



# COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Making The South Shore A Better Place

## Community Spotlight: The Pierce Brothers

Jonathan Pierce and David Pierce offer a unique service: officiating weddings, funerals, and memorial services. Their personalized approach reflects the life of the deceased in a way that resonates with loved ones. If religious rituals and/or spiritual language are important to you, Jonathan and David will include them in a meaningful way to you and your loved ones. If you prefer not to include spiritual or religious language, none will be added.

For this quarter's Keohane newsletter, we spoke with the brothers in detail about their backgrounds and approach to delivering this essential service.

**You are both graduates of divinity schools. It's interesting that as brothers, you both chose that path. Was it a calling that you felt early on? Or was there a circuitous route that led you to attend a divinity school?**

**David Pierce:** My route, at least early on, was a pretty straight shot. I had a clear sense that I was going to end up eventually going to a seminary or divinity school. I've mostly worked in parish settings, and church settings. Of course, as part of any church parish setting, you do a lot of funerals, and you

provide a lot of care to families in grief and in crisis. So funeral services, crafting services, and working with funeral homes has always been part of my work, largely through my work in more church parish settings.

**Jonathan Pierce:** Not at all for me. I went to undergrad at the College of William & Mary. I thought I wanted to study languages and political science or government, and I took a religion course, and that kind of set me on a different path. I realized I love the study of religion. David and I grew up in a family where church and Christian faith were really important, and I took great pleasure in learning to think and look critically at these things that I'd already always only understood in a very personal way.

After undergrad, I realized that I had more questions than answers, and Divinity School seemed like a great place to go ask those questions. So, it was a very not well thought out, kind of a very selfish, navel-gazing kind of path. I wanted to go to study more, to ask more questions. I really had no career goals in mind. I knew I didn't want to work for a church, and I didn't.

**And you graduate from Divinity School, you still have to get a job.**

**JP:** You're not going to be in a church, you've got to pay the bills somehow. I ended up working in hospice chaplaincy, and it was not formally a calling. It was what job am I going to do and I think I might enjoy that.

If you think you enjoy hospice chaplaincy, it might be the right thing for you, because it's a weird thing to feel like you might be good at, but I enjoyed it. I was good at it, and in fact, I loved it. I guess it became a kind of calling, it became what I felt like I should do.

It was through doing that work that I, like David, but through a different means, found myself officiating hundreds of funerals and memorial services over my 15-year hospice career, certainly over 1,000 now. Through that work I first met the Keohanes. My work supporting hospice people on the South Shore brought me into their orbit before David and I started this enterprise.

**It must be so meaningful, knowing the impact you're having on a family and friends and the community and the person that's transitioning. That's got to be quite extraordinary to carry forth, although constantly being surrounded by death and dying must be tough after a while.**

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**JP:** I would say that as a practicing meditator, someone for whom meditation and mindfulness is really important, being close to death, again, this marks me as a weirdo in cultural terms, but it's a very helpful thing because it keeps me honest about the stakes of living and what matters and being around people at end of life and certainly in communal memorial services.

Yes, people are going through a very hard time, but they're also really trying to be at their best. And that's a very special thing to see. I mean, even when families aren't at their best, it's special to see the ways in which they're trying and succeeding despite failing. There's a beautiful quality. It's never not interesting.

**You shared a bit about your background in our opening conversation. You mentioned growing up in a very Christian household.**

**DP:** Faith was sort of central to your lives.

**What was that like growing up? Was it church every week and living the faith?**

**DP:** I would say for both of us growing up, the part of my faith that I appreciated early on and have not stopped appreciating was a really strong sense of a caring community. It took me a long time before I started questioning the values that undergirded that community and started thinking more critically on my own terms about even what the word faith means and how I come to apply that and make space for that in my life. None of that for me has ever changed the fact that growing up, I was pretty fortunate to be circled by a lot of caring people, people who genuinely wanted to look out for their neighbors. Genuinely, people that fit the cliché of, the people that showed up with casserole dishes on the front doorstep for every death. And I really came to see a certain hopefulness and came to appreciate what that stood for and that the place that it held in the lives of the people around me, came to hold that place for me as well.

A lot of my own sense of, whether you want to call it a vocation or calling or just a career choice, had to do with wanting to be in community. I'm still doing this in my approach to working with families now through Keohane. Many of the families we work with are families that I don't meet until I get the call saying that a family is looking to have a service, and they want to find a way to honor their loved one and to tell their loved one's story.

