

Ask the Undertaker

By Ryan Helfenbein

Imagine if you will entering a facility and being immediately greeted by someone smiling who even made a light joke about the weather. As you make your way further into the facility, you can't help but notice that your favorite Summer vacation song is playing. Before too long a glass of red wine is offered and just outside an arm's reach is a table filled with fresh fruit, gourmet cheeses and homemade cookies. You look around after receiving your glass of wine and notice that there are pictures displayed along with a video playing that includes photos of you and your friends while vacationing together a few years back. Finally, as you approach your friends who are gathered in a circle talking about last Summer, you are met with a burst of laughter as they reach the final hilarious moment of the story they just shared.

Where do you think you are? A wedding reception? A high school or college reunion? Perhaps even a 60th birthday party for a good friend? Nope, you have just entered a modern funeral home and experienced today's version of funeral service. Yes, you can say goodbye to the low lights and a lonely casket surrounded by flowers in a darkened room with friends and family huddled together whispering with their heads down while elevator music plays in the background. Today's undertaker has taken on the challenge of *telling a story of a life lived* and has created a new means of saying goodbye. This modern-day method of grief therapy has taken the funeral industry by storm.

This concept is nothing new. Families have been doing it on their own for years by arranging for receptions at local facilities after paying for a funeral service. The funeral industry is finally catching up and providing families with a comforting ambiance with friends and family to gather with one another and share the stories of the one they lost. We are finding that in some areas, undertakers

are providing full service bars with acoustic bands, or meals that encompass everything from a Starbucks coffee station to gourmet appetizers.

Now what about those families that want to have the casual gathering, but still want to incorporate the traditional aspects in a funeral ceremony? Fortunately, undertakers have found ways to incorporate both and have developed answers to this common dilemma. Progressive funeral homes now offer "tribute specialists." These highly trained individuals take on the task of actually telling the story of the decedent and assist the family in personalizing what is being called a "time of shared memories" that is typically held at the funeral home. These specialists take time to interview family members on what they remember most, what special stories they shared and what they will miss most about the one they love. Through this time together, songs and poems are chosen, and family members become involved with this modern-day form of saying goodbye. During the gathering at the funeral home, friends and family are casually gathered in a room and the story of the one they mourn is shared. What is amazing about this service is that people end up truly experiencing all levels of emotion, from laughing to crying. It becomes a form of therapy that perhaps normally would not have been there. Most importantly, it involves you. It tells the stories that you were a part of and what you will remember about the individual. After all, isn't that what we want to hold on to after we lose a loved one – the happy times?

We have found that these modern-day "eulogists" can not only provide a one-of-a-kind, highly personalized service, but can also support clergy members who serve in

high-demand churches. In some churches today, it is required that eulogies be no longer than three minutes and that only one person be allowed to give a eulogy due to either religious custom or other demands for church's time. Now I don't know about you, but I know that I can talk about my loved ones for much longer than three minutes.

With progressive undertakers now providing "tribute specialists" with a casual gathering atmosphere, the personalization of funeral service takes place first. Then afterwards, typically the following morning, the religious aspect of funeral service is held. This is like holding the wedding reception before the wedding, with the best man and maid of honor giving their speeches before the grand kiss pronouncing the couple man and wife. By taking advantage of this new service, friends and family can take the time they need to share their memories, and still receive the comfort of a traditional religious service.

Yes, modern-day undertakers are taking a whole new spin on funeral service. They are working with each family to provide a highly personalized, one-of-a-kind, exclusive tribute to a life lived. Or as many have shared with me, progressive funeral service providers today are truly providing the option of putting some "fun" into a funeral.

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