[EMBALMING]

July 2025

‘Providing Families with the Opportunity for a Meaningful Farewell’

The Important Role Embalming Plays in Funeral Service

By Patti Martin Bartsche

MICHELLE JOHNSTON

Embalming has long been regarded as a cornerstone of the funeral profession – a practice that blends science, skill, and compassion, providing families with an opportunity to say their final goodbyes in a meaningful way. We recently had the chance to chat with five embalmers who offered their perspectives on everything from changes to modern embalming techniques to educating families on the value of embalming to the critical service embalmers provide, especially in the times of tragedy.

Dominick Astorino is a licensed funeral director and embalmer in Michigan and Illinois. He is also a professor at Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Chicago and Wayne State University in Detroit. In demand as a speaker, Astorino travels worldwide to give seminars on embalming and restorative art.

Damon de la Cruz Ph.D. has worked as an embalmer and funeral practitioner in Los Angeles, Portland, Oregon, and throughout Ireland. He is the director of education at the Frigid Fluid Company and a Cypress College mortuary science faculty member. He also co-authored “Turning Art Into Science: Applying Chemistry to Funeral Service.”

DAMON DE LA CRUZ

Michelle Johnston has been licensed as a funeral director and embalmer since 2013. She has attended Fountain National Academy in Springfield, Missouri, to further her knowledge in restorative art and postmortem reconstructive surgery. She is the founder and CEO of Johnston Embalming & Reconstructive Institute in Tyler, Texas.

Jennifer Lares Ph.D. is a licensed funeral director and embalmer. She has been an instructor with Northeast Texas Community College's funeral service education program since 2021, where she teaches a variety of courses. She is also the founder of Mulling Mortician, a training and consulting company that offers on-site and online custom training for funeral service professionals.

Kari Northey is a licensed funeral director, embalmer, educator, and business consultant. She launched her YouTube channel, Kari the Mortician, to help funeral directors give a better customer experience to families they serve, and to educate consumers about the different areas of the funeral business.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN MODERN EMBALMING TECHNIQUES OVER THE PAST DECADE?

Dominick: The willingness of embalmers to use different chemicals. For a long time, I think a lot of embalmers just used the same thing on every case because it was what they always did; it seems that embalmers now are more willing to try specific fluids and accessories that suit individual cases. I also think the use of restricted cervical injection has really increased.

Damon: One [illegible]

Damon: Over the past decade, one of the most significant changes in modern embalming has been the evolution of chemical formulations. Today's fluids are more targeted and case-specific, moving beyond simple preservation toward enhanced tissue response, moisture control, and environmental awareness. Advances in surfactants, lanolin-based humectants, and modifiers have given embalmers better control over dehydration, edema, firmness, and cosmetic outcomes. As someone deeply involved in developing and teaching these new chemical technologies, I've seen firsthand how thoughtful formulation, paired with data-driven application, has transformed the clinical practice of embalming into a more refined, adaptable, and science-backed process.

Michelle: Over the past decade, significant advancements in embalming techniques include the development of more environmentally friendly embalming fluids, the use of less invasive methods, and increased emphasis on restorative techniques to improve the appearance of the deceased.

Jennifer: The chemical composition of some embalming fluids within some brands has changed over time, recognizing the shifting needs of their customers. As our deceased clientele demonstrate new challenging conditions, we must be able to address them. Trusting your fluid is a crucial component. Some changes are more ancillary (new scents), while other can significantly impact your results. Additionally, the new Frigid embalming machine infuses technology into its operation in a way that has not been seen before. The digital display provides information in an explicitly measurable manner. Some embalmers are wary of the technology aspect, however. I have noticed that people are very attached to their preferred embalming machines with unwavering loyalty! (*I am not affiliated with Frigid Fluid.*) Finally, the creation of formaldehyde-free products is becoming more emergent. I foresee this trend continuing as the profession finds ways to appease those who feel embalming chemicals cause damage to the earth. Suppliers are responding to changes as needed, which is a testament to their belief in the goods and services that they provide.

KARI NORTHEY

Kari: The tools at our disposal have been one of the most significant changes. The amount of types of chemicals, more specific types of chemicals that we have for changes in the body – edema, jaundice, hexyethylphenoform – all these things that were more general fluids years ago, we now have more specific (chemicals) to treat specific problems and more instruments that we can use.

