

The New York Times

It's My Funeral and I'll Serve Ice Cream if I Want To



Harry Ewell's 2003 funeral in Rockland, Mass, was as personal as they come. He had driven an ice cream truck for many years, and mourners were treated to ice cream at graveside.

By JOHN LELAND

[Published: July 20, 2006](#)

ROBERT TISCH, who ran the Loews Corporation, had a marching band at his memorial service and a packed house at Avery Fisher Hall, all orchestrated by one of New York's most prominent party planners. Estée Lauder's had waiters passing out chocolate-covered marshmallows on silver trays. At Nan Kempner's memorial, at Christie's auction house, guests received a CD of [Mozart's](#) Requiem. Ms. Kempner had wanted a live performance of the Requiem, but the logistics — full orchestra, chorus and soloists — were too much.

At a time when Americans hire coaches to guide their careers and retirements, tutors for their children, personal shoppers for their wardrobes, trainers for their abs, whisperers for their pets and — oh, yes — wedding planners for their nuptials, it makes sense that some funerals are also starting to benefit from the personal touch. As members of the baby boom generation plan final services for their parents or themselves, they bring new consumer expectations and fewer attachments to churches, traditions or organ music — forcing funeral directors to be more like party planners, and inviting some party planners to test the farewell waters.

The planning for most funerals still falls to the nation's 22,000 funeral homes, which bury more than 2 million Americans each year, at a price tag of \$13 billion. But some families are beginning to think outside the box-provider, said Mark Duffey of Houston, who last year began what he calls the first nationwide funeral concierge service. For \$995 or a monthly subscription fee, his company, Everest Funeral Package, has helped several hundred families plan their final rites, providing concierge services that range from writing obituaries to negotiating prices with undertakers.

"Baby boomers are all about being in control," said Mr. Duffey, who started his company after running a chain of funeral homes. "This generation wants to control everything, from the food to the words to the order of the service. And this is one area where consumers feel out of control."

Multimedia



[Video: One Man's Funeral Plan](#)

What they want, he said, are services that reflect their lives and tastes. One family asked for a memorial service on the 18th green of their father's favorite golf course, "because that's where dad was instead of church on Sunday mornings, so why are we going to church," Mr. Duffey said. "Line up his buddies, and hit balls." Another wanted his friends to ride Harleys down his favorite road, scattering his ashes.

The biggest change, Mr. Duffey said, is that as more families choose cremation — close to 70 percent in some parts of the West — services have become less somber because there is not a dead body present. "The body's a downer, especially for boomers," Mr. Duffey said. "If the body doesn't have to be there, it frees us up to do what we want. They may want to have it in a country club or bar or their favorite restaurant. That's where consumers want to go."

Mr. Duffey has a suggested time limit for speeches: five minutes. "We urge them, 'Don't ad-lib. Get up and read it. It's O.K., people expect it.'"

Requests for unusual services, while still in the minority, have stretched the creativity of funeral directors, said Ron Hast, the publisher of the trade journals Mortuary Management and Funeral Monitor. As funerals move away from traditional settings like churches or funeral homes, he said: "we're heading in the direction of event planners. Forward-thinking funeral directors are bringing in hospitality like food." This can pose a challenge, especially for businesses that have done things the same way for generations, he added. "In New York and New Jersey, it's illegal to serve even coffee or any food in a funeral home," Mr. Hast said. "So they don't have the

comfort foods that people expect.”

Funeral homes do not always appreciate competition from entrepreneurs, whom they may consider interlopers, said Bob Biggins, the president of the National Funeral Directors Association.

“It’s not like planning a wedding or helping out with a reception,” Mr. Biggins said. “Funeral directors respond to families’ needs at any hour of the day in a short period of time.”

