



FD Chat #10 - Cemetery Photography with John Thomas Grant

<http://www.funeraldirectorschat.com/2011/cemetery-photography/>

Nancy Burban: Hi, I'm Nancy Burban, your host of Funeral Director's Chat, a podcast providing funeral professionals with insight to current industry topics, news and trends. Today we're going to get a little bit off track and we're going to actually visit with my friend John Thomas Grant who is a celebrated cemetery photographer and co-founder of the Passion Project. Welcome John.

John Thomas Grant: Well, thank you very much, Nancy. I'm very happy to be here on Funeral Director's Chat. I appreciate the opportunity that you and Rick and United Priority are giving me. I'm happy to be here.

Nancy: Thank you. You know, Rick Frasier is a great fan of yours and he's also a cemetery photographer. So we have a personal interest in chatting with you as well. We'd like to get into your head and find out what your experiences are and why you do what you do.

John: Perfect, perfect. Yes, I've come across quite a number of cemetery photographer's like Rick. I had no idea when I first started that there were so many people out there with this love of cemeteries and the peace and serenity that they contain. I was quite surprised. I have quite a few fans that are cemetery photographers.

Nancy: Oh, I'm sure you do. I've seen them on FaceBook. John, when did you first start photographing cemeteries and monuments?

John: Well, It's quite a recent event. I'd spent 30 years in the music business. I had a camera by my side for some other shots, but I never thought, at the time, that cemeteries would be my passion, if you will. It's a recent event within the last six or seven years, actually. It all started with my fascination, my love for the adventure in genealogy. Most people that are introduced to cemeteries will start with a search for their family tree.

That's the way it started with me. When I got all the information I needed from the living, with pencil, paper and camera in hand, I marched off to see the dead. That was in New York.

I lived in New York for quite some time. I was actually born and bred in New York. One of the places where my family, many of my family, is interred is the Old Calvary Cemetery in Queens, New York, so there I went.

Nancy: Oh, I know Calvary.

John: Yeah, yeah. It's a gorgeous place. It's a real unknown gem in New York, as a matter of fact. I have a lot of family there. I went there to take pictures of the stones that marked their graves and get dates. A lot of the living had forgotten much of the information. So what the living weren't willing to, or couldn't, tell me, the dead were more than happy to provide. That's where I went.

Once there, I was drawn into the peacefulness and the serenity of the cemetery. I was struck by many images and visions. I had an epiphany, I guess you would say, regarding being in the cemetery. I started from that point.

I guess within the last six, seven years. I can't tell if it's more of a photographer's eye. I've retired from the music business and I was looking for something else creative to take its place, if you will. I guess I had a bit of a photographer's eye, so I started composing pictures. I also found, I guess you could say, a new found sense of life and mortality.

So I shot a few pics, especially at Old Calvary. The family seemed to like what I was shooting. They said, "Very nice, very nice indeed." I started a little gallery on the Internet. People started to drop by and see what I was doing.

It got bigger and bigger and I got a little bigger gallery. Then in 2009, before I knew it, I had slightly less than 200,000 hits.

Nancy: Wow.

John: So somebody out there, yeah, tell me about it. I was quite surprised, not counting those numbers. I had a couple hundred thousand hits, nearly. There were a lot of people out there that were enjoying my images and telling about their experiences in cemeteries and their families. Just stories of how, when they were younger, their parents used to take them to the cemetery and walk around. Talk about the stories.

Between the birth date and the death date, there's life. It's just a wonderful, wonderful place to reflect.

When I first started shooting cemeteries six or seven years ago, I had no idea anybody did shoot cemeteries. I thought I was, if you will, a quote-unquote, freak of nature, to be honest with you.

Shooting cemeteries, how creepy can that get? But, I'd come to learn there are thousands, if not 100's of thousands of people out there that have a great appreciation and they've really flocked around my work.

They've really come to admire my stuff. I'm most gratified by the attention my work's getting. I do get a lot of hits on my work.

