

## Blended Funeral Directing: Tips for Finding the Right Balance

By Lee Webster

Shortly after his hospice nurse left, Peter Findlay's breathing changed. His wife, Myra, and two of their three grown children, quietly talking to him and each other by turns, stayed by his side long into the night even after his breathing had ceased.

They made three calls. One to report the time of death to the hospice nurse who would be by later to start the paperwork. Another to Myra's close friend Susan who would activate the family's friend and church phone chain. And the third to Jack of Sawyer's Funeral Home, to let him know he could stop by any time to pick up the death certificate for processing.

The family dressed Peter, brought flowers and photos and mementos to his bedside, changed the ice that was cooling his body every few hours, and greeted visitors throughout the next day. Sometime during the wee hours of the following morning, Myra woke and made her way to Peter's side, sitting with him for their final hours together. They had let Jack know they were ready, and he had made the appointment at the crematory for them.

Jack had dropped an alternative container by days earlier in anticipation of the grandchildren and visitors writing colorful messages along the outside and inner lid. When Jack arrived, they lifted Peter into the casket and the casket into Jack's van, headed to the crematory to complete paperwork and help load him into the retort. Sean, the eldest son, played the bagpipes from the parking lot.

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Blended funerals, or home funerals that include professional service involvement like the Findlay's, are becoming increasingly common. Funeral directors like Jack are being faced with a business dilemma and opportunity simultaneously, as families leaning toward a more informal funeral experience request a different kind of service—one that taps funeral directors'

expertise but keeps the focus on family participation.

This is not new. In the early days of funeral service, it was standard practice to remove the body for preparation and return it to the family parlor where it would be waked for days before disposition. With the decreased demand for embalming associated in part with the rise in direct cremation, some funeral directors are offering home visits that actually bring back the opportunity for ritual and ceremony, providing a window for services that are often lost in today's hurry. While some families will continue to seek full service funerals, and some will opt for none, still others are looking for a middle ground. This may result in providing goods and services that might otherwise have been lost to non-service-oriented packages such as direct cremation.

Where does that put you, the funeral director? According to licensed funeral directors Amy Cunningham and Char Barrett, it could put you at the forefront of death positive funeral reform initiatives and practices that are rocketing into the mainstream due to the influence of groups such as the National Home Funeral Alliance, the Green Burial Council, the Funeral Consumers Alliance, and Death Cafes.

Barrett, whose business *A Sacred Moment* in the Seattle area has been in operation for over 11 years, explains it this way: "Funeral directors can indeed be successful by offering home funeral options, but it requires a radical shift in their own perception of what funeral service is—from directing to partnering, event planning, problem solving, and finding ways to surface meaning. It's about the relationship more than the services. It's about less emphasis on products, and more on services and possibilities."

She goes on to ask, "What's the most important thing you can do for these families? Help them ask the right questions. They may know they want to participate but they may not know how. That's

where you come in. Ask questions that steer them, starting with 'What is the most pressing concern you have right now?' Follow it up with 'What is the first thing you need from me?' And then let it grow organically. Home funeral families respect your expertise but are often skeptical about the process."

Cunningham, who opened her own business *Fitting Tribute Funeral Services* in Brooklyn, NY, to cater specifically to home funeral and green burial families, concurs. "They need and want all the benefits of your mortuary education, they want your professional opinion, but be forewarned, they may want to adapt whatever you say.

"They need your equipment—your stretchers, your cot covers, your car—so that they can—with you—orchestrate a regal, ceremonial departure from the place of death. They often need your cooperation in getting them the death certificates and transit permit they need in a timely way. They need your stories on what funerals you've directed have been successful in the past. They need counseling and clear descriptions of what a witnessed cremation may be like to experience. They need names of caterers, restaurants with extra rooms, registry books that are different from those at Barnes & Noble. They need your encouragement to take the funeral in an original direction—your willingness to play the music they like, help with the slide show, obituary, event planning.

