



# WE WANT A PARTY

**She was dying.** Her hospital bed was set up in the sunroom of her parent's home. Her husband sat on one side, her hospice nurse on the other, and her parents, who had invited her to move back home after her ovarian cancer diagnosis, hovered in the background, helpless and hurt as they watched their daughter suffer the agonies of this cruel disease. The day I was asked to come to the home, she had just days to live.

So why was a celebrant coming to meet with a family before the death? They had some very specific ideas about how to have a service for this wonderful woman and wanted to talk about them while she could still have input and offer her feelings. They'd been referred to me by one of their friends who had attended a service I had the privilege of doing a few months before. She told them, "She will honor her life and tell her story. You must call her."



**Give families what they want in honoring their loved one's life but also what they need – a time to grieve before the celebration commences.**

I sat down next to her bed with my celebrant notebook at the ready. Before I could get my pen out, the husband said, “We are going to have two parties. One just for close friends and family, with wine, lots of pictures and music and people telling stories. Then, the next day, we will have another party for anyone who wants to come, catered food and wine, lots of pictures and music and let everyone tell stories.” He went on, “And then we are going to do the exact same thing back in Maryland, where we live.”

They were in their mid-50s, well-educated professionals, she a high school history teacher working on her doctorate and he a real-life rocket scientist who worked for NASA. Religion or embalming or traditional funeral elements were not even topics of discussion.

My first thought was, “So why am I here?” If a family wishes to have a story-

telling party, then they probably do not want a celebrant. I was confused.

My second thought was, “So this is the new face of funerals?” – people so determined not to have what is considered the expected funeral experience that they will bend over backward to not use a firm, not have a service, not embrace anything that feels funereal. *We want a party.*

As we continued to talk, I tried very hard to listen to what was being said and also what was not being said. It was clear that the mother and father were really struggling with the idea of not having that one moment, that one experience that they could call a funeral service for their daughter. The son-in-law was adamant that he didn't want anything to do with funerals. The woman who lay there waiting for the inevitable had no real opinion. She was focused on her pain and her breathing from one minute to

the next and truly did not care what happened, as long as there were lots of candles and some of her favorite songs.

I finally offered, “Stories and sharing from family and friends are wonderful, and those stories will be cherished. But in my experience, on down the road in your grief journey, I think it will be important that you have some organized and cohesive collection of memories, a life tribute if you will, that you can look back on.” I went on to explain that I would meet with them and gather all of the stories and put them together in a service that would share her life and her personality and her spirit. If they wished to choose a few people to speak in the course of the service, they would be an integral and coordinated part of the entire tribute rather than random stories offered from around the room. (Anyone who has been to a celebrant training can attest to the fact that

I'm neither a fan nor an advocate of "open mic night at the karaoke bar.")

You could feel the tension subside. They had no idea what to do, and so the good old "celebration of life party" concept became the only frame of reference upon which to build. But now they were hearing that there *was* a way to have a service without having *a service*. Here was someone who was willing to work with them to have the type of gathering that was meaningful for them while still being a professional guide who would offer suggestions and experience that would be important as they began to grieve together.

While sitting in that sunroom watching this exhausted, brave woman live out her remaining days surrounded by people who adored her and who would miss her beyond comprehension, it struck me: These truly are our next customers, the growing number of families that wish to use the funeral home only as a removal and disposal service. Please take care of the body because we don't want to. Outside of that, we see no need for you. You are so yesterday, so black suits and somber faces, so impersonal and disinterested officiants, so limited options and burdensome traditions. *We want a party.*

There are two grave concerns about this next phase of funeral avoidance as we consider the changing face of our profession that I hope we can consider in this discussion.

### **The Wedding Planner Isn't Just a Bad Movie**

Some of us are old enough to remember the 1950s and early '60s. It was a time of conformity, of acceptance by anonymity, of doing exactly what our neighbors did so people wouldn't talk about us. Weddings during those decades were all cut

from the same organza. The dresses were modest and always white, the music was *I Love You Truly* and *The Lord's Prayer*, the flower girl was a darling niece or the child of a friend, florists took care of all of the details, the reception was cake and punch and nuts, and everyone got married in a church. Those few daring ones who went to Vegas or eloped were certainly gossiped about in the grocery store.

