

# Jewish funeral director reaches out to community

By **Tonyia Cone**

Special to The Jewish Outlook

**W**ith a degree in psychology and experience in customer service and as a makeup artist, joining the funeral business was the last thing Mitzi Byron Chafetz thought she would do. After wrangling with a large corporate funeral company when her mother died and then working for the agency that regulates funeral directors and homes in Texas, she realized working as a funeral director offered the opportunity to put her people skills to work while helping families in crisis.

After moving to Austin from Houston in 1998 to marry her husband, who lived here, she landed a job with the state regulatory agency. While working through problems with her mother's pre-planned funeral arrangements, Chafetz had met a woman at the Texas Funeral Service Commission. That connection led to Chafetz becoming continuing-education coordinator with the agency. She later was promoted to public information officer, and when teaching mortuary law and ethics across the state gave her the opportunity to see firsthand what funeral directors do, she enrolled in mortuary school.

Today she is a funeral director with Weed-Corley-Fish Funeral Home, which has been family-owned for 100 years and has done funerals for such Texas icons as former President Lyndon B. Johnson, Lady Bird Johnson, former Gov. Ann Richards and Barbara Jordan, a former congresswoman from Houston who later became an adjunct professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin and for whom Austin's airport terminal is named.

Chafetz, who believes she is the only Jewish funeral director in Austin, said, "It combined so many of the things I loved."

After her personal experience with the industry, with both supportive funeral directors and what she considers a large, insensitive company, Chafetz said, she understands what customers want at what is a painful time in their lives.

Her experience working for the Texas Funeral Service Commission also has informed her work as a funeral director, since she had the opportunity to read complaints from consumers across the state, a perspective most funeral directors never see.

"I want to be there for people when they're hurting, to comfort them," Chafetz said. "I want to behave ethically, not just to profit."

Although most Jewish funerals in Austin are conducted by Cook-Walden Funeral Homes, Chafetz also hopes to have the opportunity to serve the Jewish community. Though she works with people of all faiths, she said being as a funeral director has made her more proud of being Jewish. Traditions like taharah, the ritual bathing of the dead, and shemirah, watching over the body, are respectful of both the dead and those left behind to mourn, at a time when it can be difficult to make decisions and keep thoughts organized.

"We have some really wonderful traditions," Chafetz said. "It's a recipe for healing."

Finding so much wisdom in Jewish death rituals has led her to become more

observant in other aspects of Jewish life, like keeping kosher, she said.

Since finishing mortuary school and joining Weed-Corley-Fish Funeral Home in September, Chafetz said, she has realized that Austin's Jewish community can benefit from working with a Jewish funeral director.

"There are certain things someone who is not Jewish just wouldn't understand," she said, explaining that she is familiar with Jewish culture beyond the basics that are taught in mortuary school.

For example, Chafetz knows not to make calls on Shabbat, not to embalm a Jewish body or bury it with metal, and to save the blood of a Jewish accident victim to bury it with the body. She is also able to sit with bodies for shemirah and perform taharah, which can be particularly valuable to unaffiliated families, since local synagogues typically organize the people who perform those mitzvot.

Since she began working as a funeral director, Chafetz said, she has been surprised at how strong people are and how much pain they can endure.

"Our generation heard about the Holocaust. When I see people dealing with a death or tragic accident, I think how did people survive this, endure, laugh or smile again, when they have gone through so much pain," she said. "I am touched and inspired by resilience of people."

Those who survive the death of a loved one are at a loss and find themselves need-

ing God, Chafetz said.

"It's a time when people feel a need to be in touch with the way their parents and grandparents did it," she said. "I see it all the time, particularly with Judaism. It really brings people comfort. People who are not religious or observant at all will do Jewish death rituals. I think it brings them comfort and makes them feel connected."

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