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Putting the Fun In Funerals

Entrepreneur Lynn Isenberg brings new life to death with novel, customized services that add some humor to the somber

By Michelle Dammon Loyalka

When it comes to spicing up the traditionally somber atmosphere surrounding death, Hollywood scriptwriter Lynn Isenberg has no shortage of clever ideas. For the lifelong golf enthusiast, she foresees an end-of-life celebration on the 9th hole, complete with glow-in-the-dark golf balls engraved with the name of the recently deceased. For the animal-rights activist, perhaps a soiree at the local zoo. And when her own time comes, Isenberg has already planned an outdoor showing of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

"Sometimes it's necessary to bring an element of humor to the table," she says. "Tears and laughter are twins, and we often can't cry until after we've found the humor inside the sorrow."

Isenberg's ideas are not entirely new: She stole them from her own recently released novel, an "entrepreneurial comedy" called *The Funeral Planner* (published by Red Dress Ink). In the book, Isenberg's protagonist, Madison Banks, is a serially unsuccessful entrepreneur who finally finds her niche in opening *Lights Out Enterprises*, a company that plans designer life celebrations and produces commemorative life-bio videos for clients looking to add flavor to their own final farewell.

GROWING TREND. In preparation for writing *The Funeral Planner*, Isenberg spent months taking entrepreneurship courses at the University of Michigan and learning all she could about the funeral industry. That's when she first realized that unorthodox funeral planning wasn't just a wacky idea that excited her friends and made good fodder for a comic novel -- it also had potential as a real, viable business.

She found that her *Lights Out* concept capitalized on two of the fastest-growing trends in the \$11 billion funeral industry: personalization and pre-planning. According to a recent study by the National Funeral Directors Assn., a mere 13% of adults want a very traditional funeral service, and of those who are interested in having a funeral of some type, 62% would like to customize the event, and nearly 75% prefer to prearrange their own service.

By the time she finished writing the novel this February, Isenberg had received so much positive feedback that she decided to launch her own real-life version of the company. In a rather complicated case of life imitating art imitating life, she not only named the new business *Lights Out Enterprises*, but also adopted the same business plan, marketing tactics, and strategic alliances that her character Madison Banks uses in the novel. "Rather than Madison Banks being an extension of me, I'm becoming an extension of her," she says. "And I hope I

can do her proud."

TALENT POOL. Isenberg isn't the only one jumping on the specialized funeral-planning bandwagon. Companies like Batesville now offer caskets with interior panels that can be customized with nature, religious, sporting, and other motifs, while funeral directors around the country provide a variety of commemorative video and slideshow options.

But Isenberg's comic flair and media background add a touch that would be hard for even the biggest names in the funeral industry to compete with. While others are still dabbling with what David Techner, director of the Southfield (Mich.)-based Ira Kaufman Chapel, calls a "cookie-cutter approach" to customization, Isenberg has assembled an advisory board and talent team that's something of a who's who of the entertainment industry -- including veterans such as Chris Fager, a member of the senior management team that founded E! Entertainment Television Network; Adam Taylor, president of APM Music; and Tamara Rawitt, co-creator of the TV show *In Living Color*.

To ensure that the Lights Out team produces commemorations that truly capture the essence of a person's life, Isenberg only works with what she calls "pre-need" clients -- people who can actively participate in the creative process. "What Lynn hopes to do is somewhat revolutionary," says Techner, who's also a member of the Lights Out advisory board. "She's trying to capture a person's life through their eyes and through the eyes of their loved ones when they're healthy, rather than when they're in an active state of dying."

VERBAL LINEAGE. One of Lights Out Enterprises' first customers, Santa Monica realtor Jack Susser, is currently brainstorming with Isenberg on themes for his 20-minute life-bio video -- a project, he says, that has got his whole family involved. Filming is slated to begin in January, but for now, Isenberg is still negotiating to get one of Susser's favorite actors to either narrate or act in the video.

Susser readily acknowledges that creating a grandiose tribute to oneself might seem a bit egotistical, but he sees it as an innovative way to chronicle family history. "People do family trees to remember who their ancestors were," he says. "This is a way of providing a family tree that's verbal, a way to let my grandchildren know who I was."

If it sounds intriguing, be forewarned: Lights Out services aren't for everyone -- not even everyone eager to memorialize themselves on film or with a crème-brûlée-served-casket-side bash. Life-bio videos cost about \$3,000 per produced minute, and Isenberg says celebration design can run the gamut from "modest to the sky's the limit." Frills like customized merchandise or appearances by major Hollywood talent are extra, of course.

LIFE CELEBRATION. Despite the costs, Isenberg and her team are betting that affluent baby boomers will eat it up. "Yuppies are looking to reinvent every phase of their life and lifestyles, and this is yet another way to do that," says talent-team member Rawitt. "If we can personalize and customize a part of our life that we're in total denial about, I think that appeals to us on some crazy level."

Though it may sound like it's all about fun and the flaunting of tradition, Isenberg is quite

serious about bringing new life to the business of dying. In fact, the original inspiration for *The Funeral Planner* came at her own brother's funeral, when, as per his request, one of their cousins sang a cappella.

For Isenberg, it lightened the mood and enabled her to better cope with her grief. "It's important to grieve -- you can't get away from it -- but I think it just helps ease the pain if you can celebrate that life as opposed to being consumed in the mourning of a death," she says.

"EXIT STRATEGY." Like Madison Banks before her, Isenberg has already put together two guidebooks -- *Grief Wellness: A Guide to Dealing with Loss* (which she co-authored with Techner) and *Grief Tributes: A Guide to Life Celebrations* -- and she's now preparing a series of personalized-tribute workshops.

For her, the novel, the company, and all the other spinoffs she's working on are ways to help people find more meaning in life by talking more openly and planning more carefully for death. "I think what happens is, when you think about the end, it just makes the beginning and middle that much better," she says. "It's kind of like having an exit strategy in business." And Isenberg is simply helping people do it in style.