



Ask the Undertaker

By Ryan Helfenbein

This is the second of a two-part series in which mortician Ryan Helfenbein answers the most frequently asked questions about preplanned funerals from his customers and the readers of his column.

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•In making my arrangements, can I get specific as to flowers, or what I want to wear (I saw your orange dress ad), or music to be played?

We often get families bringing us music in advance so we have the songs they would want to play in the background and during the services. In regard to clothing, this is also true. We have closets in each of our funeral homes where we have individuals clothing that is to be used when they die. So yes, even if it is that orange dress you have so longed to wear, it too can be noted in advance.

• I might be eligible for a military funeral and burial in a military cemetery. Is there a specific funeral home that I'll need to go to?

Not at all. Any funeral home today can offer assistance with military services in any military cemetery. What you may want to consider is which cemetery and what service option you prefer. For example, if you are considering cremation as your service option, perhaps the columbarium at Arlington National Cemetery would be an ideal place for your remains to be inurned. It is wise to discuss the burial benefits with an undertaker in advance so that you are able to make an educated decision about which option would work for you.

• How long can my burial be put off if it's going to take time to gather the family?

I understand that many people feel the funeral ceremony needs to take

place in a very short period of time due to the deceased remains. Unless religious beliefs require a prompt burial, time is not normally an issue if a family wants to delay the burial. Through preparation procedures that undertakers offer, such as embalming and refrigeration, time is very rarely an issue. Therefore, there is no rush to have services right away, and undertakers can be flexible in allowing time for the family to gather.

• Who writes my obituary? Who contacts the newspaper?

Often the undertaker assists in writing the obituary and almost always contacts the newspaper to run the notice. The key question would be who pays for it and is it included in what the funeral home provides? The cost associated with the newspapers is included in what is called "cash advances" or in non-undertaker terms – outside expenses. These expenses are paid by the funeral home and then passed on to the family. There are no added fees on cash advances.

• I want to be cremated and I have some specific ideas where I want my ashes spread. Can this be made part of the preplanning?

Most definitely. When plans are done in advance, the notations can be made such as where cremains are to be scattered, who is to have them and even costs associated with the scattering ceremony can be covered in the preplanning as well. In addition, it is required by law that every undertaker provides you with the state laws regarding the scattering of cremated remains. This is a two-page document provided by the Maryland Department of Mental Health and Hygiene.

• If I have more than one child, can my ashes be divided among them?

This is actually becoming quite common today. These containers are called "Keepsakes." Keepsakes are smaller urns that come in many options. For example, cremains can be placed in small glass globe(s) that become night lights, necklaces, keepsake charms, wind chimes and even made into a diamond. In addition, keepsakes are also available in miniature traditional urn styles. Whatever you would like, I'm sure it can be done.

• I would very much like to have a celebration instead of a traditional funeral -- as in lots of good food and even a trio playing background music. Can I be specific and prepay this?

This is a very popular movement today. We are finding that families want to honor their loved one in unique ways. For example, some families can choose to conduct the burial service first, then hold a remembrance tribute immediately afterward with friends and family. This tribute would include a themed area designed around the hobbies and interests of that individual. It could include themed food, refreshments, videos, picture boards and in some cases even a martini or wine bar. Some funeral homes are even offering catering services so that all costs are covered through one's preplans. We've made arrangements for a wine toast to be done as the family gathered around their mother prior to cremation, a sunrise memorial service which included coffee and Danish on the Victorian style porch of our Easton funeral home, and another family has prepaid plans for a gospel group to come in and sing "O' Happy Day" at the conclusion of their church service.

If you're not making mistakes - you're not trying anything new!