Oral History # 13

An Interview With
Robert A. Jones

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RENÉE TAPPE: This is Renée Tappe interviewing Robert Jones for The oH Project, Oral Histories of HIV/AIDS in Houston, Harris County, and Southeast Texas. The interview is taking place on August 3rd, 2016 in Houston, Texas. The purpose of this interview is to document Mr. Jones’ recollection concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Houston.

Hi, Bob.

BOB JONES: Good morning.

RENÉE TAPPE: How are you?

BOB JONES: Fine.

RENÉE TAPPE: Thank you for being with us today.

BOB JONES: I’m happy to be here.

RENÉE TAPPE: Good. I want to get a little bit of your background first, so could you give me a little bit of your personal history: where you were born; tell me a little bit about your family.

BOB JONES: Sure. I was born in Texarkana, Texas, and my mother and father had divorced when I was two years old. I went to schools in Texarkana at church-related schools. I’m a lifelong Episcopalian, and I went to Episcopal schools, even on through my high-school years. So I would only come back to Texarkana in the summertime when I wasn’t in school, and there in Texarkana were two local funeral homes. Both had been established for a long time. Back in the 1950s, they all operated an ambulance service.
I got a job for the summers working at this particular funeral home as an attendant for the ambulance. Ambulance service then was not like it is today where you have qualified and educated EMT’s such as you have here in Houston. In fact, even in Houston, they were generally operated up until the 1970s, until Mayor Louie Welch came into office, by local funeral homes. And then he is the one who, through his administration, got the fire department involved in the emergency ambulance service with the EMT’s and the training.

Going back to what I was talking about, I would summer in Texarkana. My dad lived in Midland, and I would sometimes summer out there. There was also a funeral home out there, here again, that operated an ambulance service, so that was basically what I did. Another part of my job was being what you call an attendant, which means that you assisted with the funerals by either driving a vehicle, things like that, doing necessary, sundry duties around the mortuary.

I moved to California when I was 20 and lived in the Los Angeles area for about two years, and also there was a large operation in Los Angeles that I worked for that had numerous chapels around the outlying areas, Los Angeles, Huntington Beach, and Redondo Beach and many, many communities like that out in Pasadena, and I would have the same job. I wasn’t licensed, and so I was an attendant, and pretty young, not really knowing what I wanted to do.

TAPPE: Was an attendant someone that assisted at the service itself, or did you help with preparation of bodies?

JONES: Basically, no. At the service itself. Because I wasn’t a licensed embalmer at that time, I wasn’t allowed to do that. You had to be licensed for that; but yes, everything you can think of that would relate to a service. Even in some cases in
a smaller community where I first started in Texarkana, mowing the yard and
doing things, and washing the cars or taking them to get them cleaned up, what
have you, and being in a suit and ready to be at the door, and many, many things
to assist the funeral directors.

I lived in Los Angeles for two years. Then I moved to San Francisco, and
I wasn’t in the business at all then. I was sort of just floundering, if you will. It
was the early 1960s. I couldn’t get myself in line to start getting my marbles
worked out, you know.

TAPPE: It was the 1960s.

JONES: Yes, and I was a child of the 1960s. In 1964 or 1965, I moved to Fort Worth. I
met and married in Fort Worth, again working at a funeral home, because that’s
the only thing I knew at the time. I had not done, really, anything else and would
do the same thing. Here again, not licensed by the State to do anything except the
attendant role and whatever was required around the mortuary to support the
management and the funeral directors.

I married in Fort Worth, and we had a child. I was married about five
years, and during that time we had a child and unfortunately lost her about two
days after birth from a congenital heart valve situation where the doctors basically
told us had she lived, she never would have seen 12. Pretty hard. It kind of
messed me up a little bit like it would anybody. I was young, and it messed my
wife up, and ultimately we were divorced and I moved back to Texarkana.

I went to work briefly, when I got back to Texarkana, for a television
station there, which was a local television station, as a cameraman, and I would
do different things.
TAPPE: Were you trained in that?

JONES: Barely, if you want to call it training. Not officially, but by word of mouth and showing me how to do it. In other words, “Lift over here.” One of my jobs was to televise the services at one of the major churches there during the Sunday services, and so I did that.

Then I decided to move to Houston. Houston was a big city, and I was trying to, I guess for the lack of a better word, find myself, although by that time I was just about 26 years old, 28 years old when I moved to Houston, actually. I came in March, it was 1968, to Houston. Again, not licensed, and I went to work for a local funeral home. It wasn’t at Geo. H. Lewis & Sons, where I am now, but it was a nice, family-owned firm on the East End in the Hobby Airport area. They again, like I said, had an ambulance service associated with their mortuary operations, and that’s what I did, plus assist on the funerals.

Then I had to decide, am I going to do this the rest of my life, or am I going to go to school and get licensed, or what am I going to do?

Well, at that point in time, I decided I wasn’t quite ready to get my license, because I wasn’t for sure I wanted to stay in the business, quite frankly. I had an opportunity come my way to go into the restaurant business, so I was able to go to work for a chain of fast food restaurants, ended up having my own restaurant franchise is what it was, actually.

TAPPE: So you bought a franchise?

JONES: Yes, in Galveston. And then in Houston I had two locations, and then later I went to work for a steakhouse. This was over a span of about four years, maybe five, because in 1973 is when I went to mortuary school. I lived in Galveston
briefly whenever I operated the business down there, and it was a fast food franchise, like I said.

One day after I got out of that particular business and had gone to work for a steakhouse chain and got involved with that and had that business to run here in Houston, which was on the north side of Houston in the Parker Road area, north and 45, a steakhouse. It was profitable. I made money. I was 32 at that time. I realized it was a great business, but I got to thinking I don’t know how anybody can last long because it’s quite a turnover in personnel. There are a lot of issues that go along with restaurant ownership, management; and probably from an employee’s standpoint, the same thing. I decided to go to mortuary school and get my license so that when I got older and I wasn’t able to function in that restaurant business, that I’d have something to kind of fall back on.

