



FD Chat #17 – Removal and Transport Services with Duane E. Hall

<http://www.funeraldirectorschat.com/2011/removal-duane-hall/>

Nancy Burban: Hi, I'm Nancy Burban, your host for Funeral Directors Chat, a podcast providing funeral professionals with insight into current industry topics, news and trends. Today it is my pleasure to have my friend Duane E. Hall from Huntsville, Texas with me. Duane is a licensed funeral director for many years and prior to starting Park Area Mortuary Transport, he worked for Service Corporation International.

And Duane trained at Commonwealth Institute of Funeral Service. So today we are going to chat about services that make funeral directors lives so much easier such as removal and transport services.

But first, Duane, I'd like you to tell the listeners a little bit about yourself. Welcome, Duane.

Duane E. Hall: Thank you. I've been a funeral director for many years. Actually, it's been over 25. I went to Commonwealth Institute in Houston in 1986, worked for Service Corporation International while I was there. I stayed there in Houston area for 25 years, decided to move up here to Huntsville area in the country to get out of what they call the rat race. I became a funeral director because I attended a funeral service for my mother and it made such an impression on me and I decided that I would like to do that myself.

Nancy: And that was the sole reason why you became a funeral director? Had you thought about it before that?

Duane: I'd never thought about it before. Of course, I was only 14 at that time. I went to my high school guidance counselor expecting him to laugh at me because I went to a small high school. And actually, he was very supportive and said actually our high school has turned out three funeral directors in the past. He gave me the name and phone number of how to contact Commonwealth, and once I graduated I attended and became a director. The rest is history.

Nancy: That's wonderful. And so, your first and only job as a funeral director was basically with SCI?

Duane: Actually, the funeral home. The way I joined SCI was through their mergers and acquisitions. When I was an apprentice, the funeral home where I was employed was purchased by SCI.

Nancy: Oh, I see.

Duane: Yeah. And then after that, actually, I even left SCI and went to another corporation and then came back to SCI. So, actually, I worked for SCI twice.

Nancy: Oh, OK. And did you have a specific role that you played at SCI? I know a lot of times they assigned you, like, a role, like you're either working client conferences or you do embalming. Usually, you do one thing. You do it over and over again. Was that the case with you?

Duane: The SCI homes that I worked at were of the smaller scale. And so, I was an arranging director and a service director. We weren't one of the larger funeral homes to have only one person do a specific job. We actually did a little bit of it all except for the embalming which was, of course, done at the central embalming location.

Nancy: Oh, I understand. So then you got a little bit more of a flavor of like, what funeral directors do more that if you worked in one of the larger facilities.

Duane: Yes, ma'am. The families and I went through making the funeral arrangements then I followed through by conducting the funeral services for them.

Nancy: Oh, that's great. Now, Duane, today we are going to talk about removal and transport services and we have lots of people who are going to listen to this podcast going from people like yourself with 25 years in the industry to people that are considering entering funeral service and students. So, if you could, in your own words tell us what a removal service is, removal and transport service.

Duane: A removal and transport service can actually be the funeral director's best friend. Whenever the staff is not available to go on a call, the call does not need to be turned down simply for lack of staff. You call the removal service. They go to the call, make the removal, meet with the family and no one ever knows that you are not a member of the staff of the funeral home. And also, with the overland transport of course, there are times when air travel is an option but overland travel can sometimes be the best option.

Nancy: I see. And why did you decide to when you move to Huntsville to start a removal and transport service?

Duane: When I came here, I saw that there are several funeral homes here in the area but there was no removal service. And everyone had been doing all of that type of work themselves. They had to scramble. One funeral director, owner of a funeral home told me that she has little old men perform her over-the-land transport. He would go on a call to another city and forget where he was going, and sometimes, forget how to come back.

Nancy: Oh, that's terrible.

Duane: And the other funeral homes, they just had to call in someone from Houston because Houston was actually the closest to this area.

Nancy: I understand. So, your service actually is much more cost effective for these funeral homes?

Duane: Yes, ma'am.

Nancy: Now, you do removals, local removals for your funeral homes, but you also take care of like if someone is deceased in your area of the woods for that day. They actually want to be transported back to say California, New York, do you handle that also?

Duane: Oh, yes, ma'am. I do overland transport. Very recently, after the tornadoes, I was in Joplin, Missouri. I brought someone home to this area that passed there. I've taken people to other areas. I've been to just outside Chicago, Illinois. I've been to Tulsa, Oklahoma. I did a gravesite service for someone who passed here and then the actual burial was held in El Paso so I conducted the gravesite service at the national cemetery there in El Paso. It was actually a follow through all the way with the family. They actually believed that I was from the funeral home here as opposed to selecting a second funeral home there in El Paso.

