

Title: **Episode 2. Dying to Meet You**

Speakers: Georgie Vestey, Dead Honest & Andy Holter, Funeral Director, CPJ Field

Interview Transcription

Georgie Vestey: I want to get your feedback on something which I think you would you have a very interesting perspective on. The Grenfell fire of 2017 in London was Britain's worst fire since the Blitz. What were your thoughts when you saw that fire happening on the news; what were you thinking?

Andy Holter: The thing that immediately comes into my mind is the families; it's the families. It's those that are then left with having spoke to their family member the day before and everything was absolutely fine, "How you are doing? Yeah. Are you getting ready for this; are you getting ready for that? Yeah, great. I'll see you at the weekend", or whatever it might be, to then suddenly it stopped. Everything that was is no longer.

Georgie Vestey: I'm Georgie Vestey and this is Dead Honest, a podcast where we talk honestly about death. This week, it's the turn of Andy Holter. Andy started his career as a special constable in the police and so was no stranger to death and its traumatic aftermath.

After a few years, Andy realised he had a gift for this type of work and, rather than stepping back, he decided to step in even closer and become a funeral director. We talk about his favourite funerals, the deaths that affect him the most and why flying down the highway behind a coffin in a convoy of trucks is all in a day's work.

When was the first time you saw a dead body?

Andy Holter: Actually, it was a road traffic collision. A taxi was travelling out of Eastbourne, another car was coming down the opposite direction. The vehicle had lost control and had a head-on collision with the taxi. On arriving there, I remember opening the driver's side door and, as I looked through into the vehicle, I could see the passenger; he hadn't survived.

But the impact on me was quite interesting. It was quite surreal I guess, because what had happened was it was almost like time had stopped; time had absolutely stopped. I vaguely remember what felt like hours of slowness with my colleague in the car with me, he tapped me on the shoulder, "Andy? Andy? Andy?" and, all of a sudden, I snapped out of it. That sat with me for quite a considerable time.

Sadly, I also then had to look after the partner, who was also in the car, and then give the information that the person had passed away. But certainly, that experience probably set me up then for the future on reflection, because it gave me the ability to understand how important it is when sharing that kind of devastating, very upsetting information that nobody particularly wants to hear.

Georgie Vestey: That first incident gave you a sense that you had a bit of a calling?

Andy Holter: Yeah, I think so, certainly in my heart, and that I think is the key thing. Anybody who's in the profession of looking after others has a heart of care and a heart of wanting to look after somebody.

Georgie Vestey: So, is that how you got comfortable with death?

Andy Holter: It probably was, because after that, it was like the first one happened and then the next load followed. So, I remember the next one of looking after somebody who'd passed away was actually where someone had passed away in the vehicle. Again, because of sudden death, we attended, myself and my colleague, and the circumstances were different, because it was the first time I'd gone into a mortuary.

We had to take the person who'd passed away out of the vehicle they were in and then it was necessary for us, at that time, to do the dignified and respectful thing, looking after the deceased prior to putting them into the cool area. That was the first experience of having that.

Never being in a mortuary or a morgue; it's a very strange environment. You're particularly aware that suddenly, there were a few people that are laying in that environment, and if you've never seen that kind of environment, it's a little bit of a, "Oh", moment.

But I think that was certainly an eye-opening experience which, again, it certainly didn't deter me; "Oh, this is shocking", because actually, that's not as I saw it. It was a case of, "Oh, this is where these loved ones are being looked after". I think that mindset certainly helped me out for the future.

Georgie Vestey: You also have an additional role as a funeral director in the area that you're in. You are responsible for looking after the deaths that occur that come under the jurisdiction of the coroner, which means all sudden and unexpected deaths; it could be suicides, fatal accidents, presumably transport-related incidents as well. Tell me about that side of your work.

Andy Holter: Well, the police officer at the scene would ordinarily ring our number. It would come through to one of four funeral directors, of which I'm one of those four. We'd also be given details of the loved one who's passed away, the address to where they are and any circumstances that we need to be aware of; but particularly also for the purpose of me being able to support my colleagues, because of the nature of what you rightfully said about road traffic collisions and suicide.

Usually, at that point, I would say to them, "Right, when you've gone and you've done what you need to do and you've attended the mortuary, please give me a call afterwards so I can just check up on your welfare and make sure you're okay".

If the circumstance is such that actually I deem they need a little bit more support than that, then I will then physically go out with the two colleagues who will be attending the scene, looking after their wellbeing, their welfare. It also gives better support at the scene if it's required.

