

And the beat poetry goes on

Sentinel Staff Report

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San Francisco was the hub of beat poetry in the 1960s. Local poet Morton Marcus was a part of the creative scene. So was his friend, poet Clemens Starck.

"Clem Starck and I go back 35 years or more. We would read our poetry in the coffee houses in the then-rising Haight Ashbury and the libraries," Marcus said.

Now Marcus and Starck are inviting lovers of word-craft to step back in time for a blast of '60s poetry along with some new offerings which have never been shared with the public.

Morton Marcus was the 1999 Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year and in 2003 his work appeared in two important anthologies, "Poets Against the War" and "No Boundaries: Prose Poems By 24 American Poets." Those publications mark the 79th and 80th freight trains, has been a ranch hand, a newspaper reporter on Wall Street and a merchant seaman, among other things.

For more than 20 years, he worked construction up and down the West Coast.

As a poet, he received a scholarship from the Breadloaf Writers Conference as well as a grant and yearlong residence at the Helene V. Wurlitzer Foundation of New Mexico. In 1998, he was the Witter Bynner Fellow and poet-in-residence at Willamette University.

Starck's poetry has been included in anthologies ranging from Walter Lowenfel's "Where is Viet Nam?" to "A Richer Harvest: The Literature of Work in the Pacific Northwest."

In 2002 his collection of poems, "China Basin" was published and "Traveling Incognito" was released in the fall of 2003.

Both writers will be reading from their work at the Museum of Art and History on Tuesday.



If You Go

WHAT: Poetry reading with Clem Starck and Morton Marcus.

WHERE: Museum of Art and History, 705 Front St., Santa Cruz.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

COST: \$3 suggested donation.

DETAILS: 476-7406.

al, and national resurgence of locally-owned funeral homes thriving in the wake of the multinational buyouts of the early '90s. The reason: conglomerates forgot one tiny detail when anticipating baby boomer profit margins: it's tough making a cookie-cutter approach work for a ceremony honoring an inherently personal life passage.

Of the five local funeral homes now operating, only one — Davis Memorial Chapel in Watsonville — is under the thumb of "The Big Three," the term commonly used to refer to the three corporate giants that owned 20 percent of the market in 1995. The chapel was bought out by Stewart Enterprises in 1996.

Business at Davis' rival, the family-owned Mehl's Colonial Chapel in Watsonville, has only increased since the takeover.

"The corporate buyout has done nothing but help us," said Claudia Mehl Corsetti. "People know they have more flexibility when dealing with a family-run funeral home (like ours) — because there isn't a corporate headquarters dictating policy."

The county's other mom-and-pop mortuaries paint similar pictures of economic health. Pacific Gardens, handling 700 deaths yearly, is swamped with business. Santa Cruz Memorial Park and Funeral Home, at 500 a year, is not far behind.

It's all proof, undertakers say, that family-owned homes are here to stay.

"We've been here since 1862," said Randy Krassow, president of Santa Cruz Memorial. "So it's pretty hard

to dislodge us."

Rise of the funeral home Although ubiquitous now, the American funeral home arrived on the scene a relatively short time ago — at the turn of the 20th century.

It found a fertile culture in which to take root. Increases in life expectancies, fueled by improvements in medical technology, were shifting the deathbed from the home to the hospital.

Death, in the process, was disappearing from American life. Undertakers helped move it along.

History professor Gary Laderman discusses the shift in his book "Rest in Peace," published by Oxford University Press this year. As life-sustaining technologies bred an avoid-death-at-all-cost mentality, Americans became increasingly reluctant to deal with their dead — and the messy decay that accompanied them.

Undertakers gladly stepped in, offering embalming as their calling card, and fundamentally changing America's relationship with the corpse, Laderman explains.

"Dead bodies, in effect, disappeared from the everyday world of twentieth-century Americans," he writes.

A chore once relegated to the deceased's survivors morphed into a thriving industry — so successfully, in fact, that almost all mourners now turn to funeral homes.

Benito estimates that not even one-half of 1 percent of people today handle the dead on their own. In addition to the mess, the system's just too hard to navigate, he said. Hospitals, for example, require that mourners prove they have a place to dispose of the body before relinquishing corpses. That entails securing disposition and death permits.

"There are a lot of small details associated with the completion of those forms. If signatures go over the line and are not in black ink, for example, the registrar won't accept them," Benito said. "Would I consider (taking care of my dead alone)? Absolutely not."