Nancy: So there was a great continuity of service?

Duane: Yes, ma'am.

Nancy: That's really important, because you don't want the family to have to be burdened with dealing with too many people. And if they instill trust in you and you're following through all the way from Huntsville, Texas to El Paso then you're really providing a service for them where they are seeing that you are taking care of all their needs from start to finish.

Duane: Yes, ma'am. And it also was more cost effective for the family to pay for the trip overland per mile. Even though it was a bit high but, that much of a distance, it was less expensive then selecting a second funeral home and paying for the cost of them receiving the remains and their staff to conduct the graveside service.

Nancy: Right, you don't want to add a lot of confusion to the situation anyway.

Duane: Yes, ma'am.

Nancy: Now, let's talk about... In my opinion, and we've chatted about this before, removal service is really very valuable to funeral directors. One of the things that funeral directors complain about is getting up in the middle of the night or there perhaps, I don't know the service and they get a call and we certainly don't want client families to have to wait any more than they have to have somebody pick up the decedents. So let's talk about some of the things that make funeral directors lives a whole lot easier. You are able to keep your staff at the funeral home to cover services, right?

Duane: Yes, ma'am. That is correct.

Nancy: And they are able to service walk in families?

Duane: Yes, ma'am.

Nancy: Let's chat about a couple of other advantages in having a removal service versus having staff on call.

Duane: Well, one thing it does limit is the wear and tear of your vehicles. The removal services are, of course, responsible for the high price of the gasoline. They are responsible for their maintaining, insuring their own vehicles and therefore you do not add the miles in the wear and tear to your own car, which keeps them looking nice for your services.

Nancy: True, and then you don't need an extra removal van, either.

Duane: Yes, that's correct. The fewer number of vehicles that you have to maintain, the lower your overhead is and the lower your insurance premiums.

Nancy: Good point. And as you said, your funeral home is represented professionally and by name. You do use the funeral home's name when you represent yourself, is that correct?

Duane: That is if the call is for the local funeral home. Now, sometimes, they do have enough sense to know that if their selected funeral home is five hours away and I arrived in 30 minutes, that I am not from their hometown funeral home.

Nancy: Sure.

Duane: Therefore, I say that I am working with the funeral home on their behalf, but I never use the words 'transport service.'

Nancy: OK. And timing is so critical. You never want to keep the family waiting while you are trying to find staff to make a removal call.

Duane: Yes, ma'am. Once I was told by a funeral director that in a family's mindset, when they call the funeral home, it's already been 10 minutes. When they hang up from talking to the funeral director, it's already been 30 minutes. And after an hour, it has been forever. And so, during this time, while they're waiting on you, you don't want to be scrounging around trying to locate staff that's going to go and make the call for you.

Nancy: Right, because that is your first impression. And if you wait too long, as you said, in the family's mind it is forever.

Duane: Yes, ma'am.

Nancy: And you do removal services 24/7. So if the funeral director does get the call and he doesn't want to get up at three in the morning, you handled that for them professionally.

Duane: Yeah, of course, just like the funeral home. The removal services operate 24/7. That is why we're here to accommodate any needs in the middle of the night. Sometimes you get two calls in the middle of the night and you may chose to go on one and select to have the removal service go on the other. Therefore, you've handled both of your calls, basically at the same time.

Nancy: Oh, that's convenient. So, there's no need to be concerned. I would assume that if you are at a graveside service or you are in the middle of another funeral service and you get a call, it might be very awkward to figure out who am I going to send out in this removal.

Duane: That is correct. You should actually have the transport service on your speed dial so that you don't even have to give it a second thought. Just go down your list into the transport service and let them handle it for you.

Nancy: And Dwayne, as we said a little bit earlier, if the body is in another city, it is so much faster for a transport service to deliver the body to you than for you to have your staff make that round trip call.

Duane: Yes, ma'am because if your body is in a town that is eight hours away, it's obviously faster for the transfer service to bring the body to you in eight hours. By the time you sent someone and then have to turn around, that's 16 hours that could be cut in half.

Nancy: That's really important, I would think.

Duane: Yes, ma'am. Particularly with the timing of the funeral service, because if you can have the body back to your funeral home in eight hours, you can have the funeral service the next day as opposed to waiting two days to schedule the service.

