

The man in black



NOBLE GUYON | IDS

Funeral director Cory Graham, 27, takes a moment to sit down and rub his eyes after preaching at a funeral service at Stuart Mortuary in Indianapolis on Saturday. This funeral was Graham's second and last of the day after being up until 4:30 a.m. performing house calls the night before.

Cory Graham grew up surrounded by death. Now, as a funeral director during the most violent time in Indianapolis' history, he works with death for a living.

By Jack Evans jackevan@indiana.edu | @JackHEvans

INDIANAPOLIS — The undertaker would not watch the local news anymore. He hated how the broadcasters talked of nothing but death. He hated each mention of the city's rising homicide toll and how the anchors seemed excited about the city setting a new record in blood. He hated how a news item could reduce a victim to a cause of death: the number of bullets torn into them, the place their body fell.

Most of the victims were men, like the undertaker, and young and black, like the undertaker. Some of them were friends, people he'd grown up with. He knew they had emotions, motivations, lives too complex to fit in a news brief.

Often he looked down at a victim, laid out in a casket, wounds concealed by make-up or strategically arranged clothing, and had the same thought.

That could be me.

* * *

Sometimes the call comes on a holiday, on a weekend, in the middle of the night. Cory Graham has woken at 3 a.m. to retrieve a body more times than he can recall. Sometimes it takes him through restricted access doors into chilly morgues, where he finds boys and men with bodies cool and shrouded and broken by bullets.

Graham works at Stuart Mortuary, a family-owned institution just north of downtown. A painting of thorn-crowned Christ hangs by the front door. The mortuary's slogan: "Open to Serve" since 1948.

As a teenager considering the funeral business, Graham shadowed undertakers at Stuart. His family entrusted so many loved ones to the mortuary that as a child, he

thought it was the only funeral home in the world.

In recent years, as homicides in Indianapolis have surged, many victims have come into Stuart's care. The killings — 149 in 2016, 154 in 2017, most of them shootings — have rocked neighborhoods across the city and around the funeral home.

There was Phyllis Anderson, 65, shot in her east-side apartment, her granddaughter arrested. There were Daquan Proctor, 23, and Jonte Williams, 18, both killed in a double-shooting after an argument with a third man. There was Jason McNeal, 25, who police found shot in a parked car on the far east side, and Matthew McGee, 13, who died outside a Long John Silver's while 10 other kids watched.

All this, in just 30 days last fall.

Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett declared the city to be in the midst of a public safety crisis at the end of 2015, but nothing has stopped the carnage. In 2017, one person died in the city in a homicide, on average, about every two and a half days.

Community leaders and residents have struggled to pinpoint the causes. Ralph Lemmon, a local police chaplain for two decades, sees arguments settled with guns where fistfights would have once done the job. James Dixon, a funeral home owner on the west side, sees Old Testament sin — envy, greed, wrath — combined with modern weaponry. Any given shooter a Cain, any victim an Abel.

"Nothing has changed," Dixon says.

Amid the turmoil, Stuart Mortuary stands as a rock. Like the church, a funeral home provides constancy, a place to confront death in the strength of numbers, to

mourn and celebrate life, to accept inevitability and to reject the bleakness of the void.

Graham's demeanor suits the job. He has the gentle, knowing smile of a Sunday-school teacher. In the stillness of the mortuary, he seems to always speak at the exact right volume.

Though he's a young man, just 27, he has a well-honed intuition when it comes to helping people grieve and mourn. He knows when to laugh, when to lower his voice, when to offer prayer. And sometimes, he says, he sees death in advance.

Often he looked down at a victim, laid out in a casket, wounds concealed by makeup or strategically arranged clothing, and had the same thought.

That could be me.

Weeks before his grandmother died, he saw her slip away in a dream, then predicted, almost to the minute, the time she'd die. He had a troubled friend on his mind all one day, then heard of his death the next. He ran into another friend on the street and saw a darkness over him. Six hours later and seven blocks down, the man died. He took the premonitions as signs from God.

