

# Cover Story

By Patti Martin Bartsche



# Service-Driven *Purpose*

Ask Ruthann Disotell to tell you about herself, and you'll get a mix of her trademark humor, passion and compassion.

“I live on the side of a mountain in New Jersey. OK, it's not that big compared to those in Colorado, but we still call it a mountain here,” she laughed. “I have no visible neighbors, and the deer come to drink from the pond twice a day. I am blessed with a quiet environment to write and create. I live here with my husband, Tommy, aka the Marlboro Man, and an occasional visiting bear.”

The 66-year-old Disotell continues on, her voice taking a more serious tone.

“My life is built around service. I am a funeral director/embalmer, a life celebrant, a creator of a grieving tool – the Oaktags memorial pin,” she said. “(I'm also) an advocate for victims of domestic violence and a fundraising

chair for the local Habitat for Humanity. I am blessed by grace and mercy and enjoy sharing my faith with those who need encouragement.”

Disotell may not have started out wanting to be part of the funeral profession, but in a career that has spanned more than four decades, the White Township, New Jersey, resident can't imagine what a life without funeral service would have been like – and has no plans of stopping anytime soon.

First as a funeral director/embalmer, then a life celebrant, Disotell is now serving funeral directors and families in a new way as founder of Oaktags memorial pins.

The oak leaf lapel pins, Disotell explains, help to identify family members who are remembering the one who fell from the family tree at

a visitation or funeral service. Afterward, it becomes a treasured keepsake to wear when a family member wants that special someone near.

It is Disotell's hope that the oak leaf pin will one day become as easily recognizable as other well-known emblems, like the pink ribbon. “When you see someone wearing an Oaktag, you can say, ‘Who is your leaf?’ This gives them the opportunity to say that person's name and possibly share a few words about them,” according to Disotell. “This simple act is a grieving tool and can bring healing to a broken heart.”

We recently had a chance to talk with Disotell about her life of service – how she got involved, what fuels her purpose, and what the future holds.



Opposite page: The Oaktags memorial pin.  
Above: Funeral director and life celebrant  
Ruthann Disotell is the founder of Oaktags.  
(Photo credit: Cinematicceye)

### **You are a second-generation funeral director. What was it like to grow up as the daughter of a funeral director?**

We lived upstairs over Dad's funeral home (Harvey H. Brown Funeral Home) in a three-story brick Victorian in the center of Moorestown, New Jersey. When he opened a second location, we shifted the family over to the new place in Lakehurst. It was closer to the shore, and you can't beat the Jersey Shore. Dad ran both places solo, did trade work for a handful of accounts, and was Burlington County coroner.

He worked hard to give his family a good life. Though he ran out the door on a moment's notice, I feel I had the privilege to spend

more time with my dad than other kids, even if it did involve the art of spotless window cleaning, removing the entire root of a dandelion and snow-shoveling herringbone brick sidewalks before 10 a.m.

I am still in awe of my folks for raising six kids over a funeral home. We learned at an early age about being quiet when sad people are downstairs. It instilled empathy and respect in us. We saw Dad work hard and smile when he was exhausted. He truly was a wonderful funeral director and a skilled embalmer. It wasn't until I went to a funeral at another place that I finally understood why people thought the dead look creepy. At our house, they were always beautiful.

When I entered junior high, I started "standing door" during viewings. My standard line to friends inviting me to parties was, "I'd love to ... if nobody dies."

### **Did you always want to be a funeral director ... or did your future include other plans?**

Originally, I was going to have a large family and make great chocolate chip cookies for PTA meetings. My father suggested I learn a vocation as a safety net to that plan.

One thing I knew was, "I am never going to have anything to do with Dad's business. I want a steady paycheck, benefits and vacation time." He was always on the go with no guarantees of meeting the bills. There is a picture in some box





**Oaktags founder Ruthann Disotell tossing the leaves that inspired the pin.**  
*(Photo credit: Dorothy Salvatori Photography)*

of all of us on the beach surrounding Mom and Dad. Everyone with a strong tan and Dad in a black three-piece suit.