Nancy: Excellent point. And it's much more cost efficient. The prices of a transport service are probably lower than your funeral home GPL and are recouped by the client family. So it's almost like getting free help.

Duane: It is almost like getting free help, because you're going to recoup your costs from the family. Therefore, you haven't actually been out any cost.

Nancy: And the cost of the long distance transport is per loaded mile? Can you explain that a little bit?

Duane: Per loaded mile means that if the call is a long distance away, you're only paying for when the body is in the vehicle being transported. You're not paying someone to make the trip and turn around and come back. It's not a roundtrip charge; it's one-way, whereas, if you send your own person, you have to pay them both ways.

Nancy: So you're saving the hourly fee of an employee and you're saving gas and wear and tear on your vehicle. I don't think a lot of people know that it's only the loaded mile. So let's put this in perspective. You're in Huntsville. If you're picking up a body, a removal, in Dallas, Texas or the Fort Worth area, you drive to Dallas and Fort Worth on your own dime, right Duane? And then you're only charging for the ride back.

Duane: That is correct. Yes. We would go to Dallas, make the removal and come home. And on my odometer that is 350 miles but, of course, a funeral home is only charged for the 175 miles that the body was being transported.

Nancy: I don't understand why every funeral home doesn't use a removal service, especially for decedents that are out of the actual zip code or out of the driving range. As you said, it saves time, it saves money, it saves wear and tear on the vehicles; it saves employee hours. It's a win win situation.

Duane: It can be if you have a good relationship with your transport service. I don't understand why everyone doesn't use them either. There are some people who just like to try to handle everything themselves and then they become overwhelmed.

Nancy: And also Duane, let's bring this up. What should people be looking for in a removal service? Let's face it, we've all heard of removal services where people show up and they're not funeral directors. They may be on staff but they're not funeral directors. They're not really professional. They're a little too casual. They show up and they're at the decedent's home and they're like, "Where's the body?" That kind of sets the tone for the funeral home, and they get a bad impression of the funeral home that they're using. Should they be using a removal service like yours with a trained funeral director, a trained licensed funeral director, who has years of experience and knows exactly how appropriate they need to be?

Duane: Yeah, professionalism is the number one key. If a family is present, their removal is going to be a memory that will last them forever. If not done professionally they will let you know about it, and also set yourself up for a potential lawsuit.

Nancy: How are you setting yourself up for a potential lawsuit? That's interesting.

Duane: For instance, if you come into the home and start making minor chit-chat with a family and are too personal with them, you can be setting yourself up for mental anguish. If the removal team is not professional and they do something that is detrimental to the body, such as, I dare say, dropping it, you are setting yourself up for a mental anguish suit because families are going to notice every little thing when you are a guest in their home.

Nancy: True. And this is a very traumatic time for them as well, so they're hypersensitive, I would think.

Duane: Yes, they are.

Nancy: And the impression that you leave when you're doing a removal will last forever, because they are so hypersensitive and they don't know what to expect. They are sitting with a loved one who has recently died and they're anxious and nervous and scared and don't know what to expect. It has probably never happened to them before. It's so important, as you said, to be professional and to handle it in a professional manner; same as a funeral director would who has been doing this day in and day out.

Duane: Yes. There are touching removals that you make, such as the time I went into a home and the couple had been married for well over 60 years and they'd never been apart. And I went into their room and the spouse, even though I invited him to step into another room, he said, "I've never left her. I'm not leaving her now." So he stayed there in the room while my assistant and I made the removal. So you have to be very cautious with the handling of the body. For one thing, I am always very sensitive when it comes to their heads when we're sliding the body from the bed over to the cot. I'm always careful not to bang their heads, because you're being watched. You don't want to do this in front of a client family.

Nancy: So you treat them like you're handling a new born baby?

Duane: Exactly, a very precious commodity because, to the family, that is their most precious loved one. I even verbalize to my assistant; let's watch our little head so that we don't hurt her. When client families hear this, they notice and they seem to think, "Wow, they really do care."

Nancy: Yeah, I think that they would. As you said, they are looking for signs and they don't want to let go. It's very difficult. And when they see that you're treating their loved one with such tender loving care, it calms them down a little bit. Not that anything could actually calm them down, but it makes them feel that perhaps they've chosen the right funeral director. Perhaps they've chosen the right funeral home to entrust their loved one to.