As the stewards of such an emotionally charged event, undertakers became important cultural figures who helped shape the death rituals that are now a staple of American culture.

Which begs the question — just what kind of people are they?

The people in the business The word "mortician," to many, conjures images of a profession that preys on vulnerable families, exploiting grieving for big profits.

It's a stereotype that culminated with the 1963 bestseller "The American Way of Death," a scathing — and largely misleading, according to Laderman — indictment of the funeral industry that undertakers have yet to recover from.

There's no doubt the funeral trade is big business. With about 2.4 million Americans dying annually, the industry grossed about \$11.6 billion in revenue in 2001, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Industry profits are expected to skyrocket even further over the next two decades as baby boomers perish — the death rate will rise from 8.6 per 1,000 in 1999 to 10.24 in 2020, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

Shows like "Six Feet Under" and the movie "My Girl" — which starred Dan Akyroyd as a widowed mortician struggling with issues like parenting and dating — have begun to shatter the stereotype of undertakers as money-grubbing profiteers, Laderman says.

The Fishers, for example, are portrayed as a compassionate lot who put clients above the bottom line. Local morticians, not surprisingly, say the show hits the mark in that respect.

"People think we're these white guys standing around ringing our hands and waiting for people to die, but it's not like that. We actually hope people don't die," said Benito, whose business can barely keep up with the county's dead. "I mean, please, stop!"

While you would expect such lip service from the mouths of morticians, their claims are backed up by professor Laderman, who found, in his research, a group of highly respected people just trying to heed communities' deepest wishes.

Benito and Azzaro say undertakers are people who feel called — like a minister — to the "dismal trade," entering for the spiritual and emotional, rather than monetary, rewards it brings.

Staff embalmer Dave Cutter, for example, decided to join the profession at the young age of 12, after his father's death showed him the solace a good viewing could bring.

"I just have a feeling inside this is what I'm supposed to be doing," Cutter said. "It's just really rewarding to know a family can pay their last respects."

Benito and Azzaro point to what they believe are modest profits to support their claims — their home grosses between \$800,000 and \$900,000 annually, and staff morticians make between \$75,000 and \$100,000, they said.

Their average funeral costs between \$4,500 and \$6,500, which doesn't include burial costs charged by a cemetery. Direct cremations range from \$1,200 to \$1,600, they said.

According to the California Funeral Directors Association, the average mortician makes \$40,000 annually. There are roughly 900 homes in the state.

But spouting figures is beside the point, Benito and Azzaro say. People who get into the trade for the money simply don't last — the job is too grueling, he said.

"Our entire client load is comprised of people on the worst day of their life," Benito said. "We're confronted every day with our mortality."

Meeting the clients When Vince Azzaro walks into a room, it's like the sudden activation of stadium lights on a dark night — an almost blinding jolt of instant radiance. With his boyish, sunburned features and two-hour attention span, he seems a perfect match for a grim yet constantly fluctuating trade.

Today, he walks into a conference room seating the elderly wife, daughter and son-in-law of an 86-year-old man who died the previous day. The man, who had Alzheimer's, was lost to the family years ago. All the same, the family still mourns.

Azzaro, who enters the room balancing a crystal tray, holding a jug of water, knows the perfect way to start the intake: a nice, old-fashioned, corny joke.

He places the tray down on the table and smiles: "I went to flight attendant school — that's why I didn't spill a drop," he says.

It's the perfect segue. The trio laugh, and immediately relax. Before you know it, Azzaro has booked the church they want for the funeral, taken care of a delicate issue involving who will preside, has explained the death certificate process and is chatting with the family like old friends.

During a conversational interlude, the undertaker mentions a man he once knew who attended the family's church. It turns out the guy's still there.

"He knows all the women," says the day-old widow, making fun of the mutual acquaintance's lothario tendencies.

By the time the family leaves an hour later, the basics of the funeral are in place, the obituary is written, the cremation form is signed and Azzaro has scheduled an appointment for the family at the cemetery, for choosing a niche for the urn.

The trio rise to leave. Their load is much lighter than when they walked into the mortuary, and they're ready for lunch.

Says the son-in-law, with relief in his voice: "They're pretty much going to do everything here. The cemetery is the only thing we have to do."

The morning is a typical one for Pacific Gardens and exemplifies, says Azzaro, what the funeral industry is really all about: working with the living, not the dead. Contrary to the trade's portrayal on "Six Feet Under," the corpse plays a minor role in day-to-day business, he says.