After much pondering, I opted to study art with a focus on portraiture and minor in education.

### **What eventually led you into funeral service?**

I went to college to be an art teacher. My second semester at Oral Roberts University showed an unusual shift in my fine arts curriculum. In humanities, we didn't study humanitarians, but rather how they died. In English, we studied poetry. All of the

poems were about death. Art history? Michelangelo's "Death of a Virgin." Even my modern dance class put me in the group that had to interpret death to music!

A break offered me the opportunity to visit my brother, who was studying at the then Dallas Institute of Mortuary Science (now Dallas Institute of Funeral Service). While "playing mom" for a week, cooking and cleaning for him, I felt drawn to open a Bible on his coffee table. Quite frankly, deciding where to read has always been a challenge, so I just thumbed my way along until I found this passage:

*A good reputation is more valuable than the most expensive perfume. The day one dies is better than the day he is born! It is better to spend your time at funerals than at festivals. For you are going to die, and it is a good thing to think about it while there is still time. Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. Yes, a wise man thinks much of death, while the fool thinks only of having a good time now. – Ecclesiastes 7:1-4*

I crossed the living room, picked up the phone and told Dad I was following in his footsteps. He almost had a coronary. I have learned to never say "never" again.

From that day forward, I have learned more and more about why I am in this field. It's home to me. I love the grieving family and want them to get from "Point A" to "Point B" in one piece. I count it a privilege to carry their heart for them.

### **You graduated from the then Dallas Institute of Mortuary Science in 1975. How has funeral service changed over time?**

I graduated in a class of 104 students. Five were women, of which two entered school with their husbands. Back in those days, I was most certainly a minority as a female, but that was nothing to being the only Yankee. Don't mess with Texas.

We did our case reports at local funeral homes. Up to three students could team up with a proctor at a firm and get hands-on training. I will never forget my first experience – or the proctor. He approached us (I was the only female in the group) in the hall and said (long and slow), "Lil' lady. Should you be requiring it, the little ladies room is down that hall, second door on the left. C'mon boys. Let's go." His complete dismissal of me is what spurred me into the room that day and created a resolve to be able to do what any guy could do.

I went home to work with Dad in a business that shuddered at the thought of cremation, as most of the profit in those days came from merchandise. It took a long time for many to understand their professional worth.

In five years, I moved across the country with my new husband. After a couple years with a large firm, I went on my own and designed a funeral home, which I built with my hands and sweat. I proudly ran 103 funerals the first year.

There is a whole other story about the value of choosing the right spouse. My mate was not in

funeral service and jealous of the time I spent, at a moment's notice, with the bereaved and their dead. With the success of the business, the marriage failed, and I returned to New Jersey.

By then, Dad and his businesses were gone, and I worked for others.

As a female, I felt last in line for trade calls, and when I received regular work of any kind, it usually came in anticipation of my "appreciation." I faced lots of challenges along the way, but I had the opportunity to build departments and set-up branch offices. I tried to leave each place better than I found it.

Forty-five years later, we are less afraid of cremation. We have learned how to have a full service followed by cremation – and we understand the challenge many have with burial, as they don't know where they will be living in five years because the job market is so fluid.

We value our professional licenses and are less afraid to ask to be compensated for our skillset and the added costs of being in business (Federal Trade Commission, Americans with Disabilities Act, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, continuing education, etc). But now we are challenged to be valued by a

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**Oaktags memorial pins can help family members and friends remember a loved one who has died. Each memorial pin is packaged with a poem. (Photo courtesy of Oaktags)**





segment of the public as the DIY movement hits the funeral industry and many with little training are self-proclaimed experts in death.