I'm thrilled to know and still so thrilled that, last year, at the beginning of the year, sometime around March, I was approached by a publishing company, Schiffer Publishing. They wanted to put out a coffee table book of my work. I'm overwhelmed, if you will.

Nancy: No, that's great.

John: Yeah, I know. It's wonderful.

Nancy: John, let me ask you an obvious question. Why cemeteries, why grave monuments? Because, you have a wonderful eye and you could shoot anything. You could shoot any subject matter. What drew you to cemeteries in particular?

John: I found something walking through cemeteries, the stories of the dead, the feelings of the dead. The fact that they too, at one point, were living and loving and going about their lives on a day-to-day basis, like myself, like yourself and everyone listening, they too had a life. I shot what aroused my feelings, my emotions; anything that aroused my sense of human familiarity. I'll explain that by saying that life is essentially increments of time.

A lot of my pictures, to be honest with you, are almost autobiographical. I started to see things that brought me back to another time in my life, a moment in my life. I'll give a couple of instances.

I have a picture of a husband and wife's stone that I shot in Massachusetts. Now, that may not seem so odd, but the husband's stone is actually leaning up against the wife's stone and she's standing quite straight. To most people, they probably just passed it by, I suspect. But to me, it just reminded me of my family.

I have another picture of four stones. One of them is a mom's stone. She's leaning in the direction of three little stones and they're leaning in her direction. It was just very sentimental, very emotional for me. Those are the pictures, basically, that I look for in the field.

Nancy: So it's an emotional journey of life and death.

John: Yeah, it's a reminder of the life, the precious life that we have. That's what I would like for people to get from my work. I get a lot of emails from various folks about how my work affects them. That too, is an emotional journey. I'll read some of those a little later. It's been an amazing ride, I must say. It's been an amazing, emotional ride. It's given me a new vitality in the preciousness of life and a new outlook on things.

Nancy: Well, John, do you have any favorite cemeteries?

John: Of course. I lived for 20 years, or there about, in Brooklyn. You can't get any better than Greenwood. That's my home away from home. I don't know how many times I've been to that place. Some of my finest pictures come out of there. As I mentioned earlier, I didn't start terribly long ago, so I have not traveled that far in pursuit of the pictures. It's still life and I'm still trying to get my photography to a point where it could be a form of subsistence, if you will.

I'm hoping with the book out, that will take place. In the meantime, I've been locked into the Northeast. Some of my favorites, obviously New York, is Greenwood. As I mentioned earlier, Old Calvary, which is the hidden gem where my family is and the place I consider eternity is Ellis Island. All the immigrants, the place is packed with immigrants, and all my relatives came over in the late 1800's or early 1900's.

Woodlawn, I can't forget Woodlawn, up in the Bronx with its majestic mausoleums; incredible, just incredible.

But also, I lived for a time in Rockport, Massachusetts. Now I'm in Auburn, the first garden cemetery, and then the old New England cemeteries, of course. The little roadside cemeteries I love so much.

Nancy: I grew up in New York as well and I lived down the street from a cemetery. I have fond memories of Calvary, Greenwood and Woodlawn. They're really beautiful cemeteries as well as the ones in Massachusetts. Have you been to the one in Salem, Massachusetts?

John: Yeah, the Burying Point, yep. There are a few new's: Greenlawn, Harmony Grove in Salem, that I enjoy so much, and the Burying Point in Midtown. Yeah, I've been there. I have a couple of pictures that are quite popular.

I know a lot of people look at cemeteries for the history and maybe even the mystery, the paranormal and such. I pretty much go to find those stories, ways of expressing that life once was and ways of expressing the little increments of time I spoke about earlier, stuff that makes me feel, that reminds me I'm alive.

Nancy: Now John, do you have a lot of funeral directors who are interested in your art?

John: I have everyone from funeral directors, to paranormal enthusiasts, to life fulfilling speakers and life enrichment speakers, to steam punkers and all kinds within the gothic crowd. I have a lot of everybody that's coming on board, that's finding admiration for my work. The one absolute that we all have is that we're all alive. To me, if one person feels, "that's me," then everyone's going to feel, looking at my work, or anything, for that matter. So...