Also, more modernly, the technology for us to be able to reach out for support from other embalmers has been a significant change. It's not about the actual application of what we're doing on the body but the fact that I now know somebody who is in Texas or North Carolina or somewhere else that I can reach out to, where years ago you knew your local people for the most part, and you knew your state people – you knew a smaller base of individuals. Now, within minutes, we can have responses, input, and support from embalmers across the world, the country, and across the state, who can say, 'Hey, I saw this as well.' 'Hey, this is what we did, and here's what I recommend.' That resource, I think, is

Hey, this is what we did, and here's what I recommend." That resource, I think, is the most modern thing we have as embalmers to be able to use.

HOW CAN FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS BEST CONVEY TO FAMILIES THE VALUE OF EMBALMING?

Dominick: Embalming exists because it offers the best way possible to give the overwhelming majority of families we serve what they want: adequate time to plan a service, the ability to see their loved one in a more pleasant appearance, and the ability to transport the deceased into public spaces in a more sanitary way. The value of embalming is the embalmer because we are the ones who give the grieving what they have been asking us for.

Damon: Funeral professionals play a vital role in guiding families through the grieving process, and effectively communicating the value of embalming is an essential aspect of this support.

Embalming serves as more than a preservation technique; it provides families with the opportunity for a meaningful farewell. The ability to view a loved one at peace can be instrumental in acknowledging the reality of death, facilitating emotional expression, and beginning the healing journey. This process often brings a sense of closure that is crucial for coping with loss.

Recent research by the National Funeral Directors Association underscores the importance of such practices. Their studies reveal that families who engage in viewing and visitation services report higher levels of satisfaction and a greater sense of peace during bereavement. These findings highlight the therapeutic value that embalming can offer when integrated into personalized funeral services.

To convey this effectively, funeral professionals should approach discussions about embalming with empathy and clarity.

Providing educational materials, sharing personal experiences, and explaining the benefits in the context of the family's cultural and individual values can help families make informed decisions that honor their loved ones and support their

emotional needs.

By articulating the role of embalming in facilitating meaningful goodbyes, funeral professionals can reinforce its significance in the grieving process and assist families in finding comfort during a difficult time.

Michelle: Funeral professionals can convey the value of embalming by educating families about its purposes: preserving the body, enhancing the deceased's appearance, and enabling meaningful viewings and memorial services. Sharing testimonials, offering detailed explanations of the process, and discussing the emotional and psychological benefits can help families appreciate embalming's significance. Many funeral homes are starting to do this via social media, and it is working for them.

Jennifer: First and foremost, they need to see the value in it themselves. If funeral professionals don't authentically believe in its importance, the families will not see its worth. It's essential that the people facing the families know and understand the embalming process and its capabilities (as well as its limitations). Not all practitioners do, as some licensing is separate, and some funeral directors may not be as familiar with the beneficial changes possible with embalming. Another hindrance to the value proposition is the results within the firm. This is a point where we really need to be honest with ourselves about the quality of work being displayed. If a funeral director is meeting with a family and doesn't feel their embalmer does a good job, they are likely going to feel conflicted when it comes to describing the positive outcome embalming can produce for the family's viewing experience. Leaders carry the responsibility of ensuring the team has the proper skills, training, supplies, etc., to perform their important work. If they have open conversations with their team and a solid Q&A system in place, it could ensure that only the best possible results are being presented.

Training your team on the preferred wording to use when speaking with families would be beneficial. This could guarantee that accuracy and legal compliance are maintained. Another consideration that would aid in conveying the value of embalming would be materials created and provided by embalming product

suppliers for funeral homes to offer to their families. Chemical companies can speak with confidence backed by science and provide support in this explanation, as an extension of their customer service.

