

PROFILE

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Supporting Children in Grieving a Loss

By Patti Martin Bartsche



MICHAELENE DOWERS

Michaelene Dowers is never *not* doing anything.

On a recent Friday afternoon, she was putting the final touches on the unpacking from the family's recent move to Chattanooga, Tennessee, preparing for a five-day retreat as part of her Ph.D. program, and writing

invoices by hand for her recently launched business.

"It's a lot," the 37-year-old laughed, "but when you're doing something that has meaning, that you're passionate about, that's what you focus on."

She's also taking a few minutes to give an update about her business, which she has named Pollen. The company supports families through child grief, offering kits with resources for comfort, guidance, and fostering resilience during difficult times.

"It's been a little crazy," she said. "It was something I never expected."

It turns out that Dowers had sent – unsolicited – a box of curated books to Michael Story, a funeral director who goes by the name Theappalachians on Instagram. Dowers, who is just one of Story's more than 196,000 followers on Instagram, decided to send off the curated four-book box.

Dowers was unaware that Story had even done an Instagram unboxing until her inbox began filling up with families wanting their own curated boxes. The requests quickly reached 70 ... and still climbing.

As part of the unboxing, Story read a note Dowers had included: "My mission at Pollen is to transform how we approach the discussions about death and loss with young minds. I provide tools and support that help caregivers and educators create meaningful conversations with children, fostering a sense of security and understanding during challenging times."

Story then went on to show the four books: "In Loving Memory: A Child's Journey to Understanding a Funeral and Starting the Grieving Process," "A Kid's Book About Alzheimer's," "A Kid's Book About Death," and "The Healing Book."

"This is amazing," Story told his readers. "... if you or a loved one has a child that is experiencing grief, this is a wonderful thing."

The response was beyond anything Dowers could have expected.

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At the same time, it reaffirmed that the funeral profession is where she belongs.

Before you can understand why Pollen is so important to her, you need to know a bit more about Michaelene Dowers.

She has nearly a decade of experience as a funeral director in Washington, Minnesota, Wisconsin, California, Indiana, Oregon, and Idaho. She has an associate's degree in mortuary science from Cypress College, a bachelor's in religious studies from Grand Canyon University, a master's in emergency/crisis/disaster management from American Military University, a master's in thanatology from Marian University, and is currently in a Ph.D. program in mind-body medicine focusing on end-of-life care and trauma at Saybrook University.

She also works as an adjunct professor at multiple mortuary colleges at both the associate and bachelor's degree levels and as a visiting lecturer in funeral service at other colleges nationwide.

Besides Pollen, she is also the founder of Quietus Bee, a consulting firm which, as she describes, "sets out to address the most current issues and challenges in the death-care industry, many of which are not examined through standard educational channels."

She's also married and the mother of 5-year-old Chloe.

"I never would have dreamed this would be my journey," she said, "but looking back, it's exactly where I belong."

THE PATH TO FUNERAL SERVICE

"Purely by accident," Dowers explains when asked how she found her way into the funeral profession.

As a high school senior in California, Dowers was required to do a senior project. "Someone at the school said, 'Well, with your glowing attitude, why don't you just go into a funeral home? It seems like you'll be great there,'" she recalled. "They were taking a jab at me, so I said, 'You know what? Maybe I will.'

Dowers worked at the funeral home throughout her senior year, finding that she liked what she was doing and was also good at it. Still, she wasn't sure funeral service was her career goal. It was only after attending community college in northern Los Angeles County and receiving her associate's degree that Dowers' thoughts again turned to funeral service.

"I just didn't know what to do; I didn't have a clear career path," she said. "Then someone suggested that since I did my senior project at a funeral home and loved it, why didn't I consider continuing to do funeral service."

She eventually found her way to Cypress College, graduating in 2014 with an associate's degree in mortuary science.

"I learned the ins and outs of everything in California, where I'm originally from, and then my husband and I moved all around the country for the last 10 years," Dowers said. "I learned about death care in urban, rural, and super rural settings, like towns of 50 people. There have been socio-economic statuses of various types, including the ultra-rich and those who don't have anything. I've had experiences with different cultures, different religions, all sorts of different family dynamics."

As she and her husband crisscrossed the country, Dowers would combine working full-time as a funeral professional with attending school, picking up a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees along the way.

