

ETCETERA

Thursday, May 3, 2001

24

Helping the living and the dead

BY JEROME WATT

Special to

The Economist & Sun/Tribune

Dead bodies, coffins and crematoriums.

Doesn't sound like the type of environment in which most people would choose to work.

Eric C. Tappenden, president of Chapel Ridge Funeral Home Inc. in Markham, is well aware of the attitude toward his profession.

"You would think that people would look at a funeral home as something positive," he said. "It's nicely kept, quiet and clean, but because we have a death-denying culture, people don't want a funeral home in their neighbourhood," Tappenden said.

The funeral home business definitely doesn't work a nine-to-five

"You can't cut yourself off. You have to be involved. If you can't handle your emotions, you can't be a funeral director."
— Tom Lalonde, funeral director

shift — death waits for no one.

"We answer the phone at two (in the morning)," said Sean McCloskey, a funeral director at Roadhouse and Rose in Newmarket. "In a matter of minutes, you are up in a suit."

Tom Lalonde, funeral director and owner of Marshall Funeral Home in Richmond Hill, agrees.

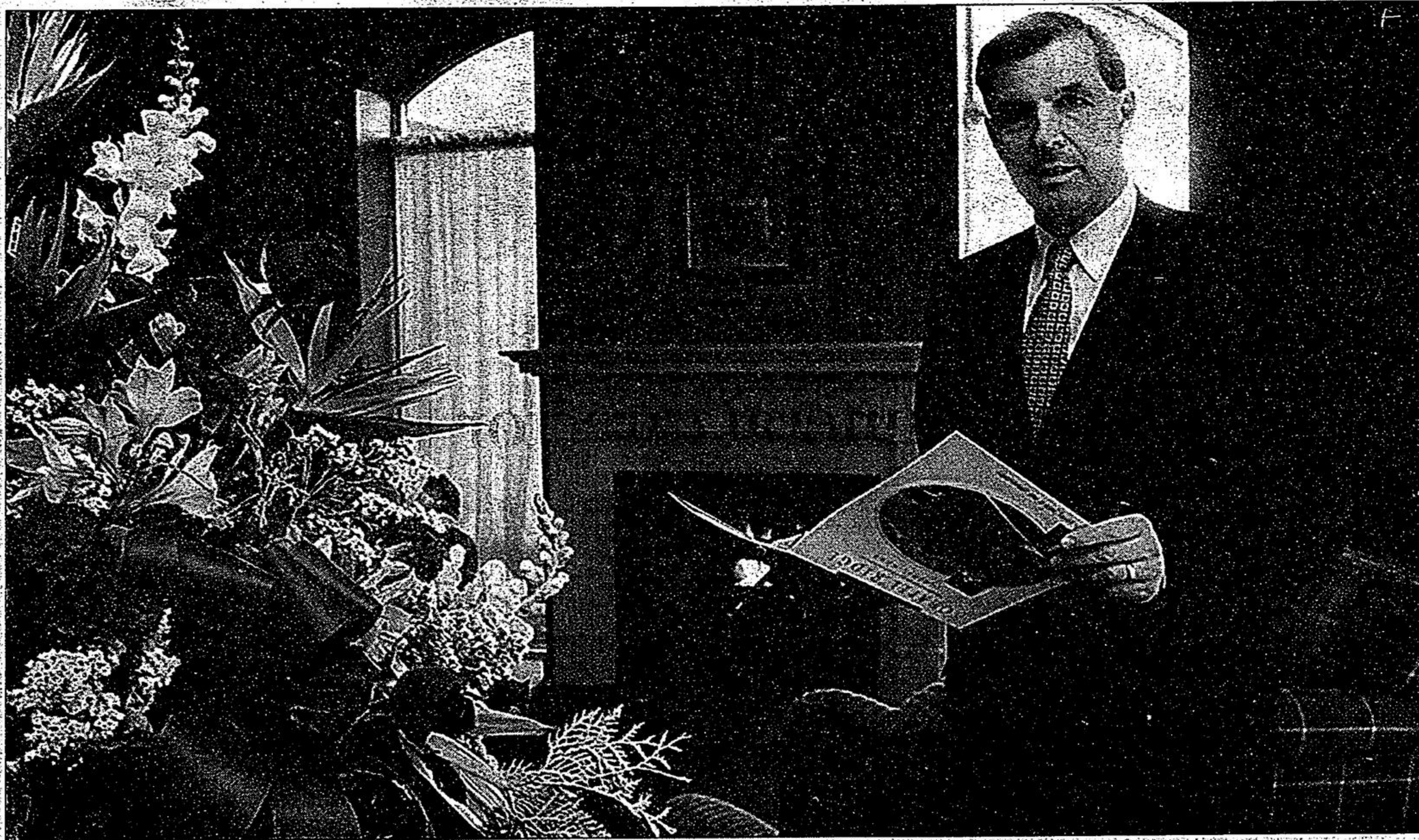
"It's easy to put in a 60-hour work week," he said. "There would be the odd week that you aren't very busy."