That's usually the first time I meet them. I approach it thinking about, 'what is it going to look like and what is it going to mean to be in community with this family and to care at the end of the day?' To care enough to want to know their story, who was their loved one? What were the things that were important to their loved one? What were the things their loved one found great struggle within their life? For me, those are all elements of community that I started figuring out early on. I think the parts that have more to do with how I now interpret and understand my faith, and even how I think about what it means to call myself one particular thing, say, a Christian, I think of that a lot more critically now than I did in the community that I grew up in.

**JP:** Being a part of a religious community growing up, church was a big part of our youth. I mean, going to Sunday school, going to church, going to Bible camp in the summer. We grew up in a little evangelical church, which were outliers here in New England at the time. As David underscored, the nice part about that was learning how to be around people who were similar, but also different.

I'm even thinking of being around a lot of older people. Our grandparents, but also all of their friends. And I wouldn't have been a successful hospice chaplain or a funeral officiant if I hadn't learned how to engage intergenerationally. That's a huge plus.

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A big part of my college and divinity school experience was getting critical distance from that world. The result for me was that world really ended up feeling much too small for several reasons.

I took a long time away from church and from spiritual community generally because I wasn't sure there was one that was big enough to hold the multitudes that is me. I spent years in psychotherapy. I love psychoanalytic Freudian stuff. I'm also a Buddhist practitioner. I practice meditation in a Buddhist mindfulness way. I've added a lot of self-care community things to my well-being that are not Christian or even religious. They're just as important to who I am in the world as the Christian faith I grew up in.

I also never said no to the Christian faith I grew up in. I never rejected it, but I argued with it. I put it down and I turned away from it. I held those things in tension until holding them in tension didn't feel like a complicated thing. I wouldn't say I resolved anything, but I resolved to be someone who, as Walt Whitman said, contains multitudes.

If I contradict myself, well, all right. That mindset has been very helpful to me in the work I do because being a hospice chaplain and doing funerals in the way David and I do them is about being present to anyone and everyone. I've done funerals for non-practicing Jewish people, and I've done a lot of funerals over the years for African American families where I'm one of the only white people there. I mean, supporting people across all manner of differences. It's risky, crazy, scary in some ways, and it's also lovely and fun. I think I love that about being a person of faith, being open to all.

I'll say this now, I've organized and facilitated on the South Shore, for the people that might be reading this, a new non-religious spiritual practice and volunteer community. It's really a spiritual community for people who identify as "nones" and non-practicing people. It's meant to be welcoming and inclusive of people who find traditional religious communities a little too constricting.

**At a time where religious affiliation is declining and yet there are people following the non-denominational Christian part, people are still seeking in some way. They're looking for answers, but they're also looking for some form of belonging and a sense of something larger than themselves, in whatever form that might take. Most major religions – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism – effectively boil down to love thy neighbor. Yet we seem to stray so far away from that or to use commentaries as leverage to avoid having to love our neighbors without qualification. And so, the group that you're talking about Jonathan, I think people want to be able to explore this in a safe environment to do so, is really valuable.**

**JP:** I think it's worth noting. Culturally speaking, you don't have to be a sociologist to know that most of the people, even the non-practicing people on the South Shore, identify or grew up in some kind of Christian community and/or Catholic. I'm very happy to be both literate but authentically literate in the language those people speak because it's comforting and there's no need to say no to things just because you are non-practicing, or you found other things helpful. There's no need to say no to the things that you have found helpful before or that are part of your family system.

That's just as important to me as being available to people who don't identify with anything but need support at end of life.

**DP:** Being able to come alongside a family, particularly in time of death, when you're thinking about crafting a service, is that I'm not looking to interpret for a family what they should be thinking at that moment. I'm not even looking to help provide meaning to the moment for them. I am stepping into the moment with just sheer curiosity, and curiosity is one of the things that was not part of our faith upbringing. In fact, if anything, I like to think that we were taught to not be curious.

I sort of am drawn to your comment about "love thy neighbor." It's pretty universal and bedrock, and it's just good human practice. But, I think, right alongside that, you have to be curious about your neighbor. I think for me; it's also about just asking good questions. If I'm okay with what I don't know in a moment, I find that families are more inclined to also be okay with what they don't know. So, if anything, one of the things that I've tried to grow into is being very comfortable with what I don't know and not feeling like I have to reconcile that.

You know, if I'm trying to reconcile those things for myself, then the family I'm working with is going to feel like they're somehow or another supposed to be doing that as well and that's not important. That's a pressure and expectation that doesn't have any necessary place in memorializing or celebrating a loved one.

