

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAURA SUSSMAN

BARBARA TABACH AND CLAYTEE D. WHITE

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REMEMBERING 1 OCTOBER

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SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVE

This is Barbara Tabach. I'm sitting in my office at UNLV Libraries. Claytee White is here with us and Laura Sussman.

Laura, would you spell your name for us?

It's Laura, L-A-U-R-A. Last name is Sussman, S-U-S-S-M-A-N.

I appreciate you coming in. We're going to be talking about the Remembering 1 October project and your involvement. You're a funeral director and funeral home owner. Tell me a little bit about how you got into that particular line of work.

I was in nonprofits for about thirty years and in my last position I worked for a synagogue and got involved in the *chevra kadisha*, which is the Jewish Burial Society. I'd go into funeral homes to help take care of Jews prior to burial and prepare them ritually. There were no Jewish-owned mortuaries in town and very few family-owned mortuaries. My wife, Wendy, worked for one of the corporate firms and wanted to do things differently, so she suggested we open a funeral home. After about two years we got licensed and opened in 2009, March, so it's our ninth anniversary.

Wow, time flies.

Yes.

It's a competitive market in the fact that most of the funeral homes are under one big corporation umbrella; is that correct?

Yes. Actually, there's three corporations in town. Most of them in town are under SCI, which is Service Corp International, which owns most of the funeral homes in town and actually in the world, but then Legacy and Carriage own some of the other funeral homes in town.

On October first and second, as the fatalities are starting to rise, what is the normal procedure within the funeral home business for receiving fatalities? My remembrance was

that one funeral home would be on call; is that correct?

If it's a coroner case.

Explain that.

The coroner investigates any death that takes place outside of natural causes under physician care or medical care. Anything like a homicide would be a coroner case where the coroner would contact the mortuary on call, one of the mortuaries they have contracted with to pick up the deceased and transport them back to the coroner's office for an investigation. In this case, it was much different although they did use the mortuary on call. They have two mortuaries that they're contracted with; I believe they use both of those then to transport the deceased back to the coroner's office so that they could do the autopsies and investigate whatever they needed to find related to their death.

How did you spend October first and how did you learn about what was transpiring?

I found out about the shootings because my daughter called us at five in the morning and said, "Are you okay?" I had fallen asleep before any of the reports had come out and I didn't know what was going on. Obviously we were okay; we were in bed. Then I looked on the news and found out what was going on. I sent a text to John Fudenberg, who is the coroner, "If there's anything that you need, feel free to give us a call; we're available to help." I also called the Hites Funeral Home who I thought was on duty that day with the coroner as being the on-call mortuary and let them know that we were available to help them.

It turned out that people weren't really moved immediately and the coroner didn't release people right away, so we had a lot of anxiety and were anxious about what was going to be happening, but there was really no information at that point for the funeral homes. We just waited.

In the meantime, we did get some calls from a couple of families wanting to know if we could help them. We did just like we would any other case. But in all the cases that we were involved in, they were out-of-towners that needed to be transported back to wherever they came from.

How many cases did you work with?

We worked with four cases.

How did the families reach out to you? How did they know to call you?

Different ways. In a couple of cases, they called their funeral director back home where they were living and they recommended us. I think one case, they looked online and read reviews and decided to come to us, probably two cases. Two of each. It wasn't that they knew of us prior to that; this was the first contact.

Those were all out of town. Did you deal with any in-town cases as well?

No, we didn't.

What were the steps that transpired? You said that the coroner was keeping the bodies at the scene. How did they decide when to start releasing people?

They were kept at the coroner's office. I believe they wanted to release everybody at once; that was scheduled I think for Thursday. I don't remember unfortunately. As you could imagine, the parents were very anxious to be able to see their children, so they were putting a lot of pressure on us. *Can you get a release early and allow us to see him or her?* We did get one child that was released to us before the rest of them—or they were able to release to us directly, and then everybody else was taken to Davis and then released from Davis because Davis was on call the day of the release. We had to prepare that child so that the family could see them and then make arrangements to get them back to wherever they were from.

Did the families for the most part fly in prior to the bodies being released?

Yes. Three of the families that we worked with, three of the four came into town right away.

They got some information obviously from the support center that was set up to help the families. Then we tried to provide them as much support as we could until we were able to bring their children into our care.

What part of your training prepared you personally for this kind of mass casualty?

Nothing specifically. It was really hard. The hardest cases that we work with are always when a child passes away. In this case, we had four of them all together, about the same age as our kids, and it was really difficult emotionally, especially since there was such a delay in allowing them to see their child. These parents, the last thing they knew their kids were going to a concert and everything was great and they got a call that their child had been killed and then it's a few days until they can even see them. They were just hysterical. They just couldn't comprehend why we couldn't let them see their child sooner. We didn't have them in our care, but I think the coroner had to do what they had to do. If you don't understand what the process is, nothing makes sense. This is the worst news you can have and nobody is letting you make it easier.

