

## Embracing a Loved One's Legacy

How a celebrant can be a strong asset to your funeral home.

“Within all of us is a varying amount of space lint and star dust, the residue from our creation.

Most are too busy to notice it, and it is stronger in some than others.

It is strongest in those of us who fly and is responsible for an unconscious, subtle desire to slip into some wings and try for the elusive boundaries of our origin.”

– K.O. Eckland

Don loved airplanes – watching them, studying them, talking with pilots and flying his own plane. He loved being in the rarefied air, testing the limits of his boundaries. But then, way too soon, he was gone from us, slipping into heavenly wings years before anyone thought he would... slipping into that rarefied air that only angels breathe.

This was the opening for a ceremony honoring the life of a beloved husband and father who died in a tragic accident a few days before Christmas. The funeral home called for assistance, and I immediately traveled to Don's home. Decorations, intended to be cheerful celebrations of the season, hung around the door, but they now served as a reminder of his absence and of sadness rather than joy.

I spent two hours with Don's widow and children, taking detailed notes on significant events in his life and poring through photo albums. Most importantly, I listened to his loved ones share their favorite memories.

The ceremony options, suggestions and guidance I proposed surrounded Don's story and his legacy. Were there mementos that the family would like to bring? Friends who would like to speak at the service? Would family and friends be willing to participate in other ways? Before I left, I caught the names of the three rescue dogs Don had brought home and learned that one of them might attend. Follow-

ing my visit, I spent 12 hours writing and pulling together the ceremony, including coordinating with the funeral director on music and a setup accommodating pictures, mementos and possibly a family dog. We even discussed a fly-over by pilot friends.

This is an example of how a celebrant can assist a family in their initial steps of grieving and be an asset to the funeral home by embracing the family and helping them to define their loved one's legacy. The funeral director remains the primary contact, but a celebrant can bring invaluable expertise to the funeral service team because a professional celebrant is trained to gather and honor a loved one's story and is able to devote time specifically to this purpose. The celebrant also picks up on family traditions, extracting this information from a detailed interview and follow-up conversations. Armed with this knowledge, celebrants write a ceremony that is personal and memorable and, if they're "worth their salt," they deliver that ceremony straight from the heart. After the service, attendees should be wondering, "How

long did you know my friend?"

Celebrants can often devote much more time to developing the ceremony than can funeral directors and clergy. This is beneficial since surveys show that it is often the ceremony that the family remembers most of all of the elements of working with a funeral home. Because the celebrant is a ceremony expert and is focused on the family's efforts to honor their loved one, the celebrant can be a tremendous resource. What they offer can even be attractive to those who initially think they don't want a ceremony at all.

The field of "celebrancy," as I am referring to it in this article, was introduced to the United States about 15 years ago through the Celebrant Foundation & Institute (CF&I; [www.celebrantinstitute.org/funeralso-memorials](http://www.celebrantinstitute.org/funeralso-memorials)). The concept and appeal of personal ceremonies started with weddings but quickly expanded to include funerals, which is not surprising given our culture of valuing individual expression and the decrease in connections to church or other faith-based communities that traditionally took care of marking life's transitions.



The celebrant philosophy is to serve people of all beliefs and value systems. In designing the spiritual aspects of a ceremony, celebrants follow the lead of the families they serve.

Life-Cycle Celebrants trained through CF&I have completed a rigorous seven-month training that includes coursework in the history of ritual, rites of passage theory, structure for ceremonies, world traditions marking life's transitions, symbolism, client relations, storytelling and in-depth study in one field, which can include funeral service. Graduates must also prove they can write well and are capable public speakers.

In more recent years, the InSight Institute has developed celebrant training specific to funerals and memorial services ([www.insightbooks.com](http://www.insightbooks.com)). In several locations around the country and multiple times each year, InSight offers three days of hands-on training that culminates in trainees delivering a brief ceremony. My employer and its affiliates have used InSight extensively to train funeral home staff to provide celebrant ceremonies in addition to their regular job duties. We have supplemented InSight's training course with training in public speaking, having found this to be a very important element of a successful ceremony.

There may be other sources of training, but these are two of the most established training sources for celebrants. They are different, and each has its benefits.

