

Easing the grief



COMPASSION

Bill Coye: "There has to be a professional barrier a little bit to function at the level that we do day after day after day. That doesn't mean we're not compassionate by any stretch of the imagination."

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A local man's company helps families clean up after a death

Bill Coye met death in the back of an ambulance as a rookie EMT, one who'd left behind life as an assistant chef to save lives at high speeds. But death didn't care that Coye was trying to keep a heart-attack victim alive. Death simply brushed right by him to leave Coye riding in a glorified hearse.

Later, as Coye's sweat cooled and his adrenaline waned, he noticed something about the dead man: The second hand on his gold-toned watch was still moving.

In that moment, Coye understood, "Time continues and life goes on."

Years later, Coye is now in his mid-40s and serves as a St. Francis trauma/surgical/ICU nurse. He's also the owner of Apex Bioclean, a local crime and trauma scene cleanup service.

So, in a sense, when second hands sweep over the 6 and 12 long after their owners stop breathing, Coye's cell phone rings and it's time to go to work.

Soon after, Coye's unmarked white van arrives on the scene just as it has for the past 2 ? years.

Then he makes his way from the front door to where the dead met their end.

Sometimes Coye and his crew arrive on scene to clean

up after a lonely, dead body that was ultimately discovered after days or weeks.

Coye's team also gets the call to handle meth lab cleanup.

Then there are the other kinds of jobs, like cleaning up industrial accidents and "pack rat" properties, where Coye once helped recover \$150,000-worth of diamonds lost among 12 tons of trash.

Heck, Apex will even remove the stench of a dead skunk found beneath a house, or vanquish the overwhelming smell of a moth-ball-laden attic.

City and state government employees cannot refer any one company to clean up a crime and trauma scene, Coye said, but officials can provide a list of companies — including Apex — to the victim's family.

"How traumatic is that?" Coye asked. "No. 1: to lose a family member in such a violent way, whether it be suicide or homicide with a handgun, hanging, whatever the case may be. And then turn around and have to get on your hands and knees with a brush, a mop, a sponge, and have to clean it up. Friends and family are not prepared emotionally, nor are they prepared technically, to handle the situation."

After all, there's a reason why Coye only hires professionals who can withstand cleaning up the aftermath of, say, a father who killed his two children, or a wife who looked her husband right in the eye before pulling the trigger.

"I can take that (professional) and teach them how to clean these properties," Coye said. "I can't take someone who is not involved as a firefighter, a paramedic, a registered nurse, and teach them what they need to know."

Coye has tried hiring outside of those specialties, but ended up with folks who'd seen too many episodes of "CSI."

"It winds up being individuals who like crime scene novels, and want the yellow tape and the chalk outline," he said. "The harsh reality is it's a very difficult job. We're in Tyvek suits, masks, gloves and boots. It's hot. We have to deal with heat stress frequently and we have to stay hydrated."

"And the smells involved," he said, then paused for a second. "If you have anything against maggots, this is certainly nothing for you to do, because we see them virtually on every single scene."

Although Coye hires nurses and other professionals, he made an exception for his own son, 17-year-old Taylor. But, as Coye said, the kid's a natural.

As for 23-year-old Natasha Henson, she's Coye's right-hand woman.

As a certified nurse's aide, she came to Apex understanding the importance of being empathetic — not sympathetic — to the victims' families, Henson said, because she has no idea what it must feel like for a mother, for instance, to walk into a son's bloodied room and wish she hadn't.

"When I first started, it was emotionally draining, but you just have to learn how to separate yourself," she said. "You have to look at the blood and the guts as: 'That's stuff that needs to be removed, and I need to do it. If I don't, (the family) will. And they don't need to see this.'"

Thinking about everything he's seen on the job, Coye said, "We all have different defense mechanisms. Although, we can't wear these stories on our sleeves when we're doing the work — we'd never be able to do the next one."

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Actually, that compassion carries over to not charging the families of homicide victims.

The man who knows how to get blood spatters out of a wedding dress hung in a victim's closet said, "There is an opportunity for us to extend our professional services and be a resource for the community."

Not long ago, Coye sat at his dining room table when his cell phone rang.

"Apex Bioclean, this is Bill," he said to the funeral director on the other end of the line.

While Coye jotted notes on a flower company flier, he used his ink pen to direct a visitor's attention to one word: suicide.

Then somewhere in Oklahoma, a second hand swept over the face of a clock as the dead woman's loved ones waited for someone to wash away tangible reminders of a very bad day.

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