Duane: Yes ma'am. Recently, when I went to a removal at someone's home, the gentleman who passed was the patriarch, as they called him, of the family. So when we placed the body into the back of their removal vehicle, the daughter asked if she could have just a moment. And I said, "Yes, Ma'am." Here we are out in the driveway of their home. And she reaches down and gets a handful of dirt and throws it into the back of the removal car, and says, "Here daddy, now you can take some of the ranch with you." And that just meant the world to her, that Daddy was taking some of the ranch with him on his way to the funeral home.

Nancy: And with less experienced staff or, as we were saying, people who are not really in the funeral services field, that might seem odd, and they might have chastised her, "What are you doing?" You, being a funeral director and having seen so many different things and been involved in so many different scenarios over the 25 years of your service, you would see that as a loving gesture and you would enable the young lady to do what she needed to do to say goodbye to her dad.

Duane: Yes, Ma'am. There have been some removals that I've made that I've actually had to turn away just for a brief moment, so that the family couldn't see that I was actually tearing up myself.

Nancy: And that speaks volumes, because that shows that, here's this person that I've entrusted to take care of my loved one now, and even they are sorry to see them go.

Duane: And you learn with each and every removal, nothing is cookie cutter. Each call is different. You cannot become callous and go on and remove, saying, "Oh, just another removal." Because with each and every one, there's going to be something different and unique about that, and you have to keep that in mind when you're meeting with the client family.

Nancy: And just like anything, just like SCI, they have embalmers that do it every single day, one right after the other, and they get really good at it, let's face it. Duane, doing removals and only doing removals, as you said, you look for those moments that you can add compassion, you get better at what you do. You make people feel more at ease. Is that why you love doing what you do?

Duane: Oh, I love doing what I do because I've always been told that I have a way of making things easier, and I try not to tell people a lie by telling them that I'm going to make things easier for them. I tell them that I'm not going to make it any more difficult than it should be.

Nancy: Good point. Good point. And you are a very caring, compassionate person, and I'm sure that you bring that to every removal that you do. Why did you decide to form a removal transport service out of all the things that you could specialize in?

Duane: For the entire time that I've been a director, people have always asked me, why don't you go into business for yourself? For which I've always said, "I don't have that kind of money." Funeral homes are very expensive ventures: finding a facility, insurance, the liabilities. And then one day I had an epiphany that to being a transport service. I still could be in the funeral industry, meeting with families, do what I have been trained to do all these years, and all it would cost as far as overhead would be the cost of a removal van and the removal gurneys. So I was able to be in business for myself, yet not have the expensive overhead of owning, say, a funeral home.

Nancy: That's a very nice story. Thank you, Duane. Do you think more funeral homes are going to be using removal and transport services in the future?

Duane: Yes. I do believe that funeral homes have figured out that removal services can be a great help to them. One thing is the price of gas. Maybe we'll convince them. And also, once the word gets around how convenient it is, then everybody will be like, "Well, how come I haven't always done that?"

Nancy: Exactly. That's my point exactly. It's such a great idea. And you wonder, why wasn't it always done like this? Why wouldn't you make people's lives easier? I mean, the life of a funeral director is not an easy life. Let them sleep through the night and let you have the business, and it's not costing them a dime, actually.

Duane: And people talk amongst each other. Say at a funeral convention, one funeral director is telling about how busy he is, how he's constantly on the go. He's getting up in the middle of the night, and go, go, go. Another funeral director will tell him, "Well I'm rested and refreshed. I let the transport service do it for me and I don't have a concern in the world."

Nancy: Especially, like I said, when they use a transport service like yours. With a trained, licensed funeral director, they have total peace of mind and no cares at all. They know that you're going to do as good or better a job than they would do themselves.

Duane: Yes, ma'am.

Nancy: Yeah. I think that your transport service is a model for an excellent service that all the people in the Huntsville, Texas area should be availing themselves to. People who are from other places and need long distance transport as well. So you're on Facebook and your page is Park Area Mortuary Transport.

Duane: Yes, ma'am.

Nancy: And do you want to give your email address?

Duane: The email address actually is Parkareamorttrans@aol.com.

Nancy: OK.

Duane: And that is a new email address. The one that I've been using most often is Dehallfd@aol.com.

Nancy: So that's Dehallfd@aol.com.

Duane: Yes, ma'am.

Nancy: And you can just look Duane up on Facebook. Duane E. Hall. I would encourage all funeral directors and all students that are listening to this podcast to get in touch with Duane. You never know when you are going to need his services. I can vouch for him. He has an excellent reputation. I think he would be a great person to know either way. Thank you so much Duane for sharing your knowledge with us today.

Duane: Thank you, Nancy. [exit music]

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