Kari: When I explain embalming to families, I emphasize that it is a temporary preservation because I do not want any grand thoughts of this being a forever preservation of their loved one. But I also talk about color correction and how we can balance out how that person looks, and can better control how the person looks and changes happen; Mother Nature always wins. I use that phrase a lot: Mother Nature is always going to win, but we can help slow down what Mother Nature is going to do, and that way, we can control purging and color change and all the different things that could come along with it. I'm saying it in a gentle way, but also trying to emphasize that there are some big changes that happen, and especially if we're going to be presenting to the public, we want to ensure how their loved one is going to look, and the best way that we can get a little more, not lifelike, but lifelike appearance for them is to do the embalming and to be able to hinder what Mother Nature is going do over time.

THE HEALTH OF OUR COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT CONTINUE TO FACTOR INTO EVERY BIG DECISION, INCLUDING END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS. HOW DO MODERN EMBALMING PRACTICES MEASURE UP?

Dominick: Formaldehyde is completely organic and ubiquitous, existing naturally in the cells of every animal on Earth.

Because of its organic nature, it readily and quickly breaks down in the soil, water, and atmosphere. Furthermore, because of the irreversible chemical reaction that takes place when formaldehyde fixates proteins, it no longer exists in the remains after embalming. Almost all arterial fluids are composed of organic substances like formaldehyde, methanol, and water. Forty years of scientific research has continuously shown that formaldehyde exposure for embalmers is substantially lower than both workplace and metabolic limits.

Damon: Modern embalming practices are more aligned than ever with public health and environmental responsibility. As someone deeply involved in embalming chemistry, I can say confidently that today's fluids are designed not

embalming chemistry, I can say confidently that today's fluids are designed not just for presentation and preservation, but for effective disinfection. Embalming neutralizes proteins and disrupts the genetic material of bacteria and viruses, rendering them noninfectious. This is especially important in protecting funeral professionals, families, and the wider community, particularly in cases involving infectious disease.

Environmentally, there's often misunderstanding about the fate of embalming chemicals. What many don't realize is that during the embalming process, these compounds undergo significant chemical change. Aldehydes, like formaldehyde and glutaraldehyde, bond with tissue proteins and are neutralized as they cross-link. This alters both their conformation and their chemical reactivity, meaning they don't persist in the environment in the same active form.

So, when families are making end-of-life decisions with community and ecological health in mind, modern embalming holds up as a process that supports both closure and safety. It's about more than aesthetics, it's about dignity, disinfection, and scientific integrity.

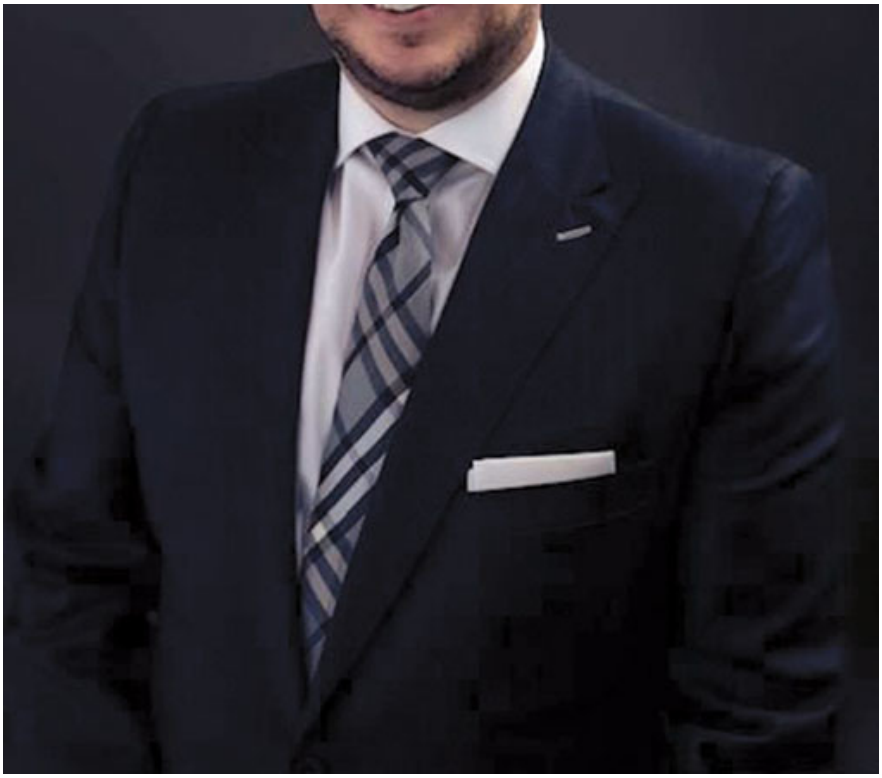
Michelle: Modern embalming practices now consider environmental health, with a growing focus on eco-friendly alternatives. Some embalmers adopt practices that minimize hazardous waste. Additionally, the conversation around natural burials and conservation cemeteries is gaining traction, reflecting a shift in end-of-life options.