"I wouldn't call it a sixth sense," Graham's mother, Debra, says. "I would call it an anointing."

From childhood on, Graham seemed destined to wind up as an undertaker. As a boy, he watched, intrigued, as funeral processions passed. He presided over funeral services for his mother's goldfish and

neighbors' cats.

He understands death as a part of life. He sees it as his chance to help people in need — the despondent, the confused, the angry.

But the killings are something else. The victims seem to get younger and younger. And he has known so many of them. More than a dozen. He's lost count.

Every time he sees a young victim, he takes stock of his fortune — that he gets to be the one outside the casket, that he's still able to use his experiences with death to help others.

"I don't want to say I had the luck of the draw," he says. "But I had this opportunity, and I took it."

* * *

When Debra Graham saw her infant son, she thought he would die.

Cory stopped breathing as doctors pulled him from the womb. They diagnosed him with a breathing disorder and told Debra he had a slim chance of survival. Then the doctors suggested a last-ditch option, a then-new treatment called extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, in which an artificial heart-lung machine would keep him alive.

But at Riley Hospital for Children at IU Health, when Debra looked down and saw the tubes coming from Cory's head and neck, she felt more despair than hope.

"Do you think he'll die?" she asked her sister.

"Let's pray on it," her sister said.

As he grew, he tagged along when his grandparents went to Stuart to make funeral arrangements for his aunts and uncles. He grew fond of the services, curious about the work of the funeral home employees, these people who

got to close the caskets.

When friends went to funerals, he offered to go with them. At the cemetery, he would walk up to the fresh grave and stare down into the earth.

His mother didn't imagine him becoming a mortician, but she noticed his grace around death, his knack for helping others grieve.

"Even though I don't believe he quite, as a child, understood it, he still had that compassion," she says. "He prayed a lot."

His maturity also showed in his friendships with older boys and young men who took him under their wings. There was Justin, seven years older, who took on Cory in pickup basketball and Donkey Kong on Super Nintendo. Later, there was Doc, nine years older, who coached Cory through his first real heartbreak. He told him the pain would only make him stronger.

As Cory grew, he saw death in many of its cloaks. It swelled in tumors in his granny's belly and head, felled an uncle with a brain aneurysm. It chased the bullets that tore into friends and acquaintances and family members.

When Cory was 12, Justin was shot and killed. Cory was too young to know the context of the murder, only that someone went to jail and that Justin had been "set up."

At Justin's funeral, a minister urged the young man's friends to point their lives in the right direction. Maybe they could meet their friend in the afterlife.

By the time Cory got to Broad Ripple High School, some of his peers were fighting, stealing or getting into drugs. Some were his friends or mentors. So much of the

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crime seemed to stem from boredom, a lack of direction.

His geography teacher, Ms. Chandler, cared about these kids. She gave them rides home. She let them sleep at her house when they needed somewhere to stay.

Then one day she showed up in one of Cory's dreams of death. When he recounted the dream to her, she tried to reassure him.

"Death means the end of something," she said. Maybe her career had reached an end. Maybe it was time to retire.

Then Ms. Chandler got sick, and he visited her in the hospital, saw her with one leg missing. Two months later, another teacher called. "She stopped breathing, but she's OK," she said. "We're waiting for you." But by the time he reached the hospital, she was gone.

In the eulogy he delivered at her funeral, Cory talked about how she helped even the unrueliest kids, how she acted like a mom to the ones who didn't get love at home. Afterward, a funeral director approached him. He'd been impressed with Cory's effort to memorialize his teacher. Maybe, the man suggested, Cory should consider his line of work.

Some family and friends found it strange when he decided to go to mortuary school.

Debra didn't believe Cory would make it through the program — could he really handle embalming those bodies? But Graham says the bodies never made his stomach turn — he was awed by the funerary process. When Debra saw him, clad in all-black cap and gown, walk across a stage in a Louisville church to get his diploma, she knew he'd made the right choice.

