

Chicago Tribune

Traditions Buried

As Baby Boomers Rethink Their Final Exit, They Are Reshaping the Funeral Industry. Formalities Are Out; Themed Funerals Are In.

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By Lisa Bertagnoli

Those who attended Violet Affrunti's funeral late last year left with happy images of her life. Those images, a montage of photos spanning from her childhood to adult years and set to music on a DVD, played during her wake, said her son, Chuck Affrunti.

The DVD was "the most fantastic, tasteful thing they could do at a wake," said Affrunti, 65, who lives in Niles. "It's unique and very moving."

Friends of Mrs. Affrunti, a resident of Florida until her death at 85, didn't have to travel to Chicago to view the DVD. It was posted online for a month after the funeral, allowing out-of-towners to view it as often as they liked.

Chuck Affrunti didn't make the DVD, post it on the Internet or come up with the idea. It was suggested to him and created by the owners of Colonial-Wojciechowski Funeral home, which has locations in Niles and Chicago's Northwest Side. The DVD send-off is part of a larger trend of funerals becoming less formulaic and more personal, said Mark Wojciechowski, owner and funeral director.

"There really aren't the traditional funerals you'd see 20, 30 years ago," Wojciechowski said.

Baby Boomers, who have changed the landscape of everything from music to marriage, are rethinking their final exit strategy and are shaping the funeral industry while they are at it. Out are formal ceremonies with caskets and somber organ music. In are cremations, urns and themed funerals. As a result funeral directors are looking for new areas of growth and are honing their event-planning skills.

"What you're seeing is Boomers colliding with an industry that hasn't changed in 100 years," said Mark Duffey, chief executive of Everest Funeral Package LLC, a Houston-based funeral-planning service. "They want it their way, not the traditional way. They may decide they want to ride their Harleys into the mountains."

In the Chicago area, one themed funeral for a fishing buff was held lakeside, complete with a final "cast off" at the end, said Don Kaminski, a Chicago-area salesmen for Everest. Another funeral, for a 60-something equestrian, featured saddles, riding boots and a small jump. Cremations also are cutting into the funeral industry's profits.

Since 2000, the nationwide cremation rate has risen to 32 percent from 26 percent and is expected to hit 50 percent by 2025. Because cremations often don't involve a coffin, a wake or attendance at the funeral home, they can be less expensive than a traditional funeral.

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Plus, consumers' funeral options have widened. Consumers can now buy coffins at Costco or online at sites such as FuneralDepot.com. And companies such as Everest allow customers to price-compare funeral services in their areas.

Chicago, however, remains somewhat insulated from wider industry cost-cutting trends. Nationwide, the cost of a funeral averages about \$3,900, according to an annual survey conducted by Everest. In Chicago, however, that average price tag is \$4,900, the second-highest cost in the nation, after Charlotte.

That's because of Chicago's strong neighborhood orientation, Duffey said.

"Families have used certain funeral homes for generations and generations," he said. "Because (the families) don't move, it acts as a barrier to price shopping," thus allowing funeral homes to raise prices.

"Chicago is pretty unique," Duffey said. "You don't see that even in New York City."

Chicago also remains fairly traditional when it comes to funerals. In other markets, particularly the West Coast, funeral directors are successfully offering eco-friendly funerals, converting viewing chapels to wedding chapels and planning elaborate funeral meals.

Here, efforts to offer non-traditional services are tamer. For instance, in addition to offering memory-laced DVDs, Wojciechowski last year gutted his Northwest Side location and redecorated it Pottery Barn-style, with more relaxed furniture and lighter colors.

He also is investigating the possibility of filming funerals and putting the live feed on the Internet, so those unable to attend the funeral in person can at least watch the proceedings.

"It may be forbidding cost-wise, but we're looking into it," Wojciechowski said.

Chapel Lawn Funeral Home, which is located on the grounds of a cemetery in Schererville, Ind., turned an empty space into a 70-seat banquet facility. The facility is a popular spot for funeral luncheons and buffets, mostly because of its proximity to the cemetery, said David Grabecz, general manager.

"We just put hardwood floors in, that's how successful it's been," he said.

Grabecz contracts with an outside caterer to provide food, with prices topping out at between \$15 and \$18 per person. Grabecz said he thinks the space, decorated with burgundy drapes, yellow-gold walls round tables that seat eight, has bigger potential.

"If it were larger, we'd be able to accommodate showers and things like that," he said.

He said the state-of-the-art funeral chapel, which seats 350, has hosted five weddings.

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But not all funeral directors are successfully offering new services.

Jeffrey Wolowiec, owner of Parkside Chapels and Cremation Service in Chicago's Garfield Ridge neighborhood, attended an event-planning seminar several years ago. Wolowiec said he thought he could use event-planning skills to help customers set up receptions but to date has used those skills only "a little bit," he said.

"I have limitations because I don't have a separate reception hall," he said.

Nor has he had luck partnering with an event planner, even though he contacted three.

"I saw no interest," he said.

Wolowiec also saw limited success hosting a grief group, a service he thought natural for a funeral home. The group, led by a professional grief educator, lasted for about a year and a half but was never well attended.

However, it is just a matter of time before Baby Boomers, who buy into convenience and customization, start demanding more services, said Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, author of "Remember Me: A Lively Tour of the New American Way of Death." The book explores "green" funerals, creative ash-scattering and other non-traditional practices.

"Boomers and others aren't unwilling to spend money," Cullen said.

But they are, increasingly, unwilling to spend on traditional funerals, which, said Cullen, were created by the funeral industry.

"The wake, the embalming, the visitation... these were not traditions that were passed down from our forefathers in our ancestral lands," she said.

"The industry feels a bit threatened, but they ought not to," Cullen said.

"You have to give people options. That's creating business, not taking away business."