"Only about 20 percent of the business has to do with the body. The other 80 percent is interacting with the family," he said.

A lot of the job is simply guiding people through the red tape and bureaucracy that have grown up around the disposition of a body, Azzaro said. It involves the tricky task of empathizing with mourners — "walking the walk," as Azzaro puts it — while simultaneously distancing oneself from clients' losses.

"It's a tightrope," said Mehl Corsetti. "You can't get pulled into the grief too much, or your capacity to help is diminished."

As death pays little heed to the standard nine-to-five schedule, the job is also far more demanding than the HBO show lets on, undertakers say.

Calls from mourners on weekends, holidays and in the wee hours of the night are common. When that happens, undertakers have to hustle to pick up bodies — industry standard dictates a 30-minute response time, at the most.

Pacific Gardens is one of the busier homes in the county. Benito and Azzaro routinely work 14-hour days and rarely see a day off in the span of a week. Lunch breaks are a foreign concept.

"We kind of put our whole lives on hold," Azzaro said.

The pair start each day by scrubbing the funeral home from head-to-toe. That's followed by a staff meeting in the "situation room," where a rough schedule is hammered out. The plan will last until noon, if the pair are lucky. More often, the schedule is abandoned mid-day as new families walk through the door.

"It's kind of like a big juggling act," Azzaro said.

The stress of getting every detail right, from the choice of flowers to how a pastor pronounces the deceased's name (families remember every mistake) is intense, leaving undertakers emotionally exhausted by the end of the day. They're charged with cramming into two days the same amount of organizing wedding planners take a year to pull off. At the same time, the morticians have to treat each family as if they're the only people walking through the door.

"When someone passes away all a family wants to hear is 'yes, yes, yes.' We try to fulfill all their wishes," said Cutter. "But they often don't realize there's five to six other families you've dealt with that day."

Living with death Dave Cutter has watched the gray-white pallor of death spread over more than 7,000 bodies. He's watched the skin slip away over stiffening muscles as body liquids move toward the ground, succumbing to gravity. He's smelled the odors of death, the noxious fumes a corpse emits as intestinal bacteria enter blood vessels and tissues.

Cutter has seen the bodies of children lying as lifeless as stacked pallets and corpses mangled beyond recognition. Yet the daily confrontation with the body's temporality has left him far from jaded. On the contrary, his spirituality has only strengthened, he says.

"People think folks in this industry become immune to death, hardened to it," he said. "But I think it only makes you believe (in a higher power) more."

"You'll look at someone," said Azzaro, "and know they're at peace. You'll know that this is much, much better — where they're at. Call it paradise, call it Santa Cruz. But there is another place."

Azzaro, Cutter and Benito don't deny that dealing in death is hard. Working with dead children, especially, is something they all have trouble reconciling. But hand in hand with the emotional challenges comes a spiritual reward, they said. And all feel honored to partake in it.

Cutter finds proof of faith every time he injects a client's jugular with the formaldehyde solution that temporarily restores the pink, natural look. The bodies' delicate alignment of bones, sinews and tissues make it clear to him there's "something beyond," he said.

But he also sees God in little things — a peacock opening its feathers at a graveside service, for example,

or three dolphins surfacing as ashes are spread on the ocean.

The morticians' families say their husbands are fun-loving spouses and fathers who keep death at the office. But the undertakers also cherish each moment with family, knowing life is short.

Attendant with that, however, is a slighting of everyday worries that can be frustrating to family members, said Tina Azzaro, Vince Azzaro's wife. It's sometimes a struggle, she said, to get her husband to take family matters seriously.

"He'll be like, 'Where's the problem here? Nobody's dying,'" she said.

It's an occupational hazard, judging from a message board devoted to undertakers on the Web site of "Six Feet Under."

One wife, "Gloria99," writes of her husband: "He can not sympathize at all to every day stresses. It's almost as if his emotions are frozen."

But most challenging, undertakers say, is how the profession eats into their time with loved ones.

"The people closest to you end up taking a back seat," Azzaro said. "It's so unbalanced, it's sick."

It also raises, says Benito, one of the great ironies of morticians' existence.

"You realize life is really short and that we ought to spend a whole lot of time with our family. But in fact what we end up doing is spending a lot of time at work. There's a conflict between an obligation to excellence and knowing life is short.

"It's a conflict that I'm still, after 25 years in the business, trying to resolve."

Contact Jeanene Harlick at jharlick@santa-cruz.com.

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