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ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

► Hentges is president of The Tribute Companies Inc., Hartland, Wisconsin. She previously headed the company's cemetery division.

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► She is a vice president and former secretary and board member of the ICCFA and a former president of the Wisconsin Cemetery Association.

► The Tribute Companies consists of Tribute Cemetery Systems, which owns cemeteries in Wausau, Green Bay, Milwaukee and Hartland, Wisconsin; Tribute Precast Systems; and Tribute Design Systems.

More about this topic



► **ICCFA University College of International Studies**, July 17-22, University of Memphis Fogelman Executive Center, will discuss how to serve a variety of ethnic, religious and national groups, including Roman Catholics and people from Latin American countries. **Andrés Aguilar will be speaking** about "Capturing the Hispanic Market."

► **Christine Hentges, CCE**, will give the following presentations at ICCFAU:

- "Employee reviews, evaluations, incentives and effective morale-boosting programs and events" (College of Leadership, Administration & Management).
- "Community outreach" and "Developing hidden treasures on your property" (College of Land Management & Grounds Operations).

► ICCFAU includes seven colleges, plus masters and CEO programs. Additional information about the colleges and deans can be found on page 51. The full university curriculum and registration information can be found at:

<http://www.iccfa.com/university>

MANAGEMENT/INTERNATIONAL

Touring a successful funeral home or cemetery operation can be educational, providing ideas and inspiration. Visiting one located in another country adds another dimension to the experience.



Visitors walk toward *El Portal de las Bellas Artes* (The Fine Arts Portal) at Los Parques cemetery in Guatemala City, Guatemala. The center attracts families both for art and entertainment and for cremation services. It includes art galleries, museum displays, a lounge, cremation niches, a room for services and a retort.

Going to Guatemala to study excellence & another culture

In late 2014, a small group of us representing cemeteries, funeral homes, insurance companies and memorial suppliers traveled to Guatemala City, Guatemala, to learn more about how our profession is practiced in a different culture and to have a great adventure.

Andrés Aguilar from Señoriales Funeral Homes and Los Parques Cemetery needed a firm nudge from Abbie Brammer Quiocho to carve out some dates to host the group, but once the trip was organized, it went off without a hitch.

Andrés, his wife Renee and their daughters Andrea and Ana were wonderfully gracious hosts who dropped everything going on in their regular lives to

welcome the group and show us a slice of their lives. Besides making spectacular arrangements for fun, learning and travel for the group, they fed us constantly, causing us to wonder if all they did was eat.

Prior to the trip, many of my friends and Wisconsin colleagues asked why I was going to Guatemala. The look of utter confusion I received when I explained the purpose of the trip was universal. Unfortunately, in our country a lack of knowledge about other cultures is common, and often we take far too much for granted.

Many of my friends simply could not understand what I could possibly expect to learn from a Guatemalan funeral and cemetery company. I explained that based



Andrés Aguilar talks about the Guatemala veterans memorial at Los Parques.

on my conversations with Andrés over the years, I knew I would be bringing back ideas I could use daily. As it turned out, that was an understatement.

A culture of superior service

Señoriales and Los Parques offer the Ritz Carlton experience for their families. The service we observed and received from the staff was second to none; no detail went unnoticed. All team members were fully engaged in their positions and did everything they could with grace, energy, enthusiasm and a passion for doing their best.

Those of us on this trip continually talked about the organizational culture we were observing and how hard it was to capture the essence of what we were experiencing. We knew it was something we all hope to inspire within our own organizations.

Trying to fully communicate the experience to my team was impossible. I tried to share details, stories, the experience, ideas and pictures of what I saw the best I could, but I couldn't quite get across what I had hoped to, and I'm not sure I ever will be able to.

It was clear that the families at Señoriales and Los Parques were receiving the funeral experience we so often talk about, whether at staff meetings or during convention workshops. And this experience seemed to be provided flawlessly because the employees felt compelled to impress everyone around them, especially the families they serve. An aura of excellence was prevalent.

One exceptional employee who took



Clockwise from top, a visitation room, a casket being carried out to where a coach will take it to the cemetery and food and beverage service available at the cemetery and the funeral home.

us under his wing was Renato Lopez, Señoriales' marketing manager, who guided us through a full tour and mock funeral, procession, cemetery interment and life celebration event.