Nancy: Now, do you have a lot of unusual epitaphs that you've seen on gravestones?

John: Well, in my book, and if I can cut to that then, because...

Nancy: Sure.

John: Yeah, I have my first publication. As I said, I had a pretty good fan base and you know people talk to people and they've recommended my work. And next thing I know, I had a publishing company approaching me, Schiffer Publishing, regarding putting up a book. I had been working on one prior to that, the reason for their attention; I had been working on the concept of a book that I call, "Final Thoughts."

Nancy: Aha.

John: "Final Thoughts" is a synthesis of my first photographic work and epitaphs. So they loved the idea. And right now, I designed it all last year, gave them the artwork and the manuscript essentially back in November. Oh no I'm sorry... I gave it back to them... November, yes, November 2nd I dropped it off. And their design department is now working with what I gave them. It's going to be 225 pictures, and I figure about 275 epitaphs.

Nancy: Wow.

John: So, it's actually one of the first, if not the first, book that is going to be a hardcover coffee-table-style book on cemetery photography. So, I'm very proud of that fact. That it's going to be one of a few. I can't really name any other books that are on the subject, that is, strictly cemetery photography in that kind of style - a coffee-table book. So it's a synthesis of my work and epitaphs.

Nancy: Aha.

John: And some of the epitaphs... They were all collected by me at various locations on the northeast, and I've tried, so earnestly, to associate a proper epitaph with a feeling of a picture. There are some extremely familiar epitaphs of "Remember me as you pass by, as you are now so once was I, as I am now so you must be, prepare for death and follow me." And that one's from 1836, or thereabout.

Nancy: Nice.

John: Yeah, I mean that's a standard epitaph. You find that on quite a number of stones. I have everything from... And then you have some more heart-rending epitaphs - "Rest, loved one, rest. Love could not keep thee here. Goodbye." That's from 1872.

Nancy: Aha.

John: Yeah, and then one of my most popular pictures. You're probably familiar with it. It's the stone; I believe the statue I shot at Greenwood with the autumn leaves around it. The red autumn leaves and the epitaph. The angel is bent over the crypt. The epitaph there was "It was hard to give thee up." But I have 275, at least 275 epitaphs in there and 225 pictures. So I'm thrilled about that.

Nancy: That's very nice.

John: Yeah, it's a simple book, and it's not many words. It's strictly epitaphs, pictures, and full-page pictures for the most part. There are a couple of pages where they are doubled up.

Nancy: Aha.

John: I wrote an introduction for it, but I also had, and I'm quite proud of this and most appreciative and gratified, as I had Doug Keister who offered to write the foreword for my book. He's absolutely another big fan of mine. Doug wrote "Stories in Stone," which is the, I guess, the cemetery enthusiast Bible. I asked him, and he said, "Yeah, don't even think about it. Sure. I love your work. Yeah, I just shoot pictures, but you shoot novellas. Every picture tells a story, but your stories speak novellas," he said, "I'd be happy to print the foreword." So I'm thrilled.

Nancy: That's great praise!

John: Oh yes, yes. From Doug that's wonderful.

Nancy: Yes.

John: He's in my book and the books of many other people...

Nancy: Aha.

John: ...that are interested in this. Yeah, I was quite happy and thankful.

Woman 1: Usually, I talk about different things, from embalming to funeral celebrance, to all different aspects of the funeral services industry. And today I wanted to chat with you, because I think that you are an integral part of that journey as well, because you tell the story of end-of-life. After everything's said and done, after the person-deceased is disinterred, you go back and you kind of let them have a second voice. Let them have a second life, as it were.

John: Exactly. I'm going to read something to you from something that was sent to me, which relates to what you're talking about.

Nancy: Great.