"There's more to him than even I know," she says.

Graham became an undertaker just as violence in Indianapolis surged. The year he graduated mortuary school, 2012, the city recorded 101 criminal homicides. Since then, the number has risen every year.

Other job opportunities and career paths have nagged at him from time to time. He's entertained a move into politics — he could see himself as mayor someday. Last fall, he was offered a job at a Chicago funeral home and weighed the idea of a change.

But he believes God put him in this time and place for a reason, so he stays.

He still lives in the 120-year-old white-and-brick house he grew up in, a place that's been in his family for more than 60 years. The number of residents has always been fluid — he lives there with his mom and grandfather and a rotating group of cousins and friends and neighbors. At least as long as he's been alive, it's been a safe place for anyone who needed it.

Most nights, after work, he returns to the house and sits in front of the television. "Walker, Texas Ranger" has been one of his favorite shows since childhood. He loves its stories of justice, especially his favorite episode, the one from season four where a homeless

man's dog helps Walker track down violent criminals. It's titled "Lucky."

In Graham's bedroom is a dresser with an attached mirror, and taped to the mirror is a collage of more than 100 obituaries, the kind handed out as pamphlets at funerals. They memorialize friends, family members, coworkers — people who, for one reason or another, were special to him. He has collected them for as long as he can remember.

Mornings before work, he rises and pulls a black K&G suit from his closet. If a family is wearing a loved one's favorite color to a funeral, he picks a tie of that color. He looks in the mirror to tie it and sees the obituaries.

He tells himself: "This is why I do what I do."

* * *

Even after he became a funeral director, death still found ways to surprise him. One rainy day in 2015, he sat in his office preparing an obituary. His phone rang. He heard an uncle's voice on the other end.

"Doc is gone," his uncle said.

"What do you mean?"

"He's not with us no more. He was killed today."

Graham sank to his knees. *This is a joke*, he thought.

He rushed to his car, drove to an intersection near the Children's Museum. Orange-brown leaves clung to the rain-soaked road. Police cruiser lights reflected in puddles.

This is a joke. How could this man, who taught him how to handle life like a man, be dead in the street?

Graham pushed through a crowd, toward a ribbon of yellow police tape.

This is real.

Pressed against the police line, Graham thought of the last time he saw Doc. They'd gone to a bachelor party. At some point in the night, Doc had said something that stuck in Graham's brain.

"Forget all the negative things and focus on the positive things you have," Doc had told him. "You woke up this morning. That's a positive thing."

By the end of 2015, Indianapolis had recorded 144 criminal homicides. Doc's death was one of them.

Doc's family made arrangements with another mortuary. Graham didn't arrange his friend's funeral, didn't hide the bullet holes to make him presentable for the casket. He let other funeral directors comfort him. For once, he let the emotions of a funeral overtake him.

Standing over Doc's casket, he looked down and told him he loved him, thanked him for his friendship. Doc wore jeans and a T-shirt, the same simple outfit he wore every day. He would've liked how he looked, Graham thought.

His mind returned again to his last conversation with Doc. "You woke up this morning..." He didn't think Doc knew his end was near, didn't think it was anything more than a coincidence. But maybe it was something Graham needed to hear.

* * *

What happens after



PHOTOS BY NOBLE GUYON | IDS
Top Cory Graham, center, talks with funeral attendees after a funeral service at Temple of Praise Assembly in Indianapolis. Graham said that directing funerals outside of Stuart can be more difficult at times, as the director has less control over the environment.

Left Tim Burnett vacuums the floor before the start of another funeral at Stuart Mortuary. The staff members at Stuart go to work immediately after a funeral is over, prepping the chapel for the next service, which often is within an hour.

Right Graham sits outside a Cracker Barrel in Indianapolis discussing his favorite sports teams after attending church on Nov. 12, 2017. The Indiana Pacers and Indianapolis Colts are Graham's favorite teams to watch. Because he works so much, Graham doesn't always get to watch the games.

