



# Making a Difference

CYNDY NEILLY-SPENCE

**By fitting the best skilled officiant with each family you serve, you can influence how everyone remembers the end-of-life ceremony – and your funeral home.**

At a community gathering last fall, I began my “What’s New in End-of-Life Ceremonies?” presentation with this question: Have you ever been to a heartwarming end-of-life ceremony, one you fondly remember for the right reasons?” I was not at all surprised when no one answered yes.

A question was then asked of me: What would it be like?

I often tell people that a really good end-of-life ceremony is one you might actually enjoy as it unfolds, even though there may be tears. It’s one you remember fondly and talk about with people who may not have even known the deceased. It may be an occasion that you discuss at future family events as you remember the stories exchanged and share even more memories that come to mind because of the ceremony.

A really good ceremony lives on in the hearts and minds of those who attend. For a funeral home, a really good ceremony is the best advertising you will ever achieve!

The presentation touched on why expectations have changed, new ceremony options and how to make the ceremony you envision happen. Attendees described the session as being inspiring and informative. They asked how to connect with someone with the skills to help them have such a ceremony. A few specifically asked if their funeral director could refer them to an officiant with the skills to help them prepare such a ceremony. Unfortunately, my answer was... well, it depends. But I wish I could have instead quickly responded, yes, of course!

### **Each Ceremony Is a Marketing Opportunity for Your Firm**

Every ceremony held in your location or managed by you at another location can reflect on your presence in the community as an end-of-life service provider. Key family members involved in the planning get to know your staff. Extended family, friends and associates who experience the ceremony get to know your funeral home through their impression of the ceremony. A heartfelt ceremony that reflects

the individual being honored is a memorable experience for those who attend.

Your funeral home will get a positive halo effect from such a ceremony. People *will* remember!

By fitting the best officiant with each family, you can influence how everyone remembers the end-of-life ceremony and your funeral home. It's time to shift the mindset of the ceremony experience from just being a disbursement on your invoice – you know, the “honorarium” you pay to a so-so officiant.

Ceremony specialists such as celebrants are gaining a foothold in the market. We are skilled officiants who have studied ceremony design, can facilitate discussions in tense family situations, can prepare a professionally written ceremony and are proven public speakers who are confident being videotaped as we officiate a ceremony.

We will cost more than the average honorarium. But from an ROI perspective, our value far exceeds our cost.

Start focusing on ceremonies as marketing opportunities and you can make an impression with every guest, not just the family members you meet. Memorable ceremonies can become a powerful way to drive traffic and overall revenue to your funeral home. If seeing ceremonies as a revenue driver is too much of a leap in your mindset, at least consider the ceremony experience as a well-spent marketing expense.

### **Ceremonies Are Being Planned Separately**

As professionals who serve those who experience a death, this change is affecting both of us. We see it in the death notices – private arrangements, memorial to follow, tribute being planned – and they're all saying the same thing – the ceremony is being held elsewhere. It is likely your funeral home is being left out of the planning of the most important and highly visible aspect of saying goodbye, the end-of-life ceremony. When I officiate at these types of ceremonies, the gaps that arise, without the expertise of a funeral director being involved, are tangible, and it's a shame.

The once comforting “we'll take care of everything” approach by the funeral home just doesn't work for families these days. The heartfelt guidance of a funeral director is incredibly important to navigate the have-to aspects of end-of-life. Yet families want more – they need someone to enable their efforts and intentions. They want to be better informed; often new to the end-of-life planning experience, they want to know the full extent of their options. They need their funeral director to be the key resource for all things related to end-of-life passage.


### **DIY Ceremonies and Ceremony-Lite Events**

The do-it-yourself movement is certainly part of the trend for taking the ceremony away from the funeral home. People aren't just refinishing their kitchens and basements on their own. At the time of a death, they now ask, “Why not do it ourselves?” People figure they can do anything with the examples available on the internet – find a ceremony template, view a few YouTube videos and take an hour or two to pull together a ceremony. It only lasts about half an hour – how can it possibly be that tough to create? (Little do they know...)


The term celebration of life can also be associated with taking the ceremony away from the funeral home. In the original sense, the intent was to shift the focus of a funeral to honor the life lived rather than focusing on the individual's death and the transition of his or her soul. It was a good intention – at the start!

