



WAYNE HANSEN / Press & Sun-Bulletin

William J. Scheider closes the casket as he prepares for transport to the cemetery.

# 'God's given me a gift'

## Funeral director comforts living, tends to dead

By LIZ SADLER  
Press & Sun-Bulletin

**BINGHAMTON** — A tall, sturdy man in a black three-piece suit answers the door at the Chopyak-Scheider Funeral Home at about 8 a.m. A dog's barks echo from inside the two-story building.

### DAY IN THE LIFE

"Tootsie!" the man shouts.

"That's my only full-time employee," he says of his brown and white Brittany Spaniel.

A smile spreads over his face as he extends a hand. His name is William J. Scheider, he says, but he prefers to be called Bill.

Scheider, 49, has been the funeral director at the First Ward funeral home since he bought the business from his mother in 1981. He wanted to do things differently, he says, to remove some of the stiff ritual from funerals and give them more meaning.

So Scheider changed everything one week while his mother was on vacation, he says. As he leads fam-



Tootsie, funeral director William J. Scheider's Brittany Spaniel and "only full-time employee," lies near sample caskets in the Chopyak-Scheider Funeral Home.

ilies along every step of the funeral process 60 to 70 times a year, he tries to provide personal service and make families feel at home.

"Since there are so many funeral homes in the area, it's important I set myself apart from the rest," he says. "It's my calling. I feel this is a way of life."

Scheider lives in Johnson City with his wife and 20-year-old daughter. But he sometimes spends up to 18 hours a day at the

funeral home — meeting with families, washing cars, embalming bodies, and arranging funerals and burials.

On this particular morning, he's been at work since 7 a.m. puttering in the upstairs kitchen and preparing for an 11 a.m. funeral, he says.

Scheider passes an open casket and greets the woman inside it.



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Funeral Director William J. Scheider goes over a funeral service with the Rev. Michael Kleban, of St. Mary's Orthodox Catholic Church in Endicott.

## Funeral —

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"This is my life," he says. "I knew these people when they were living. So I talk to them now."

He has his own way of dealing with the everyday reality of death and grieving families.

"How I deal with it is, first of all, I joke," Scheider says.

He leads two visitors through a display room at the back of the building, where dozens of disassembled caskets—wooden, bronze, steel, stainless steel and Fiber Board—line the walls.

He walks past the suits and dresses for sale (because people

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ometimes come from nursing homes with no appropriate clothing, he explains) and enters the stark white room where he sometimes spends up to 15 hours embalming the deceased.

Scheider calls this his playroom. "My focus is on embalming and how I make people look," he says. "God's given me a gift. I'm able to do things like that with my hands."

Colorful liquids fill four cabinets above an empty metal gurney. Some are for plumping up features, he says. Others drain fluid from bloated bodies. One liquid is for tanning the skin. Another removes yellowness.

Scheider has embalmed hundreds of bodies in this room, including the nose of his own grandparents, father and 33-year-old best friend.

### DAY IN THE LIFE

This Tuesday feature provides glimpses into the daily lives of the people in the Southern Tier. If you know someone who would make an interesting subject, e-mail Wayne Hansen at [whansen@pressconnects.com](mailto:whansen@pressconnects.com) or call 798-1187.

"(The body) is just an object at the time you're doing it, until you're done and you spend your special time with them," he says.

Sometimes, he says, he'll shed a tear.

"I just have to be myself," he says. "We're like little teapots. If we don't vent, we blow."

Scheider says he feels as if people are standing next to him as he prepares their bodies for burial by injecting fluids through the circulatory system and applying makeup to the skin.

"Nothing looks worse than Cover Girl," he says with a grin, though he sometimes uses the drug-store concealer to cover bruises.

About 10:30 a.m., people start to file through the front door for the funeral. Scheider discusses the eulogy with the Rev. Michael Kleban inside his office.

"Bill is very supportive and

understanding of the clergy," Kleban says. "The funeral director often fulfills a quasi-pastoral role."

On many occasions, Scheider participates in the services. Today, he sings Bible verses with Kleban and tries to ignore the muffled barks from upstairs.

After he finishes the prayer, Scheider rushes back to his office, where Bob Bussom, Steve Pitkorchemny and Andy Lisik — his three part-time employees — are sitting and waiting.

"Andy, keep Tootsie company, would'ya? She's barking like crazy up there," he says, sounding a bit panicked.

With Tootsie under control, Scheider perches on a chair at the back of the parlor. It's his job to blend in during the funeral, he says, so he waits while friends and family members pay their respects.

Once the room is empty, Scheider closes the casket and helps carry it out the back door. He slides it into the back of a gray Buick Roadmaster converted into a hearse and shoos Tootsie away from the front seat.

He's off to Holy Spirit Cemetery in the Town of Chenango to finish his job.

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