In 1973, I enrolled in the Commonwealth College of Sciences, which was here in Houston. It’s now called the Commonwealth Institute of Funeral Service. At that time, it was downtown in the Montrose area on Dennis Street.

I pursued that and then served my internship and worked for Settegast-Kopf Funeral Home, which was on Kirby Drive at that time, and was able to live there, and at the same time I was still not letting go of that restaurant business. There was a Burger King right down the street on Kirby Drive after you cross under 59, on the left, and I was night manager there. So here I was in school, night manager at Burger King, and an attendant and a student living and working out of Settegast-Kopf Funeral Home.

Well, it didn’t take long before I decided I had to let one of those things go. Obviously, I had to choose resigning my position as night manager of Burger
King, and so I just then concentrated on my schooling, graduated in the spring of 1974, and came to work for Geo. H. Lewis & Sons as an intern. We call it provisional licensees today. Back then it was called an apprentice, which you had to serve a two-year apprenticeship. After you had taken your State Board examination in Austin and passed, you had to serve two years. I hold a funeral director’s license as well as an embalmer’s license.

When I joined Geo. H. Lewis & Sons, as I mentioned, I was an attendant, an apprentice, if you will, so I would begin to be more involved in the things that the State required to do in order to get that license, and I’ve been here ever since. The Lewis family was very much involved back then, and we learned what the high standards of professionalism are and things like that.

TAPPE: It’s certainly a very well-recognized business here.

JONES: They’re a reputable firm. They’ve got probably one of the finest reputations in the city. They were founded in 1936. It’s actually a service business. Anybody can sell any kind of a tangible product, but what we sell, and I would assume what most funeral directors sell, is service. The clients are the ones who determine whether they get it or not for perceived value in what they paid.

TAPPE: You’ve spent 40 years in this funeral industry. Generally when people stay that
long in a position or a field, they find something rewarding about it or there’s a
draw of some sort. Is that the case for you?

JONES: That is the case. I never could figure out what in the first place even drew me to
it. It’s not anything, contrary to what the general public thinks, that you make a
lot of money out of. If you’re an owner, there are opportunities there like that, but
a lot of people — it’s just like police. I have always felt law enforcement and
probably firefighters too and other related services like that, people that usually
go into that and stay and make a career out of it often are not there because of the
money. Obviously, you want it to be as much as you can get because you most of
the time have family to support and other things, but you have to be dedicated to
what you’re doing. There are not too many people I know in law enforcement or
in the firefighters or any other, like I said, related businesses, education, education
in particular.

Now, there’s a classic example of what I think because I have members of
my family who are educators and in that industry, and you certainly have to be
dedicated because we all know that they’re underpaid. They can’t be in it for the
money. They have to be in it for what they believe in and that dedication to the
profession. I’m a quick defender of teachers because of what they have to put up
with and the thankless jobs. And when you hear about situations where these
teachers are so dedicated, they go out of their own money and purchase pencils
and school supplies, that’s absolutely unbelievable. I think it speaks for itself.

TAPPE: It happens every day for the teachers.

JONES: I am dedicated, and the thing that you have to have in this business more than
anything is empathy. That’s something I suppose we’re born with. I don’t think
you cultivate it and just grow it. Either you have it or you don’t. When a family comes to us, they’ve had a death and they’re asking for your services, you just have to look at them and think to yourself, “What would I be thinking if I were sitting across the table from me? How am I going to handle this? Am I going to handle this in such a way through a business perspective and at the same time have the empathy to walk and guide them through this whole process to its fruition?”

And if you have that, because they want certain things — in today’s world especially, things have changed so much regarding this industry, that it’s not like it was when our grandads and our mothers and fathers were in it. It was pretty traditional, and in fact most of it still is traditional. But today the term “celebration of life” is used more appropriately, and that’s basically what you’re doing, and so a responsible funeral director has got to be able to see that this is not what Grandfather did or Mom did or Dad did. It’s what I want to help me through this process, and some of it may be what some traditionalists might call off the wall, but it’s not off the wall if you’re serving and completing the service and giving this family or this representative that you’re dealing with of the deceased what they want, or more in particular and more importantly, what the deceased might have wanted where he or she had ever had the opportunity to discuss it with that person. An executor is an example of that, or a family member, or things like that.

TAPPE: You take, obviously, your clues or your cues from the family members that you’re dealing with.

JONES: Exactly. The first thing that we do when someone comes to us and we have the
first meeting with them is we sit down and just try to get a feel of what they want to do. Do they want cremation? Do they want traditional burial? Do they want entombment? Are the remains going to be remaining here in Houston, or are they going to be sent somewhere else for final disposition, or whatever. You’ve just got to get a feel, and then you start reaching out and seeking, and you just pull out of them what they expect you to do and is this possible.

One thing that I’ve learned in my life — and I think this goes for any service industry; I don’t care if you’re selling clothes or what you’re doing — is the fact that we don’t ever say, quote, we don’t do that. I have taught my funeral directors over the years, when a family asks for something we don’t ever say no.

If you feel and you know when they’ve asked you for something specific that you feel that it’s not going to work at our location or you may know already it’s impossible to accomplish, you simply say, “Let me see what we can do.” Nobody wants to hear the word “no.”

TAPPE: Especially at a time like that.

JONES: It goes back to the empathy situation. You’ve got to realize why are they asking for this. Maybe it’s not impossible. We have the obligation to explore every avenue if they ask for something.

I remember the first time that I was asked to have a catering. Now catering is part of our standard service, as is most mortuaries’ today. We’re almost event planners. This family flat told me, they said — I remember they had lost a son tragically. They were a prominent, well-known Houston family, and he had been killed in an automobile accident, and they came to us, and they said, “Before we even start the conversation with you” — and by the way, we had
served this family before, so they were not new clients to us — “we have a question.”

Well, the mother and father were divorced. They were not at all amicably getting along. There was a strong tension there, not only because of the tragic loss of their son, but because of their situation with the divorce. And the question to us was — and I was not the funeral director who met with the family; it was one of our other directors and it was new to him — they said, “Before we discuss anything, we’re not sure we’re going to use your facilities or your services, but we have a question.”

