



Ask the Undertaker

The Making of a Lasting Tribute

By Ryan Helfenbein

Undertakers have noticed the increased popularity of so-called immediate disposition services, when the body is cremated immediately or buried directly after death. No services. No ceremony. Obviously, we have examined this express means of disposition and asked ourselves why. At a conference of undertakers recently, I heard it explained best by a presenter, who said, "It is common for all of us to avoid something that we have never dealt with before, as it naturally generates a negative response in our minds."

We realize deep down that death will occur to all of us. Based on the heart-breaking feelings that are often associated with a loss of a loved one, it is natural for us to want to avoid it. Think about it: We see on TV families escorting their loved ones while grieving deeply in the streets of other countries. We saw the emotions of Whitney Houston's family while the pallbearers escorted her casketed remains from the church. Watching this outpouring of emotion often makes family members try to think of ways to spare their loved ones this sort of pain. They may think that an immediate disposition will accomplish that.

Fortunately, some undertakers recognize the value of a meaningful tribute to the life of a loved one. This is expressed by families holding ceremonies at their favorite pub or community facility rather than their place of worship. We are noticing more families incorporating special songs, photos and videos in the services they design today, placing less emphasis on death and more importance on life. We are even observing funeral establishments providing themed food and favorite wines rather than a bowl of mints and a water cooler.

Overall, we are noticing an increase in the way undertakers are providing assistance when someone experiences a loss – much more than just selecting merchandise and choosing a date for

the service. Let me share with you a few examples of how undertakers are providing these lasting tributes for families today and assisting in telling the story of the person who passed away:

A funeral home in the Midwest had a well-known local pass away who had a deep passion for baseball. Knowing this, the undertaker took it upon himself to learn about the individual and created a life tribute that actually received national recognition earlier this year. The undertaker used a baseball hat as the register book for people to sign, played "Take me out to the ballgame" as people left the church and provided each guest a box of Cracker Jacks with the decedent's photo on it rather than preprinted cards with a verse on it. This type of personalization placed the emphasis on the things the decedent loved so much, and provided a unique life tribute that will be remembered. It was a way to share this gentleman's life story, providing a sense of comfort for all who attended.

Another example is a little closer to home. Just last year, our firm organized services for a past president of the Maryland State Funeral Directors Association who also was a previous owner of a local funeral home. George absolutely loved the Christmas season and it was important to family members that they celebrated this time of year together one last time. On

learning this during visitation times prior to the funeral, our staff created Christmas morning for the family. We had an 8-foot Christmas tree near the front of the room and his two 10-foot nutcrackers standing at attention on either end of his casket. Mr. and Mrs. Claus greeted visitors as they entered the room, Christmas carols were playing in the background and guests were served punch and cookies. In taking the little bit more of time to talk with the family, we were able to tell George's story through the wonderful expressions of Christmas.

It is only natural to want to spare your loved ones pain, but it is important to provide them with an opportunity to grieve. Some unique undertakers today are stepping out from the way "it's always been done" and are truly helping families develop a unique tribute to a life lived. Be sure to learn about all options available and select a funeral provider that specializes in developing ways a life can be remembered. A quick decision may not be the right one. As my father has always said, "We only get one chance to do this right."

Ryan, owner/supervising mortician and preplanning counselor at Lasting Tributes on Bestgate Road in Annapolis, offers area residents solutions to high-cost funerals. He can be reached at 410.897.4852 or Ryan@LastingTributesFuneralCare.com



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