Georgie Vestey: When was the last time you did that?

Andy Holter: I did that earlier this year. There was a circumstance in regards to our coastline where, unfortunately, someone had taken their own life along with some others at the same time; very delicate situation which occurred, very hard. A lot of people were emotionally upset, quite rightfully.

I know the Coastguard were particularly affected, our men. It was the two colleagues who attended that on that particular occasion, it being their first experience of collecting more than one person, and it involved younger people.

Georgie Vestey: It's interesting me to me, because you are dealing in your area of England with a very high number of suicides --

Andy Holter: Yes, we are.

Georgie Vestey: -- which is tragic, and one of the things we have an issue about is talking about suicide, because we're obviously concerned that if we talk about suicide, we might then be encouraging other people to take their lives. But you are at the end where you get to see the impact that this course of action has on the families, and I'd like you talk to me about that.

Andy Holter: It creates all sorts of anxiety, anger. It's trying to fathom how; why; "Why didn't they talk; why didn't they communicate with us; why didn't you tell us how you're feeling?" We can never understand. For the families left behind, it's about again, as a funeral director, supporting them, holding their hand and trying to just help them, because ultimately, it's important for counselling after that really.

It's about the support network afterwards; it's the friends, it's the professionals. It's helping them try and understand why a decision was made that they may have never even had an inkling about.

Georgie Vestey: Are they the hardest deaths to support a family around?

Andy Holter: No.

Georgie Vestey: What are the hardest deaths to support?

Andy Holter: From my experience, in my personal opinion, and colleagues may say differently to this, but, for me, it's child death. Child death is certainly the one that I find hardest as a funeral director; that's really tough.

Georgie Vestey: What is it about it that hits you so hard?

Andy Holter: It's a new life; a new life that there's so much ahead of that new life and, as a parent of a four-and-a-half-year-old, to even think of losing my own daughter, is just really, really difficult. So, to sit there and actually help families during that time is emotionally challenging; I certainly find it very hard.

Georgie Vestey: So, when you think about the child deaths and you think about the work that you've done in the last ten years, are there any cases that have hit you particularly hard?

Andy Holter: Yeah, probably a friend of mine. You will always, as a funeral director, end up with, quite rightfully, a connection between you and the family you're looking after. It's even harder when it's someone you know really well, but it's harder when you know it's someone really well whose child it is, and for me, that is incredibly challenging.

Within the last six months, a very good friend of mine, lost their little girl. Very hard. Very, very hard. They'd basically got a little white coffin, which is normal and customary for a baby funeral, and they bought Frozen stickers.

Georgie Vestey: Frozen being the Disney film?

Andy Holter: The connection I guess that was then made was that my own daughter loves Frozen and then my best friend's daughter, who's passed away, loves Frozen, and I got asked could I put these stickers onto the coffin, because they were unable to do that. So, I then had to start doing that.

I then took a personal responsibility for looking after the little girl and dressing her and making sure she looked absolutely her best, because I was entrusted to do that from my friend. I did that for them, but needless to say, I carry that because that's one of the biggest challenges, to look after a little girl. So that, I would say, it's my toughest moment.

Georgie Vestey: When you have a day like that, when you've had to dress the child of a friend of yours, something which is so beyond the realms of what anyone could ever imagine having to ever have to do, what do you do to bring yourself back to who you are? Where do you take those feelings?

Andy Holter: I take them to prayer. I know different people do different things, but for me, I give it to God. I pray to God and say, "Look, I need to pass this to you; I need you to help me with this". That's how I deal with things.

I know others that will sit on a computer and just play games on a computer as a release of pressure and stress, people go and play golf or you know; everyone's got their own different ways.

Georgie Vestey: When you talk about your team, I'm interested to know what are you looking at when you start seeing them begin to burn out? What are the symptoms you're beginning to look for?

Andy Holter: One of the ways that we suggest looking at is about temper and behaviour, because actually, people get snappy. Ask why they're getting snappy; is it tired or is it stress or is it something that's upsetting them; is it something that needs to be talked about?

So, we encourage people very much now to communicate with each other, and we look at each other, we try and monitor and support each other. So, many a time, I'll sit in the office, and I look at my colleagues and just, "How are they doing today; are they okay?"

Then it's about trying to take some pressure off, so, "Do you need some time off; do you need some time out? Do you want me to do that little task for you while you have a little bit of a break? Do you want a cup of coffee?" So, there are lots of ways we can do it.

