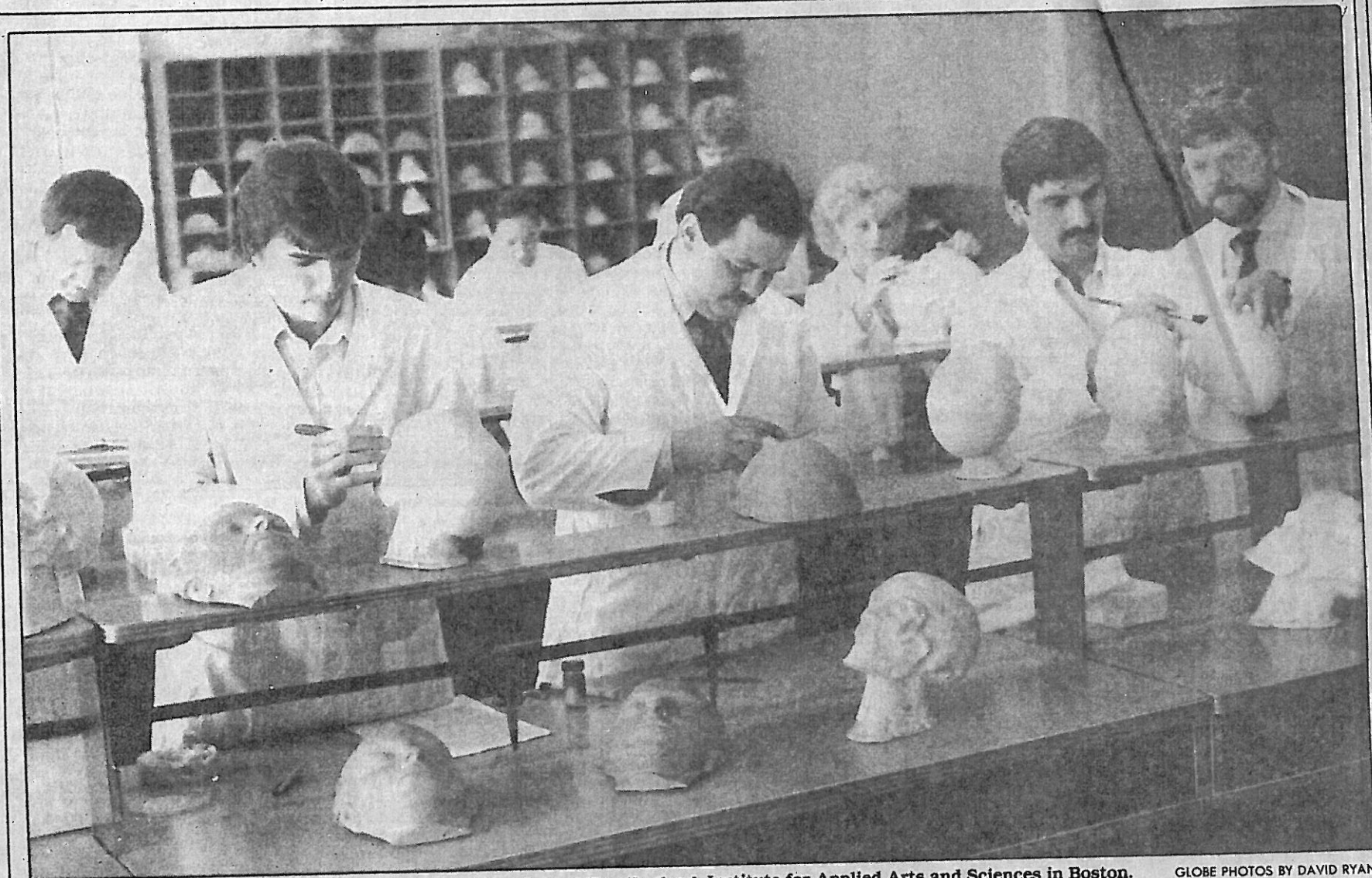


# METRO/REGION



Budding funeral directors work on masks in restoration class at New England Institute for Applied Arts and Sciences in Boston.

GLOBE PHOTOS BY DAVID RYAN

# Funeral directors-to-be: 'We're all normal'

The pathology class at the New England Institute of Applied Arts and Sciences on Beacon street in Kenmore Square is noisy with the sound of cracking gum and students comparing notes on livers and pancreases and the common cold; they wear Sergio Valente jeans, shocking pink sweaters, Moosehead beer T-shirts. Among them, Robert Eaton stands out. He wears his

conservative somber suit to class, speaks in gentle tones, and places his palms on his desk as if he were soothing it.

Eaton looks like a funeral director. In fact, after graduation next month, that is what they all will be.

"We're all normal people, maybe different only in that we don't mind talking about death," says Ken Merrifield, who at 41 is switching from a teaching career to become a funeral director. "I think people envision a school for funeral directors as all of us sitting in a dark cellar with a cadaver and a vat of embalming fluid spread out before us."

An institute graduate is schooled not only in embalming and the art of restoring bodies, but also in anatomy, psychology, management, chemistry, biology and business law.

"At first the name for these people was undertakers," says school president Victor Scalise Jr. "Then it was morticians and now funeral directors. I'm gunning to have them referred to as funeral professionals."

Scalise also changed the name of the school when he took over seven years ago from the Institute for Anatomy, Sanitary Sciences and Embalming, "because that reflected only the science we teach and not the business and counseling parts." Colleagues still accuse him of trying to hide what kind of school it is.

That would be understandable, the students and teachers of the Institute acknowledge. "Telling someone you're a funeral director is likely to throw a pall over the conversa-

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**TERRI MINSKY**

tion, or should I say, kill it?" says Paul Turgeon, a restorative arts instructor. "That's especially true if you're sitting next to someone on an airplane and they're already jittery about flying."

Most of the 120 students are children or wives of funeral directors, and to them the main drawback of the profession is that they are always on call. "I grew up hearing, 'Death

never takes a holiday,' and I resented not having my father around for Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner," says Betsy Caparco, 25, of East Greenwich, R.I. "But then one day he needed help, and I was standing at the front door dressed in a black suit greeting people, and I knew it was what I wanted to do."

To Caparco and the others, being a funeral director means being a scientist at embalming, an artist at preparing a body, a healer who meets the grieving, a seller of caskets and an accountant running a small business. "Very little of what we do is actually for the dead body," says Tony White, 22, who left his job as a service manager for a Star Market store for this training. "I'd say 90 percent of it we do is for the living, and it's very rewarding to know you have helped these people through the most difficult times of their lives."

The institute is the only school of its kind in New England, one of only half a dozen in the country and one of only a few that teaches students how to use computers in funeral directing. To get in, the students must be high school graduates and take their Scholastic Aptitude Tests, just as for any other college. Massachusetts requires a single year of training for a license, compared with two and three years in most states. Scalise is trying to have that changed.

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Elizabeth Bernaducci of Providence works in class on basic makeup.