CELEBRATING *Success*

HIGH ACHIEVERS BEN AND SALLY LOOK TO THE FUTURE

The two students to be awarded a High Achiever Award for 2020 were Ben Blunt of CPJ Field & Co in Sussex for the Diploma in Funeral Directing (DipFD) and Sally Pritchard of Freeman Daynes Funeral Services in Chesterfield for the Diploma in Funeral Arranging and Administration (DipFAA).

Funeral Director Monthly caught up with them both to find out what brought them into the profession – and what motivated them to study for the qualification.

Explains Ben: "I joined CPJ Field in 2017 as a trainee funeral director. I had worked for nearly two decades in a completely different industry, the last ten of which was running my own HR and training business. It was quite a change!

"Whilst it was a career change, I had had previous work experience in the sector when I was in my teens and at university (holiday jobs), within a local family firm, who were friends of my family. I had always wanted to return to work in the funeral service as I realised early on what a rewarding profession this is - an opportunity presented itself to have a change, and the rest is history."

For Sally, the career path was very different. "Raising a family of three children kept me very busy during my twenties and thirties but, as they got older, I knew I wanted to start a career," she says. "The funeral industry was something I had felt drawn to from a teenager, but it wasn't until I had met my now-husband that the opportunity presented itself.

"When I came to relocate from Shropshire to Sheffield to start a new life, with Declan, I took a chance and applied for a trainee position at Freeman Daynes. Needless to say, I was delighted when I was offered the job. That was three-and-a-half years ago now, and I still love the job and enjoy the challenges it brings."

Working in the funeral profession is a busy and all-encompassing role. What inspired Ben and Sally to take on the challenge of studying for a NAFD diploma?

"Like most things in life, we tend to get better with experience, and our profession is no different!" says Ben. "However, I was fortunate enough to join CPJ Field who invest heavily in the development of their colleagues, and supported me all the way.

"I realised early on that there was definitely benefit in having a structured programme of training and development to underpin the 'real life' experience I was gaining. I was also fortunate to work alongside some outstanding colleagues who supported me, and willingly shared their own experience with me as I was developing in my role. I studied for the DipFAA in 2017/18 and then progressed to the DipFD which I started in 2019. Both qualifications helped to grow my confidence to perform in my role

and I was fortunate to learn alongside a great group of fellow students. My tutor, Peter Linford, was also excellent and incredibly supportive.

"I took my final exams on 11 March 2020, just prior to the first lockdown. I recall travelling to Birmingham and seeing a few people wearing face masks on the train. At that stage, I don't think anyone could have anticipated what was on the horizon. I was fortunate to be able to sit the exam and have attended all our training workshops before the impact of the last 12 months really kicked in.

"The study for the DipFD was particularly challenging, and I think I wrote more for my DipFD than I did my first degree at university! At times it felt like an endurance test, and managing it alongside working full time, on call duties, my family commitments and everything else, was challenging at times. The breadth and depth of the syllabus was significant, and whilst relevant, there was a lot to learn, understand and remember. I found planning ahead and keeping on top of the many assignments, reflective logs, portfolios and tutor assessed work was critical. I like to plan and know what needs doing when, and I felt more in control that way."

"There's a real benefit in group learning, rather than ploughing through the materials on your own in a darkened room!"

For Sally, having a funeral-related qualification to further her knowledge and understanding of the industry was really important to her. "I wanted to be sure I was following best practices, and the Diploma in Funeral Arranging and Administration would give me the foundations I needed early on in my training. I knew that in time I would want to do the Diploma in Funeral Directing, so this was the stepping stone to reach that goal also. With the backing and support from Gary and Jamie Daynes, I was able to commit the time needed to attend course dates.

"I really enjoyed doing the course, and found I gained a great deal of confidence from it. My tutor, Natasha Gidley, was supportive and made lessons fun as well as informative. My fellow students were great, and provided me with further insight into an evolving industry. We created a WhatsApp group to help with revision, and offered each other support.