The interesting thing is, it's nothing new. We've been doing this for years and years and years. The problem is we've got into a lifestyle which is really busy, and we're so busy we forget. Where we're so busy, we just don't take time to sometimes just go, "Stop! Stop and calm. Let's destress and now let's start again when we're ready".

Georgie Vestey: Who gets overlooked in the grieving process?

Andy Holter: That's a very interesting question. I think probably the overlooked one will be the main mourner after the funeral has taken place. What tends to happen is the funeral will take place, for a couple of weeks after maybe everyone's still, "How are you doing? Is everything all right? Anything we can do for you?" and then everyone goes back to their way of life and the loved one is then left struggling, and so much so that we've started creating what you call You're Not Alone events.

So, what we're now doing is picking up aftercare. We're picking up and saying, "Well, actually, you might be a funeral director that will arrange your funeral, but actually we still care and, as caring people, we're going to invite you to just come along, and we'll just have tea and coffee. 'How are you doing?' Just a chat".

That chat might be difference between the person sitting at home, constantly, all the time on their own, to actually being invited to something to come and share and just have a little bit of companionship. So actually, your question I think actually may well be the main person who's lost that loved one.

Georgie Vestey: So, what can we do better to support that person?

Andy Holter: I think we need to go back to basics, and the back to basics is friendship. I think our way of life has got so busy that we just move on, so much focusing on what we need to do, we forget those that we also need to do things for, which is just basic friendship.

Georgie Vestey: Tell me, as a funeral director, what is the most satisfying part of your job?

Andy Holter: Being able to hold the hand of the loved ones and support them at a time which is very difficult for them. That's why, for us as funeral directors, it's imperative that we're there to say, "It's okay; it's okay. We're going to hold your hand; we're going to guide you through. We're going to do what you need us to do".

There is very little time I will ever say, "No", to something. I want to be able to do what is important for the loved one who's passed away, but more importantly, to the one that is sitting with me who needs that help.

Georgie Vestey: Have you ever had an experience where you've had to say no?

Andy Holter: Yes. A very difficult decision really. Sometimes, sadly, a loved one might not have been seen for some weeks, and unfortunately this person had passed away, been indoors for quite a period of time and I had to say to this family, "Unfortunately, my recommendation would be that perhaps you remember your loved one as you last remembered them".

There was quite a bit of discussion around that, because I don't think there was an understanding of, "Well, what would change? Why could we not? Everything should be fine". So, you've got to be really diplomatic, but also very sensitive to saying, "Actually, there is a period that has passed, and nature has done what it's done, and our suggestion would be that you remember your loved one as you last saw them".

Whilst we probably would never stop anybody if they really, really, really wanted to come in, we have got to be mindful of their emotions, their feelings and how they are going to feel after that visit.

Georgie Vestey: But the thinking is that, if people are really properly informed, that the value of seeing someone after they've died actually has a huge benefit to people's grief and their realisation and their acceptance going forward perhaps, so it's a really tricky one; I can understand that.

Andy Holter: It is, and one of the ways to overcome that is, "There're our suggestions. You can come in", and I certainly offer this as well and I think, actually, with the circumstance we're talking about, I'd suggested, "Well, we could do a sealed coffin. You can come in to a sealed coffin. You can come in and have some time alone. You can leave us a letter which we'll place it in", those kinds of things. You can come up with other ways.

Certainly, one of other things you can do is just leaving the hand out. "You can hold their hand". So, it's a very fine line but it's about doing what's best for the family. The family know best; they are the ones that need to tell us. We should be listening to them and being compassionate to what they want.

Georgie Vestey: I think also because families react within families, they react very differently, so what might be right for one family member is not right for another, and I imagine there are times when you're dealing with families where those tensions can become pretty volatile.

Andy Holter: So, you say about volatile situations, it's interesting that family members don't always necessarily, unfortunately, get on. I remember sitting in one particular arrangement where we were talking about the decision of what coffin selection should be made for the loved one, and one family member was, "I'm not

having that; that's not what I'm having", that's where the other one was going, "No, that's what I want".

There was this real discussion going on to the point I actually had to, and it's the first and only time I think it ever happened, I had to say, "Right, tell you what we're going to do, we're going to have a break, we're going to have a cup of coffee and we're going to get some air and then we're going to resume". I had to actually physically stop the arrangement; have some time out; calm the environment and then restart again.

Georgie Vestey: So, they've never come to blows?

Andy Holter: Not yet, thankfully!

Georgie Vestey: Clearly, your anger management skills are extremely good, and you've managed to avoid that!