CLAYTEE: *Explain the process.*

That the coroner goes through?

Yes.

You probably want to ask one of them to get specifics. I'm sure they had to document—they're usually getting a certain number of decedents every day; let's say that's twenty or thirty. Then to get another fifty-some in one day, it's doubling on what they need to do. My understanding is they work around the clock, twenty-four seven. But, in most cases, they needed to do an autopsy. Because this was a criminal case, they probably had extra things they had to do. They had to

document everything. It just amplified everything they needed to do. They knew once they release someone into a funeral home care that whatever they needed as far as evidence is gone because they wouldn't necessarily get that person back. They just wanted to be very thorough. I think not to prioritize one child or one person over another, they wanted to release everybody together. They do a great job. I have great respect for what the coroner's office does. But it was just a massive undertaking for them.

How did you explain that to a parent? Would you have said the same thing you just said to me?

Maybe a little differently. I would have probably said that they wanted to make sure that they have all the information they need so that when they release her or him that we can follow through and do whatever your wishes are, and they're doing everything they can to do it as soon as possible.

In some aspects of this tragedy, different first responders and people who were involved in additional steps, there were peers from other communities that had dealt with this that reached out to them. Did that happen within the funeral home industry?

Yes. We had our national organizations—and we belong to a number of them—that reached out to see if there was anything that we needed. They offered to send in professionals, embalmers and funeral directors, to help. Because we only had four families we were working with, we could take care of them with our own staff. People were wonderful and very supportive, not only communities that had been involved in these kind of experiences, but pretty much from all over everybody was really supportive. People in the community calling to say, "Do you need lunch or meals or something?" Everybody was great. Everybody talks about how the community came together and was supportive and even down at our level. I know when I'm speaking with some of

the first responders, they got more support than they could even acknowledge. I'm on the board of an organization called TIP, Trauma Intervention Program. You may want to interview them, by the way, as an aside, with Jill.

I actually have an appointment with Jill Roberts.

That organization is amazing. The work that they did with the families and first responders in debriefing them and supporting them was amazing. I'm on the board of Jewish Family Services and the counseling staff was there to help work at the sports center, whatever they called it down at the convention center. It just brought together people from all walks of life to help and support these families.

The four cases that you dealt with, they were all from out of state?

Yes.

In the handling of the bodies, were they transported embalmed or not embalmed? What disposition?

One family chose to cremate their child here and then they took their remains back with them. The other three were embalmed and transported back.

I mentioned an aside. The New Yorker article came about and gave kind of an interesting perspective within a few days after. How did you feel about that and how did that happen?

It was interesting. Our daughter is best friends with somebody who works for Condé Nast. Apparently he was sitting in an editorial meeting and they said they'd love to do a story about funeral homes' response in Las Vegas, and he mentioned he knew somebody who had a funeral home, so they called us. I did a phone interview and then they sent out a videographer and then they send out a reporter. At first we were wondering, *should we even get involved and speak to anybody?* We didn't want people to see it as a marketing ploy, and we did get some bad emails

like that. But we wanted people to know that the funeral home response is an important part of the whole picture, and that not necessarily our funeral home, but all the funeral homes that were involved need to get some recognition and just show that we have compassion and we were part of link of making everything work out for these families.

Communication between the various funeral homes, did you afterwards get together to download and support each other? Did that happen?

No, it didn't.

This is such an extraordinary situation.

Yes. We really didn't do anything like that. We did a little debriefing with our own staffs, but we didn't do anything as a community.

Did Davis get most of the people?

Yes, because they were the ones that were on call to receive them. I think it was probably easier. Most people probably didn't know they could have gone to other funeral homes, and that's part of the coroner rotation, anyway, is that these funeral homes excuse to be on so that they will get cases.

Are you on that rotation, too?

No. It's just currently Hites and Davis, two funeral homes that are on that.

Palm doesn't do that?

No.

Did your opinion of Las Vegas change at all before and after?

Yes, definitely. Just to be able to see so many people, the whole community really come together, building that garden, the sign, people that were just going and getting water and taking it to the coroner's office and opening up their homes for families. I talked to somebody with the

Flight For Life, I think it's called, and they were flying families back and forth. Everybody came together. It really showed how we have great humanity here. People talk about the city in a much different way. If there was anything good that came out of it, it was showing that we have great people here.

When you think about guns and your thoughts about them prior and now, did it change at all?

I have always been negative guns. I don't see a reason why people need guns, period. So, no. It strengthened, I think, my belief that especially assault types of things should be outlawed. But there are lots of countries in the world that don't allow citizens to have guns and they survive fine. I'd like to be one of those countries—or I'd like the U.S. to be one of those countries.