The director said, “Well, what is it?”

They said, “Well, we want to have our son’s service in your chapel, and we’re going to bury him in a local cemetery here, but when the service is over, we want to meet in the foyer of the chapel. We want a catered reception with premium liquor and hors d’oeuvres.”

The director, us having never done this before, he said, “Well, can you just excuse me for a moment?”

He had the wherewithal to come downstairs and get me, and I came up and met them, and they told me what they wanted.

I said, “Well, let me just ask you: Did you have a caterer, or do you want ours?” There was no question.

Now, to me, with all that grief that they were going through, to have somebody turn them down — to me, that request was not unreasonable. Now, we had never done it before, but because you had never done it before doesn’t mean you can’t.
One more thing too. He had a beautiful Golden Retriever dog that was very near and dear to him. We had never had animals in the funeral home. You know, you can’t put policies in place that are going to be made in stone. You have to be flexible. They said, “One last thing, Mr. Jones. We want to bring his dog in, and we promise you he’ll not soil the carpets or anything. He’s a well-behaved animal, and we want him lying up there by the casket.”

I said, “Bring him.”

Well, I can tell you, emotionally the staff was in tears. We’re supposedly ministering to these people, and we were having a difficult time maintaining our emotional strength to get them through the situation. It was that moving. To me, that’s a celebration of life focused on what the son was about, what Mom and Dad were about, and what his friends were about, not about what we do or don’t do.

TAPPE: That’s wonderful that you accommodated them.

JONES: I can’t imagine somebody saying, “Well, I’m so sorry.” Well, I can tell you, had we said that, they would have gotten up and left. They would have found someone who would have done it. We’re always been kind of trendsetters here in town anyway.

TAPPE: If you’re throwing a first-class party in your lobby, I would say so.

JONES: They specified premium liquor. Well, the caterer has a liquor license. Now, the ironic thing about it is, in New York State you’re not allowed to bring any food or drink into the funeral homes, period. They just recently modified that, just very recently modified it. And I got to thinking, that must be because of the wild Irish wakes they used to have. I don’t know what that was about. I never researched it, but I know that you couldn’t do it. Pennsylvania, I think, was another state that
was like that. I’m not sure about that, but I think they were, and they’ve modified theirs too. You-all know about Pennsylvania.

TAPPE: That’s right. They’re just now getting around to selling wine in grocery stores in Pennsylvania.

JONES: That’s worse than rural Texas.

TAPPE: I know it. It is bad.

Well, I can see where the empathy is terribly important in your business, to maintain the business as well as just it’s the appropriate thing to do for the clients.

JONES: I will tell you something else too. What we were just speaking about as far as affecting the staff, we’re schooled and we learned in the cycle of life that we’re born and we’re going to die. We’re not accustomed to burying our children. That one being a sad, terrible situation, untimely death of that young man, also in that same light is when we have — and the good news is this rarely happens — an infant or a young child, and I can tell you there’s not anybody on any staff, I don’t think, of any mortuary, that’s not affected tremendously by that. It’s just the hardest thing. Having lost a child, it doesn’t affect me anymore and I got used to it, but as I’ve gotten older — they say when you get older, you get more emotional. I guess that’s probably true, because I find myself tearing up about everything anymore just about. But if you have a young child or a baby, there is absolutely nothing worse.

And the staff, we have at our disposal counselors for us sometimes that we have to use to get us through this because we realize that that’s life. It’s a most unpleasant part of life, but nevertheless it’s life. But we have to be strong enough
to get the family through it, at least follow their dictates and their wishes to honor this life, as sad as it is. But if you don’t think we don’t go in the back office and cry, it happens. The good news is, it happens very rarely we have that situation. That’s just an untimely situation like that.

TAPPE: Right. Thank goodness it’s not commonplace.

Bob, let’s go back to the 1980s. You were already employed in the funeral industry when the HIV/AIDS crisis hit back in the 1980s, in the early 1980s.

JONES: Yes, I was. I sure was.

TAPPE: For the people that passed away from HIV/AIDS, especially early on before there was really any concrete knowledge about what this virus was, or was it even a virus, what it was, how was it spread, that sort of thing, in your industry did the employees handle those bodies any differently than they would have someone that perhaps died in a car accident?

JONES: They did. You have certain diseases — spinal meningitis is one of them. Some things are very contagious. With HIV, it wasn’t — and I don’t remember this much about some segments of this, but I know that eventually — it wasn’t too terribly long to where it had been determined that direct contact with maybe an open wound with the embalmer perhaps or the caregiver, but the caregivers and the embalmers and those of us in the industry who would be handling the remains were taught early on through education through our associations and the National Institutes of Health in Washington and different entities how to handle situations like that. There were a lot of people who were very paranoid and very scared because it was so new. We all know about tuberculosis. It’s an airborne type,
you know. But nobody knew about HIV or AIDS, so they were stumbling around really trying to be very careful and probably overcareful. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with being overcareful when you don’t know what’s going on. The hospitals were the first to know how to handle those patients that had passed away from this disease, and we would pretty well follow the dictates of what they did.

Now in our industry there’s what’s called universal precautions. That came about a little bit later, not soon. But most embalmers knew, and those who handled the remains knew that they had to wear protective gloves and masks and things like that, which they didn’t normally do in every situation back before this disease came on the forefront.

However, today it doesn’t make any difference what you have died from. It could be a heart attack or getting hit by a car or whatever the death is. We use what’s called universal precautions; that is, mask, gown, gloves, and anything necessary to protect the individual doing the preparation work and handling of the remains.

TAPPE: Do you think that stemmed from the HIV?

JONES: It very well could have. Yes, I would have to say — I can’t say this unequivocally, but I would think so. It had to have. I later found out there were diseases much more contagious than HIV was. Like I said, meningitis and things like that, which you always want to wear a mask and things like in preparation. The good news is, today very few people are dying of HIV anymore. With the medicine that has come forth, those who are HIV-infected can live a long, long life and oftentimes will pass from something else besides that or anything related
TAPPE: Just old age.

