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Alive and kicking

Funerals, like just about everything else in the 21st century, are changing to suit the personal and political tastes of the nation's 78 million baby boomers.

In recent years, boomers have been delegated with the task of planning their parents' funerals. And typical of boomers, they're making different choices than those of their parents' generation.

They're overwhelmingly choosing lower-cost alternatives such as cremation and personalized funeral services to celebrate their parents' lives.

Some are considering another type of burial that doesn't involve a landscaped cemetery plot. They're opting for the back-to-nature green burials in memorial nature preserves that are opening up around the nation.

Their choices eschew the long-observed traditional funeral service that included a casket, embalming, cemetery plot, hearse and a whopping price tag.

"Baby boomers want something different. They ask a lot of questions, where their parents did not. Their parents tended to go with the same funeral that Aunt Martha had or just go along with what the funeral director recommended," said Bill Burns, a funeral industry analyst with Johnson Rice & Co. in New Orleans.

"Boomers have changed the dynamics of funeral services by expressing the life of the deceased. These are celebrations of a life with music and images that pay tribute to the deceased."

The demand for cremations is a growing trend in the United States. In 2002, 27.8 percent of deaths were handled through cremation. They're expected to account for more than 40 percent of funerals by 2025.

"We're a more mobile society today than previous generations," Burns said. "People don't have strong ties to a particular community or funeral home. So cremation is a more sensible alternative."

The problem for the funeral industry is that a cremation generates only about half as much revenue as a traditional funeral.

The overall trend toward simplified, less expensive funerals has shaken up an industry still struggling with heavy debt incurred by the consolidation of funeral homes in the 1990s.

Nonetheless, funeral homes across the nation have embraced the trend toward personalized funerals by providing customized services in an effort to become more profitable.

Funeral directors will scan photos of the deceased onto a disk for a Power Point presentation during the service and create Web site memorials. They'll decorate the room where the funeral service is held with mementos, trophies, collectibles and other items that help tell visitors about the life that has ended.

"Theme funerals are one of the biggest changes in the industry over the past 10 years," said Bob Vandenberg, past president of the National Funeral Directors Association.

"Directors now suggest ways to personalize services. They're extremely involved in the planning process, along with the family, making sure that the deceased's life is properly celebrated," he said. "But this is not a cookie-cutter process. Each service is so different from the one before."

Vandenberg, president of Kaul Funeral Homes in Southern Michigan, recalled the elaborately adorned funeral service for a well-known butcher in the area. The funeral director had the man's shop recreated inside a funeral home chapel.

"It was the most elaborate theme funeral I've ever been to," Vandenberg said. "Everything was there except the meat hanging in the freezer. This man's life had revolved around his shop, and he had retired shortly before he died. It was a wonderful tribute."

But the bottom line is cremations generate lower revenues. A cremation may cost \$900 to \$2,500 with services. By comparison, a traditional full-service funeral costs from \$4,500 to \$6,000.

With reduced demand for the more expensive traditional services, funeral homes are streamlining their operations to maximize revenues.

Companies with four funeral homes in a city are shutting one or two facilities to cut operating and manpower costs. Some are looking at moving into smaller facilities better suited for today's services.

The worst seems to be over for the funeral industry. But there's more adjusting ahead.

The industry recognizes that boomers need the assistance of funeral homes and funeral directors. They obviously value directors who can accommodate their needs because they lean on them when planning their parents' funerals.

A strong sign that funeral homes have a robust future is that in recent years boomers have been prearranging their own funerals.

"They've been through the difficulty of arranging their parents' funerals," Burns said. "There are so many decisions that have to be made about funerals. Some can be very difficult, very emotional. They don't want their children to have to go through the pain."

Green burials, common practice in much of the country until the Civil War, are gradually regaining acceptance among the ecologically minded.

Several green cemeteries recently have opened around the country, including the 81-acre Ethician Family Cemetery just outside of Huntsville. Others have opened in Florida, South Carolina and California.

It's a simple approach to burial — no embalming, bodies wrapped in cloth shrouds and only biodegradable coffins made of wood or cardboard. There are no tombstones. A green burial usually costs less than \$3,000.

It's a burial option in harmony with nature and allows the body to decompose naturally, in keeping with the biblical idea of "dust to dust."

The nature preserves where green burials take place don't look like cemeteries and don't function solely as cemeteries. Hikers who traverse the rustic areas usually don't know they're in a cemetery.

"We're in the business of burying bodies, but that's a small part of it," said Joe Sehee, a partner in Fernwood Forever, a green cemetery planned for a 32-acre area of Marin County in California. "We plan to use it as a tool to conserve a million acres of land over the next 20 years."

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