on display at a church or funeral home. Instead, people paid their last respects to her right there under the oak tree.  
  
Fay Butler, 45 is a stylist at New Creations II, on Massachusetts Avenue in Lakeland. She pampers plenty of live women, and, for Coney, plenty of dead ones, who get makeup and a new do. What often happens, Butler said, is the dead person is in her seventies, and her family whips out a picture taken when she was in her fifties. Of course, they say, "We want her to look just like this."

Like the others, Butler said, she doesn't get the creeps working with the dead. "My grandma always told me, 'Dead people can't hurt you. It's the live ones you gotta worry about.' And she sure was right."  
  
Robb Ragan, 38, works as a morgue technician at the Medical Examiner's Office in Winter Haven. He said that when he was in high school "the other kids thought I was morbid."  
And he drives a 1972 Cadillac Hearse, just for fun. At work, which Ragan takes very seriously, his office gets all the corpses that may need an autopsy.  
  
While other students were collecting baseball cards and stamps, Ragan collected miniature Hearses. He still does. After taking photos of a body, he washes any blood from its surface and prepares the body for the pathologist. He helps the pathologist in a variety of ways. Most people, when they give directions, use landmarks like restaurants or convenience stores as a guide. Not Ragan. He uses funeral homes instead. He's studying to be a funeral director.

Ragan has always been a fan of scary movies. But after what he sees in a day's work, not much scares him anymore. "The only movie that scared me lately is '28 Days,'" he said. "The corpses blew me away."  
  
Tom Wheatley, 45 is the superintendent of cemeteries in Lakeland. He worked his way up to the job, starting in grounds maintenance 25 years ago. Wheatley has dug thousands of graves at the city's two cemetery complexes and lowered thousands of people into them. He's seen some otherwise tough guys transfer out of grave digging jobs. When you bury an old person, it's not too bad, Wheatley said. "But when it's a kid, or someone dies in an accident...."  
  
Wheatley said he tries to be as respectful as possible to bereaved families. "You can't be too cold or too involved," he said. "It can get stressful."

*Robb Ragan, a morgue technician with the Polk County Medical Examiner's Office, prepares a body for autopsy in Winter Haven*

Someday Wheatley will be lowered into his own pre-paid plot at Oakhill Cemetery. City workers will do for him what he has done for thousands of people. “We all know we have to go someday," he said. "But I sure do hope my day is a long time from now."