"They want to see you as an authority in funeral originality and excellence. They want your hand on their shoulder from time to time, and your willingness to stand there and be with them through thick and thin. They want you to say, 'Call me, even if it's in the middle of the night.' They want you to check in on them and handle their loved one's funeral like it was the most important funeral of your firm's year."

So who are these families? "Primarily Baby Boomers," says Cunningham, "who were raised during the Sixties and Seventies recycle their newspapers and empty cans; it's their wish to tread lightly on the earth. So it makes sense that they'd eschew the harsh chemicals used in the

embalming process, skip the stained and polyurethaned casket of the past, and turn towards simple vessels that are unvarnished and made by carpenters they can speak to and identify with.

"They want to be in greater control of the death, a time when there's so much out of their control. If they don't want control, they want full transparency, and they all seek authenticity. These are people who came of age during Watergate. Don't expect them to go along with any set system; they'll want to re-invent it!

"Over and over again, I hear families say, 'We want this funeral to be real.' No pancake make-up, less hairspray and rouge. They want to accompany their dead to the grave or crematory. They want a transformative funeral in the hope that in engaging in the process, they'll feel better afterwards. They want to honor their dead, and go to bed the night of the service feeling a little proud of themselves."

What Top 10 tips do Barrett and Cunningham have for fellow funeral directors? Here's a starter list:

1. Don't try to pigeonhole green funeral families—they cross all age, regional, religious and socio-economic lines.
2. Don't try to sell them things they don't ask for, especially things that aren't environmentally friendly.
3. Don't try to justify higher prices for green privilege—chances are good they're computer savvy and already have a good idea what's what.
4. Don't assume that they are doing this to be cheap; they may have plenty of money to spend but only on things that truly matter to them.
5. Do recognize that place of death—be it home or hospice—and graveside service are where the family really wants and needs to participate, so offer ideas and options accordingly. Jewish families are no longer the only ones to request the cathartic act of shoveling.
6. Do focus on offering a wide range of services that allow the family to mix and match to create the right combination for

their unique needs. Examples: eco-friendly as well as conventional burial, services at the crematory chapel, witnessing the casket's retort entry, memorial services with live music, prayers and poetry.

7. Do encourage local artists and craftspeople to make caskets, urns and shrouds to offer in your showroom; gather antiques, fabrics, candles, baskets, and other home goods to pull out of your trunk when needed to help set the scene. Bring your portable Bose speakers and

iPads to play a wide variety of music spontaneously.

8. Do plan to use your time differently, not more or less than you would for a conventional funeral.
9. Do expect things to be slower paced—taking time to be present is the gift of the home funeral and is essential for the family.
10. Do embrace funeral historian Todd Van Beck's words: "Every home funeral I assisted with was a full service funeral."

The author, **Lee Webster**, is the Director of New Hampshire Funeral Resources, Education & Advocacy, President of the National Home Funeral Alliance, and former board of director of the Green Burial Council. She is the author of several home funeral and green burial books, and articles and interviews for various publications such as National Public Radio, The Boston Globe, National Geographic, The New Republic, Huffington Post, Qeep, Natural Transitions, American Funeral Director, FuneralOne, and more.

**Char Barrett**, licensed funeral director and owner of A Sacred Moment, and frequent national and international speaker on alternative funeral options, has been featured in The Wall Street Journal Magazine, MSCNBC.com, NPR-KUOW Radio, KING 5 News, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, American Funeral Director Magazine, Real Change News and FuneralWire.com. She is also a founding member and first president of the National Home Funeral Alliance.

**Amy Cunningham**, New York licensed funeral director and owner of Fitting Tribute Funeral Services, was profiled by the New York Times in March 2014, then named one of nine top funeral innovators by FuneralOne. She is an experienced public speaker, including the Open Center's Integrative Thanatology, Green-Wood's Crematory, and Park Slope Food Coop.