

# Black funeral homes an increasingly dying business

By Erik German  
Special to Sentinel-Voice  
NEW YORK (NNPA) — The steady income of morticians was once seen as inevitable. Nowhere was the truism more apt than in Harlem, where, for decades, a cluster of funeral homes guaranteed their owners a secure position among the wealthier Black professionals in New York City.

But falling death rates, shifting tastes and consolidation have changed all that. Many of Harlem's small, family-owned funeral homes — a solid financial bet since the 1920's — may soon need undertakers of their own.

"Some of them are just keeping afloat and some of them are going to sink like the Titanic," said Clifford James, the 46-year-old general manager of Unity Funeral Chapels on 126th Street and 8th Avenue. James said that almost a fifth of Harlem's funeral homes have closed in the last five years. For many of the 30 or so remaining homes, he said, prospects are grim.

"A lot of them are just hanging on," James said. "They've taken their last breath already; they just don't know they're going to die."

This dire outlook, many undertakers agree, grows in part from the fact that New Yorkers just aren't dying as fast as they used to.

"There were 90,000 deaths in New York City 40 years

ago, and there were 57,000 last year," said Tom Kearns, president of the New York State Funeral Director's Association. For funeral directors, he added, "this means fewer people and fewer clients. There are constantly funeral homes going out of business."

Funeral directors offer a variety of theories to explain the change. Better health care has lengthened lives; young immigrants have rejuvenated the city's population; and elderly people with fixed incomes are fleeing New York's high prices and passing away elsewhere.

Whatever the cause, the drop in deaths has had drastic effects on communities like Harlem, where funeral homes have been staples in the community, as popular as barber shops and churches.

"It's killing us," said Keith Davis, owner of Griffin-Peters Funeral Home at 134th Street and 7th Avenue. "It's worse now than it's ever been." Davis, a 28-year veteran of the funeral business in Harlem, immediately excused himself for discussing human loss in such seemingly glib terms. He is a fit, freckled and instantly likable 53-year-old who discusses the challenges facing his business with a soothing smoker's baritone.

His grandmother founded this funeral home after leaving North Carolina in the late 1920's. Davis joined the busi-

ness in 1976 and says there's no escaping the transformation that has swept over his trade.

"Traditionally the funeral profession was one of the best professions open to Blacks," he said. "In the small towns in the South, if you were the funeral director, you were it... and that carried over to New York when Black people came from the South."

This special status, Davis said, grew out of the unique services that the funeral director once provided for African-American mourners. One of those services was the skill that Black morticians brought to the bodies they handled.

In *Passed On*, a study of African-American mourning traditions, Duke University Professor Karla Holloway wrote that, for Black funerals, "the cultural importance of an open casket viewing required of morticians a particular skill with an attention to the appearance of the deceased."

Of all the beautifying skills in the Black undertaker's toolkit, perhaps the most culturally unique was postmortem cosmetics.

"The Black race is a rainbow race," said Oliver Davis [no relation to Keith Davis], an African-American embalmer in his 60s. "Blacks go from damn near White to dark as this," he said pointing to the licorice-colored lacquered chair where he sat in

the lobby of a Harlem funeral home. "In the cases where there is postmortem discoloration," he said, "you have to get the right shade and that's hard." But Black morticians tend to be better judges of this subtle shading because, he said, "we do it every day."

Unfortunately for embalmers like Oliver Davis, such culturally specific skills have depreciated as the funeral tastes of young clients change.

Back at the Griffin-Peters Funeral Home, Keith Davis says that his younger customers often cremate rather than bury their loved ones. Since cremation ceremonies rarely involve the elaborate displays of more traditional African-American funerals — often the family does not even purchase a casket — cremations cost less. As a consequence, the funeral director makes less.

"When you cremate, you're talking about cutting your profit at least in half," Davis said. He added that now 30 percent of the funerals he directs are cremations, a drastic shift from the 1 or 2 percent of his clients cremated

in 1976.

Davis and other funeral directors agree that this money crunch will force Harlem's smallest funeral homes to consolidate. Davis' own funeral home already illustrates the trend: In the last three years, three formerly independent funeral directors have come to run their businesses out of Davis' address. Each director maintains a separate client-list but they pay Davis rent each month and fees for each service they hold in Griffin-Peters' squash-court-sized chapel.

One of these consolidated funeral directors said she moved to Griffin-Peters because she had no choice. Brenda Young, 34, owns Elizabeth M. Smith Funeral Servicing, a company her mother founded in 1951. Young said a dispute with a landlord forced her out of the building where she ran her business.

"To open a new one, you have to build from the ground up," she said. "And that takes a million or more."

So Young moved under the Griffin-Peters roof, where she said business is steady

but slow.

Like the other two consolidated funeral directors there, Young holds down a full-time job on top of directing funerals. In order to make ends meet, she spends most days brokering small business loans for a local lender.

"I can't depend on the funeral business to take care of my financial obligations," she said. "It's not like every day the phone rings and someone says they lost a loved one."

Young's new landlord, Davis, collects enough in rent and receives enough referrals from Abyssinian Baptist Church to keep his business afloat. But in the current climate, Davis said he expects to see more small funeral directors forced to consolidate or close down. Directors are competing for fewer funerals each year and many of these clients won't spring for traditional, full-dress ceremonies that were once commonplace in the African-American community.

He said, "You put that all together and it spells doom for a lot of places."

Erik German writes for the *Amsterdam News*.

## Bennett

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the public defender, the district attorney and the attorney general all have a higher obligation to the judicial system than any other because they are paid by taxpayers dollars. I insist on a higher standard and I know that if I have done nothing else, I've raised the bar in that regard."

Commenting on recent media scrutiny regarding setting low bail amounts for suspects appearing before her, Bennett said, "I consider it unfortunate but it's a reality. Bruce Wright, a judge in New York, wrote a book in the 1980s called 'Black Robes-White Justice,' and it's funny because when I read that book, the things that he talks about that occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s are continuing to occur in the justice system now.

A lot of the isolation, a lot of the negative press and criticisms that he experienced, I

find myself experiencing. When I read the letter from the Birmingham jail that Martin wrote, I can only tell you that I am in very good company, it is something that happens to us and it happens for a reason, and it happens ultimately for the betterment of others."

She added, "From a fiscal standpoint, it costs taxpayers in Clark County on an average about \$100 per day to house somebody in the Clark County Detention Center. Now, if that person has mental health issues, if that person has medical issues, you pick up that tab on top of the hundred dollars for housing that individual. To transport these individuals back and forth from the court to the detention center, you have to have a number of correction officers assigned who often are working overtime and the taxpayer's footing that bill. Just from a fiscal standpoint,


warehousing people at the Clark County Detention Center for misdemeanor offenses and non-violent offenses, when there is way to offer alternative sentencing should give judges the opportunity to assess the situation, know the history of the offender, and work to not only reduce the amount of recidivism, but offer a chance for that individual to change through counseling and relieve that financial burden from the taxpayers."

Bennett treasures the opportunity to pioneer a trailblazing effort for others to follow and regardless of the outcome of the election, she see herself as a public servant helping others through the legal process and is thankful for the opportunity to do so.

She credits her success to the support of her family, friends, her church, and her community.

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