If you are considering adding a celebrant to your staff, I highly recommend selecting someone who has received the above-referenced training. I also recommend that you attend at least one of their services in person. Consider send-

## The Author's Celebrant Best Practices

- A personal meeting with family members to gather their loved one's life story, plus phone contact with family members or friends, as needed
- Unlimited ceremony consultations, as needed
- Research to incorporate appropriate symbols, traditions and rituals
- Coordination with funeral home staff (e.g., music selections and setup) and with all ceremony participants (e.g., musicians and speakers)
- Officiating at the ceremony
- Intentional public speaking so as to deliver an impeccable service of remembrance from the heart
- A keepsake copy of the ceremony, emailed to the family and also printed.

ing a current staff member to be trained or connect with a certified celebrant on a fee-for-service basis. Not everyone is cut out for this work, so take care in your assessment of who to use. As the number of requests for celebrant-style services grows, you will have people to turn to and perhaps even add to your staff in order to meet family requests.

You'll also require some basic materials to adequately explain to families exactly what a celebrant can do for them. Early in developing this program, I created a brochure that describes this program for our Denver market. We also offer a sample ceremony script. Funeral directors make it clear that each ceremony is different, of course, but showing even one ceremony's script immediately makes the point that the loved one's story is central. We also have a binder of celebrant bios and pictures on hand in case the family wants to personally select a celebrant. Provided that celebrant is available, we will accommodate the family's request.

There is reason to be confident that requests for celebrants will increase. A 2012 survey by Pew Research Center indicates that one in five adults in the United States have no religious affiliation; this group comprises 46 million people and is growing. Those who don't have a personal relationship with clergy might be more likely to need assistance finding someone to officiate a funeral or memorial service. It's worth noting that those who don't have a connection to a formal religion often nonetheless feel that spirituality is important to them. Many even have rather traditional beliefs or they fall back on these beliefs when faced with the death of a loved one. Offering the option of a celebrant could suit these families very well.

The number of celebrant requests is increasing; in my Denver area, about 185 celebrant services were offered through SCI Colorado Funeral Services in 2015, up 31 percent in comparison to 2014. Other regions that have embraced the celebrant option are also seeing increasing requests for celebrants. The reason is not difficult to discern – families like the personal attention to their loved one's story and find that celebrating a life can be an *uplifting* experience.

As you know, happy families return when they need assistance in the future. Those who felt that the funeral service was particularly beautiful and satisfying – a successful culmination of all that funeral home has done for them – are more likely to return to that firm to plan services for other family members. Some are now including celebrants in their arrangements both before the next

need arises and at the time a death has occurred.

To return to the story at the beginning of the article, our ceremony included several elements personal to Don. This particular family described themselves as "spiritual but not religious"; they weren't connected to a faith community, but they believed their loved one had gone on to a better place, at home with his Creator, and that he would want us to wish him well on that journey. Don's ceremony expressed that.

I told Don's life story, and other speakers added their personal perspective through a few favorite, meaningful memories. I also provided symbols and unimposing ritual that the family immediately grasped as relevant to celebrating the life of their loved one. I wanted to give them a new image of Don, at peace in his new home beyond this earth. They told me that the one place where this busy man was at peace was on the beach. So in front of the gathering, I made a symbolic beach by pouring sand onto a platter and adding appropriate décor. I placed a model plane like one he had made with his son, a tiny version of a favorite beach towel, a small cardboard cutout of a rescue dog and a paper parasol from one of his favorite beverages.

(In a ceremony for another family that also involved a beach as a restful place, the widower came forward to light candles floating in a bowl of water set behind sand and palms – a candle for each attribute he would always remember about her.)

With personal symbols in place, there was a look of relief on each face that had, until then, been lined with deep grief. Don's family was ready to release him to his rest. On behalf of his family and friends, with tender words of thanks for his life among us, we bid farewell to Don.

Within a week of the ceremony, a beautifully packaged keepsake copy of the ceremony arrived at the widow's home. I also emailed a copy to her to save and distribute as she wished. It has been my experience that this is very helpful to families because they are often not emotionally able to "take in" all of the ceremony details at the time of the service. But later, in the quiet of their homes, it can be comforting to read the ceremony word for word.

This kind of ceremony comes from intense listening to a family and a heartfelt desire to walk beside them in their hour of need. A celebrant can take this experience to a new level, much to the credit of the funeral director who has introduced a family to a good celebrant. Sometimes celebrant and clergy even work together, with the clergy handling the religious aspects of a service and the celebrant handling primarily the life story. There are also ordained clergy who have had celebrant training.

Whatever nuances a particular ceremony

might have, a celebrant provides professional expertise and a focus that can significantly enhance families' experience of bringing their loved one to rest. ★

*Diane Gansauer is director of celebrant services at SCI Colorado Funeral Services Inc. in metropolitan Denver. She joined SCI Colorado to begin the celebrant services program in Denver in November 2013. In 2014, her celebrant team completed 141 celebrant services; about 185 celebrant services were completed in 2015.*

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