Stuart Mortuary is summoned for service is always the same and always different. Mortuary employees plan for logistics: If the body is in a house, is it upstairs? How is it positioned? How big or heavy is it? Will they need extra hands or equipment?

They clean and embalm the body. They dress it, do hair and makeup. For a homicide victim, they might add a layer of clothing or button an extra shirt button to hide an injury, might search for the perfect makeup blend to help conceal a wound.

They call it restorative work. They cannot revive the dead, but they can offer something that imitates life. The hands-on work has always bothered Graham more than the rest of the job. Old women make him think of his granny. Homicide victims make him think of lost friends, like Justin and Doc.

He considers himself good at keeping his personal life out of his day-to-day work, at putting others' needs first. But these moments of collision between the present and past unsettle him.

For every funeral, the core of his job remains the same: Make sure everything runs smoothly. Give out hugs and handshakes. Get the casket from the funeral home to the church or chapel, then to its final destination. Get to the cemetery on time, or the family could incur a late fee.

It is in the services

themselves where the details vary most, as they did in two Stuart Mortuary funerals one day in November.

One casket held a young woman gunned down in her prime, the other an old woman taken by illness. For the first, hundreds of mourners, some in T-shirts bearing the victim's nickname, packed a church, leaving latecomers to stand in the back. For the second, only a few people showed up, dotting the chairs in the mortuary's small chapel, the one with a crooked painting of a ship coming into harbor, and the service ended with just 11 signatures on the guest registry. In one, a band played and preachers recited passages about walking through the valley of the shadow of death and a young artist delivered a poem so loaded with detail that even a stranger clenched his jaws against sobs. In the other, Graham himself gave the eulogy, cobbled together with whatever details he could glean, and the whole affair ended in 20 minutes.

It isn't unusual for Graham to work several funerals in a day. The job feels busier now than ever before.

* * *

Graham thinks he knows exactly what will happen to him when he dies. His soul will separate from his body and go off to some place of rest, a sort of heavenly

waiting room. Then someday that trumpet will blow and, as the Bible says, "the dead in Christ will rise first."

He goes to church at Christ Our Healer Ministries, as he has for the past 12 years. It's the kind of church where a band stretches modern gospel songs to 20 minutes, where the pastor sweats through his shirt. Dapper women in pantsuits share pews with rough-handed men in crewneck sweatshirts.

The job feels busier now than ever before.

One Sunday, he settled into a pew near the back 50 minutes into the service, just as the focus shifted from the guitar-organ-drums combo's rocking catharsis to the pastor's sermon on the inherent flaws of man: that people tend to serve themselves first, that they don't consider consequences until they're caught, that they depend on God to deliver salvation.

"It is His goodness and His grace and His mercy that have kept me here!" the pastor declared, and Graham raised his hands and clapped in praise.

"Look at your neighbor and say, 'I've been a mess!'" the pastor ordered.

"I've been a mess!" As the pastor cited scripture, Graham followed along

on an app on his phone. The pastor came to Romans 13:11: "... our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."

Graham believed he had already found his. He could have been in the ground, like so many in his city. But his faith, his family, his job — they had combined to form a path that could carry him safely through the shadow of death.

"Look at your neighbor, and say, 'I'm saved!'"

Graham turned to the person next to him and grinned: "I'm saved!"

When the rapture comes, Graham believes, those true believers will rise first. But he thinks any of those dead souls can get forgiveness up until the last minute. In his version of the afterlife, even the sinners have hope.

* * *

When Graham leaves Stuart Mortuary at the end of the day, he climbs into the front seat of his black Kia, and time stops. In the silence he talks to God. Sometimes he speaks out loud, and sometimes he hears God talk back.

Outside, sirens sound through the streets. A lifetime in the city has taught him to tune them out, to not wonder where they're going.

He might sit there for an hour or two, cherishing the only time he ever gets away from the living and the dead.



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