During the early years, some of the funeral homes around the country were either refusing services or charging extra fees and doing some things that were not really appropriate. Did you ever witness any behaviors like that in the industry or know of?

JONES: I had heard of it. I had heard of it, but we never experienced it here at our firm. This particular firm, along with Settegast-Kopf Funeral Home, which was on Kirby Drive, had always been a welcoming funeral home, and we know what the term “welcoming” means. Even before HIV was even heard of back in the day, people in the community would always feel welcome to be served by the mortuary with no ill will toward them because of their lifestyle or whatever the case may be.

I have had a lot of experience over the years not just from friends I knew who had passed away with that disease, but just other types of deaths that I served, where the partner of the deceased was absolutely overwhelmed with grief but yet had an adversarial relationship with the next of kin of the deceased.

The good news is, in today’s world we have what’s called — and we can thank Representative Glen Maxey, who I don’t think is in the Texas Legislature anymore, for this bill that was created under the Health and Safety Code of Texas legally which is called Agent for Control of Remains. All attorneys have that form. Everyone should have that. I wouldn’t care whether you were gay or straight or bisexual or transgender. Everyone that doesn’t have a legal spouse, which today we have those now in our community, should have that, because that
will override that kind of a situation. But I witnessed back before all this, when we would have someone pass away and we’d have the services here, and that partner was often told not to even show up for the funeral, and here they were grieving as much as anything.

Well, of course, you know, this is a public building. We can’t just tell people they can’t come in the door, and if you feel like you’re going to have problems with families who have adversarial relationships with one another — I’m generally speaking, not this particular topic — you can always hire a security guard to be out here, just be present. But to sit there and say, “You can’t come in,” that’s not allowed, because it’s a public building, so we would not take part.

We’d have to tell the family who was angry at that partner or whatever the case may be, or even today, when it’s not a situation like this, it’s a regular situation that doesn’t involve somebody being gay — they may not get along with somebody; it might be an ex-wife, whatever — we just have to tell the families, “Well, we can’t as operators of this business tell that individual they can’t come in. We can’t do it. We’re not allowed to do that.”

So I said, “But we can get the security guard here and let you-all handle that between them and how that’s going to work.”

We’re just facilitators of getting the service done here. We can’t be passing judgment or telling, “You can’t come in. You can’t be a part of this. You can’t sit in the chapel,” things like that. We’re not going to do it.

TAPPE: Did you witness, in particular with AIDS clients, family issues?

JONES: Meaning?

TAPPE: Between partners and the families?
JONES: Indeed, absolutely. More than once. It was hurting, because I knew they were hurting, that partner was, and I would try to reach out and give him or her as much attention as I could, to let them know they had somebody in their camp, on their side, to be there for them. But at the same time, at that time you had to legally do what the person in charge of the service said to do, which was often a family member, because we were contracting with them, and that’s our fiduciary responsibility. But it didn’t mean that I didn’t have empathy and caring for the other individual and did what I could to be there for them and to support them.

It helped some. I know it did, because I witnessed it helping. They’d say, “Oh, thank God,” or whatever, “you’re here.” They felt like they had somebody in their camp. But I had the responsibility of making sure that I carried out the contract signer, the people who had hired us to take care and who was in charge, basically, because back then they were in charge.

Now today, if they have that Agent for Control of Remains in their hand, they can tell that family member, “Well, I’m so sorry, but I’m in charge,” and the law backs them up.

TAPPE: And that doesn’t require any kind of legal marriage or anything like that? It’s that piece of paper that does it?

JONES: That’s right. And now with today’s ruling, and I’d have to have an attorney to speak to this, because I’m not an attorney, but I will tell you this: With having the Supreme Court rule what they just recently ruled, I don’t think that paper is that necessary anymore if they are legally married. Now, if they’re not legally married, yes, you need it, I would think. But again, I’d have to defer to attorneys for that.
TAPPE: That would make sense, because it would be just like your typical husband and wife. That rules, and that would be the case here.

JONES: Sure. All spouses rule, usually. That’s right. Or husband and husband, or wife and wife, whatever.

TAPPE: I know. It’s a whole new world, isn’t it?

JONES: Yes, it is.

TAPPE: Bob, in doing some research, I noticed that there were, back in the 1980s in particular, funeral homes that would refuse services to clients. Did you ever see anything like that?

JONES: I did hear a couple of times, and one was when we had this young man who was ill with this disease, and he lived in Northeast Texas. He lived here, actually, but he was from up there, and his grandmother, who had practically raised him, who he was very close to her, he wanted to go to be up there where she was whenever he passed away, and then we would bring him down here to have the services and everything.

I told the family pretty well what to expect. I said to let me know when he passes away, and I would call the local funeral home up there to go take him into their care, just not to embalm him or anything. No, on second thought, I think I did ask him to embalm him. Then we would come for him and bring him into our care and have everything else done down here. The family said that was fine.

Maybe a month or two later, he died, and they called me.

I said, “Well, let me call the funeral home up there, and they’ll come out and do what we talked about; not to worry. You-all come tomorrow to Houston, and we’ll meet and plan.”
Well, when I called that funeral home, they apparently knew what was going on. It’s a small town, and they knew not only the family but I think they knew him, but I’m not for sure about that. And they basically told me they weren’t going to be a part of it; that they just felt like that was not anything they could do; that I need to make other arrangements.

I asked them, “Well, why?”

They said, “We just don’t want to do it.”

In all of my years in this business, I’ve never seen a funeral home, any type of funeral home in any town, react like that. I was actually shocked, and I said, “Are you sure? Am I understanding that you just don’t want to pick him up because of who he is?”

They said, “Well, that’s essentially it.”

I said, “Okay. Well, thank you,” and I had to sit there for 15 minutes and think how am I going to handle this with this family, because to add to the fact that they were already suffering grief — even though it was anticipated, they’re nevertheless suffering; he had just died — and to call them up and tell them that their long-established funeral home in that area, who had served them before over the years, for whatever reason chose not to be involved in it whatsoever and refused to come out and take into custody his remains until we could get him to Houston.