Jennifer: The mechanics of modern embalming practices are neutral regarding environmental impact, with the concern being the chemicals and body fluids ininvolved. It seems to be a matter of absent education. The public learns from whatever they can find online, which is not always complimentary or accurate. Proactively providing resources that explore and break down the chemistry while offering explanations that consumers can understand are vital missing pieces.

As my nerdy friend Ben Schmidt points out, "Formaldehyde crosslinks to proteins to prevent them from breaking down, with the byproduct being water." Consider other instances in which we actively interact with materials that

contain formaldehyde, such as cosmetics, home construction materials, various cleaning products, and more (EPA, 2024). Addressing the resounding concerns with an industry-based response would be helpful. Education and receptiveness to the consumer are our responsibility. If we don't fill the information void, then others will. *(They already are …).*

Kari: One of the big decisions that families have to face at end of life when someone dies – not about the actual death itself – is when are they going to have events, when are they going to do things, and we are seeing more and more prolonged services, expected viewings with you know weeks out. Two to three weeks is not uncommon anymore for people to want to do a viewing visitation, gathering, because they want to make it as convenient for themselves because that's our society we live in – a convenient-for-me society – and so they want that as well when it comes to the viewing. We have kind of said for so long that's why we embalm … is to preserve the person. So, if we are preserving, why is that not for two to three weeks? So the expectation, I think, has been set over years that we can hold somebody because they're supposed to look good for so long; it has almost become a little bit more of a challenge for us that, 'Hey, you are going to hold this person for longer, and we are going to be able to view them at that time.' Being able to maintain that visual for a longer period of time, has become something in modern embalming that we are having to challenge ourselves with. Not just embalming with stronger fluid, but keeping the hydration level on the tissue, keeping the cosmetics as lesser as possible for that viewing so they're not just all painted up. We've got these challenges presented, and we're stepping up to the challenges to try to stand behind that fact that we want people to view even if they're throwing these timelines at us that are more extended than they ever were before.



DOMINICK ASTORINO

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING EMBALMERS TODAY

Dominick: Aside from owners of funeral homes who don't embalm and who pay their embalmers a non-livable wage it is probably the increase of complications caused by drugs, both prescribed and illegal.

Damon: One of the most significant challenges facing embalmers today stems directly from advancements in modern medicine. While these medical interventions have improved quality and length of life, they often create complex postmortem conditions. Long-term chemotherapy, antibiotic resistance, dialysis, and polypharmacy all alter tissue integrity, vascular response, and biochemical composition, factors that can make effective preservation significantly more difficult.

In response, embalming chemistry has had to evolve. Traditional arterial fluids are no longer sufficient for many modern cases. We now rely on advanced formulations that incorporate enhanced surfactants, reactive modifiers, and more adaptable preservative agents to counteract the biochemical changes introduced by medical treatments. These newer compounds allow for better

penetration, protein fixation, and moisture control in compromised tissue.

This complexity has also reshaped embalmer education and clinical expectations. Embalmers must now approach each case with a higher level of technical judgment, assessing body condition, medical history (if available), and postmortem changes to determine appropriate fluid selection, dilution ratios, and injection strategies. It requires a blend of anatomical knowledge, chemical understanding, and case-based critical thinking.

In today's practice, embalming is no longer a standardized procedure, it is a dynamic, science-driven process that demands both technical precision and adaptive decision-making.

Michelle: The biggest challenges for embalmers today include the rising popularity of cremation without viewing options and a shift in public attitudes towards traditional funerals.

Additionally, there is increased scrutiny on the chemicals used and the environmental impact of embalming, putting pressure on the profession to adapt.