Yet the emerging interpretation of a celebration of life simply focuses on the “celebration.” A family will host a party-like reception where few, if any, words are shared about the deceased. To someone who might observe the event in passing, it could just as easily be a birthday or retirement party.

As end-of-life professionals, we know these ceremony-lite scenarios do not work. They do not assist with the inevitable journey of grieving the family is about to begin. They do not set the pivot point for family, friends and colleagues to transition to a life without their loved one at their side. They are simply not enough to begin the healing and they definitely are not events that live on in the hearts and minds of those who attend.

 *You did a wonderful job conducting the full event, and you spoke passionately and collected... something the rest of us couldn't do.*

– L.H., DAUGHTER

 *How can I thank you for all that you did in bringing the ceremony together so fluidly, respectfully and positively?*

– T.G., DAUGHTER

### **Families Need Professional Expertise**

Families expect to contribute and be involved at the time of death so they feel like they've made a difference. They tend to grapple with what they can do that will have a tangible effect. I firmly believe families need to participate in saying goodbye and that the most heartfelt point in which to be involved is the creation of the end-of-life ceremony. I also strongly believe that families need to have a professional guide the ceremony development, create the ceremony and then manage and officiate the ceremony experience.

### **A Celebrant-led Ceremony Could Be Your Best Social Media Investment**

Social media isn't just technology-based; in its truest sense, it is simply word-of-mouth opinions that cascade to others. Technology can make this happen faster and extend the reach of what's shared. But it's when opinions are shared person to person that they have their strongest influence. Word of mouth is one of the most effective ways to be introduced to potential clients. A personal referral from someone who has attended a memorable ceremony at your funeral home can be your best connection to a new client.

The truth is that in the minds of many who attend an end-of-life ceremony, officiants are the most visible representatives of your funeral home. They are the medium for your fu-

neral home image. This is wonderful when the ceremony is memorable – the officiant shows everyone that your funeral home cares enough to ensure a heartfelt ceremony.

Imagine hosting a ceremony where word of mouth cascades from the event and your funeral home is mentioned in each discussion. In effect, each person who attends a memorable ceremony can become an ambassador for your firm.

### How Does a Skilled Celebrant Make a Difference?

Each ceremony begins with a blank page. For sure, we do have a sense of a framework to guide the emotional arc of the

 *“You gave us a sense of control as we explored our options. That was so important. Thank you so much.”*

– R.H., SON

assure them that the ceremony is about their loved one but is really for them. We ask what would be best for the family and share examples of what has worked for other families in similar situations.

In an intimate family gathering, we ask questions about the deceased to elicit fond memories and life stories. The intent here isn't to get a chronological portrayal of their life but to create a “soul sketch” that will weave throughout the ceremony. With an understanding of who the person was and not just what they did, ideas begin to flow to share with the family. Then the magic begins. Family members begin to relax and smile; yes, there are still tears, but the creative ideas flow! Stories are shared about favorite times together, hobbies and what was important to the deceased. Now creating the framework for a fitting ceremony can begin.

It's not always easy. I remember a family situation in which I expected to be overwhelmed by input from five daughters at the family meeting. However, very little was said other than that he was a wonderful dad. Reluctantly, one daughter gave me contact information so I could reach out to her dad's brother. She was concerned about what the brother would say, but I assured her she would have the opportunity to review and approve of the ceremony in advance. Well, I can see why the daughters were cautious. Did this man ever lead a colorful life! I was able to create a heartwarming, ritual-filled ceremony that truly portrayed the essence of this gentleman. Commented the family: “Feedback from our family and guests was that they felt a true sense of Dad from the ceremony and that he would have been proud of the way it was carried out.”

This remembrance has carried on. A year later, I heard from the daugh-



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ter who was my key contact for the ceremony. "It has been a very difficult year and I still think of picking up the phone to just call my dad. I read and reread your service often. Your words summed him up so well and I am ever so grateful to have them."

My personal goal is that during the family meeting and development of the ceremony, the family will learn something about their loved one they didn't know before his or her death. I have never missed on this target and am always happy to hear in passing a conversation that begins with the words "Did you know Dad/Uncle Jim did that?" as I leave the ceremony space. This always makes me smile!

### **Families Aren't Spending Less at End-of-life. They Are Spending Differently.**

Families value saying goodbye to the person they have lost. As they drift away from the "need" for elaborate dispositions, the traditions of the grand casket, multiple days of viewing/visitation and large headstones are fading fast.

