Billy Guidry, an embalmer/funeral director at Rabenhorst Funeral Home, displays an antique hearse and coffin at his home in Baker.

Childhood passion leads man to undertaking

By DAVE CORTEZ
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As a child, Billy Guidry lined up toy cars to mimic a funeral procession and buried old Band-Aid cans in the yard as if they were casket vaults. One of his aunts would stand behind him pretending to weep.

His childhood prepared him well. Guidry, 42, is now an embalmer/funeral director at Rabenhorst Funeral Home on Government Street.

Guidry has prepared hundreds of bodies for visitation and burial, including the late Bishop Stanley Joseph Ott and Japanese exchange student Yoshihiro Hattori, who was killed a year ago.

"The idea of death never scared me as a child, or even now," Guidry said.

"I can remember sitting on a dirt mound in our yard watching funerals next door. Whenever there was a funeral, I would sit alone and watch it."

Guidry grew up next to a cemetery in Iota, in Acadia Parish.

"I used to rearrange the flowers around graves after the funerals had concluded. He said his brothers thought it was a little strange, but his parents figured it was just a strong curiosity he had from living so close to a cemetery."

Guidry also vividly remembers rearranging the flowers around graves after the funerals had concluded. He said it was one of his favorite childhood pastimes, and it is no coincidence that he spent 20 years in the floral business before finally returning to school to become a funeral director.

After two years of study at McNeese State University, he met his bride-to-be Sandra and dropped out of school. That was when he started working in the floral business.

When Sandra's family received a windfall in a mineral rights case, Guidry finally had a chance to realize his "burning desire to become a funeral director. It was my dream," he said.

He attended Delgado Community College in New Orleans and received his degree in funeral service. He has been at Rabenhorst Funeral Home for the past five years.

Guidry said the funeral home prepares an average of two bodies each day.

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On a typical day, Guidry will be out on “death calls.” When he and his partner return, they immediately transport the bodies to the second floor “operating room” where they will be preserved and prepared for the visitation, a process that can take 12 to 18 hours.

He said it takes so long because the embalming fluid needs time to work its way through the body.

Jarred Guidry, 13, is eager to talk about his father’s work.

“Most of my friends think it’s cool,” said Jarred, one of Guidry’s three children.

Guidry is also a Civil War enthusiast, and all kinds of memorabilia, including a letter written by a Confederate soldier, are displayed on the walls of his living room.

In the back yard of Guidry’s home in Baker, next to the barn, is an early 1800s horse-drawn hearse that his father acquired at an auction many years ago. Inside the hearse is a late 1700s casket.

He jokingly admits to displaying his hearse and casket each Halloween when he is not working.

“I always knew what Billy wanted to do in life,” his wife Sandra said. “I just always thought it was interesting, but he’s not a strange guy by any means.”