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Work gives county coroner an appreciation of life



Joe McIntyre/staff photographer

Kevin Sharp talks about the roles of a Cortland County coroner Wednesday in a sitting room of his Cincinnatus funeral home.

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Cortland County Coroner Kevin Sharp views death as just a step in the journey of life.

Sharp, who has been a funeral director for 30 years, the past 10 at K. L. Sharp Funeral Home in Cincinnatus, is accustomed to dealing with death and says he is not afraid of it.

"I believe in life beyond this," Sharp said Tuesday as he sat in a sunny front room of his funeral home. Sharp said this belief helps him to deal with death constantly and he said both his job as funeral director and as coroner help him appreciate life more.

Sharp, who is 50 and originally from Berkshire, said that his experience as funeral director has equipped him to deal compassionately with people in his role as coroner, a position which he has held for the past six years.

Cortland has two county coroners, Whitney Meeker and Sharp, both of whom are elected to the position every four years. Sharp, who has held the post since January, 2004 is paid \$17,126 annually and Meeker, who has been coroner since January, 2007, is paid \$16,467 annually.

The coroners are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week and charged with investigating any death that occurs in the county and is not attended by either a physician or a hospice service. Deaths that occur at home or en

route to a hospital where death is officially declared, are also investigated by a coroner.

The coroners ascertain the manner of death, whether by natural causes, accident, homicide or suicide. The deceased's primary physician or the coroner's physician, Dr. Stuart Gillim, then signs off on the official medical cause of death.

If the cause of death cannot be ascertained, an autopsy is ordered, which would be conducted by the medical examiner at Lourdes Hospital in Binghamton since Cortland does not have a medical examiner. In the event of a suspected homicide, of which Sharp has only investigated one, Wendy Thibeault, the coroner works closely with detectives, state police and forensics units.

Sharp said in any given year he and Meeker will investigate about 70 to 75 deaths and about 20 percent of those are autopsied. Out of those autopsied only about 5 percent are usually determined not to have been from natural causes, Sharp said.

Sharp, who likes the investigative aspect of the position, plans to run again in two years, saying he finds it rewarding.

"I like to work with the Sheriff's Department, and the state and city police have become accustomed to me," Sharp said, adding he responds quickly to scenes because he does not want to delay the emergency responders. Coroners are a branch of the Sheriff's Department and have jurisdiction over everyone at a death scene, including police agencies.

At a death scene, Sharp will try to determine that the death was the result of natural causes, which typically involves interviewing doctors, friends and relatives about the person's behavior and health prior to their death. The coroner will also physically examine the body and inventory any medications the person may have taken, ensuring they were prescribed by their physician and have not been abused.

Sharp said in the last two years he has noticed an increase in the county suicide rate. He attributes this to the downturn in the economy, saying prior to that the coroners may have investigated about three to five suicides annually whereas now they investigate about seven to 10.

Since Sharp is both funeral director and coroner he said he is very conscious of the potential conflict of interest in the positions. If a family is not sure what funeral home to use he suggests ones in the area, never his own. But typically a deceased body where death occurs in Cincinnatus, ends up at Sharp's funeral home.

Sharp said in both his capacities as coroner and as funeral director, the most emotionally trying time is when he deals with grieving families but he focuses on the task at hand to get him through.

"I like helping people, I like serving people," Sharp said.

Sharp said he did the funeral preparations for his own grandmother, his aunt and close friends and he would do the same for his parents.

"It is hard doing it for family but it is also an honor that your family would entrust you to do that," Sharp said. Sharp said his two children, both in their mid-20s and now in the medical profession, grew accustomed to his job.

"They lost members of their family and they know that the person is always with them. They know what they see in a viewing is the shell of that person but... the true meaning of that person will always be with them," Sharp said.

Sharp, who was the first in his family to enter the funeral profession, said he did so because he wanted to work from home and never viewed death as something to avoid.

This familiarity with death made the transition to coroner an easy one and the investigative aspect of the job has always appealed to Sharp.

Sharp said people should know that the coroner is not there to be intrusive but is required by state law to investigate the scene of a death and determine it is not criminal.

As both funeral director and coroner, Sharp said the firsthand look at death has given him valuable insight into life.

"You don't know what's around the next corner. You could be at the wrong place at the wrong time so you learn to appreciate things more," Sharp said.