Jennifer: Challenges embalmers face include a lack of continued development of their skill set. In an environment where service has become the only real differentiator, the appearance of your decedents can sway a family's choice. Whenever a firm tells a family the casket will need to be closed, a potential opportunity is lost. If seeing their loved one (or even the hand of their loved one) doesn't happen, the goodbye is thwarted. Sometimes, in our fear of failure and desire to preserve our ego, we forego what we think would be an unsuccessful attempt. We get in our own way and limit our learning when this happens. There is great value in refresher and/or advanced training and investing in your firm's embalmers. It can increase their confidence, empower them, and remind them of how important their work is. Having the proper supplies and equipment can be a challenge for some embalmers as well. It goes without saying that providing quality supplies and equipment is necessary. Though it is the room where the magic happens, the room and its inhabitants are hidden from sight and can

easily be neglected.

SOME IN THE PROFESSION SAY, "THERE ARE EXCELLENT ALTERNATIVES TO EMBALMING THAT HAVE MANY ADVANTAGES." WHAT IS YOUR PERSPECTIVE?

Dominick: Alternatives exist, and for the families that want those choices, they are great, but there is no comparable alternative that can do as good a job in giving the majority of families what they ask us for.

Damon: There's no question that families today have more choices than ever when it comes to final disposition, and that's a good thing. Alternatives to embalming, like refrigeration, green burial, direct cremation, and natural organic reduction, absolutely have their place and can serve families well, depending on their values, timeline, and needs.

That said, embalming offers distinct advantages that shouldn't be overlooked. It's the only method that allows for both thorough disinfection and preservation, while restoring a natural, peaceful appearance that gives families the chance to say goodbye in person. For many, that viewing experience is a critical part of acknowledging the death, processing the loss, and beginning to heal. The National Funeral Directors Association's own research shows that when families view their loved one, they report higher satisfaction with the overall funeral experience and a stronger sense of closure.

From a technical perspective, embalming is not outdated; it's evolving. Modern formulations address the challenges presented by advanced medical treatments, and embalmers today are more clinically trained than ever before. So, while alternatives exist, and they are important, embalming remains a comprehensive approach when restoration, public viewing, and disinfection are priorities. It's not about either/or; it's about offering the right option for each unique situation.

Michelle: While there are excellent alternatives to embalming, such as refrigeration and direct burial, the value of embalming should not be dismissed. Each family's wishes and circumstances should guide the decision, and

professionals should be ready to discuss the benefits and limitations of each option. In my opinion, there is no 'excellent alternative' to embalming that can provide the same preservation, disinfection, and comfort as a proper embalming can.

Jennifer: Embalming disinfects and proactively preserves, currently the most effective way to delay decomposition and provide the structural reinforcement needed for restoration. I am not aware of anything that can replace that. While you can disinfect externally, and refrigeration can delay decomposition, embalming increases what you can do on a grander scale. As embalmers, we can create fixation with varying levels of firmness and color. I think that the act of embalming itself can take family considerations and changing trends into account if we are open to it. We can explore options within the embalming scope if we choose to think outside of the box. As it is, there are firms that do not want to apply cosmetics to unembalmed cases, even as there are gentle, sanitary options for such things. What if instead of replacing embalming, we think of different approaches that may or may not fall under the embalming umbrella? Ultimately, what is the goal? Base your actions on that, and everyone is best served.

Kari: I think embalming is embalming. You can have other methods of temporary preservation, you know, cooling boards, topical essential oils; we've embalmed with the green fluids at the funeral home and not with the best results; there may be a little bit of preservation, but embalming is a skilled technique that is, I think, standalone. There is nothing else that is going to do that. You could freeze a body, but you're not restoring and giving back a presentation. Yes, you can preserve a body, possibly in some similar fashion in terms of how long that body is going to be hindered from decomposition, but we're not just preserving; we are creating an experience for the family. We are enabling a ceremony to take place with what we do. If we freeze a body and then set them out for viewing, it's not the same as embalming and presenting them for the viewing. So, I don't think that they can compare in a lot of the same ways; it depends on which levels of comparison you're trying to go for, but I don't think in the long run you're going to be able to compare them.

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JENNIFER LARES PH.D.