There is a groundswell of women in this field. Mortuary schools are largely female now. It's a natural vocation for those who are of a nurturing spirit. Women have become more recognized as capable leaders in business and in the community. There are some strong and savvy women out there. I am so in awe of them.

### **What made you decide to become a life celebrant?**

I had a series of auto accidents. Hey, when you're good at something ... I needed to close a head-hunting business I had created for the industry, as my meds interfered with my clarity for a while. And after some extensive spinal surgeries, my ability to spend countless hours in the prep room diminished. I needed to pull away from regular hours at a funeral home, knowing that I would overdo it and pay for lifting chairs, flowers, caskets and loaded stretchers.

The celebrant movement had just started in the United States, and it was a godsend for me, as I was mourning the loss of the grieving family. They were still in my heart and I needed a way to be with them. I thought about funeral arrangements I had made in the past where, while collecting obituary information, a humorous story about a hobby would provoke laughter to erupt and offer a release to those who were too staid to cry. It was magical. Then, I would attend the funeral and it would be the same as the one last Tuesday. "Tell the story about the canoe!" my heart would scream.

### **What are the most important lessons you have learned as a celebrant?**

It is possible to have a meaningful funeral with a full Gospel environment, or one with a storyline nodding

to the faith of the individual. It can be centered around the life of the decedent and a closing prayer of thanksgiving, offer more than one religion woven into the service to honor the deceased and the family members present, or a service with no religious markers at all. My goal is for everyone to walk away with what they need.

### **What do people want in a funeral service today? Is funeral service even the right term?**

There is no pat answer for this. Most need the person's life addressed. Somewhere we started calling it "celebration," but that has been misconstrued by some to mean "party." Most families want to hear good things, but honest things. They want the world to know this person's life made an impact on the Earth and on those in the room, in particular.

If religion was important to them, by all means, include those rites, readings and prayers. But many are just in need of a sense of community, to be surrounded by others who know things are changed by the death of this person. I often have services where the family requested "no religion," but welcomed the idea of a prayer of thanksgiving for that person's life. My take is that they just didn't want to be *preached* to in their grief.

### **You call yourself a life celebrant, not a funeral celebrant. Can you explain why it is important to make that distinction?**

It's like the terms mortician and undertaker, just semantics. I got to thinking, though, and thought I celebrate the person's life, not the funeral, so I created the title life celebrant to feel authentic about my work.

### **You have said that, "Everybody deserves to have their own show. If you can't have it at your funeral, when do you get it?" Can you explain this?**

No two people are the same. Everyone's story is uniquely theirs, so

the words said should be freshly written. How can you say the same thing for Betty Crocker that you said for John Deere last week? It just wouldn't be fair ... and it wouldn't serve the family well. You usually only have one funeral service to get it right. Make it count.

### **With so many people most closely aligning with "None" when it comes to church affiliation, does this offer a unique opportunity for celebrants?**

Most certainly. There are still many who believe a funeral is a religious service. Where does that leave those who don't practice a religion? To offer a storytelling service where the personality of that person is center stage allows the family an opportunity to walk down memory lane and be drawn into a time before the deathbed. It helps to bring them back to their joy. It can even offer a time of better understanding with each other over life events and mend fences.

Of course, the soundtrack can be a bit different than the religious service. I have played Frank Sinatra, Ferlin Husky, Bob Dylan and Queen, to name a few. I have also had services with no music, programs, prayer cards or keepsakes. Every service is different.

### **Do you have a favorite celebrant-led story you could share?**

I was honored to be the first celebrant to officiate the Service of Remembrance for the National Funeral Directors Association Convention (Boston 2009). The change from a quiet, religious service on a Sunday afternoon, changed into a widely attended ceremony on Tuesday morning that welcomes all faiths and adds traditions of the hosting state. To be a part of this evolution is a joy to me.

