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## 'I Never Could Have Imagined'

Dignity Was Denied the Dead as Bodies Were Stored and Handled Using 'Disturbing' Methods, Area Funeral Home Workers Say

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By Josh White  
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Ronald Federici's father, a retired Army colonel, had just died, and Federici wanted to escort his body to Demaine Funeral Home in Alexandria. But the driver who came to pick up the remains at the hospital said he wasn't going to Demaine, he was going to some other place.

Upset and confused, Federici followed the van driver, who pulled up to National Funeral Home in Falls Church. When the white garage door opened at the edge of a cemetery just off Lee Highway, Federici said, the foul odor of decomposition smacked him in the face. A body lay on a gurney in the garage near a rack holding coffins, and the walk-in cooler where his father was to be left was filled with exposed bodies.

"The stench was horrific," Federici, 53, said about the cooler. "Bodies were laying buck naked all over the place. There was no dignity whatsoever. It was disgusting, degrading and humiliating."

What Federici witnessed Dec. 6 echoed what embalmer-turned-whistleblower Steven Napper had been complaining about for months, first to his supervisors, then to the state. Napper documented the atrocities he saw in notes and photographs and turned them over to authorities.

Napper, a retired Maryland state trooper, had been hired in May by National Funeral Home, which also acts as a regional clearinghouse that embalms and stores bodies for four other Washington area funeral homes -- Arlington Funeral Home, Danzansky-Goldberg Memorial Chapel in Rockville, and Demaine Funeral Home in Alexandria and Springfield. From May to February, when he quit, Napper said that the walk-in coolers could not hold all the bodies and that a manager told employees to store them in unrefrigerated areas.

During his time there, Napper said, as many as 200 corpses were left on makeshift gurneys in the garage, in hallways and in a back room, unrefrigerated and leaking fluids onto the floor. Some were stored on cardboard boxes or were balanced on biohazard containers. At least half a dozen veterans destined for the hallowed ground at Arlington National Cemetery were left in their coffins on a garage rack, Napper said.

He began to take photographs in December and presented them to the Virginia Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers. Federici and Napper's observations -- accounts supported by three others

who have worked there -- have led to a probe by the state board, although board officials said they were prohibited by law from disclosing such an inquiry. Several people said they were interviewed by a board investigator in recent weeks.

What was supposed to be a dignified end to thousands of lives had instead deteriorated into a haphazard operation, Napper said, more about money than honoring the dead. Part of the largest funeral services conglomerate in the world -- Houston-based Service Corporation International -- the company did not want to spend money to address the issues, Napper said supervisors told him.

"It was disturbing and disrespectful and unethical," Napper, 34, said. "I never could have imagined what I saw there or the things we were asked to do. These are people's loved ones, and they never should have been treated this way."

Representatives from Arlington Funeral Home, Danzansky-Goldberg Memorial Chapel, Demaine Funeral Home in Alexandria and National Funeral Home referred calls to the SCI corporate offices in Houston.

Robert Malinow, location manager at Demaine in Springfield, said he was not aware of anything other than the highest standards at the central facility.

"Service Corporation International has always represented to me that we carry out the highest standards and professional behavior within our industry and that we do not tolerate exceptions to those rules," Malinow said. "Behavior such as this would not occur at my location. We do not tolerate this behavior, and we only ascribe to the highest standards."

J. Scott Young, president of SCI Virginia Funeral Services, said the company is conducting a thorough investigation of the "disturbing allegations."

"I can assure you that our company takes these allegations very seriously," Young said in a statement. "Thus far, we have not found any evidence that supports the allegations. We have inspected our preparation facilities and found them to be completely sanitary and in compliance with all applicable laws and regulations, including OSHA. Our company is committed to treating all human remains with the utmost dignity and respect at all times."

Young also said that SCI officials place "great importance on the condition of our facilities and invest significant resources to ensure that they comply with the highest professional standards."

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Napper, who was one of two embalmers, said as many as 2,000 bodies from the five funeral homes affiliated with SCI move through the regional care facility, sometimes called "Central," at National Funeral Home each year for embalming, cosmetics, dressing and storage, overwhelming its facilities.

Some bodies waiting months for burial at Arlington are stored in the garage and are subject to external temperature changes, Napper said.

When he was hired in May, Napper was not aware that National Funeral Home had just been placed

on three years' probation for unsanitary conditions.

SCI, which owns more than 1,700 funeral homes in the United States, has been accused of problems before, such as in the Menorah Gardens case in Florida. Customers filed a class-action lawsuit against SCI alleging that funeral homes in the chain desecrated vaults, oversold cemetery plots, and removed bodies from grave sites and dumped them in the woods in 2001. SCI settled the case out of court for \$100 million in 2003.

Lisa Hahn, executive director of the Virginia Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers, said she could not confirm a current investigation or discuss specific allegations. Hahn said, however, that pools of body fluids left on the floor of preparation and storage areas "would likely be a violation of the laws and regulations." The board oversees funeral operations in the state and can impose sanctions ranging from fines and probation to license revocation.

Although Virginia law does not require funeral homes to have refrigeration equipment, "inappropriate handling of dead human bodies" would violate the law, Hahn said. Further sanctions against a funeral home on probation in Virginia could lead to license suspension or revocation, Hahn said.

Melissa Williams, executive director of the American Society of Embalmers, said storing a body in a coffin in a garage over a long period almost certainly would cause the corpse to mold and decay, and she said such storage would "not be a funeral profession acceptable practice."

Williams said she believes most funeral homes operate with high standards.

"I don't see how anyone could see that kind of scenario as being treated how they'd want their loved ones treated," Williams said.