When asked how much planning went into preparing this special presentation for us, he was humble and gracious. When we asked how much Andrés had been personally involved in the planning, Renato said Andrés had simply said, "impress me."

That comment really resonated with me,

since I catch myself getting far too involved in details that I should be leaving up to others to handle. Since the trip, every day I think about that example of delegating responsibility, and I try to impart that idea to my team, as well.

I asked some of my colleagues from the trip what their greatest takeaway was. Their responses didn't surprise me, based on what I had seen:

Michael Eddy, Matthews Bronze: "Service to families and their traditions was



The trip to Guatemala included time for hiking a volcano, roasting marshmallows on the volcano and visiting a lava shop.

always placed first. Culture is extremely important to the success of the company. It is lived from the top down. The Guatemalan culture characteristic that is visibly strong is sense of family first, job second.”

Delana Pratt, Forethought: “The company culture is like no other I have ever experienced. Each individual who is employed within the organization feels appreciated and therefore is committed to making Señoriales the best it can be.

“They are each proud to be a part of the business and feel a personal sense of ownership, pride and great accomplishment. The funeral experience is very much a community celebratory event that I found to be quite moving. Señoriales leaves nothing undone; the attention to detail is unmatched by any other facility I have seen.

“The most admirable characteristics of the Guatemalan culture are the work ethic and also the family dynamic. Regardless of monetary status, the family works together to provide for one another. Should the children obtain food at school, they eat small amounts and take excess home to their family. To see this first-hand was incredibly powerful, and I will never forget the amazing love that I witnessed.”

Abbie Brammer Quiocho, Gibraltar Remembrance Services: “Having heard Andrés speak at ICCFAU, I knew he had a



Visiting with some of the children of the Asociación Bendición de Dios, where company staff members help out as a way of giving back to the community.

remarkable organization. His staff’s participation and desire to better themselves always impressed me. After visiting Señoriales, I know that the reason for their success is their leader.

“The staff fully believes in Andrés’ vision and are committed to the goals they set out to achieve. His passion and commitment to his staff enable them to better serve families in a way that is making



A familiar sight to North American visitors, a tent setup for a graveside service.

a difference to their organization and their community. Leadership and vision make a huge difference in our industry, especially when embracing change.”

Giving back to the community

Those of you who have attended the sessions lead by Andrés Aguilar at the ICCFAU College of Sales & Marketing have heard him speak about the culture of personal development at his organization.

Every year, he mentions how his staff sponsors and volunteers at an impoverished school outside of Guatemala City. Their involvement is personal and emotional, and his team walks away with a sense of renewal and motivation from every visit.

Some of the people in our group were fortunate enough to experience a day with the children of Asociación Bendición de Dios. The children welcomed us into their school and told us about the difference the school has made in their lives.

Most impressive, they thanked Andrés and his organization for their involvement and the positive impact their involvement has made in their lives. The children of Asociación Bendición de Dios are grateful for the opportunity to learn and to dream.

After visiting the school, the same group was honored with a tour of the community, including a couple of the students' homes. One was a home the staff of Señoriales built for one of the families and the other was typical housing for the area.

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As the group was leaving, we walked through their local cemetery. It provided a stark contrast to Los Parques. Due to the poverty in the area, the maintenance at this cemetery was minimal and stark. Nevertheless, it was clear that those buried in the cemetery were respected and remembered, as every grave had flowers placed on it.



Clockwise from above, carrying an urn ark in the niche room of The Fine Arts Portal; a flower cart at the cemetery; and at the new family estates section at Los Parques, with memorial park marketing manager Renato Lopez at right.

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It was humbling and rewarding to see the impact Andrés Aguilar and his organization were making on a community. His organization is involved with the school and community for no professional gain, but rather to enrich the lives of those around them.

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Cemetery staff waiting for a procession to arrive.

The cemetery was clearly for the living to remember and reflect on their loved ones. Having the privilege and opportunity to be

able to learn from the best is generally the greatest value that many people get from their ICCFA membership. This trip was a great example of that benefit, reminding all of us how generous our colleagues are and how open most of them are to sharing their passion and secrets to success.

The trip to Guatemala is just the beginning for our group; we intend to plan a learning trip annually. We discussed the value of learning from other cultures, as well as from each other, during these sessions.

None of this would have been possible without the connections we've created through our involvement with the ICCFA. □