**Walt Whitman famously said, be curious, not judgmental. And it's a great approach to life just to hold that curiosity without having an opinion about it. I'm curious in both of your careers prior to this endeavor that you launched, what led to creating the Pierce Brothers as a service offering, effective for weddings, funerals and memorial services?**

We should be clear that this is this is a part-time enterprise for us that exists alongside other full-time work that we do. Thankfully, our full-time work has tremendous flexibility and bandwidth to be able to do this work also, which is economically helpful to us, but also practically what that's worth.

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## What are your full-time jobs outside of this?

**DP:** I'm still in full-time parish work. I'm still working in a church, in a faith community full-time. Part of what led to this was – and I do attribute some of this to the pandemic and to the shifts that occurred in community life for a lot of people during the pandemic – I just found that I am my own people if you will, that are sharing space with me and holding space with me as part of my own parish.

They are wandering outside of the traditions and customs and practices of their own church when it comes to funeral services. I do very few services anymore inside of any kind of established church building. I find that even with my own congregants, they're not even coming.

They're working out of a funeral home. I was getting a lot closer to working with funeral homes in the area and finding that they were calling more often. I was getting a lot more calls from funeral homes saying "There's a family and they've had a death. They would like to do something, but they don't know what." And that's kind of the beginning of it. They would call and there was a sense for them that in calling me and in calling Jonathan, we would be people that would come alongside them and help them tease out whatever that is in a way that it's going to feel authentic for them. And in a way that is not going to feel like they're going to be given something canned or rehearsed.

**JP:** Yeah, there's absolutely nothing canned at all about what we do. I can honestly say of the hundreds of services I've done; I've never done two that are the same. When I say they're not the same, I don't just mean I switch out the names.

**DP:** The sense of belonging and intimacy is different in every single service. More often than not, I find that at the end of the day, if you get a family that comes back and they say, "Wow, I had no idea that that was the experience we were going to have, and that was healing. That was joyful, even. It was meaningful. It was sacred. It was clarifying." I think most often what I hear people say is, "I had no idea. I had no idea it could be that good."

**That's quite a compliment to you. It's got to be so gratifying to hear that.**

Well, I'm usually seeing the same thing about my own experience, quite honestly. I'm generally coming away from it and saying that was lovely.

**JP:** You know, every time I'm hearing stories I don't know and am amazed at people's abilities. On the one hand, I've seen more times than I can count someone who feels like they can't get up to speak getting up and doing it. That happens almost every time, but every time it happens, it's amazing to see that particular individual, who we spent a little bit of time getting to know, doing it.

It's amazing to see the person who's being memorialized and celebrated, to kind of feel the way their spirit comes alive in the room. As a postmodern kind of believer...I don't necessarily believe in miracles because I've never seen one because as a hospice chaplain, death operates with 100% certainty. Yet, when I'm at a memorial service, there is something that is a little superordinary. I wouldn't call it magical. I wouldn't even call it sacred, but it's very special. The sense of something alive coming, the sense of love being bigger than death.

We can talk through what's hard and challenging. We can speak our truth about this person even if the person was a hard-to-love person, which happens. Life's complicated. We find the words to say what we need to say, and it ends up being good. That's the hidden secret. It's amazing.



*The Pierce Brothers can be reached at*  
**[www.piercebrothers.org](http://www.piercebrothers.org)**

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## EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT



### Meet Brigitte Gibson, Funeral Director

**You're a Quincy native from a large family. You were familiar with Keohane from growing up, right?**

Yes, through growing up in Quincy, but actually, John Keohane raised his family right across the street from my grandmother. And John's wife, who I call Miss Wilk, was my kindergarten teacher at Sacred Heart!

**How did you end up working at Keohane and becoming the Office Manager for the Weymouth locations?**

COVID, I think, for everyone, was a time of change and reflection. My son was five months old when COVID started. It was such a blur back then, but I knew I didn't want to go back to what I was doing. I thought I'd work part-time and be home more with him. So, I went on Indeed and saw that there was a job for a part-time bookkeeper here. I thought, "That's great, part-time! I can do that. I can still be home with him. I don't have to send him to daycare full-time. I started as the bookkeeper, and I did that for about a year.

During that time, I did the books, but I also wanted to learn everything. I started listening to people answer the phones. Some of the staff took me under their wings and when they heard me speak with people, they said "You have a knack for this. You make people feel comfortable and you're trustworthy. You follow through with whatever you say."