So I sat there and I had to think how am I going to handle this. Something came upon me, some karma, whatever, guiding force. I picked up the phone. I called the family. I said to that grandmother, “Listen, I’ve been thinking about something, and I want to just run this by and see if it’s okay with you.” I said, “I
don’t think I would like to have anyone else handling him other than Geo. H. Lewis & Sons.” I said, “If you can give me two hours, three at the most, I’ll have my staff come take him into our care. No one will have anything to do with his remains other than Geo. H. Lewis & Sons.”

She said, “Oh, I would love that.” She said, “That would mean so much to us.”

I thought, “Oh, good. There is a God,” as opposed to taking the other road, you know.

They were thankful and thought we really went out of our way to help them and do for them just because of who they were. And that basically is what it came down to when you dig down to the depths of that.

So that’s what we did. I put a car on the road. We had two staff members go up there in our car, went right to the house, so Geo. Lewis had custody of his remains from the minute he left this earth until we got him in the ground buried.

TAPPE: Which is the kind of service your company is known for.

JONES: It is, but more than anything, I was so shaken by the response. I was caught off guard. I had never experienced that before, and I haven’t experienced it but one other time since then. It was a comparable situation. We had to take the whole fleet of cars up to this town at this church up there and have the funeral because the other funeral home didn’t want to be involved. Same kind of scenario, different part of the state, but we took four limousines and a hearse and two flowers cars up there and six staff members. And we did not charge them anything except mileage, no extra charges, just to render that service, because they had called upon us to be in charge.
When a family calls us, it doesn’t make any difference if it’s a family like that or the most meager socioeconomic, depressed family. Whoever calls upon us, we try to give them the maximum service, because like I said in the beginning, it’s all about service. Not judging; service.

TAPPE: I suppose more of the small-town mentality, for lack of a better phrase, is part of what interfered here with these people making these decisions.

JONES: It very well could have been. You never know.

TAPPE: Fear, bigotry.

JONES: Their religious beliefs. Who knows. I don’t know. I was raised in a town larger than that, but it was also Northeast Texas; like I said, Texarkana. They had 60,000 people there. Well, this town didn’t have that many, but it almost did. I grew up in the 1950s. As a young man, I know what prejudices are. I’ve experienced it. We all have. Somebody that’s different, somebody who doesn’t think like you, whatever the case may be. That’s what the political divide is in this country today. It’s unfortunate, but that’s what it is. But I think, to quote an old saying, we have to go along to get along. We don’t have to agree with everything, but in this industry, particularly this industry, it’s not like you’re going to a department store and buying a suit of clothes, or the grocery store to buy your groceries. There’s always service there involved, but in this industry, because of the uniqueness of the fact of the death-care industry, it requires a lot of understanding and sympathy and empathy.

TAPPE: And diplomacy.

JONES: And diplomacy. More than anything, diplomacy. Also, you have to keep your mouth shut. Discretion, utter discretion. That’s one of our focuses here, is
discretion. Discerning service and discretion, because it’s like the HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act] laws of medicine. You just don’t — I’ve had people over the years say, “How did she die?”

And you may know, but you have to tell them, “I don’t really know.”

You don’t want to say, “It’s none of your business.”

Because we’re human beings, it’s natural to be curious, to ask that, but they don’t realize when they’re asking somebody who has a true knowledge and knowing, it would be like asking a doctor that. A doctor is not going to tell you that unless you’re a family member and you have authorization. We’re not going to do that.

We have a lot of things that we’ve had occur to us and happened over the years, at this location particularly, that were unique, to say the least, but they were done with utter discretion and dignity. Nothing out in left field, but I’m just talking about very private things that are private to the families. We have a very high-profile client base here. Former governors, senators, things like that, scions of industry, and all those who expect discretion and know that when they come in here, that two weeks later they’re not going to hear something down the road. It’s not going to happen, not at this firm.

TAPPE: Which is why you have the reputation you have.

JONES: Hopefully. Hopefully. We’ve got to maintain it. We’ve got the right staff here. That’s what you have to do, is get the right staff. If they don’t work out, you have to just say, “Well, I’m so sorry.”

TAPPE: Is there a lot of turnover?

JONES: There’s not. There is, but there’s not. Not like in some business, mostly
because we’re a large — and you know, younger people want to have more opportunities. If they want to go into management, they’ll get good training here and we can send them out to wherever they want to go, or some of them do stay here for a long time. There are not too many of them like me that’s been here as long as I have. I just happened to do that. It’s kind of like the gold watch.

TAPPE: Let me ask you a few more questions about the days when the HIV/AIDS deaths were unfortunately very regular or often happening. Did your company deal with very many of them? Do you recall?

JONES: At Geo. Lewis?

TAPPE: Or wherever you were at the time.

JONES: Settegast-Kopf?

TAPPE: Yes.

JONES: Between the two of us, we had quite a few. Other firms in town did also.

TAPPE: Do you recall any concerns from the workers that would be preparing the body directly about —

JONES: Sometimes you would have the younger ones anxious, but you would take them and educate them and teach them what to do and how to do it and always have a mentor with them during the whole process. They weren’t concerned because of their beliefs or their ideas about what is this disease and where did it come from and why am I having to do it? They were just more frightened about possibilities of being infected.

TAPPE: Exactly. Do you recall if their family members were also concerned for themselves? I remember many times people that worked in hospitals, even their family members were worried that this infection might go to them and just pass
all the way through.

JONES: There could have been. I didn’t witness it personally. If that was the case, they kept in to themselves, but I’m pretty sure they were pretty well versed on how to deal with that because they’ve been going through the process with them.

TAPPE: Right, and you were educating them in terms of proper care here.

Since you’ve witnessed a number of these different services, how were the friends and partners of the deceased treated by family members during the planning of the service? During the actual service itself? Did you see any difficulties?