All three say they experience their busiest period during the Christmas season. Why?

Lalonde attributes it to the cold weather being too much for frail people.

Glenn Playter, owner and funeral director at Roadhouse and Rose, says it's because depression tends to be a little higher during the Christmas season. Tappenden also suggests winter conditions on the roads lead to an increase in fatalities.

All of this can be very depressing



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Chapel Ridge Funeral Home Inc. owner and president Eric C. Tappenden takes pride in helping people at his Markham business.

to deal with year after year.

"You'll find half the people (new funeral directors) drop out at Christmas time," said Lalonde.

Most directors admit depression affects them, but it's all part of the job. They admit cutting yourself off from the emotion isn't the right thing to do.

"It's difficult at times if you have a young person or someone who has died tragically," admitted Lalonde. "You can't cut yourself off. You have to be involved. If you can't handle your emotions, you can't be a funeral director."

Playter sees it as a very important attribute a funeral director must have.

"You must develop an immunity to death," he said. "There isn't any way to disassociate yourself."

Tappenden remembers a situation where a young intern came to him and said she wasn't cut out for the business after she cried in the middle of a funeral. For Tappenden, crying is OK.

"The day that you can't shed a tear at a funeral is the day you shouldn't be a funeral director," he said. "For the family to see you shed a tear isn't a bad thing — as long as you can do your job."

Things have changed in the business over the years. All directors agree cremation has become more popular. According to Tappenden, cremations made up 53 per cent of all funerals in the GTA last year.

He cites various reasons for the increase. For one thing, people are more concerned about the environment and don't want to take up

green space with plots.

Changes or religious diversity has also led to an increase in cremations. In 1963, Catholics were allowed, for the first time, to perform cremations.

Society is also becoming more secular, he said, something which has created other changes in funeral practices.

As well, people are becoming more creative in how they plan funerals. Tappenden has seen more people wanting to personalize funerals. He even had one request from a family to build a coffin.

"That's OK," he said. "That's a neat way of personalizing a funeral."

Families are also becoming more involved in the eulogies and playing more upbeat popular cul-

ture songs rather than the traditional hymns.

"People say 'I want to do something that reflects the way my dad was,'" said Tappenden.

Of course, another aspect of the funeral business is the handling and preparation of bodies.

So what happens to a body once a person has been pronounced dead?

Typically, the body is picked up by funeral staff after forms have been filled out by a doctor.

The reaction of the family determines the next step, said Tappenden.

"People often panic," he said. "If they are uncomfortable with the body being there, we'll remove it

See ACCOUNTING, page 25.

6 MONTHS O.A.C.

NO INTEREST

NO PAYMENTS

NO FEES

Completely
Refinished
Scroll Top
Secretary Desk
Solid Walnut
with Mahogany
Finish

Sale Price
\$3,395



1930's
Refinished
Andrew Malcolm
Design
Solid Mahogany
Corner Cabinet

Sale Price
\$1,795

Visit our Showroom

Sheraton
ANTIQUES
REFINISHED BEYOND COMPARE

158 MAIN STREET
UNIONVILLE

(905) 474-9677