

# She's a model undertaking

## Ex-pinup learns about life, death

By RUTH BASHINSKY  
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She has been in the city's morgues at all hours of the day and night.

She has embalmed, dressed and made up the dead in various states of decay.

For Alexandra Mosca, it's not like "Six Feet Under" — the HBO hit centered on a family that owns a funeral parlor — it's the real thing. The former Playboy model is a licensed funeral director in Elmhurst.

She has directed thousands of funerals. Two of her worst encounters, she said, were embalming a newborn and working in the aftermath of the November 2001 crash of American Airlines Flight 587 in Belle Harbor, where she was involved in transporting the remains of victims to their loved ones.

She has attended the funerals of some of the most notorious, including mob boss John Gotti. She has seen some gruesome things and has had some frightening experiences.

Once, she accidentally sewed her hand to a corpse.

Since 1983, Mosca, 45, of Sea Cliff, L.I., has headed the Hellenic Funeral Home in Elmhurst, a white building that looks more like a cozy old house than a funeral home.

Now, in a memoir titled "Grave Undertakings" (New Horizon Press, \$24.95) that has just hit bookstores, Mosca talks about her days attending mortuary school and working as a female apprentice before getting her license as a funeral director.

She says in the book that her profession is a sexist one, one in which whom you know gets you further than what you know and where family connections are everything.



WILLIE ANDERSON DAILY NEWS

**RIGHT AT HOME** Alexandra Mosca, director of Hellenic Funeral Home on 43rd Ave. in Elmhurst, in showroom.

She also discusses her other lives: moonlighting as a portrait model — and posing nude in Playboy.

"Women are still the minority in my industry," said Mosca, who said that when she graduated from mortuary school in 1978, women made up only 5% of her class. Over the years, she said, the numbers have gone up. Today, approximately 40% of mortuary school graduates are female.

Mosca, who was adopted and had a tough childhood, said she went into the funeral business after learning of her biological mother's death.

"I was looking for the answers to the mystery of death. I wanted to make sense out of my own loss," she explained.

She started working as a model back in the days when her embalmer's paycheck wasn't making ends meet. After an artist friend wrote to Playboy magazine about her, the magazine contacted her, asking her to be part of a series of features about women in unique professions.

The Playboy gig brought her semi-celebrity status — she appeared on a number of television and radio shows, includ-

ing "Geraldo" and "Regis and Kathy Lee." The game show "Jeopardy" even created a question based on her career.

Fear of contracting an infectious disease — such as AIDS — from a corpse motivated Mosca to switch her career from embalming to funeral directing.

A few years ago, she said, she changed her focus so that she could spend more time writing.

"Writing was my first passion. I wanted to be a journalist first," said Mosca, who is single and hopes one day to pen a novel whose central character is — what else? — a female funeral director.

# Psych cuts would hurt most vulnerable

"I hope we don't try to balance the budget on the backs of our mentally ill," said Dr. Robert Lowinger, a psychiatrist at the Bronx Psychiatric Center and an executive board member of the Public Employees Federation.

He was referring to Gov. Pataki's proposal to close the Bronx Psychiatric Center and its neighbor, the Bronx Children's Psychiatric Center, scheduled for October 2005.

Last week, Supreme Court Justice Joseph Teresi issued a preliminary injunction blocking the closing of three upstate psychiatric centers, as well as a planned merger of the Nathan S. Kline Institute in Orangeburg with the N.Y. State Psychiatric Institute in Manhattan.

That's good news, but the Bronx is still left vulnerable.

If its institutions disappear, 500 patients would see their medical care suffer, 343 people would be left without jobs and those living in surrounding areas would be deprived of inpatient psychiatric services close to home.

This would create substantial hardship

for the families of patients, who would have to travel an extra one to four hours to visit their loved ones.

"Closing those Bronx institutions would result in psychiatric patients from the Bronx having to travel to eastern Long Island for their long-term psychiatric care," Lowinger said.

Such closings also would mean that the only two bilingual Hispanic psychiatric wards in the New York State system would disappear. Who cares if more Hispanics — 645,000, to be exact — live in the Bronx that in any other county in the state?

"Bronx Psychiatric Center and Bronx Children's Psychiatric Center are specifically designed to treat the heavily minority population from which their inpatient population derives," Lowinger said. "Closing them would be disastrous."

But there is more. The governor would also eliminate the prestigious Institute

for Basic Research on Staten Island. "We don't know what is going to happen," said Public Employees Federation member Raquel Ramos, a social worker who treats patients in the bipolar and schizophrenic units at New York State Psychiatric Institute, which has temporarily escaped closure. "No one has prepared any plans for the caregivers or the transfer of patients."

Yet, it seems like only yesterday when Gov. Pataki and Dennis Rivera, the leader of health care union SEIU Local 1199, were photographed together, smiling and talking enthusiastically about their mutual friendship.

Those were the days when Pataki — talking like a new Nelson Rockefeller — was willing to spend, well, liberally, to win the endorsement of the hospital workers. This was, of course, before last November's elections. Or as Rivera himself recently put it: That was then, and

this is now.

### Demonstrating dismay

Since Pataki took his oath for a third term in office on Jan. 1, things are not what they used to be and the governor and the union leader have returned to more familiar roles.

April 1 saw more than 30,000 health care workers in front of the state Capitol, protesting the governor's proposal to cut \$2 billion from health programs.

The demonstration was organized by SEIU 1199, whose officers said that under the Pataki plan, some hospitals would have to close and 22,000 jobs throughout the state would be eliminated.

Not a pretty picture.

A picture, in fact, in which psychiatric care takes a very bad beating, leaving some of New York's most unfortunate people without the services they so desperately need.

There has to be a better way.

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