Similarly, funerals were all very predictable. Everyone went to the funeral home, everyone was embalmed and buried, most had services in the church and then went to the house where the

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neighbor ladies had brought casseroles and cakes to last a month. A few brave souls opted for cremation, but it was so rare that most adults of this era had never seen an urn.

Then weddings began to change. The songs evolved from John Denver to Bare Naked Ladies; the flower girl is the daughter of the bride and groom; the dresses have become bold fashion statements; receptions are sit-down meals with champagne and plenty of alcohol, which means that very few are held in churches; elaborate gifts and cakes are the norm; and ev-

everyone wants a destination wedding with a theme. And out of this metamorphosis, a new profession was born.

In the 1990s, event planners realized that there was a void in the wedding business. Florists had given up the role as coordinator, and the ceremonies – and budgets – were ballooning. Someone needed to step in and help these poor brides spend their money and realize their vision. There are now wedding planners in every city, the Wedding Channel on cable TV, a national Association of Bridal Consultants and multiple training schools for becoming a wedding planner.

Just as weddings have evolved, so have funerals. The implication for the funeral business is that people are turning away in droves from our beautiful buildings, our chapels with pews and stained glass, our impressive cars, our quiet halls, the same-service-different-day ministers and our dignified staff. They want a place to feel comfortable, to have the type of service that fits them, which includes an officiant who tells the story of their loved one, food, alcohol, multimedia pictures, good music and lots of time to visit.

I've heard so many funeral directors snort in derision at the idea of becoming an event planner. "I'll never do that. I'm a funeral director." Well, the fact of the matter is that we can quickly become as obsolete as the florist who refused to adapt to the changing consumer.

Sure, florists still sell flowers for weddings, but they are not an integral part of the experience and are not realizing the financial gains from the new reality.

Sure, funeral directors can still do removals and embalm or cremate bodies, but if we are not willing to embrace the new expectations of the families we serve, we can sit at home while the service is taking place someplace else with someone else running the event.

The question must be asked: What do we have to offer those families that completely reject any and all forms of our business model? How do we answer those families that ask if you can arrange for catering, for wine, for a place to have a gathering? What do we say to those families who say, "We want a party"?

Some readers can shake their heads because they are limited *at their location* by state statutes and regulations. But even in those states that allow food and drink in the funeral home, how many of us are

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truly taking advantage of accepting the role of funeral *director*? Have firms in states that prohibit food and drink been proactive in seeking out other ways to serve families or do they simply shrug and say, "Sorry, the law won't let us." Once we get beyond selling boxes, books and DVDs, how equipped are we to walk with a family that needs and wants something completely different than what we are comfortable offering? Are we allowing surmountable obstacles to be our excuse for not climbing out of the traditional chasm?

### Reality Show Candidates

The second concern/danger in this type of change is that grieving people really don't need a "party." Just like the family with which I met, they believe that the opposite of a boring, meaningless, impersonal funeral experience is a party. What we need to be ready to help them understand is that grief ignored is grief compounded and that it is vital to their mental health that they stop and acknowledge the death while honoring the life. *These families need a service.* They need a service that fits them and allows them to grieve in the way that is right for them.

I'm an avid fan of the *Hoarders* reality TV shows. There is an incredible level of interest and intrigue with this sad segment of the population that struggles with a debilitating disorder. But, contrary to what my husband says as he smirks while I watch, I do not watch these episodes out of train wreck fascination. I'm doing grief research.

You can't watch a single episode without hearing, "Everything was fine until..." until a baby died, until a parent died, until a divorce happened, until a trauma occurred. Each of these people suffered a loss of some type and none of them were given the chance to grieve that loss in a healthy and appropriate way. And so, to protect themselves from losing something again, they began to keep everything.

It has been well documented by a host of grief and bereavement experts that an ignored death becomes a problem death. When people are not given the opportunity – or they avoid the opportunity – to grasp the reality of the death and to say goodbyes in a safe and structured setting, there are huge boulders waiting for them on the road back to health.

By failing to help people understand the

power and importance of a personalized, unique and special service to commemorate the death, we are creating more people who might show up on reality shows. TLC and A&E are very grateful.

