

PBS documentary exploring death features local man

CJ Carnacchio



Oxford resident Matt Smith, a licensed funeral director, embalmer and restorative artist, was interviewed for a television documentary entitled, "The Embrace of Dying: How we deal with the end of life." The episode featuring Smith will air Monday, Feb. 22 at 7:30 p.m. on Detroit Public Television Channel 56. Photo provided.

February 10, 2016 - A television documentary that explores and demystifies the topic of death will feature an Oxford man who's been dealing with the Grim Reaper's handiwork for most of his life. "Death is a taboo (subject)," said Matt Smith, a 43-year-old licensed funeral director, embalmer and restorative artist. "People are afraid of it. It's funny because they're afraid of something that everybody must go through. This is something that everyone's going to experience at some point, unless they're caught up in the Rapture, of course."

Smith, who's owned M.S. Funeral Service since April 1999, took part in an eight-episode series entitled, "The Embrace of Dying: How we deal with the end of life."

It will air Mondays at 7:30 p.m. on WTVS Detroit Public Television (Channel 56) from Feb. 8 through April 4. This is the third and final installment of a

larger series called "The Embrace of Aging," created by Keith Famie, an 11-time Emmy award-winning documentary filmmaker, director and producer.

"This is bringing forward the reality of death and it's allowing people to see it's not a spooky, scary thing," Smith said. "It's bringing it to light. It's like, 'Hey, this is it. This is death. It's not a big deal. It's just a part of life.'"

The series deals with a wide range of topics such as hospice and terminal illness, the role of the eulogy, cemeteries, the afterlife, organ donation and memorials.

"Keith covered it from A to Z," Smith said.

Smith will be featured in the Feb. 22 episode focused on the world of funeral directors. It will explore the history of the profession, the business side of it, the hours of study that go into becoming a mortician and the emotional labor involved with supporting grieving families.

That last part is particularly important to Smith because he said funeral professionals must always keep in mind that death isn't something most people have a lot of contact with, especially when it comes to their loved ones.

"We do this every day. They don't," he said. "We're holding someone's hand through this time in their life. They've never experienced (death) before with this person (who passed away) and they'll never experience it again (with them)."

"You only get one opportunity to make it right (for a grieving family)," Smith added. "There's no dress rehearsal in funeral service. You've got to get it right the first time."

Smith watched an abbreviated sneak preview of the eight-part documentary Sunday during a private event held at the Emagine Theatre in Royal Oak.

"It's very well done," he said. "You can see that they spent a lot of time, a lot of effort, a lot of money, a lot of resources to get things right . . . I was like, 'Wow! This is really good.'"

Smith was particularly moved by the segment dealing with organ donation. "It was really heartfelt and touching," he said.

What made it even more powerful was the fact the featured donor's family was among the audience watching it and Smith witnessed how emotional it was for them.

"Of course, they were just broken up and it got me choked up," he said. "I was crying my eyes out, too - just watching their reaction (to) all the people and all the lives that (this donor) saved and touched."

Smith is by no means a newbie in the funeral business. In fact, he's a well-known expert.

Since graduating from the John A. Gupton College of Mortuary in Nashville, Tennessee in December 1994, Smith has embalmed approximately 14,000 bodies and performed about 200 major reconstructions.

As a restorative artist, Smith specializes in reconstructing dead bodies that normally could not have an open-casket viewing because the person suffered a traumatic or violent death such as an automobile crash, suicide or murder.

"That's probably what I'm more known for on a global scale in the funeral services industry," he said.

He also specializes in creating pleasant, or natural, expressions on the faces of the deceased as a lasting memorial and source of comfort for the living.

"So many people are choosing cremation because they saw grandpa look terrible in his casket. He looked worse in his casket than he did at the hospital or at home," Smith said.

Walking into a funeral home and seeing "something that doesn't look anything like your loved one" will "probably damage you more than not seeing them," in his opinion.

"My job is to turn that around, to try to show (the) value of restoring people to their likeness, so when families come in, they see dad, grandpa or whomever look like they did in life," Smith said. "It allows them to have a more peaceful send-off."

"It's very difficult to get through the grieving process when you don't spend that time seeing your loved one once again," Smith said. "One of the five steps of the grieving process is being able to say good-bye and seeing your loved one dead. We've got to do that in the most comfortable, peaceful manner possible."

Smith travels all over the state and across the nation putting his unique skills to use, restoring the dead to bring peace to the living.

He also enjoys lecturing and teaching embalming and restorative art because he believes funeral directors "need to refocus our attention on preparing the body." He's "not afraid" to say mortuary students are being taught "improperly" when it comes to setting the all-important facial features, particularly the mouth, which he said is "the tricky part."

To combat this, Smith's conducted educational programs in more than half the states in the continental United States. Internationally, he's conducted seminars and training in Hong Kong, mainland China and Trinidad and Tobago.

"I certainly have expanded," he said. "People see my work, they see what I'm doing, they see the quality of it, they see the value of it and they want to glean information. They want to learn how I do it. That's what's made my program so popular."

Last year, he was working as a restorative art professor for Wayne State University's Mortuary Science Program. That's where he got involved in Famie's documentary as the cameras were following a student in the program.

"I just happened to fall into it," Smith said. "They kind of stumbled across me. They found out a little bit about what I do and my history, so they thought it would be interesting to interview me. They worked me into their script, so to speak."

Smith hopes the documentary will help set the record straight about the funeral profession by providing the public with an accurate picture of it. "That's really why I participated," he said.

Right now, there's a "veil or cloud of negativity" surrounding the business, according to Smith, because of media reports about bodies being mishandled and mistreated, and grief-stricken families suing unscrupulous funeral directors.

"The funeral (profession) as a whole has kind of gotten a black eye," he said. "A few bad apples basically ruined the bushel."

Smith doesn't like that because to him, the majority of funeral directors out there are "working hard every day to try to make a difference and help people grieve."

"It's like any business - you've got good and you've got bad," he said. "This program highlights the value that funeral directors can bring."

CJ Carnacchio is editor for The Oxford Leader. He lives in the Village of Oxford with his wife Connie and daughter Larissa. When he's not busy working on the newspaper, he enjoys cigars/pipes, Martinis/Scotch, hunting and fishing.