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Revenge of the Casket King

Bob Davis thought his dad's funeral was a rip-off - and he did something about it

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By Steve Steinberg / The Dallas Morning News

Bob Davis can thank his father for getting him started in the casket-sales business. Not personally, though: Howard Davis was dead by then.

When his father died about six years ago, Mr. Davis went to the funeral home, where the funeral director asked whether the elder Mr. Davis had left any insurance. He had, in fact – \$20,000.

"His eyes just lit right up – 'Oh boy!'" Mr. Davis says. And the funeral director sold him a \$20,000 funeral, including a \$7,995 casket. "I think I got back \$74," Mr. Davis says.

A few nights after the funeral, Mr. Davis' father appeared to him in a dream and announced: "Son, you got rooked. Here's what I want you to do."

"I didn't know anything about caskets," Mr. Davis says. "But I knew that when I went to the feed store and bought a watering trough for our horses, the only difference was it didn't have a lid on it – and it cost only \$40."

Mr. Davis, 56, a barrel-shaped man of medium height who sports a ponytail, whitening Fu Manchu mustache, cowboy boots and a laid-back manner,

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doesn't seem like he'd be agitated easily. But this had gotten his dander up.

"I started asking, 'Why? Why? Why?' And the more I found out, the madder I got."

Mr. Davis gave up the *Auto Trader* car-sales newspaper he'd published for 22 years. He took the rest of the money his dad had left him and began selling discount-priced caskets directly to the public in Fort Worth.

Customers were receptive, he says, but funeral directors weren't. Several came to his Budget Casket store, he says, telling him he was "cheapening the business." Then he started receiving ominous letters from the Texas Banking Commission, which viewed his casket business as pre-need funeral sales, which it regulates. The commission told Mr. Davis, who had no funeral-director's license, to cease and desist.

OK, he figured. But only for the moment. "I am not the kind of guy you push around," he says.

He took the necessary training, received a funeral-director's license and later opened a funeral chapel in Fort Worth. Casket sales flourished, and Mr. Davis now owns a Budget Casket store in Bedford and The Funeral Store in Richardson.

Today, the Discount Casket King will sell you everything from a plain wooden box for \$300 to a handsome, tastefully carved, crepe-lined cherrywood casket for \$2,700. That \$7,995 casket he buried his father in six years ago? Mr. Davis sells a similar model for \$1,450. For \$1,000 to \$1,200, he says, "you'll get a nice [steel] casket you'll be proud of."

At his funeral chapel, he'll provide a complete funeral for \$1,250, about a third of what he says other funeral homes charge. That includes memorial services, staff, pickup of the deceased, embalming and dressing the body, delivery to the gravesite, visitation and the death certificate.

"All you need is the preacher and the flowers," he says – plus, of course, a casket and cemetery plot. He sells headstones, too, but if you buy the casket from him, he'll sell the marker at cost. Cremations cost \$950, including the urn.

Mr. Davis may not be the poster boy of the North Texas Funeral Directors



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Association. In fact, he's not even a member. But association president Frank Seddio doesn't have anything bad to say about him.

"He's an entrepreneur – he found a niche area," Mr. Seddio says. "If the family feels comfortable with it, that's the family's prerogative."

And the customers do appear comfortable with Mr. Davis. Neither Dallas' nor Fort Worth's Better Business Bureau lists complaints against him.

The Texas Funeral Service Commission, which regulates funeral homes (but not direct casket sales), lists one complaint, filed last August against Davis Funeral Chapel: A customer received the death certificate nearly two months after the 10-day deadline imposed by the state. (Mr. Davis contended that the deceased's doctor had left town and caused the delay. The commission fined him \$1,500 and closed the case.)

Following his father's dictates has been fulfilling, Mr. Davis says.

"This has been the most rewarding thing I ever got into. Not everyone can afford \$20,000 [for a funeral]. There are people who can't afford \$2,000."

He does almost all his advertising on late-night television, and he counts on his low-key approach and low, low prices to do the rest.

"Once somebody walks in here, they're my customer for life," he says. "Or death."

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