Celebrants are seeing a great deal of cash flow into the end-of-life ceremony experience. I've often been involved in creating two ceremonies for one individual – an intimate ceremony held privately for the immediate family and close friends is followed by another ceremony hosted for a far larger group. This is especially frequent when the deceased is highly connected within their communities. The ceremonies are often different in tone, yet both serve the need to help attendees acknowledge the loss.

Videographers are also becoming increasingly involved, ceremonies are being transmitted live over video connections and photographs are being taken, especially when extended family members are unable to attend.

### **Celebrants and Religion**

When staying true to the intent for the celebrant role, celebrants do not impress a faith agenda on their work. In this regard, a celebrant can be your most flexible officiant option. They are the best option to support families that don't want a religious ceremony, whose that may want just a

**Our Dad, an atheist, has passed. The family plot is in a Catholic cemetery. As a celebrant, can you officiate in their chapel? (Yes, I can, and yes, I did.)**

touch of religion or those that have multi-faith requirements. We can work with families of all religious, spiritual or atheist backgrounds. We will align our work with the beliefs and values of the families we serve.

### **So What's New in End-of-Life Ceremonies?**

Our individual response to a loss is as unique as our fingerprint. Families value the act of saying goodbye in a way that is truly reflective of their loved one. The power of a distinctive ceremony experience is that it is meaningful and memorable. Families will – and do – pay more for this type of ceremony experience.

The funeral home can be integral to matching families

with the best officiant to provide this special ceremony. You know what the families you serve want, and your expertise tells you what they need in an officiant. A good facilitator? Someone with a gentle touch? Someone who can ease family tensions and guide interaction? A person skilled in working with seniors? Someone familiar with the loss of a child?

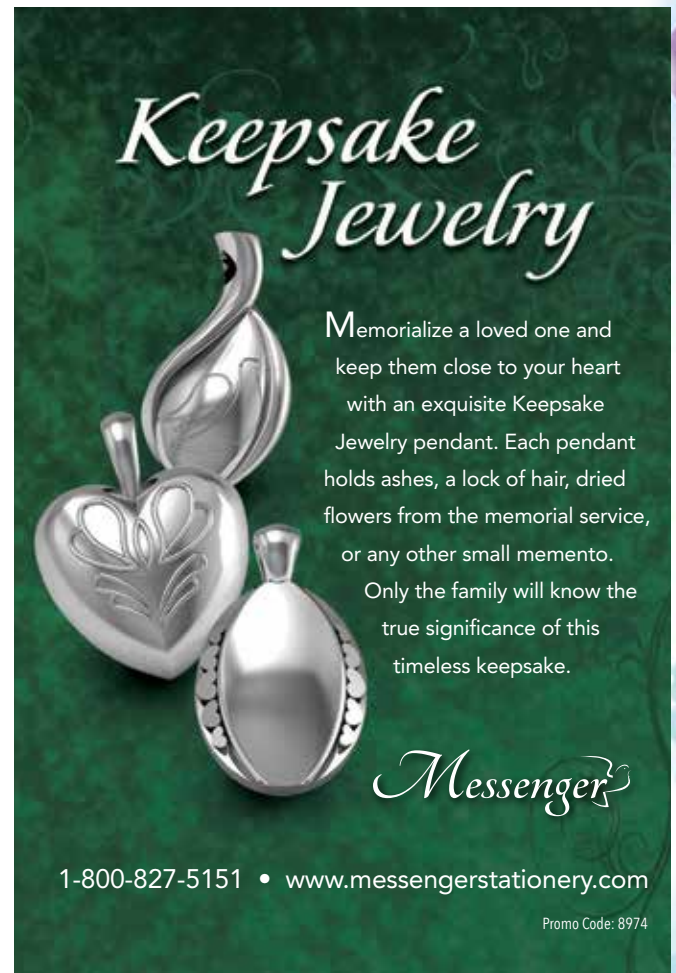
**You have an understanding of ceremony that goes to a depth I didn't even know existed. Your attention to detail has been extraordinary.**

**– C.T., SPOUSE**

Someone who will honor a family's preferences and support their values and beliefs?

When you match the best officiant to each family, your firm's reputation is enhanced with that family and demonstrated to everyone who attends the ceremony. ☰

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