

September 15, 2005

**Coping With Death: Former Detroiters writes novel, finds business as way of dealing with loss.**

Byline: Kimberly Lifton

Byline Title: Special to the Jewish News

The Funeral Planner (Red Ink Press; \$12.95) was a way for Lynn Isenberg to avoid the vital grieving process. Her father died seven years ago, and her brother died on the same date a year later. Her father told only her brother the truth about the rapid progression of his illness, and Isenberg felt a bit guilty for not spending more time with her dad. The grief was too hard to face head on. So she did what she does best. At the shivah, she went to work, interviewing friends and relatives on camera, asking questions about his life.

" Maybe I was in denial, with no knowledge or coping skills on what to do," she recalls in a grief guide she subsequently wrote with Ira Kaufman Funeral Director David Techner. "It seemed to me that grief was some omnipotent force, and all you could really do was sit it out and wait for the pain to dissolve."

The book idea came a year after her brother's death from illness. While he was still alive, her brother requested that their cousin from Flint, a famous entertainer who wishes to remain nameless for this article, sing at his funeral. She did, and a guest suggested to Isenberg that funerals be more celebratory than sad. It was at that moment that Isenberg first flirted with the idea of penning her second comedy novel, about the adventures of a single, Jewish woman in the pre-funeral planning business. (Her first, 2003's semi-autobiographical "My Life Uncovered," was about an aspiring screenwriter.)

"In the beginning, I started The Funeral Planner to avoid grief," Isenberg says. "Then it became a way for me to work through it. It became a cathartic process."

## **The Novel**

The book features an ambitious character, Madison Banks who, much like Isenberg, is high energy, driven, full of ideas and never stops thinking up new projects and ventures. Armed with an MBA, Maddy leaves Ann Arbor for California, where she has trouble finding her niche.

It is only after Maddy comes home to Ann Arbor for a friend's funeral -- the second funeral of someone close to her in a year -- that she comes up with her winning business idea. Upset by a canned and impersonal eulogy for her friend, Maddy decides to start a business that specializes in custom, pre-planned funeral celebrations. "The story is about her business, her character, about how one challenges convention to understand personal struggles and how they mix with personal goals in our modern-day culture," says Isenberg, 45. "It is about how we learn to live

life by confronting our own grief."

Just like Maddy, author-producer-brand marketer-entrepreneur Isenberg, who was raised in Bloomfield Hills and lives in Marina Del Ray, Calif., rarely passes up an opportunity. "I'm ambitious and tenacious like Madison," admits Isenberg. "We share the ability to connect and market the dots that others don't see. We both have an 'on button' that never goes off."

Not surprisingly, Isenberg, who describes herself as an "avant-garde content creator and branded entertainment marketing strategist," is already busy thinking about her next book, production and business idea. In the meantime, *The Funeral Planner* is fodder for her own brand. Blending her research for the book (she audited U-M's master's of business administration program), her own personal experiences with loss and her creativity, Isenberg brought her novel to life by launching (for real) the fictional business she created for her book's main character, Maddy. "I figured that if I can dream it and create it for my book, I bet it could be real," Isenberg says.

### **Real-Life Business**

In the novel, Maddy's business gets into some trouble with the Feds. But in real life, Lights Out Enterprises is open for business in L.A., delivering customized tributes for pre-planned funerals. Catering to the affluent, Lights Out Enterprises designs and produces celebrations for the recipient while he or she is alive and well. "I wanted to diminish our fears around death," Isenberg says. "When we can talk openly about death, and get over the taboos surrounding it with our loved ones, we can heal ourselves and celebrate lives."

In *The Funeral Planner*, the protagonist works with a funeral director to write "A Guide To Grief and Wellness." In the real world, Isenberg collaborated with Techner to write a similar guide.

"She has boundless energy and works very hard, and I admire her for that," Techner says of Isenberg. "She doesn't pass up opportunities; she also lives to create them. Lynn really attacks this subject of grief, and she can't learn enough about it." Isenberg and Techner's project, "Grief Wellness: A Guide to Dealing with Loss," is a compilation of stories and lessons learned. E-books are available for purchase at [www.TheFuneralPlannerInc.com](http://www.TheFuneralPlannerInc.com). For Isenberg, Techner says, "This was therapy." "Closure is a misnomer," she has learned. "You don't ever get over it; you simply get used to it."

Lights Out Enterprises is just one of the many adventures in the life of Isenberg, who already has adapted *The Funeral Planner* into a screenplay and her agent is talking to Hollywood about a production. She is completing another guide, "Grief Tributes: A Guide to Life Celebrations."

And though she doesn't give away any clues about the plot of her next book, Isenberg has discussed another entrepreneurial comedy novel with her publishers, who seem excited. Isenberg also has some mainstream Hollywood film credits to her name. She produces, writes and markets programming for cable television networks, live events and the Internet. She also is the founder of the Hollywood Literary Retreat.

Isenberg reads from her novel 7 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 21, at Borders, 34300 Woodward,

Birmingham; 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 22, at Borders, Liberty and State, Ann Arbor; 11 a.m. Friday, Nov. 6, at the Detroit Jewish Book Fair at the West Bloomfield Jewish Community Center; and 6 p.m. Monday, Nov. 7, at Eagles Nest Restaurant on Clark Lake in Jackson. For more information, go to the Web sites at [www.lightsoutenterprises.com](http://www.lightsoutenterprises.com); [www.lynnisenberg.com](http://www.lynnisenberg.com); and [www.thefuneralplannerinc.com](http://www.thefuneralplannerinc.com).

"A Guide to Grief Wellness" and "A Guide to Life Celebrations" are available for purchase at [TheFuneralPlannerInc.com](http://TheFuneralPlannerInc.com). A portion of the proceeds will be donated to the Alicia Techner Fund at Temple Israel in memory of Techner's daughter, who died when she was an infant.

Isenberg's second novel hit bookstores this month.