### And Now... What?

Our future holds a twofold challenge and responsibility: to be expert and vocal consultants on grief and how the funeral experience plays a vital role in that experience and to be expert and vocal consultants on planning events that incorporate all of the elements our new client is looking for.

How do we do that? Of course, given my particular interest, I'm going to say that the first step is to have funeral celebrants available to offer at all times. Whether you have a celebrant on staff or utilize independent contractors, using celebrants as your first option rather than your last-gasp effort will keep many families from walking out the door after deciding that you have nothing to offer. When they hear that you have a trained professional who will work with them to capture the story and the essence of their

loved one, they will know they have come to the right professional to guide them through their planning.

Second is location, location, location. If your firm isn't conducive to having events because of space or regulatory or staffing limitations, then become the expert on what *is* available in your city. Where are the event centers, the hotel ballrooms, the wedding chapels, the open-air spots where a tribute service could be held? What equipment do we need to have in portable setups for these sites? A projector and screen for DVD tributes? A self-contained sound system and podium? Do we need to provide seating?

What are the expenses for time, coordination and use of the hall or center? Who are the caterers we can work with or do we need to hire and train our own staff? What are the requirements for serving wine, beer or other alcohol?

Are we willing to change our vision of who we are in order to stay relevant and in business? Are we willing to change our pricing structure and how we charge for our professional services to meet the needs of the next generation? If we are

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not, then a whole new profession of event planners will be more than happy to step in and fill that void. Just ask your florists.

### One Week Later

Exactly a week after I met with the family, the woman died. I went back to the house and they shared the endearing and special stories of this adventurous and amazing daughter, wife and mother. We discussed what they wanted included in the tribute and they selected three people to speak at the service that I would incorporate into the eulogy.

They spoke highly of their time at the funeral home and the staff there but saw the funeral home's role only as the cremator of the body and dispenser of death certificates. They did not expect – nor did they receive – any other help from the funeral professionals they had chosen.

Then they spent three days frantically searching for a place to have a service. It was December 19 and many of the venues were already booked or were charging outrageous fees for the use of their facility. Since the family knew the funeral home did not have the ability to do what they wanted, they were on their own to

navigate the waters of putting together the event. Finally, they decided to hold it at a friend's home on a Sunday evening.

The family and friends put together a DVD that was played. They glued together

**Are we willing to change our vision of who we are in order to meet the needs of the next generation, to stay relevant and in business?**

er a picture board and borrowed an easel from a friend. They went to Kinko's and printed service folders on purple paper, her favorite color. They brought snowmen to hand out to all of the attendees. They hired caterers and purchased cases of wine. They took care of every detail, believing this was their only option.

That night, about 60 people arrived and crowded together in the various rooms so they could hear and try to see the service. It was not ideal – it was a little uncomfortable – but I stood up in front of the fire-

place in the den, with family and friends sitting on couches and chairs around the house, and we had a service that told the story of Liz. We lit candles, honored her life and acknowledged the pain of the loss; two of her friends briefly spoke about her touch on their lives; and I closed by giving everyone a word-find game with important words from Liz's life experiences.

After our time together, which took about 40 minutes, the caterers served dinner, the wine flowed and they all shared stories over the rest of the evening. Before I left, the husband and mother both hugged me and said that it was exactly what they had hoped for.

A few days later, the mother of the deceased called. She said, "I just have to tell you how perfect that service was. It was elegant and so much more than I expected." I was a bit impressed – I'd never been called elegant before! But what she was trying to say was the service flowed together, made sense, told the story and captured memories in a way that will be meaningful for her in the hard days and weeks to come in a way a random smattering of stories over dinner could not.

They *thought they wanted a party*, but what they *needed* was a sacred space of remembrance *before* the party. That's the missing element and the one piece we as funeral professionals can offer.

Just as the wedding of today is not how your mother or grandmother got married, this is no longer your grandfather's funeral business. We must find out what our customers need and want and then find a way to fulfill it or we will be alone in our beautiful buildings, with empty pews and unemployed staff and driving around without purpose in our impressive cars while families are having services without us and paying someone else to plan the event. It's up to us to decide how this party ends. ★

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