But one of my favorite personal services was when I led a private graveside interment of cremated remains, after which we returned to the

funeral home for a public memorial service. The lady grew up in the house that was converted into this particular funeral home. Her story also included her work as a labor and delivery nurse at the local hospital. When I learned which doctor she worked for, I suddenly realized she was most likely in the room when I was delivered. She had rented an apartment in the house of that doctor. So did my parents. It was a wonderful thought that they might have known each other. The story is such a magical part of any funeral service.

### **You've had many different roles in funeral service ... the most recent as founder and CEO of Oaktags. What led you to start this new company?**

I spent part of my career overseeing a branch of a Jewish funeral home and became enamored with the kriah ribbon. This simple black ribbon, pinned on the immediate family and ripped, was a symbol of their torn heart. At the same time, it was a quiet way of identifying the family, which is most helpful for guests and funeral home staff. I thought this concept would be wonderful for every grieving family. All I needed to do was think of something nonsectarian that both men and women would enjoy wearing.

### **Why an oak leaf and not a maple leaf or even another item?**

After 12 long years of searching for a symbol, I was walking by a funeral home, down a street lined with pin oak trees. The small leaves were scattered all over the sidewalk as remnants from a storm the night before. I started picking them up and realized this could be the emblem I was waiting for. Everyone can relate to the family tree (thank you, ancestry.com) and the mighty oak seemed a perfect fit.

### **Who can wear an Oaktags memorial pin?**

It is really up to the one who offers it. The funeral homes who are sharing it with families have all adopted practices that are comfortable for them. Some offer it to just the widow, some pin immediate family. If there are adult grandchildren, they could be included. But some offer one to the home health aide, who became family to them. Some funeral homes pin the deceased to show the connection with those in the room wearing an Oaktags pin.

### **Not everyone is familiar with the memorial pin ... what do you want people to know about it?**

The pin is worn in memory of the one who fell from the family tree. It shows that a leaf has fallen, but the tree remembers. Each pin is accompanied by a poem ...

*Some leaves wither and fly way  
Others rip off in a storm,  
This leaf rests upon my heart,  
To keep your memory warm.*

### **How can the Oaktags pin help in the grieving process?**

The action of placing the pin on the clothes of the family is a palpable experience. Their loved one is now a part of them. A thoughtful comment like, "Next time you go to the stadium, take Dad with you," can be an encouragement to know that Dad is with them. Especially in this time of restriction and quarantine, it is a blessing to offer something tangible the grieving family can touch and feel companioned.

### **What do you want your fellow funeral professionals to know about Oaktags?**

Many continue to wear their Oaktags pin every day; others bring their pin out for special occasions, like weddings, graduations and holiday dinners. People take notice and ask about it.

Funeral homes spend a great deal of money on getting their name out in the community. This

pin, out in the community, begins conversations that reflect on the caring nature of the one who gave it. No other promotional item, ad or commercial comes close to word-of-mouth advertising. This pin is also a welcome gift to your local bereavement group. Mourners go to bereavement groups for comfort. Imagine the goodwill this pin could bring.

### **What keeps you engaged in funeral service?**

I have enjoyed a wonderful career in all facets of funeral service. I have recently stepped out of trade work but am still strongly connected as a resource for funeral homes who need a celebrant. My background has made it easy for funeral directors to trust me to serve the family gently, create something one-of-a-kind and keep the service on time for the vault men.

My work with Oaktags is on the rise, with inquiries from other countries, but I am blessed to have a team that affords me the ability to continue to serve and get families from "Point A" to "Point B" in one piece as I carry their heart for them.

### **What advice would you give to young funeral professionals?**

Old people have a lot of mileage. They have been places and experienced many things. Be a sponge around them. Never stop learning. If you show them you get that, they will respectfully ask for your knowledge in return, because times and methodologies change. You get to be a student. You get to be a teacher. Stay humble.

Do all your rushing in your head. You are a funeral director. It is important for you to look like you know what you are doing. People are following your lead.

Enjoy this wonderful profession. People may not thank you often, but you are valuable and appreciated. •