JONES: Earlier on, I did. Sadly, it would happen where the partner may not even show up for the arrangement conference, for the initial planning of the services. We may be told, like I alluded to earlier, that that person wasn’t welcome to attend, but I can tell you it very rarely happened. A lot of it had to do with the fact of our client families here that we already served, who are very educated people. I’m not saying they’re any better than anybody else. I’m simply saying they have a different perspective on life than a lot of people maybe from other areas or other cultures. Our client base has always been pretty sophisticated clientele.

Still, nevertheless, having said that, there were two or three occasions where regardless of that, there were situations where we were instructed not to reach out to or do anything requested by that particular person, the partner, if you will, to assuage their grief in any manner.

We always just agreed. Again, it goes back to whoever has contracted us to do the services. Whoever is in charge is, indeed, in charge, and so we have an obligation, fiduciary and otherwise, to make sure that their wishes are carried out.
They’re the ones who called us. Again, I would hearken back to what I said earlier about the fact that I would try to discreetly minister, with my limited ability as a funeral director, to that party. I’ve not seen one yet where the person didn’t show up, who would take the family’s advice. I think most families — again, I hearken back to our client base, the sophistication of our clients.

TAPPE: I’m sure that makes a difference.

JONES: We’re not going to just say, “Well, he cannot be here.” I do recall a situation once where they wanted the person seated, in the chapel, somewhere in the back, but that person was only too glad to do it because at that time they were happy to be able to attend. They had two or three people with them who were supporting them, their friends, you know, mutual friends, which I was comfortable with that myself.

But you know what, in today’s age and today’s world, you don’t see that hardly anymore. People seem to be in many cases, at least what we experience here at this firm, more receptive, I guess, to the things and the situations there are. I think when people see what life is all about now and how short life is, that you can take an issue if you want to and really morph it into a real large problem or not. It all depends on where your priorities lie.

Death is hard on everybody. It’s the most unseemingly difficult thing people go through. Even though we all know it’s going to happen to all of us at one time or another, nevertheless when somebody is real close to that person, sometimes that wears away their anxieties or ideas they may have about what this was and what it was all about.

We all know how human nature is. When I was a young man in the
attendant phase before I was licensed, one of my jobs was driving a family
limousine, picking up the families. Not here at this firm, but at other areas where
I had worked. The family in the limousine would be arguing about who was
going in the will and who wasn’t. And I’ve even had families tell me, “Now, look
here, we want three limousines, but we don’t want her in this one or him in that
one,” and we just don’t get involved in it.

We just give them instructions on how we think they should handle this,
because we’re not going to get out there and say, “You can’t ride there.”

“We’re going to provide three limousines for you. That’s what you’ve
contracted for. You-all just get some member of the family or some good friend
who wants to be of help, and let them take on this responsibility and work it out. I
can tell you it will be a lot smoother than us having to do it,” because it’s going to
put us in an adversarial relationship with that person.

But people are funny. I’ve heard them talk about the will in the backseat
of the limousine. “You think she’s getting the ring?”

“I don’t think so. Jimmy was promised that ring.”

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

TAPPE: Let’s get the person buried first.

JONES: Yeah. I actually saw in Fort Worth a family go to fisticuffs out in the cemetery.
I had never seen that in my life. We had had the funeral, and there was obviously
dissention in that family, and I don’t even recall what the situation was about or
who the players were, but I just know that we got to the graveside after we left the
church or whatever it was, the chapel, for the burial services. That committal
service is only about ten minutes on anything, just about, at the graveside. And
the minute it was through, pop, this guy assaulted another family member.

I said, “Oh, Lord. I’m just going to get this minister and get out of here.”

The minister typically rides with the lead car in the procession, so I had that minister with me. I said, “We need to go while the going is good.”

TAPPE: I don’t blame you. You don’t want to be involved with anything like that.

That’s for sure.

Bob, on a more personal level, how were you affected, in terms of your personal social life, from the AIDS crisis? In particular, early on when people were getting sick and dying?

JONES: I was affected. There were a few of them, not many, that I knew fairly well, was socially active with them, who had that disease and died of it, and it was very stressful for me. Stressful in two ways; number one, I could put myself in their place and see how possibly that could be me there; secondly, because I knew them and knew the extended family and it was just like they were my own blood kin, and I just hurt along with those that were there too like I was actually burying my own.

It was difficult, but at the same time it’s not unlike a doctor. In fact, one time I was interviewed by the Houston Chronicle on a feature issue about this business, and the reporter asked me, “Do you take your work home with you?”

I told her, I said, “I don’t because it could be where I’d probably have a lot of issues, perhaps drinking too much or whatever the case may be, if I let that work on me 24 hours a day.”

But at the same time, I got to thinking well, you know, we are after all human. You don’t turn this on and off like you would a water spigot. There were
times I’d lie up there, and then usually after the services if I felt like that I had done something or the firm had done something, we had done something, the staff, to give comfort to this family and these friends in some manner that will have an impact upon them in their healing, we felt like we had gotten where we needed to be, that was a comfort to us and a comfort to me personally.

They would come up to you, and they would say, “You don’t know what this service meant to us. You don’t know how meaningful it was, how beautiful it was,” when actually all we did was facilitate it. They planned it. It was mostly their ideas. What we had the responsibility of doing is whatever they asked us to do, that we did it just right, to the letter.

You only have one time to do something like this right. It’s like a wedding, I think. We talk about this. With a wedding, you have rehearsals and you have planning for six, eight months, nine months out. More often than not, when there has been a death, within two or three days you’re having a burial, and there’s many, many, many behind-the-scenes decisions and things that have to be done and put into place to make this happen flawlessly, and you only have one time to do it right.

So you are able to be with a family on Wednesday and have a service on Saturday or perhaps before, and they’ve given you a list of their choices of what they want done, what they don’t want done, and many things like this. You have only one time to do it right, and you cannot let it fall through the cracks because you have failed at your duties. It’s that simple.

But yes, I was impacted by two or three or four or five people, actually, that I knew, that I was fairly close to as friends, that I lost, that passed in that
thing, and it grieved me. I grieved not too unlike what the other ones were doing, maybe not to that degree, because I had to separate myself from that part to being the professional and getting the facilitating of the situation carried through.

TAPPE: Did you handle their services?