\* \* \*

After the body of his father, Army Col. Anthony Federici, 88, was dropped off at National Funeral Home, Ronald Federici called Demaine officials the next day and later spoke with SCI's regional market manager. Federici said that both said there must have been a misunderstanding.

"I told them I stood there, that I was right there, and that I saw it with my own eyes," said Federici, a McLean child neuropsychologist. "I said that it was a disgrace and an abuse and that I had caught them red-handed."

Federici reported his concerns to the Virginia Occupational Safety and Health Administration in late December, and officials there sent a letter to National Funeral Home asking it to investigate. Because an employee did not make the complaint, the agency's policy is to address the issue by correspondence, said Jennifer Wester, a spokeswoman for the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry. National Funeral Home's general manager at the time, Kevin Hough, wrote in a letter to state officials dated Jan. 2 that the conditions never existed.

"National investigated the allegation that our equipment and environmental surfaces were not cleaned and decontaminated after contact with blood or other potentially infectious materials," Hough wrote in the letter. "Our investigation did not substantiate the allegation."

Keith Stringfield, 36, the van driver Federici followed to Falls Church, is a licensed funeral director who has been in the business for more than 13 years. Stringfield said Federici's insistence on following the van led him to see things customers would not normally see. Stringfield said conditions at the funeral home were often "very unfavorable."

Stringfield said he and other contracted van drivers were instructed to leave bodies in the garage if there was no room in the coolers, something Stringfield refused to do. He said he spoke to a board investigator about the situation last month.

"You don't leave a body uncovered. You don't let a body leak. You don't leave a body on a stretcher in the garage," Stringfield said. "But who's going to see it?"

Another employee, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he feared being fired, said that managers told workers to put bodies on the racks in the garage and that there are bodies in those coffins "constantly." He also said the condition in the coolers and the garage disgusted him.

"A lot of the bodies that are there are there for a week or a month, and they're just sitting there dripping on the floor," the employee said. "The families don't know anything about it because the families aren't allowed at Central."

\* \* \*

Marian Savage had no idea where her grandfather's body would be stored before burial at Arlington, but she assumed that Demaine Funeral Home in Springfield would keep it in a refrigerator, much like the spotless morgue at the hospital where she works as the director of quality.

Instead, retired Army Col. Andrew DeGraff's body was placed in his coffin and left on a storage rack in the garage, Napper said. Photographs show the coffin on the rack weeks before his burial, and Napper said he lifted the lid and saw DeGraff's uniformed decomposing body inside.

DeGraff, a career Army officer who was close to the family of Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, a former Army chief of staff, gave everything to his country, his family said. He was especially close to his grandchildren because his only daughter died at a young age.

When DeGraff died, Savage said, she was encouraged to do a viewing almost immediately because the funeral home told her that the body wouldn't keep until burial. She thought that strange because her grandmother, who was buried at Arlington a year earlier, had an open casket at her service two months after she died.

On Jan. 2, the day of DeGraff's burial at Arlington, Savage's 4-year-old daughter, Sophia, went up to the coffin and asked to see "Papa" one last time. Savage decided not to disturb the American flag and flowers adorning the cherry coffin. She had no idea then that her grandfather had significantly decomposed.

Upon learning about how her grandfather's body was stored, she was stunned.

"Most people don't want to think about it, but you expect it's going to be taken care of the right way,"

Savage, 35, said. "Of course, you have no idea what's going on behind closed doors, but this just can't be acceptable."

Savage's younger sister, Grace Wozniak, said she remembers how moving it was to walk behind the caisson at her grandfather's burial with tourists and strangers looking on.

"They all stopped. They all showed respect," Wozniak, 34, said. "Everyone respectfully watched this soldier go off to his grave. If strangers had the wherewithal to show this respect, it hurts me that this funeral home couldn't give him even that minimal level of respect."

A light oak coffin containing a body was placed next to DeGraff's on the storage rack, and, according to records and family members, it belonged to another veteran Army officer who died last year and waited months before burial at Arlington.

That retired officer's family members asked that his name not be used in this report but reacted with outrage and dismay. They said a funeral home official at Demaine assured them that their father's body would be refrigerated until he was buried.

"I have been in tears since the minute I heard about it," the officer's son said.

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Having to place the veterans' bodies on the garage storage rack was about as much as Napper could stomach. The son of a veteran, Napper said he was saddened to see people in uniform treated that way.

Even worse, he said, was what his supervisors instructed embalmers to do before the bodies were shipped to Arlington. Napper said he was told to put scoops of an industrial deodorant powder, Dodge Company's D-12, all over the bodies to ensure that odors wouldn't be detected by officials at the public cemetery.

Arlington's protocol is not to accept coffins that have bad odors or leaks, said Kaitlin Horst, an Arlington spokeswoman.

"The concern is that if the odor is too offensive that the casket team can't carry it, or if there are other concerns with leakage, they will send the remains back to the appropriate funeral home," Horst said, adding that it is a "very, very rare" occurrence.

Napper said he went into embalming and funeral directing after leaving the Maryland State Police because he wanted to help people at the end of their lives. His decision to report what he saw at SCI was difficult, but Napper said he believes he owed it to the clients he was serving. He and another embalmer, who declined to be identified, left SCI in recent months. Napper has landed another funeral directing job at a local firm.

"I spoke out because what I was seeing just wasn't right," Napper said. "Someone needed to stand up for these people."

Wozniak said she wanted to thank him for coming forward with information she would not have

learned otherwise.

"It's not something I wish I would have known, but this can't remain hidden, and this can't go on," Wozniak said. "Other families can't have this happen to them."

*Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.*

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