John Keohane noticed something in me and one day he came to my office and said "Brigitte, I want you to be the Office Manager." I told him I wasn't

sure. Even though I was never actually part-time, I was working 40-45 hours a week from the start because I loved it and wanted to learn everything. I liked what I was doing, but it's very hard to say no to John and so I became the Office Manager (laughs).

**What did you do before joining Keohane?**

I went to nursing school. When you're 17 years old and someone says, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I thought I wanted to be a nurse. I learned very quickly that I didn't want to be a nurse! I was still trying to find myself and was waitressing and working as a nanny, but it didn't spark my joy. Something was missing. When I started working at Keohane, I realized that I love the family care that comes with this job.

**You're now a full-time Funeral Director!**

Yes! I passed all my exams last September and was sworn in.

**What's the transition been like? Are there days when you wake up and think "I can't believe this is what I'm doing now?"**

I've enjoyed every aspect, from being the bookkeeper and managing the office to now being a funeral director. I've appreciated every single moment. Now that I'm here, I still want to learn, I still want to know what's next for this career. How else can I grow? There are eight funeral directors at Keohane, and each of them has taught me something over the past two years, and they still do. I still rely on them every single day as I'm still learning.

**It sounds like you've received a kind of parallel education at Keohane, in addition to what you learned in college to get the degree.**

Yes, and the other funeral directors will come to me when they have a billing question or death certificate question, things that I've done behind the scenes over the past few years. As the Office Manager I handled all of the scheduling and death certificate information, calling the doctors and the churches, and organizing.

**What are some of the basic responsibilities of a funeral director?**

It starts with the first phone call. It could be a call before someone has passed, or it's the first call after someone has passed. We're there to help guide them. We're not there to tell them what to do; we're there to help them make decisions. We have to ask the hard questions. Death is still taboo to some people. They've never talked about death with their loved ones. It's counseling people, discovering how they want to celebrate their loved one's life. We explain to them that if they want to hold visiting hours, this is what's going to happen.

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This is what you've got to do. Then we sit down together with the family and plan the services. There can be a lot of juggling.

Some family members might have different opinions on services. Our job is to guide and educate them on what's best. The we get all of the Mass information, plan the Mass and schedule visiting hours and services, and cemetery info. If you don't have a cemetery property, do you opt for a cremation? Cremation opens a lot of options as well, which a lot of families are now choosing, and we, as funeral directors can help them plan what to do.

You become a kind of therapist in a way, providing a voice of calm when there's so much difficulty swirling around them.

This is already a hard day. You don't need to make it harder by focusing too much on the smaller details. We'll help you with all of this.

There's also the aftercare when services have ended. Families go home, and they have to sit with some of those feelings. Oftentimes they'll start to get anxious about closing a bank account and what to do with the cars. We're here to answer any questions a family may ask, and if we don't know the answer, we'll try to get them the answer. We're here to help you. Sometimes when I'm out and about, someone will come up to me and say "Oh, you ran my grandmother's service," or "You were the funeral director at my uncle's wake," and they offer such kind feedback. I love that about this job.

**What does an apprenticeship as a funeral director entail? What are some of the responsibilities that you took on during that period?**

My apprenticeship was a lot different than most people's. I never came to Keohane thinking I'd be a funeral director. John (Keohane) said "I see something special in you and let's work this through," because I was still the office manager. I was educated and I had the skills, but I still wanted to learn everything that I was learning in school. So I'd go on transfers, I would be in the care center helping as a second pair of hands, observing as much as I could. I'd help set up visiting hours, help on funerals wherever I was needed. We all need to learn. It's not my family; it's our family we're serving.

**How difficult was it to manage your studies while doing your day job and maintaining your family life?**

I went to school full time, and I still raised a family, and I just got it done. I took summer courses. I took winter courses. I had a goal that I was going to get this done in less than two years. And I did. It was a blur. I couldn't tell you about the past few years. But I'm really proud of being able to do that as a

mom and working full-time. Just being a mom and going back to school in my late 30s...you guys can do this! Just put your head down and power through it.

**The industry is changing quite a lot. Americans are becoming less religiously affiliated. Cremation is becoming a much more popular option than it used to be. How do you adapt to meet the changing needs for funeral care?**

Ooh, good question! As funeral directors, now we can become creative. We can make services that are much more personable and build them around what the family wants. I've been lucky enough to have a few families that didn't want to go to church but still wanted a service. It might take a little longer to pull some of the information out of them, but once we do, we're able to dig into our creative sides. I felt that I was able to do that with some of these families that wanted to choose their own service, and I got to know the decedent that much better. I got to know who I was serving.

