

BUSINESS PROFILE

Life and death for a funeral director

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Michael Gendron has dealt with death every day, for as long as he can remember.

"For me, it's what I always knew," he said, with a New England accent that still blows through the occasional sentence, like a crisp, clean gust of air. "It was a normal, natural environment to be in."

In Vermont, Gendron grew up living in a house built above a funeral home, owned and operated by his parents. He never stepped away from the profession that he calls a "ministry."

Gendron worked for funeral homes owned by conglomerates, after moving to Florida in 2002. And this January, he became the funeral director at privately-owned Fort Myers Memorial Gardens on Colonial Boulevard.

For him, it all started at home, sweeping the floors or cleaning the casket-bearing limousines at the family business, after he grew old enough.

Upon graduating from a mortuary school in Boston, he became a licensed funeral director and took over the operation from his father.

Gendron, 34, has continued to provide the formal arrangements of death ever since then — the casket, the flowers, the plot of land, the headstone, embalming a body or cremating it.

"You're serving mankind," he said. "We're professionals and experts at dealing with death and memorialization. It's not a job; it's more of a way of life, as a funeral director."

"When a consumer loses a loved one, they're calling us for immediate help, whether it's 2 a.m. or Christmas morning or 2 p.m."



Michael Gendron of Fort Myers Memorial Gardens.

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Gendron is on call 24 hours per day to receive news of death. And for him, balancing patience, care and understanding with orderly management of a funeral service or burial is second nature. A heightened sense of his mortality also comes along with the job.

"With what we do here — we see it happen a lot — people retire at 65, and sometimes they pass away right after retirement," he said. "So every day we come to work, we realize our own mortality. I'd say personally, if there's something I want to do, I do it as I go along. We dance to a little different beat, I'd say."

Families and friends of the deceased also deal with life and death in their own ways. "Everybody is different," he said. "There

are no two people that deal with death the same. The emotions and psychological states we see are very widespread... Because everybody's grief is different, everything we do here is different as well. That's part of what I do as a funeral director, is design a service that's a proper celebration of someone's life."

Sometimes that includes bringing memorabilia to place on the casket, like a set of golf clubs or a deck of cards. It all depends on who died and who their friends and family are.

In Gendron's hometown, Ludlow, Va., he knew most of the people who passed away.

"It was a situation where, whether you went to the grocery store, the post office or a restaurant, you saw someone you know," he said.

"You basically treated everyone like family... If you passed away in my town, in Vermont, you naturally came to my funeral home."

"Here, because of the transiency of the state, that doesn't happen."

Floridians don't usually have a funeral home in mind before they die, he found, so people are often left to shop around before they decide on one.

"That was very surprising to me when I came here," Gendron said.

Upon getting a call about death, the first thing he does is find out some basic information about the family or friend who called, and in less than an hour, someone is dispatched "to take the loved one back into our care."

He doesn't turn anyone away if they don't have enough money to pay. That's always his option, he said, since Memorial Gardens is privately owned. It was different when he worked under the strictures of a conglomerate. As a result, arrangements can be made even for people who can't afford them.

"People are actually seeing we can help you," he said. "We will not turn you away and you'll get your financial needs met."

Some properties where you could take the big rest start at \$195; and cremations start at \$475.

There are ground-level and above-ground tombstones, community mausoleums, private family estates, a place for veterans, Catholics, Jews and many non-denominational groups.

For Gendron, the landscape of a cemetery feels like home.

"This is, in fact, a way of life for me," he said, pointing out a garden of tombstones reserved for the cremated. "And it's probably my greatest love, being able to help people. In a nutshell, it's who I am; it's what I do."

He lives in Fort Myers with his wife and son. Gendron's father is retired and lives in Lee County, but still helps out at Memorial Gardens from time to time. ■

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<div style="background-color: #e91e63; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;"> 3 Building Office Campus I-75 and Colonial Blvd New Listing </div> <div style="background-color: #e91e63; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;"> Freestanding Warehouse/Office Space For Lease Truckwell </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-Story Office/6,060± SF • 1.47± Acres • 3,436±SF/1,807±SF • Zoned Commercial General • Located I-75 @ Exit 136 • Allows Office/Retail & More <p style="font-size: small;">Price: \$3,500,000 Contact: Tom Woodyard or Carrie Vincent</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: x-small;">WA2011</p>	<div style="background-color: #e91e63; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;"> Freestanding Warehouse/Office Space For Lease Truckwell </div> <div style="background-color: #e91e63; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;"> Central Cape Business Park Sublease Unit Available </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building: 20,900± SF • Zoned I2-Heavy Industrial • Just Three (3) Minutes From I-75, Exit 138 • Frontage on Rockfill Rd • City Water & Sewer • 3,044± SF Office Space • Three (3) OH Doors • City Water & Sewer <p style="font-size: small;">Lease: \$5.00 PSF + \$2.00 (Est) CAM Contact: Todd Holman</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: x-small;">WA1978</p>	<div style="background-color: #e91e63; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;"> Central Cape Business Park Sublease Unit Available </div> <div style="background-color: #e91e63; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;"> Medical/Professional Office For Lease Motivated Owner </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3,210± SF • Commercial Zoned • Office/Retail Park Setting • OH Door • Vanilla Finish (A/C) • Pine Island Corridor • Median Cut • Ample Parking <p style="font-size: small;">Price: \$10.00 PSF Gross Contact: Tom Woodyard or Carrie Vincent</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: x-small;">WA2019</p>	<div style="background-color: #e91e63; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;"> Medical/Professional Office For Lease Motivated Owner </div> <div style="background-color: #e91e63; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;"> Office Space On Colonial Blvd. </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,259±SF - 2,612± SF Units • Second & Third Floors • One Block North of Colonial Blvd. • Near SW Florida Regional Medical Center • C1-Commercial • Medical Impact Fees PD <p style="font-size: small;">Lease: \$13.00 PSF + \$4.50 PSF CAM Contact: Alex Wright or Robyn Wright</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: x-small;">WA1997</p>	<div style="background-color: #e91e63; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;"> Office Space On Colonial Blvd. </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unit H60 1,444± SF • Unit H62 762± SF • Near Summerlin Rd & Midpoint Bridge • Zoned: B1 - Business • Good Tenant Mix • Campus Setting • Great Access <p style="font-size: small;">Price: \$9.00 PSF + \$6.00 CAM + TAX Contact: Steve Wood</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: x-small;">WA1913</p>

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