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ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

►Haddon has been in funeral service for more than 30 years and has been a Certified Celebrant since 2001. As a celebrant, she has performed nearly 1,000 services, for as few as five and as many as 1,500 attendees, and recently began performing weddings. She lives and works in the Pacific Northwest on Puget Sound.

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 In-Sight 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@iccf.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 celebrant Glenda Stansbury and former minister Doug Manning of the In-Sight 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.**

Details will be available in the spring of 2015 at www.iccfa.com or by calling 1.800.645.7700.

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

CELEBRANTS

Every service should “wow” the audience, whether it’s for an Olympic medal winner, a successful Native American entrepreneur or a grandmother who baked the best chocolate chip cookies.

A celebrant’s goal: Wow! Every family, every service

Many years ago, I worked as a sales rep for Batesville Casket Co. At the time, our focus was on convincing funeral directors that a service should provide an “experience.” We had studies and articles, even provided speakers for conventions that backed up our promotion. Some funeral homes accepted the idea, but it wasn’t until celebrants became popular that “experience-based” services really took off.

It has been my goal, as well as the goal of the funeral homes I work with, to “knock it out of the park” and provide “wow” experiences for families and attendees. A couple of recent services I have conducted provide great examples of the “wow” factor.

Special ceremonies

The first service was for a 1948 Olympian, a famous down-hill ski racer from Austria. He had been captured by the Russians and held as a prisoner of war for four years, escaping in early 1945, walking 1,000 kilometers home to Austria. Three years later, after recovering from injuries suffered in the war, he competed in the Olympics, winning a silver medal—his country’s first medal in down-hill racing.

After immigrating to the United States, he had become a successful businessman in Washington state, and was quite the legend on the mountain. His service drew people from his childhood, his racing days and local businessmen who admired how far he had come in his 92 years on earth. The timing was eerie, as his service was held during the buildup to the Winter Olympics in Sochi, which would take place two weeks later.

After welcoming the crowd and recognizing the family, I began the service with a short recap of the race that won him the silver medal. Due to WWII, the games had not convened for 12 years. In 1948, 28 nations gathered in St. Moritz for the festivities. As I vividly described that day, the

race and his number finally being called, the emotions could be felt in the room.

I built on the excitement, speaking louder and louder as the description of the end of the race peaked. The “wow” happened as the description of his run heightened and the Olympic theme song began in the background; it was truly awesome! The smiles on the faces of his family and friends were gratifying—a home run for sure.

During the sharing time, a slightly built, heavily accented, older gentlemen dressed in his lederhosen stood, took the microphone from me and said, “I’ve been to a lot of funerals and I have never been to one so good. Thank you for giving my friend such a wonderful send-off.” The entire crowd provided a rousing ovation of applause. All I could do was blush. I was thrilled; this was a “wow” moment for me.

The second service was for a Native American. His tribe was Sioux, originally from the Dakotas. He was an extremely successful entrepreneur and inventor, holding 25 patents.

His family had not celebrated their Native American heritage until recent years. As with many Native American families, his parents’ generation had dealt with and overcome much discrimination. They didn’t want their children to be treated in the same manner, so they ignored their heritage for a long time.

This service began with a purification ceremony. The three remaining brothers of the deceased carried smoking sweet grass bundles all the way around the room (we were in a yacht club on the water) as we played the Cherokee rendition of “Amazing Grace.”

The purification ceremony cleanses the mind both physically and spiritually of any bad feelings, negative thoughts or negative energy. It is believed that one must be healed of such things before one can help heal another.

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The religious element that day was provided by a Catholic priest who had served the local tribe's Catholic church for 30 years and currently works with the homeless on the streets of Seattle. A very gentle soul, he provided the invocation.

I chose the bald eagle as the theme of the service because there were many stories of the bird's relationship to the family. The deceased was the patriarch for some 60 family members, and the growth of subsequent generations was an important fact. I made use of the eagle's strength, majestic beauty, long life and the fact it is native to North America. Eagles mate for life; the deceased and his lovely bride were married 54 years. The growth of the family related well to the size of an eagle's nest. At every turn and opportunity, I wove the eagle's powerful imagery into the service.

At the end of our service, all five of the deceased's remaining siblings brought in a Pendleton blanket designed by Native Americans. They asked the deceased's wife and three adult children to join them up front, wrapped them in the blanket and held them tight as the priest performed a Cedar Blessing and chant around the group.

There were many tears. The priest then gave the benediction. The final element of the service was the showing of a video of the deceased's 12-year-old granddaughter singing "Castle on a Cloud." Again, awesome, another home run.

These examples describe services that were not elaborate or difficult to manage; they were simply creative. Celebrants naturally do what funeral and cemetery professionals have been advised to do for years: Think outside the box.

They do not insert a name in an otherwise standard service. They take the time to create and provide a real experience of celebration. It is my goal to "wow" every audience. Not every service celebrates a life as varied and accomplished as the ones I just described, but a grandmother whose claim to fame was the perfect chocolate chip cookie can just as easily provide a service that "wows" if you look for the chance to truly celebrate her life.

Can you imagine the response of people arriving in your chapel to the smell of chocolate chip cookies right out of the oven, coming from plates of cookies set out for them to enjoy? How about printing granny's recipe on the back of the memorial folder or on little cards inserted in the folder as a gift

for them to take home?

When people leave services held in your chapel, do they say to each other, "Don't ever do anything like that for me," to their loved ones? Or do they say, "Wow! Wasn't that just like Granny?"

Celebrant services provide the best advertising you can have—word of mouth raves about what people can expect from your services. These services do involve more

time and effort, from the family interview to the composing of the service, the staging, coordination of music and other elements such as memorial folders.

But these days, *not* offering celebrant services isn't really a choice, unless you choose to slowly but surely go out of business. I guarantee, if you don't offer families the choice of unique, personalized services, someone else will. 