I had a service for a Deadhead (Grateful Dead fan) a few months ago. The decedent's brother told me that he liked the Dead and followed the band around for a long time. Everyone wore tie-dye to the funeral. They shared stories about traveling around the U.S., and we played Grateful Dead music. The man's nephew got up and sang a Grateful Dead song with his guitar. When they were leaving, the man's brother said "This is exactly what he would have wanted. This is exactly how his friends saw him. This was the closure that we needed."

**What are your favorite parts of the job?**

Oh God, there's so many! I like the initial arrangement with the family. I feel like the families come in so nervous. They don't know what to expect. We just start to talk. I don't jump into the arrangements right away. I'll listen to someone share their stories and their memories for as long as it takes. I truly enjoy that aspect of getting to know them.

And towards the end of the service, when the family will stop and take a moment to say, "Thank you, thank you for doing this." I always tell them that they were doing the hard work. This is what I love to do, and it's a gift.

You can contact Brigette Gibson via email: [bridgette@keohane.com](mailto:bridgette@keohane.com) or call 781.335.0045.

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# BLOG HIGHLIGHT:

## Understanding Cremation: Myths, Facts, and Informed Decision Making



Cremation has become an increasingly popular choice for end-of-life arrangements. Per the National Funeral Directors Association, 62% of people opt for cremation, nearly double the volume of people choosing a traditional burial.

Despite the rising volume of cremations in the U.S., misconceptions about the process persist. This blog post aims to dispel the most common myths, provide you with factual information, and help you in making informed decisions regarding cremation. Of course, you are always welcome to speak with a Keohane team member to answer specific questions or learn more in-depth what our process entails.

### **Myth 1: Cremation Is Environmentally Harmful**

**Fact:** Traditional cremation involves high energy consumption and emissions. However, advancements have led to more eco-friendly alternatives. For instance, water cremation, also known as alkaline hydrolysis, is considered gentler and more sustainable than conventional methods. Additionally, you can choose a biodegradable urn or scatter ashes in meaningful locations to further reduce environmental impact.

### **Myth 2: Cremation Limits Memorialization Options**

**Fact:** Cremation offers a variety of personalized memorialization choices. Beyond traditional urns, ashes can be incorporated into special jewelry, artwork, or even planted with a tree to create a living memorial. These options provide families like yours with meaningful ways to honor your loved ones.

### **Myth 3: Religious Beliefs Prohibit Cremation**

**Fact:** While some religions have specific guidelines regarding body disposition, many have become more accepting of cremation. It's essential that you consult with your spiritual advisor to understand your faith's current stance, making sure that your choices align with your beliefs.

### **Myth 4: Cremation Is Less Respectful Than Burial**

**Fact:** Respect and dignity are paramount in both cremation and burial processes. Keohane Funeral and Cremation adheres to strict protocols to ensure

that the deceased is handled with the utmost care, regardless of the chosen method. We hold sacred the tremendous responsibility you've given us in your time of need.

### **Making An Informed Decision**

When considering cremation, take the following factors into account:

- **Personal Values:** Consider your environmental concerns, spiritual beliefs, and personal preferences.
- **Family Wishes:** Engage in open discussions with family members to ensure that the chosen method honors collective sentiments. This is another reason why advanced planning is such a worthwhile investment of your time.
- **Financial Considerations:** Cremation can be more cost-effective than traditional burials, though your costs will vary based on the services you choose.
- **Legal Requirements:** Familiarize yourself with local regulations and ensure all necessary documentation is in order.



At Keohane, we understand deeply that choosing between cremation and burial is an intensely personal decision. Our compassionate team is here to provide you with comprehensive information, answer all of your questions, and support you in making the best choices for you and your family's values and wishes. Contact us today to learn more about our cremation services and how we may assist you in arriving at your best choices.



### 2024 Winter Coat Drive Recap

Thank you to everyone who donated a winter coat to this year's drive!

Your support means that more than 500 kids and adults on the South Shore have had a warm coat during this frigid winter.

### Plant.Grow.Share.2025

Keep an eye on our Facebook Page for details on this spring's Plant.Grow.Share. workshops! Plant.Grow.Share. is a fun and easy way to help our South Shore neighbors in need by donating a portion of your garden's bounty to Interfaith Social Services' food pantry.

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