JONES: Three of them, I did.

TAPPE: I see. So that was kind of a balancing act for you.

JONES: Very balancing act. I had to be the person out there who’d make things happen and carry it through and be in charge and make sure nothing — and at the same time, be hurting too at the same time. And it wasn’t easy, but I thought, “Well, that’s life. You’ve got to be strong. They’re depending upon you.”

TAPPE: Well, I’m sure their friends and family were thankful you were there to help them.

JONES: Yes, oh, many. Well, one thing about the community is, there are a lot of extended family friends like that and you have your support systems, today unlike any I’ve ever seen, and I think it’s great, because that’s just the human spirit at its finest hour.

TAPPE: As you said earlier, now we’re seeing a lot fewer AIDS-related deaths because of medications.

JONES: I can’t recall one I’ve had in a few years whose death was that. I can’t recall it.

TAPPE: Now it’s more the old-age type of thing, other maladies.

JONES: Yeah, old age or whatever. That’s right, yeah. You don’t see that on the death certificates.

TAPPE: That’s right, because that’s not the cause.

Bob, it’s my understanding that you were involved with and you may still
be involved with an organization called The Diana Foundation. Tell me a little bit about that.

JONES: The Diana Foundation. I was involved with The Diana Foundation twice. The first time I met Charles Hebert, who was a founder of The Diana Foundation, was at a restaurant on Kirby. I can’t recall the name of it. It was a bar and a restaurant.

TAPPE: Rascals.

JONES: Exactly. It was Rascals. Is that what it was? Thank you for that. I always either think of that or Harrigan’s. I think it was called Harrigan’s later or something right there before, but Rascals. Charles Hebert announced to me, and I had just met him, that I was going to be a member of the Dianas, and I didn’t know what it even was. I thought, well, is that the goddess of love? That was before there was such a thing as Princess Diana that I ever heard of, you know. This was in the 1980s. So a friend of mine who was in it said, “Bob, you need to be in it. You’d enjoy it. It’s a social situation, but it’s also a fundraiser for a good cause.” This was before HIV/AIDS.

So I investigated it, and I was privileged to join them, and met a lot of wonderful people in there. Some of them are still around today. I found that what they did is raise money and had their programs all focused on funding young college students who had no resources but had an aptitude worthy of a college education and would have passed muster to get into a college. Poor people, poor young people who would never have been able to do this were it not for somebody helping them.

TAPPE: Like a scholarship-type —
JONES: Exactly what it was. It was scholarships to the college of their choice. We would just raise all this money for their tuitions and do that.

Then along came HIV/AIDS, and we quickly, the people who led the Dianas — I was never in any of the Chairs of the Dianas; I was always just a member — but they decided that we would have to start helping people with medications, paying for their medications, which was abhorrent, as it is even still today.

Thank you, drug companies.

There was this organization — I forgot the name of it too, but anyway, what they did, they helped pay for medication for these people who were diagnosed and had to have their meds, who could have no way in hell ever afforded to do that, and the organization kept focusing — then I got out of the Dianas for a while, and like I say, I had gotten so much going on out here. I was in management by that time out here, and I didn’t have the time or energy to devote to it. But then eventually I got back in it and still enjoy it, and I still respect them.

They’re the oldest organization of its type in Texas. It’s over 50 years old. They still are around. We used to have this event in the summer called Miss Angela’s Country Dinner, and we’d do it at the polo grounds, and Colt 45s would always bartend for us out there. It was just a great group of great people who liked to have fun and at the same time have something to do besides just drink. In other words, putting money into something that’s going to help somebody else, and that’s pretty well what the Dianas are all about.

Even since I haven’t been it, we’ve had two or three members of our staff
here that were in it following me, so we’ve always been a part of it. We’re not at the present time involved with them, but they’re well respected.

And EPAH [Executive and Professional Association of Houston] is another organization. I was never involved with EPAH, but it was equally a fine organization, and the Four Seasons.

I’m just kind of at my age clubbed out and socialized out. I like to go home and get on a couch and maybe on the weekends go down to the bar and have a couple of drinks and meet some friends and go back home. I just don’t have the energy for any of this anymore, but I’ll always look back and marvel at how the community is closely knit to that.

Another organization I was involved with was the Pin Oak Charity Horse Show Association, and I was on the board of that at one time, but I didn’t give them money. All I did was just raise money for them.

TAPPE: That’s a hard job.

JONES: That’s a hard thing to do, but it was the same thing. It benefited Texas Children’s Hospital at that time. Having lost a child, it was important to me to find something to do something about that that would benefit the children’s hospital. And you haven’t experienced anything in life until you go out there and see the little baldheaded children, because it got to you. I couldn’t deal with it. I mean, I could deal with being on the horse show and raising money, but I couldn't go out there and do too much of that.

TAPPE: And do the direct work.

JONES: The older you get, the more sentimental you get and the more emotional you get. These football players go out there and these sports teams like the Rockets
and the Texans, and they do a world of good, and those kids are so glad to see them. They must be some big, tough men, which I know they are, but at the same time, they’ve got a tender heart to be able to go out there and do that.

Those are pretty well my experiences socially, and I was a member of social clubs like the Petroleum Club and The Houston Club and things like that, but that doesn’t do anything. That’s just a social club.

TAPPE: The fundraising has gone on for years, like you said, before HIV/AIDS came along, and then it shifted. I know the Dianas is — in fact, I just received something from them. Do you know if their dollars are going back to scholarships, or if it’s for —

JONES: I don’t know that. I really don’t know. I hadn’t had any contact with any of them in a while. They elect new officers every year. I’ve known some that have been in it over the years. Marion Coleman and Sandy Bubbert are the last people that I know. I go in and buy cakes and cookies and sandwiches from Sandy. I saw Marion not long ago at the MCCR [Metropolitan Community Church of the Resurrection] at a musical event out there. All we do is just hug and say, “How are you doing? Love you. Miss you,” and that kind of stuff. I don’t think that Marion is even involved in it anymore. I used to use her for our printing here.