Mr. Biggins said funeral homes can do anything that party planners can do. At his own funeral home in Rockland, Mass., Mr. Biggins arranged a service for Harry Ewell, a man who had been an ice cream vendor. Mr. Ewell’s old ice cream truck led the funeral procession and dispensed Popsicles at the end. “If you call that over the top, then I guess I’m guilty,” Mr. Biggins said. “But our business reflects society as a whole. Today’s consumer wants things personal, specific to their lifestyle, whether it’s highlighting a person’s passion for golf or celebrating someone’s deep devotion to knitting or needlepoint.”

In the two years since he designed his first service, David E. Monn said he has discovered the biggest threat to a well-orchestrated event: the long speech. Mr. Monn’s business is organizing high-end events like museum galas or society benefits, but recently he has planned eight or nine funerals at the request of friends, including those of Henry A. Grunwald, the former editor of Time magazine, and A. M. Rosenthal, the former executive editor of The New York Times. Funerals, he said, require a firm hand.

“I have a pet peeve,” he said. “No more than three minutes. It doesn’t matter how much you loved someone, after you’ve heard someone drone on for five minutes you’re annoyed. It’s about poignant moments. Maudlin is not poignant.”

Mr. Monn said that another challenge with funerals is that attendance can be unpredictable, especially those open to the public. “You never know if it’s going to be 20 people or 2,000,” he said. “Last year I did a funeral for a very young man on July 4th. It was a guessing game, would anyone come? Lo and behold, close to 1,500 people showed up. The church was packed.”

The matter of seating arrangements can also be sticky, he said. “People feel their place in life means where they sit at someone’s funeral,” he said. “It’s staggering to me, actually.”

Lynn Isenberg, a writer and entrepreneur, had never heard of funeral planners or concierges when she attended funerals for her father and brother in 1998 and 1999. But the different experiences of the two funerals gave her an idea for a novel. She called it “The Funeral Planner,” and it was about a young woman who found a niche doing you know what.

Ms. Isenberg is now developing a television pilot based on the book for the Lifetime channel, she said, and is under contract to write two more novels using the funeral planner character.

The book, in turn, gave her another idea: to start her own business, Lights Out Enterprises, in Venice Beach, Calif., which helps people plan their own funerals, with emphasis on the tribute

video, which she calls a “spiritual biography.”

“I’m not talking about doing away with the grieving process, but I do think, why not experience a funeral service where you get to really know a person?” she said.

Though most clients want simple services, she said, one asked her for “an all-out disco party on top of their favorite mountain, with 360-degree views,” in order to remind friends of a happy period in their lives together. “And they want everyone to come dressed up in disco outfits.” For a former auctioneer, she recommended printing select words from the eulogy on auction paddles, so people could hold them up during the service.

“I see the day where our mainstream celebrities would make appearances at funerals to enhance the service,” she said.

Joshua Slocum, the executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance (www.funerals.org), a nonprofit group, said that though people have more choices than ever, they often end up paying more than necessary for things they don’t want or could do themselves. “This isn’t rocket science,” he said. “It’s less expensive and more satisfying if you do it yourself rather than write a check to a third party.”

He added, “I’ve seen places advertise that they do Webcasts of the funeral. We get 10,000 calls a year from people, and no one’s ever said they wanted that.”

But for some, including Jack Susser, a real estate agent in Santa Monica, Calif., the sendoff can have benefits now. Mr. Susser, who is 57 and healthy, hired Ms. Isenberg to create a tribute video so that his future grandchildren and great-grandchildren could know his life in ways he’d never known his grandparents’. Ms. Isenberg developed a 20-minute video called “Jack the Mensch,” with an original script, professional actors, animation and a \$75,000 budget. The lead characters are Mr. Susser and a talking fish.

“At first I felt the title made me out to be too good,” Mr. Susser said. But creating the video helped him appreciate his life, he said. And as a former actor, he saw a surprising upside to the death business.

“I’m going to use it not only for my passing, but at my 60th birthday party,” he said. “I may even send it to agents, because I think there’s good work on it. This is professionally done.”

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