Her career path had a series of ups and downs, but Dowers refused to give up and quit, believing that the right opportunities were within her reach.

OPPORTUNITY AWAITS

That first opportunity came when she was approached to become an adjunct professor at a mortuary school in Texas, which would later lead to online adjunct professorships at other mortuary schools.

Education would become a sweet spot for Dowers, who found satisfaction in teaching. "I felt I could do so much more, have more of an impact," she said. "And after teaching remotely, I realized I just didn't want to return to a funeral home."

By now, it was 2023. Dowers had completed her master's in thanatology and, with the support of her husband, founded Quietus Bee as a way to offer support to the death care community through online courses and one-on-one consulting.

"I wanted to be able to train funeral directors, doulas, and other death-care industry professionals in effectively handling a range of stressful psychological situations, enabling them to provide a highly differentiated customer experience," Dowers explained.

If teaching and launching a new business were not enough, Dowers decided the time was right to continue her educational journey.

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A selection of age-appropriate books selected by Michaelene Dowers for a curated Pollen box.

“After I got my master’s in thanatology, I looked at my husband, and he asked, ‘Well, what are you going to do now?’ My response was, “I guess I’ll have to go get my Ph.D.””

While her husband pointed out that no one was forcing her to continue, Dowers disagreed. “I’m doing it for me. I want to be at the top of my game.

...before she goes to bed. I'm going to let them think to be at the top of my game, someone anybody can come to with their death issue."

A CANDID CONVERSATION

As Dowers would soon learn, the opportunity to help with a death issue would come during a conversation with her daughter.

"My daughter's 5 years old, and probably about eight months ago, her dad was on a business trip out of state. We usually do bedtime with him, and we were Facetiming like we always do, and then his phone cut out; it just stopped working, and I didn't think it was a big deal," Dowers explained. "But then Chloe looks at me and says, 'I guess Dad's dead.' I looked at her and told her his phone just stopped working. She insisted that since her dad's phone died, he must be dead."

That conversation led Dowers to talk with her daughter, explaining to her that a phone that stops working is not the same as a person, an animal, or a plant dying.

"I wanted her to understand that phones are not alive, computers are not alive; animals, people, and plants, those are living beings, and when they die, they cease to exist," Dowers said. "Remember, she's 5, and I can't tell her too much, or she'll go off on another tangent. Her response was, 'Oh, OK,' and then she rolled over and went to bed."

A couple weeks later, Chloe was at her grandmother's house and asked where Milo, her grandmother's cat, was. It was explained to the little girl that Milo was old, and he had to be taken to the doctor so he could go to sleep and die without any pain.

Chloe responded, "Why didn't you just change his batteries?" Dowers said, referencing the young girl's conversation regarding a remote and changing the batteries since it "died."

It was in those moments that Dowers realized that when it comes to death

and grief, children are too often left out of the conversation in the mistaken misbelief that children need to be “protected” or are unable to “comprehend the concept of death.”

To Dowers, nothing could be further from the truth.

“Children are not dumb. They see what’s happening around them; they’re picking up on what we say,” she said. “It’s my firm belief that talking to a child about death doesn’t need to happen when somebody dies... it needs to happen way before. So, when grandma gets sick with Alzheimer’s, you need to have that talk about it. If someone goes on life support, there needs to be a conversation. If a pet is old, there needs to be a discussion with a child about what will come next.”

Dowers understood the profound and long-lasting impact of not talking about death.

“When I was working at one funeral home, one of my client families told me in a phone conversation that they couldn’t go into a funeral home because somebody in their family died 40 years ago and they had a bad experience,” Dowers said. “It was at that moment that I realized that there were adults who were severely damaged by things that happened years earlier, and nobody thought it was important to explain things. The death of grandma was just a part of life, and they (the kids) will figure it out.”

Dowers is quick to add that parents who are dealing with their dead mom or dad aren’t really thinking about how the death is impacting their children. “They’re not thinking they need to go to a bookstore to find a book for their kids about their dad dying or their grandma going into hospice.”





Each Pollen curated box includes a personalized note from founder Michaelene Dowers.

MEETING THEIR NEEDS

Rather than just talking about the lack of conversations surrounding children, dying, and death, Dowers saw an opportunity to create something meaningful: to provide appropriate tools for dealing with grief, which is essential to a child's future development and emotional well-being.