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"As the exams were looming, COVID-19 was just taking hold. Had the exams been just a couple of weeks later, they would have been cancelled as we went into lockdown. Having put in daily revision time from Christmas to March, I was glad to get the exams done.

"Results day was tense as I waited for the email to arrive. I was, of course, delighted to see I had passed, and quickly added my result to the WhatApp group - celebrations all round!"

And there was more good news to come for both Sally and Ben as the third lockdown began in January. Says Sally: "I received another email, this one to say I had achieved the highest overall marks for the DipFAA examinations. I was totally thrilled to have gained this award and couldn't wait to tell my bosses, colleagues and family, all of whom had encouraged me to work hard for the course."

"It took me completely by surprise," adds Ben. "But, of course, it is a great honour to be recognised in this way; the hard work feels even more worthwhile."

NAFD Past President Jeremy Field, Managing Director of CPJ Field & Co, is proud of both Ben and the three other CPJ Field students in the Class of 2020.

"We're over the moon for Ben," he says. "The Scales Award is the pinnacle of academic achievement in funeral service in the He also scored the highest marks in his DipFAA! Today, more than ever we feel it is important to invest in our colleagues. It's crucial that we grow their skills and expand their knowledge to ensure that grieving families feel supported and well informed in making choices as they arrange funerals relevant to the person who has died and also meaningful to those who participate in them.

"Ben and three other wonderful CPJ Field & Co funeral directors were successfully led through their qualification by Peter Linford, our head of training and an NAFD Approved Tutor. In addition to teaching NAFD qualifications to funeral directors from across the profession (not just CPJ Field & Co), Peter is responsible for setting the tone of continuous learning within the company. He plays a huge role in delivering our own internal training; supporting our efforts in striving to be the best we can be, in everything we do for bereaved families and their deceased loved ones. The people that spend the most time with our client families are the most important people in our company and we invest as much in them as we do any other aspect of our company. Our future success depends upon them after all, and we're very proud of our whole team and everything they achieve."

It's a sentiment shared by Gary Daynes, who said of Sally: "It's no surprise to us that Sally has achieved this award, as she has proved a valued member of our company over the past three-and-a-half years, dealing with both the funeral and memorial masonry side of the business. Sally has built a good reputation with families who have used our services, always conscientious and caring with attention to detail, making sure each family's difficult time is eased as much as possible.

"Sally has embraced her funeral career with a clear interest in moving forward within the trade, which without a doubt can only be a benefit in serving our community."

NAFD Lead Examiner, Louise Williams, wholeheartedly agrees with both Jeremy and Gary on the importance of Ben and Sally's success.

"The NAFD programmes of study really reinforce to me that we are part of a profession," she adds. "As with any profession, there is a body of knowledge that we are expected to have, as well as the skills to perform our roles well. With the CMA findings, I suspect that our ability to demonstrate our knowledge and skills as a sector will become even more important in the future, particularly when it comes to potential regulation.

"That said, I do think that the most important thing is how we treat our clients every day (and each other) and one of the good things about undertaking the Diploma study was having the time to reflect on my own practice and discuss it with others, including my tutor. The biggest learning for me personally was never to underestimate the impact we can have on those experiencing loss and bereavement through being confident in our role as funeral professionals."

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So, what's next for Ben and Sally?

Ben is now the Senior Funeral Director within CPJ Field & Co's Buckinghamshire business, Heritage and Sons. He says: "I have some wider responsibilities providing leadership and support to our team across six funeral homes, working closely with our Managing Director. Whatever direction I go in personally, I always want to continue to learn and support our teams to be the best they can be, in the communities that we serve."

For Sally, next up is the DipFD. "I look forward to starting the new Diploma in Funeral Directing course and will hopefully see some of the same faces on the course, and we will again support each other through it," she says.

"With much talk of further regulations being introduced into the industry I will be keen to embrace further training to ensure we exceed the required standards."