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ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

► **Vetter** is a freelance journalist and certified funeral celebrant.

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Editor's note

The ICCFA believes in celebrant training for funeral directors and cemeterians who wish to better help families and to be successful in the 21st century.

In addition to articles by celebrant trainer Glenda Stansbury of the InSight Institute, ICCFA Magazine is running, as a regular feature, stories by celebrants about specific services they put together for families.

Contact ICCFA Magazine Managing Editor Susan Loving, sloving@iccfa.com:

- if you are a celebrant with **a story about a service** that the family involved is willing to let you share in order to inspire others

or

- if you have any **tips for conducting good celebrant services**.

How to become a celebrant

Becoming a celebrant involves more than learning how to conduct a personalized funeral or memorial service. Celebrants trained by the InSight Institute learn how to talk and listen to grieving families and how to work with funeral directors.

- The ICCFA University **College of 21st Century Services includes celebrant training** by funeral director and celebrant Glenda Stansbury and minister Doug Manning. Students successfully completing the course receive certification from the InSight Institute as celebrants.

ICCF AU 2013 will be July 19-24 at the Fogelman Conference Center, Memphis, Tennessee. Details will be available in the spring of 2013 at www.iccfa.com or by calling 1.800.645.7700.

- Contact Stansbury (glenda@insightbooks.com) or go to the InSight Books website, www.insightbooks.com, for information about celebrant training sessions scheduled around the country.

CELEBRANTS

Sometimes a celebrant needs to suggest various ways the family can personalize their loved one's service. Other times, the family has plenty of ideas but needs someone with the willingness and know-how to put it all together.



Brian L. Tan and his mother, Serene Lee, about to take a surprise charter helicopter ride he set up for her birthday to celebrate their shared love of flying.

A flyover for Serene at graveside

Since Southern California funeral homes have embraced the celebrant movement, I have attended some incredible funeral services and memorials that have taken my breath away because they truly captured a loved one's spirit in life. That was true for the funeral planned by Brian L. Tan for his mother.

Serene Lee had passed away unexpectedly. Brian was still a young man, yet he immediately went to work to organize an honorable, personal tribute for his mother. Most family members are overwhelmed when someone passes away and they don't know where to begin. But Brian had a vision he needed to fulfill for his mom.

I met with Brian and his father at their home, listening to Serene's life stories. The definition of "Serene" is tranquil, peaceful and calm. Those words set the stage for what would be an extraordinary, loving

service for an amazing wife, mother and friend.

While I oftentimes suggest creative ideas to families, this service was different. Brian came well prepared, and my job as a celebrant was to act as a guide to encourage the options he had planned on his own.

Brian knew the memorial had to be unique and special for his mom, and he made sure it focused on her life stories, highlighting her love of family and friends and her strong Christian beliefs. As Brian works in the film industry, he was extremely organized in creating lists so no detail would be forgotten.

Serene's life story

Serene Lee was born in Singapore and raised in Malaysia. She was a happy child, and also ambitious. She attended high school in England and was only 17 when she entered



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WE LOVE YOU SERENE/MUMEE. RIP WITH GOD!

The flyover at graveside. The plane is pulling a banner that says, “We love you Serene/Mumee. RIP with God.”

the University of London, earning her degree in economics. At the university, she met the man who became her husband, Kim Tan. The couple moved to the United States, and a few years later their only son, Brian, was born.

An avid reader, Serene read to Brian and also took him to the zoo, museums, beaches, car shows, aquariums, fairs, exhibits, parks and large aerospace shows. She and Brian shared a love of airplanes.

Serene’s goal in life was to see her son graduate from college and find professional success. After his graduation, Brian worked at DreamWorks and on several high-profile films. His mother told him, “Whatever you love to do, we support you.”

In return for her love and support, Brian enjoyed surprising his mother with limo rides, private screenings and elegant dinners. Brian noted that their shared love of flying gave him an idea to surprise her one year with a helicopter ride as a birthday present.

“One of the last things I ever did with my Mum was a helicopter charter to Catalina Island, a last memory that I cherish dearly,” Brian said. “Since she was somewhat of an artistic free spirit who lived and breathed the outdoors, I figured an airplane flyover at the graveside service for my Mum would be an apt, special tribute not only to our last activity together, but to her life, love and legacy, as well.

“Our celebrant worked on the ceremony, getting everything organized, and helped make the day go as smoothly as possible. Even though my Mum is no longer with us, I like to think that she was with that airplane, smiling down on us as we conducted a truly unforgettable, poignant ceremony that I and many others present will remember vividly till our dying day.”

Brian is absolutely right; it was an incredible service. The church service was personal and loving. We shared Serene’s

life story; friends spoke; Brian shared his personal sentiments and an amazing slide show of his mother’s life.

Brian had also employed a professional string quartet to play at the church and graveside services at Forest Lawn in Hollywood Hills, California. As the string quartet was playing the song “My Heart Will Go On” from the film “Titanic” at the graveside service and the casket was being quietly lowered, an airplane appeared overhead carrying the message, “We Love You Serene/Mumee. RIP With God.”

This surprise ending to the services seemed like something out of a movie. It was so emotionally moving, there wasn’t a dry eye, as everyone smiled through their tears.

Serene always felt God was watching over her. On the day of Serene’s service, it seemed that God was watching over all of us, bringing everyone together to remember her. □