THE IMPORTANT ROLE EMBALMERS PLAY WAS ON FULL DISPLAY IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE UVALDE SCHOOL SHOOTING, WHEN THEY HELPED TO TAKE CARE OF VICTIMS SO THEIR FAMILIES' FINAL FAREWELL COULD BE AS GOOD AS IT COULD BE. HOW IMPORTANT WAS IT THAT THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA MENTIONED THE ROLE OF EMBALMERS?

Dominick: It's always nice to have positive media exposure, but it must be taken in stride because the media can go both ways. We can't love the media when they make us look good and hate them when they make us look bad. At the end of the day, yes, it's important and great to have the positive coverage, but our work is valuable with or without the media. Embalmers are the value in embalming and have a sacred duty to the families who entrust us, not to the media.

Damon: It was incredibly important that the role of embalmers was acknowledged in mainstream media following the Uvalde tragedy. In moments like that, where the emotional toll is immeasurable and trauma is profound, embalmers step in quietly to do some of the most technically demanding and emotionally weighty work in our profession. Restorative work under those conditions requires advanced anatomical knowledge, chemical application, and precision, all in service of giving families a final moment of connection.

For the public to see that, to understand that embalmers are not just behind-the-scenes technicians, but essential caregivers in the grieving process helps elevate the profession to where it belongs. Embalming isn't just a technical task; it's an act of service that helps families begin healing in the face of unthinkable loss. Recognition in the media matters because it reminds people that this work is about more than preservation; it's about dignity, restoration, and humanity.

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Michelle: Mentioning the role embalmers played in significant events like the Uvalde school shooting helped to highlight the critical service embalmers provide in times of tragedy. Media coverage can raise awareness of the challenges and emotional labor within the profession, which can foster respect for the work of funeral service professionals.

These reflections can serve as a starting point for intense discussions within the profession and with families regarding the value and future of embalming.

Jennifer: The mention of the role of embalmers was incredibly validating. Claiming the title with pride and being open about what we do would benefit our profession immensely. There is something indescribable about what we offer to families. The last acts of gentle care – the grooming, the feature building – all the things that restore the decedents to a healthier, prior place, are opportunities to show basic human kindness.

I have considered this when I have massaged an arthritic hand, shampooed the matted hair of a trauma victim, or quietly bathed my grandmother alone. When I have shaved the stubble from a tired face, filled in sunken temples, or made a mouth appear to hold teeth once more - these things were done with respect and tenderness. No one sees these acts unless something as devastating as the Uvalde incident brings it temporarily to mind. We know, though, whether we find it in the face of a shattered parent, the tears of an elderly spouse, or the complimentary words of a colleague – what we do always matters to someone.

Kari: I think in many situations, the role of the embalmer is not talked about as much or the importance of what we do to give hose final goodbyes, those moments, that last look of a loved one – or part of their loved one as we sometimes do with catastrophe, with destruction, with you know really bad traumatic situations. In the case of a mass casualty, I think it's nice when that is recognized. They talk a lot in social media and in media about first responders and them having to carry on and live through. I like to talk about the fact that every news story you see that involves someone who has died tragically or serial killer stories or any of that type of stuff, every one of those there is a funeral

director, an embalmer who cared for that body and saw that body and will never unsee that body along the way. I think that is forgotten in many of these stories and what needs to be discussed more is the importance of that role.

So, I think it's wonderful when it is recognized, and it's not that we do what we do for recognition, but I think it gives a human face and a little positive on what we do when there is so much negative behind our business. So saying that there is an actual human there seeing things, feeling things, putting in their best effort to give someone else a valuable goodbye moment is really important, rather than just 'Hey, the funeral director is trying to steal money' or 'Hey, they're trying to take advantage,' but saying, 'Hey they are there trying to do their best to give a family a goodbye moment.' I think that's super important.

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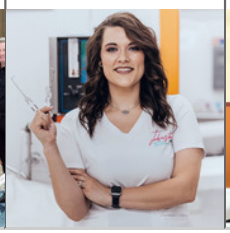

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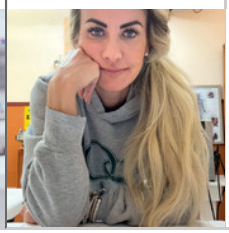

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