In launching Pollen earlier this year, Dowers offered curated collections of childhood bereavement literature that is developmentally appropriate and specific to the situation at hand. The literature is designed to provide comfort, help children find ways to express their feelings, encourage the sharing of stories and memories, and help children develop an understanding of death and, as appropriate, the concept of an afterlife or of the loved one living on through family memories and rituals.

How does Pollen work? Family members or caregivers log on to [Pollen.care](https://pollen.care) and are prompted to answer a series of questions that help Dowers curate a box of books appropriate for the child based on their age and circumstance; each of which has been reviewed by Dowers.

Although she believed she was on to something with Pollen, it quickly

Although she believed she was on to something with Pollen, it quickly became apparent that its offerings were not just something families wanted but something they needed.

“Those responses coming in so quickly after the unboxing affirmed that this was something families had been looking for ... but just didn’t know where to look,” Dowers said. “People are sending me information about their deceased loved ones and their children. So far, I’ve had everything from ‘grandma’s dying of Alzheimer’s’ to ‘my ex-husband got in a car accident and accidentally killed my son while he was drunk’ to ‘dad came into the house from mowing the lawn and he died.’”

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“I’m being entrusted with helping them care for their children in the way that they feel that they are not equipped to care for their children,” Dowers added. “They’re not equipped for this, nobody is equipped for this, nobody should be equipped for this. These are just little bits of things that I can hopefully help with, and that they’re willing to entrust a stranger with deeply personal information in some instances is something not to be taken lightly.”

While having the curated books Pollen provides at-need for 4- to 16-year-olds is a positive step, Dowers would like to see families and caregivers also think about future needs.

“I think Chloe’s experience (with death and dying) is going to be different,” she said. “When I see something coming, whether it be the death of my ...”

mom or dad, who, right now, are in good health but, at some point, they will die, Chloe will be prepared because I'm using these books for educational purposes beforehand."

From her vantage point of being a funeral director, thanatologist, and mother, Dowers says it's important to (age appropriately) normalize death because it is a normal process. "The words we use in our home have changed. Animals and physical living beings can die; things that do not live (like remotes or phones) do not die."

It's a message that Chloe is delivering in a way that only a 5-year-old could. "She says things very matter-of-factly – 'Remotes don't die, that's a lie. Only living things die.' I love that she is comfortable with what she is saying."

With the death of a pet is likely the first loss most children will experience, Dowers said it's important not to shy away from what might be difficult and uncomfortable conversations, conversations that should be had in advance of the death.

In Dowers' case, that has meant talking about the family's 15-year-old cat who has kidney disease. "Right now, she's on medication and goes to the vet every month," Dowers said. "Will she be here in five years? I don't think so."

Dowers has had – and will continue having – conversations with her daughter about the cat. "Right now, she knows how to take care of the cat. She can feed the cat and knows how to properly pet the cat so she doesn't hurt the cat. She knows the spots the cat doesn't like to have touched because she has arthritis," she said. "She also tells other children not to touch her cat in a certain way because she's old. She also explains that the cat is on medication and goes to the doctor's every month because she's old and the doctor keeps her healthy."

The conversations with Chloe are short, and Dowers makes sure her words are clear. "When the time comes, and the cat does die, Chloe may not have a perfect understanding, but she will have an understanding of why we're

upset and emotional. We'll have read books to help her understand that when the cat dies, she will not be coming back."

While families, churches and veterinary clinics have seen the value of Pollen, the funeral profession has been a bit slower with their enthusiasm. Part of the reason, Dowers believes, is during the arrangement conference, the focus is on the deceased, not the children. Sometimes, they'll ask about children and offer parents a list of reading material, but that's where it ends.

"We need to do more," Dowers said. "In not doing more, we're only hurting our children."

As Pollen grows, Dowers is also looking to create other curated boxes for adults.

"I want to have a small brand for moms who have a pregnancy where they're going to lose the baby or go into the hospital to have a baby, and the baby doesn't come home with her, and she doesn't know what to do; nobody prepares you for that," Dowers said. "There are many books out there, but they need to get into the hands of the women who need them. That's what I want Pollen to be ... a place to get what adults and children need."

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