

Celebrate A Life Lived

By Ryan Helfenbein

A few years back a large focus group was organized to learn about consumers' feelings regarding the funeral industry. Not too surprisingly, the findings were not so positive. It wasn't ill feelings about the lurch-like personnel within the industry and that familiar overpowering smell of flowers that are common in the viewing rooms. Rather, participants wondered why it needed to be so gloomy. It was interesting to learn that the majority of people within this focus group felt very uneasy when it came to planning a funeral and even attending one of a friend or relative. People simply asked, "Why does it need to be so sad?"

There is an old saying, "We should cry at a birth and laugh at a funeral." This saying truly sets the tone for modern-day undertaking. The point being, we should celebrate a life lived and share in the memories left behind. Yes, tragedies do take place, making for a sad and often shocking loss. But for the majority of deaths that occur, a life celebration is what many people want.

One of the reasons that this is not so common at most funeral homes is simply because they continue to do it the way it has always been done. In other words, some firms today unfortunately have the feeling of "why change, people are still coming to my business?" Well, living in a world today of "disrupters" such as Uber and Netflix, the funeral industry is now seeing a shift from a focus on death to a focus on life. For example, many traditional funeral homes still move a family through what I refer to as the "Three Step Death Process": first the family meets with the funeral home to make decisions about viewing the deceased, then they speak with the pastor to receive spiritual guidance and finally visit the cemetery to select a grave space. Through all three steps, the focus is death. This is not the way modern undertaking should be performed, and definitely not what the modern consumer wants either. Rather than concentrate on the last days of one's life, we should transfer that focus on the number of years they spent on this earth. Instead of focusing the discussion on which casket looks best, how long one should lie in state and what grave space is most suitable, let's discuss what that person enjoyed and how people will remember the deceased. Then, take that intel and transform this gathering time into a tribute, with food, music and memorabilia. In other

words, transform that funeral home from a place of sadness to a life celebration, removing that uncomfortable "gloomy" feel and welcoming guests with fond memories of the one they loved.

Another aspect of this focus group's findings was the importance of what's known as a "keepsake." This is something that friends and family can take home and keep in memory of the one who has died. It was found that people want something that they can reflect upon, that ultimately reminds them of the loved

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one. I don't know about you, but a card with a picture of a dove on the front and a verse on the back doesn't really tell me much about my friend's life. The "disrupter" we are seeing here is fully customizable and personalized remembrance stationery. These articles of remembrance can be made into recipe cards, sports event tickets, drink coasters, baseball cards and that's just naming a few options. This even includes Rubik's cube-style cards that display multiple pictures of someone's life, with a tailored background and favorite

text. So it becomes a little more than a single dove and a standard verse. In addition to these stationery remembrances, there is a demand for keepsake tokens such as a thumbprint charms, which can be made into necklaces, earrings, bracelet beads or even pocketknives and key fobs. Glass art, gemstones and even "diamonds" can be made from cremated remains. More and more families today are choosing to remember their loved one with a keepsake sharing that person's life adventures and ultimately creating a one-of-a-kind experience for their family and friends.

Findings from focus groups can be some of the most important information an industry can gather. Getting on the same side of the table as the consumers and seeing things from their points of view is something that has traditionally been shied away from within the funeral industry. That is until now. Modern-day undertakers are listening to your wants and desires and change is here. Seek out these alternative firms to create a personalized tribute to honor a life lived.

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

