

What A Way To Go

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By Lisa Takeuchi Cullen

When Jack Faria died in April after a long bout with lung disease, his wife threw him a party. To honor her late husband--a passionate Miami sports fan--Carole Faria asked the funeral home to re-create a stadium setting with Marlins, Heat and Dolphins paraphernalia. Jack's favorite putter, pool cue and family photos surrounded his coffin. The song *As Time Goes By*, from his favorite movie, *Casablanca*, played in the background. "I wanted a huge celebration," says Faria. "After two and a half years of difficulty, I saw the good times. It made me feel like he really did have a great life. I wanted everyone to see that."

The funeral is getting a makeover as a growing number of Americans have begun thinking outside the box, so to speak, about how they want to say goodbye to their loved ones. Not for them the weepy, organ-heavy ceremonies of their parents and grandparents. Funerals today are less about mourning a death than about celebrating a life. Custom-made coffins reflect the departed's devotion to NASCAR or deep-sea fishing. Harleys or Corvettes lead processions in place of hearses. Wakes are staged as garden parties and feature professionally made biopics of the deceased. Cremated remains are fashioned into jewelry, fused into artwork, and stuffed into fireworks for those who want an exit with a real bang. "There's not a cookie-cutter funeral anymore," says Michael Gill, funeral director at the Brady-Gill funeral home in Tinley Park, Ill. "People want to do their own thing."

The popularity of *Six Feet Under*, the HBO series about a family of undertakers, and the success of novels like *The Lovely Bones*, about a dead girl who watches her family from heaven, and this summer's *The Dogs of Babel*, in which an artist makes fanciful death masks, have helped give people new ways to look at death. Recent waves of immigrants have also made people more comfortable with diverse funeral customs. But it's the demographic might of the baby boomers, finally coming to terms with their mortality, that has sent the \$17 billion funeral and cemetery industry scrambling. "Boomers have changed every market they've come across," says Bill Burns, a funeral-services analyst with the New Orleans brokerage firm Johnson Rice & Co. "Why not death?"

In response, funeral directors act more like event planners, keeping prop rooms, offering video services and dropping words like "choreography" and "production quality" into their spiels. The Panciera Memorial Home in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., held about 100 nontraditional services last year, compared with just a handful five years ago. Valerie Panciera-Rief, the home's director of aftercare, has imported butterflies to be released at the end of a service, staged a beach party--complete with seashells and margaritas--for a late Jimmy Buffett fan, and regularly covers chapel walls with sheets of white paper on which attendees can record their memories of the dead. Jason Bradshaw, the second-generation proprietor of a funeral home in Minneapolis, Minn., has attended customer-service seminars at Disney World in Orlando, Fla., to pick up tips. "We look at ourselves as being in the hospitality industry," says Bradshaw, 28.

The younger generation of funeral directors is particularly eager to try out fresh ideas. When Tyler Cassity, 33, took over a 64-acre Los Angeles cemetery that is the resting ground of silent-film star Rudolph Valentino and mobster Bugsy Siegel, it had crumbled into disrepair. Now the site, renamed Hollywood Forever, is known for producing short documentaries about the deceased. In the on-site theater mourners can view the film in "kind of a premiere," says Cassity. The films are also made available on the Internet and as DVD keepsakes. "We live in a culture here in L.A. that believes, with enough trips to the gym and plastic surgery, death is something that can be denied or cheated," says Joe Sehee, the cemetery's director of new development. "Our philosophy is that death is natural and we have to understand it and embrace it--and maybe even have fun with it."

Debora Kellom, director of operations for Wade Funeral Home in St. Louis, Mo., works far from Hollywood, but she has embraced the new trend too. Kellom has designed her home's viewing rooms to reflect the popular pastimes of her African-American clientele. One is a TV den with golf clubs and a La-Z-Boy; another is called Big Moma's Kitchen and displays a can of Crisco sitting atop a stove, Wonder Bread on the fridge and a dinette table loaded with real fried chicken. "What we had been doing traditionally wasn't as meaningful," explains Kellom. Many black mothers "take pride in those Sunday meals, and that is what we celebrate," she says.

Some people are opting for a simpler approach. Babs McDonald, 49, and her husband Ken Cordell, 59, of Athens, Ga., have already bought plots in Ramsey Creek Preserve, a 33-acre South Carolina cemetery dedicated to environmentally friendly burials. They shudder at the thought of going the "conventional route"--being embalmed and then buried in a fancy casket. "Just dig a hole, put me in it, then cover me back up," says McDonald. Come that day, they plan to be buried dressed in jeans and T shirts and wrapped in cotton shrouds. Says Cordell, an environmental scientist: "I figure I'll just fertilize a tree or two."

Cremation is an increasingly popular choice for many people. Just a decade ago, only 18% of Americans were cremated; today, 27% are, and the Cremation Association of North America predicts that number will jump to 48% by 2025. That's owing, in part, to the swell of immigrants who practice Hinduism or Buddhism, as well as to the relaxing attitudes of the Roman Catholic Church, which began to allow cremation in the 1960s. Others are drawn by the convenience and low cost. A traditional funeral runs about \$5,800, with burial fees adding \$2,000 more.

Cremation costs about \$1,000. Cremated remains--called cremains in industry lingo--can be kept at home in urns, buried on family property (in all states except California) or scattered at sea.

Ernie Wolfe, an African-art dealer in Los Angeles, plans to have his ashes placed in a 10-ft. lobster-shaped casket. Custom-designed urns also provide distinctive resting places. But there are other things to do with the ashes. They can be melded into concrete "reef balls" by Eternal Reefs in Decatur, Ga. Or launched on a rocket by Houston-based Celestis to orbit the earth in a capsule. Or turned into diamonds by LifeGem in Elk Grove Village, Ill. Allen Lucas, a construction-company executive from Kitty Hawk, N.C., asked LifeGem to turn his share of his mother's cremains into .33-carat stones because "my mother was as hard and brilliant as a diamond." His two teenage daughters will wear Grandma as jewelry.

These newfangled death rites may make traditionalists gasp. But some experts see them as a positive development. "For a long time, people were removed from the process, letting professionals arrange these elaborate but impersonal ceremonies," says Sarah York, a Unitarian Universalist minister and the author of *Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death*. But she cautions that however people choose to commemorate their loved ones, they still have to deal with the loss. "You may want a happy service instead of a downer, but it's also a time to mourn and let go and grieve," she says.

Family members say festive ceremonies help that process. After Lourenzy Cosey, known as L.C. to his friends, died of lung cancer in St. Peters, Mo., a year ago at 62, his wife Margaret had him laid out next to a soda-packed cooler and his beloved barbecue pit. "He would barbecue at every holiday, the Super Bowl or for no reason at all, just to invite the neighbors over," his widow recalls. "He always told me he didn't want a sad funeral; he said he wanted something people could remember. People were talking and laughing. Everybody said it was different, but that it was L.C." --With reporting by Amy Bonesteel/Atlanta, Jeanne DeQuine/Miami, Jeffrey Ressler/Los Angeles, Sarah Sturmon Dale/Minneapolis and Leslie Whitaker/Chicago

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