John: It was written to me by a fan in an email. "John, your use of your art, the beauty of the images and the power evoked by the written words will do more..." And she's talking about my book. "...will do more for cemetery preservation than any group, website or individual could hope to aspire to. We all have relied on records, cemetery caregivers, history books, et cetera and et cetera. Using your art form and talents bring people to life, give them names, personalities and makes us all ponder their personal stories and wonder who they were as people. You act as the catalyst to allow these graves to speak and thus be befriended. All lovers of beauty and the human condition will surely buy your book and pass it on to relatives and friends. Consider your work as an investment in the future for these cemeteries. You are the best caregiver they could ask for. From one dedicated to cemetery preservation, I thank you. It was lovely.

Nancy: Beautiful, very beautiful.

John: It's stunning. And I would like that to happen. Ben Franklin once said, "Show me your cemeteries and I'll tell you what kind of people you have." So I put all my efforts into bringing folks back to the cemeteries like they did back in the day. In the Victorian times of the social gathering, they were parks, they were museums, there was respect for their deceased relations. It was a place to meet, a place to love, a place to feel alive. And I would do that. That's what I would like to see happen. When I was living in Rockport, Massachusetts recently over the last few years, I would go and I would pick up a sandwich or a hero. They have a Calvary cemetery and there is little kids section there. And I guess there are some 50 graves and it's just kids. And I take my sandwich and go sit with the kids.

And I'd like people to see that for a variety of different reasons. To not forget, number one, and the other thing is to feel a greater appreciation for their own lives, understand how precious it is. And that it should be lived to its fullest, to its fullest potential. I just... I'd like to see that.

Nancy: No, that's beautiful. And we all have a part in the transitional process. From helping people at the time that people get older and are diagnosed through hospice, through the funeral services process after they're deceased. And you tell the final story. Which is really beautiful and it's so necessary because, as you said, with a lot of the cemeteries, people are not really enjoying them the way we did many years ago.

John: Right. Well, they're not. They're certainly not. I'd like to see that. And I think it's slowly coming around. I'm seeing a transition, finding more and more people looking at my work and the work of others and deciding to make that extra step to go to a cemetery, to perhaps revisit or pick a weed or just learn and feel the preciousness of their existence, to find their talents, to live to that full potential as they live right now and have no great expectation of what is to come but live for now. And I'm seeing that more and more. And I'm hoping "Final Thoughts" and some of the other titles I'm working with over time will give that or provide that mentality to people. Just to get them feel their breath and understand and feel their senses and make the best of what they have.

Nancy: Well, your book is coming out at the end of 2011, "Final Thoughts."

John: Right, sometime around October, yeah.

Nancy: OK. And it's published by Schiffer, S-C-H-I-F-F-E-R Publishing.

John: Correct.

Nancy: We'll certainly let our listeners know when your book does come out so we can pay final homage to your life's work here.

John: Oh, wonderful, wonderful. Thank you very much, Nancy.

Nancy: And John, if any of the listeners would like to get in contact with you or would like to see... I know you do sell your work. I've seen it on Facebook and online as well. If anyone would like to find your work, to appreciate it or perhaps to purchase it for their funeral home or for their own residence, how can they get in touch with you?

John: Well, they can get in touch with me through the website which is johnthomasgrant.com. That's, again, johnthomasgrant.com. They could also reach me through the Facebook page, "The Passion Projects." They could reach me there. I also have a personal Facebook page called, "Cem Designs", C-E-M D-E-S-I-G-N-S. I'd be happy to acknowledge you.

Nancy: We look forward to your book and I certainly look forward to seeing some of your new photographs in the upcoming months.

John: Yeah. I'm just going to read one final farewell, if I may?

Nancy: Absolutely.

John: You had mentioned earlier about some of the epitaphs there in my book and this was one I got off a stone in Mount Hope in Rochester. And I thought, it's so appropriate for life and my pursuit and my understanding of my work when I'm out shooting. It goes something like this, and it might be familiar to some folks. "Scatter me not to restless winds, nor toss my ashes to the sea. Remember now those years gone by, when loving gifts I gave to thee. Remember now the happy times, the family ties we shared. Don't leave my resting place unmarked as though you never cared. Deny me not one final gift for all to come and see. A single lasting proof that says I loved and you loved me."

Nancy: We really appreciate you taking the time today to chat with us and to tell us why you do what you do and why you create the beautiful art that you create.

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