TAPPE: Just to wrap up here, within the gay community itself, back in the 1980s, and now it may be different, but did you ever witness any discrimination within the community, when you’re looking at people that were HIV positive and people that were not, among themselves? Does that question make sense?

JONES: You mean like a family member or just friends?

TAPPE: Within the gay community itself.
JONES: Oh, you mean in other words, gays turning on gays?

TAPPE: Right.

JONES: I did not witness it. It doesn’t mean that that didn’t exist. I personally don’t recall witnessing it.

TAPPE: And you don’t see anything like that now?

JONES: Oh, no, I wouldn’t think, today. I’d find it strange if somebody were — you know, young people today, gay or straight, they have a whole different outlook on life, these Millennials, they call them, and younger, Generation X and all that before. Like I said, I was a child of the 1960s. We were different. Everything was love, free sex, rock and roll back then. Everything just evolves.

But if I saw somebody like that, I’d have to wonder, “Who are you? You’re very fortunate that you’re not having to confront this situation unless you’re very careful, and I find it hard to believe you are, 24/7.”

TAPPE: Well, it is a different world now.

The education that went around that was involved with AIDS 35 years ago, you would see it everywhere. You’d see it in the publications. You’d see it in the bars. You’d see it everywhere. We don’t see that now.

JONES: No.

TAPPE: I don’t see it anyway.

JONES: Legacy, which is another organization, Legacy Community Health is another that’s very near and dear to my heart. That’s my primary charity now because I was in at the beginning of when they started, as one of the many people that’s on the seed money to get that building started over there they’re in now. They’re in my will, and I have seen right up close what they do.
There was a lady I know who lives in the Livingston, Texas area, and I’ve know her for a long time. She’s a dear lady, just a friend of mine, but a dear lady, and she had absolutely no resources whatsoever and went through a terrible situation with a husband, and she had nothing, and she needed medical care. I didn’t know whether her living out of Harris County would qualify her or make her eligible for receiving any kind of benefit from Legacy, but I just picked up the phone and called down there and got ahold of Keith Nappier, who is Katy Caldwell’s assistant.

I said, “This woman needs help.” And I said, “Now, I’d go up and get her and bring her down here,” which I didn’t have to do; a friend did it eventually. But we got her care.

And you know, going to church is a wonderful thing, and churches are important to you, and your spiritual life is very personal. Everybody has their own unique way of helping them or reaching out to them. But to me, my spiritual life — and like I told you at the beginning, I’m a lifelong Episcopalian and I went through all kinds of issues with that.

I remember when I used to be so bitter when I went to these schools. They were prep schools, is what they were, and the newest students, which were the freshmen, had all the bad duties. Get in by 5:00 o’clock in the morning to do chapel with the priests, and then have all the various details. As you progressed on to sophomore and junior, of course it got better and better.

But I thought to myself, that’s wonderful, and I’m sure it gave me a foundation, but to me, church today, my religion, Lord of the Streets Episcopal Church locally is another organization I give to because it takes women,
particularly women, who are unable — a woman can’t go out and make a living like a man, particularly if she’s got a child to raise and she’s a single mother. I mean, it doesn’t get much worse than that. You can’t take them in there on Sundays and sing some hymns, give them a pot of beans, and say, “See you next Sunday. Take care of yourself.”

But the Lord of the Streets Episcopal Church, which is chartered through Trinity Episcopal Church on Main Street and Holman downtown, has a seven-day-a-week ministry to teach these ladies computer, help them get jobs, take care of babysitting, do everything. They don’t just take them and then leave them. To me, that’s what religion is all about.

Legacy, and I’ve seen people on the street who needed medical care. You know, people talk about — and there are some political parties who say, “Well, just don’t worry. I not going to fund anything. We’re not going to do this one or this.”

Well, what are you going to do? Let them lie on the street and die and just lie there and rot?

No, I don’t think so.

If you want to get real spiritual about it, one of the scriptures says, “What you do for the least of them, you do unto me.”

I’m a Christian, but I’m not one of these, “Oh, hello.” I live it every day. I think action speaks louder than words, and I don’t judge, because we’re only on this earth a short time. If we can do something to contribute to give back, because I have had many blessings, I have had many pitfalls. I don’t know too many people who can’t say the same thing regardless of who they are or what they are.
I just feel like, well, if I can help somebody, it will come back to me. I’m a big believer in karma. That’s pretty well my religion, really.

These organizations like Legacy, I’ve seen up close and up front, witness what they do behind the scenes and how they raise money, all the things. They’ve got these children now. They’ve got these children’s things they’re involved with. They’re just wonderful. It’s not that they’re perfect, but what is and who is? But they strive for that, anyway.

TAPPE: They’re grown so much. They were just kind of a little — I don’t want to say a little group, but really just a lot of the grassroots AIDS groups that came together, and they’ve just blossomed and grown and reached out to all different communities.

JONES: Everybody, and they don’t judge.

TAPPE: I mean, this is not an AIDS organization. It hasn’t been for years.

JONES: Oh, no. See, they had that stigma too. When it was called the Montrose Clinic, I was trying to raise money, I was resisted by some people I know. I have some pretty good connections in this town, but people would say, “Oh, Montrose Clinic, I don’t think so,” and it was quite obvious what that was all about.

And I know. I understand. I get it. I’m not going to say they were wrong for that. I’m just saying that’s just the way it was, and we all have a right to do what we want to do with our resources.

But that Legacy Community Health and the Lord of the Streets Episcopal Church are very near and dear to me.

TAPPE: Well, Bob, I’m going to let you get back to work so you can make more money so you can give it away to your charities.
JONES: I do give it away. I do try to give it away. I spend a lot too.

TAPPE: Thank you so much.

JONES: It’s been a pleasure meeting with you, and I’m excited about what the organization is doing and the fact that we’re going to archive this history of this dreaded disease, but I’m comforted in knowing that things have progressed so much and that people are more open-minded about this than ever before; that that affects everyone, either directly or indirectly, and we have to reach out and help one another.

TAPPE: You’re absolutely right.

JONES: Thank you very much.

TAPPE: Thanks, Bob.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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