Andy Holter: Yes, thankfully.

Georgie Vestey: You spend a large amount of your job, from what I imagine, as a grief counsellor in many ways?

Andy Holter: Yeah.

Georgie Vestey: So, you have a lot of experience to see how families grieve. What would you say are the things that help families in their grief?

Andy Holter: My first thing I say to them before I do anything is, "Before we do anything today, and this might sound a little strange, is I want you tell me about Miss Moggins, because I want to know about Miss Moggins, because I'm now being going to be caring for Miss Moggins up to the day of the funeral, and the care doesn't stop at the time of her passing; the care continues with me and I want to know as much as I possibly can about her".

I think, by getting the family members to tell me that, whilst it's emotional and it's really quite difficult, it's good that they can hear the positives they're coming out with, and nine times out of ten with all my families, it's positive.

Georgie Vestey: So, tell me about the negatives, because what are the one in ten that come to you with the negatives?

Andy Holter: Yeah, that's quite interesting. You usually get, "Oh, he was always so moody, always this, always that", and I always end up saying to the families in that circumstance, I say, "Okay, so there were always areas of perhaps development, but at least there are some real positives in there that you will always remember". So, it's about trying to turn that into a positive.

Georgie Vestey: But are there occasionally families who are just genuinely happy to see the person dead?

Andy Holter: I haven't had that. I know my colleague has, to which actually, we only had a discussion about that last week at which I sat there slightly gobsmacked going, "Really?" Only because I'd never experienced it, but obviously it must happen.

Georgie Vestey: What happened in his circumstance? What did he have to deal with?

Andy Holter: We had a memorial service for work where we invite all our families, once a year, to come to a memorial service at Christmas; it gives everyone a chance to come and just have moments to share. This lady he'd looked after some five years earlier, he said, "Oh, good you're here". "Well, actually", she said, "I don't really want to be here because I didn't really like him, but I'm going to come anyway".

Georgie Vestey: She was there for the booze!

Andy Holter: I think so! He was like, "Oh my word!" So, anything happens. It's a unique profession.

Georgie Vestey: What's your favourite type of funeral?

Andy Holter: My favourite type of funeral is absolutely, categorically, reflecting the full life of the person who's passed away. If that means, like a friend of mine's dad the other day, we were on a trike and there were 100 trikes and I'm on the back of it in my jeans and my t-shirt and my leather jacket, because that's what the family have asked me to be as a funeral director, sitting on the back, and we're going really fast down the road, because that's what the family want: that's my favourite funeral.

Georgie Vestey: I'm interested to know what's your least favourite funeral?

Andy Holter: My least favourite is little Miss Moggins, there's no family, there's no one left, she's on her own and it's just me and the vicar; that's sad.

Georgie Vestey: How often does that happen?

Andy Holter: More commonly than you'd think actually. Yeah, a lot more common than you think. But equally, whilst it's sad, I'm pleased to be able to say I am there, I am there for her and so is the vicar, or the person taking the service. So, she's not alone, or he's not alone; there is someone there. But that's a little sad.

Georgie Vestey: Tell me, what has this job taught you about life?

Andy Holter: Never take it for granted. You just don't know what's going to happen next, so love everyone for as long as you can love them, be happy for as long as you can be happy and help those you can help when the opportunity arises; those are my lessons out of it.

Georgie Vestey: How would you like to die?

Andy Holter: In my sleep.

Georgie Vestey: What about your funeral?

Andy Holter: My funeral, I would probably give one of those weird messages in my funeral which is, "Yes, I've passed, yes, I've gone, and I know I've gone to a better place, but for you left behind, please smile and please carry on".

Georgie Vestey: One of those spooky hologram types of things? I worry, Andy!

Andy Holter: Yeah!

Georgie Vestey: I'd like to thank Andy for being so honest about his work. I hope you can hear his compassion; it's not just some marketing gimmick, but genuinely part of his DNA. It's a credit to CPJ Field, the family company Andy works for, that they've encouraged him to create one of the first wellbeing programmes for his colleagues in this profession. You can find a link to CPJ Field on our website, deadhonest.com.

If you've enjoyed this episode, then I'd love to hear from you. Perhaps you have a suggestion for a future episode or maybe want to share your own experience. Whatever it is, I'd be happy to hear from you. You can find my contact details on deadhonest.com. So, until next time...



A transcript from EliteScribe Limited
0208 138 1026 / 0330 128 1644
enquiries@elitescribe.co.uk
www.elitescribe.co.uk
