

Ask the Undertaker

By Ryan Helfenbein

A gentleman asked recently when he was preparing his funeral plans in advance, "Why are so many traditional funeral homes still so grim?" Afterward, he explained that when he worked with an undertaker to arrange services for his father there was a gloomy and cold feeling throughout the entire building. It seemed there was an all-encompassing sadness that pervaded the entire process. He also felt he was being "nickeled and dimed," especially when selecting the necessary merchandise, such as the casket and service items. Sticker shock was inevitable.

It doesn't have to be this way. Some undertakers who have taken on the challenge of improving the planning of a ceremony, focusing the funeral or cremation service on a life lived. For years, undertakers have been trained to concentrate on the final days of a person's life, rather than trying to capture the years that person walked this earth. The sharing of a story of a life lived with family and friends is something that has just recently started surfacing.

This is not only a shift for undertakers, but for clergy as well. Very often, members of clergy are perfectly willing to incorporate personal stories or video presentations into their services. We are even finding funeral homes providing "celebrants" or "tribute specialists" whose primary role is to learn about and share the story of a life lived. End-of-life care professionals are being challenged to lower their blinders and realize that each family needs to have a unique experience when planning their loved one's final farewell. So how can we have the emotional energy when there are so many other decisions and financial discussions that need to take place immediately upon a passing?

One way funeral homes can help families is by taking the focus off the "nickels and dimes" when making arrangements, and placing it on the telling of the person's life story. Undertakers are beginning to offer all-inclusive, price-point packages. This allows families to select the "necessary" items, for example, the casket, funeral services, flowers, cemetery lot, outer enclosure, catering and much more in one easy step. Each family is given the simplicity of selecting the plan that fits their budget best, so that they can focus on what truly matters: creating a celebration of life.

Most people don't want to sit with us-dark suited individuals when death occurs if they don't have to. They would rather be at home with family and friends, reminiscing on the stories of that person's life and helping each other walk through the emotional

challenges. With the all-encompassing some funeral homes are providing today, the daunting task of selecting funeral details has been removed. Rather than the emphasis being on what casket design to use or what style urn is preferred, undertakers are able to now focus on how a family might want to tell about their loved one's life story. For example, rather than a nest of flowers being put near the casket in the funeral home, the undertaker could create a beach with mom's beach chair resting in it, hat hanging off the side and beach bag sitting in the sand. Perhaps even the grandkids' sand toys are there because mom's greatest love in her life was being with her grandkids at the beach. On the televisions throughout the funeral home is not the standard video of photos of mom, but the crashing waves on the North Carolina beach that she loved. Photos with palm trees and tropical flowers are displayed throughout the room and the Beach Boys' greatest hits playing in the background. The water cooler and mint jar are pushed to the side, and jerk chicken skewers with a Caribbean sauce is provided alongside mai tais and margaritas. It may seem crazy to some people, but more of the norm for others. Funeral homes out West are now offering full bar services during their visitations and ceremonies, reception rooms within the funeral homes for "after parties" and we have even found a StarBucks coffee shop located in a West Virginia funeral home. The idea with all of this is to provide that one-of-a-kind experience for families and friends.

With undertakers and family members now working together to design services, visitors are becoming more comfortable at visitations and ceremonies. How many times have you gone to a funeral home and had nothing to say to the bereaved? With this modern way of saying goodbye, you can walk up to anyone in the family, whether you know them or not, and start a comforting conversation amid the memorabilia, food, drink or a song in the background that reminds you of the one you both will miss. Say goodbye to the standard line of, "I'm so sorry for your loss," and hello to, "Do you remember when ..."

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