What do you think you learned about yourself from this experience?

Good question. Every time we have a difficult situation, I feel like I've gotten a little stronger, if that makes sense. This was really, really bad. As I mentioned at the start, dealing with parents after a child passes away for whatever reason is bad, but something like this when they were just murdered was heart-wrenching. Just being there with the families and crying, it was okay to be who I am and they appreciated it and knew that we were right there with them.

Because of the lapse of time and the types of injuries that you dealt with, does that make it harder for the families to view their loved ones?

Physically, no. But emotionally, as time went on they got more and more anxious and they were so grateful when they finally had the chance to see them. It was nice that they had that chance.

I'm curious. I haven't had an opportunity to even touch this. But the grieving families that came into town, did they have opportunities in the funeral home or in your experience or observation to help each other out in the grieving?

I believe at the support center—I don't remember what it was called—I believe they had groups

and opportunities to do so. A lot of them interacted with each other.

I'm going to ask a question that I should know the answer to and I know part of this answer.

What is the difference between the embalmer and the funeral director? I think those are the two terms.

Yes. That's a good question. The embalmer is a person that's licensed to embalm the body and do that process. They don't necessarily meet with the family. A funeral director meets with the family. In Nevada, they're dual licenses, so you can be a funeral director and not be an embalmer; some states, you're both.

I'm from a small town and most people were both.

What state?

Ahoskie, North Carolina.

North Carolina, yes. The West is different. In Colorado, you don't even have to be licensed. In Nevada, until about two years ago, you didn't have to be licensed to meet with a family. But it's evolved. We've become more professional.

Is that a good thing?

Yes. It's harder to find staff, but it's a good thing.

It sounds like you've done a good job finding professional staff.

I think so.

Yes. I've heard about it.

Thanks.

That's great. Anything else that you want to reflect on with us? People will be accessing these interviews to learn from. It could be peers in your funeral industry. It could be just anyone who's interested in that aspect of dealing with the massiveness. Anything else that

you want to share with us?

For professionals, when we heard about this, immediately Wendy and I said, "We're going to discount our charges." We charged half of what we normally would. Then the fund was developed. I guess the FBI actually reimbursed funeral homes for their charges. The families were not out of pocket at all. A lot of our colleagues said, "You shouldn't have discounted. You could have made the whole amount." But we were totally fine with our decision. Some funeral directors would have maybe wanted to wait to make a decision like that, but we just didn't want the families to worry, not knowing that somebody else was going to reimburse. It was nice that—I don't know if nice is the word—that the FBI did take care of all those expenses.

I have to admit I wasn't aware of that.

I thought someone had done it, but I'm surprised that it's the FBI. That's exceptional.

Other things, I don't know if you can be prepared for something like this. We try to do training, but there's always something that's going to throw a wrench into the system. As long as we're doing our best to meet the families' needs as best we can that's all we can do, I guess.

It's admirable.

Sorry, I don't have any great words of wisdom here.

I think this is great.

This is great. This is an aspect that we haven't heard before, so thank you so much.

I did read my last interview and I said "like" every other word, so I've been trying to not say that.

I said a lot of "ums," I noticed, too.

We take all of those out.

Thank you.

They will be lightly edited for you. You won't have to look at that. Thank you very much

for coming in. It's much appreciated.

Sure. You guys do such great work.

Your handling all of that is important. It's not an easy career path you've chosen.

No, it's not. It's crazy. It's twenty-four seven. The other night I was on call and I got six calls between midnight and seven a.m., totally exhausted. But at the end of the day when I went home, I felt like I had made a difference. It was good. It's much different than anything I've done before, but it's very rewarding.

Great. Thank you so much.

You're welcome.

About two weeks after the shooting, we got a call from a local priest. He said, "Would you be willing to cremate the shooter? Because we've talked to some other funeral homes and they refused." We said, "Yes." He deserves to have a final resolution, and it was really for his family. It turned out he called us an hour later and said, "The other funeral home said they would do it." His family was in limbo for a little while. Apparently the first few funeral homes they talked to would not take care of his remains.

I was one of those people who thought we should have had the number at fifty-nine, if we are going to actually believe that we are all one, if we're going to believe that.

Yes. The potential that he had mental illness and had no control over what he was doing, he should be given some kind of compassion.

There is a lot of conversation anymore about even mentioning the perpetrator's name. I don't think we're glorifying them. They are part of the human condition that led to—
The young man in Florida; that's a troubled person and now to think that he's really alone.
Oh, yes. You can't help as just a caring person that that's a pained individual.

Oh, yes.

Compassion.

Right.

So I love your attitude.

When the priest calls, it's like this is one of God's children, too. I definitely don't agree with what he did, but he doesn't deserve to rot.

[End of recorded interview]