

Nontraditional Funerals for Baby Boomers: New Trends in Funeral and Burial Services

Baby Boomers have never followed tradition, and planning their funerals is no exception. Those born between 1946 and 1965, a time when birth rates increased dramatically, have always wanted to do things their way. Funeral directors are anticipating, with a bit of macabre excitement, the exit of a giant generation. Because of declining death rates, the funeral industry has suffered. Longer life spans have certainly put a damper on death revenue. But at some point, the Baby Boomer generation will have a large impact on the death care business. And make no bones about it (pun intended) the death care and funeral industry is big business. Very big business.

The Baby Boomer generation includes 78 million Americans, and represents 29.4% of the total U.S. population, according to the U. S. Census Bureau. Just as they lived their lives somewhat off the beaten path, Boomers are also not going to be happy with "cookie cutter" funerals. They are desiring customized funeral arrangements, with personalized touches. (This is not your grandma's funeral.) You may enter the funeral home to the tune of rock music and a display of helium filled balloons.

The casket is likely to be surrounded by memorabilia of the person's life, including prized possessions, trophies and awards, and other items signifying accomplishments or hobbies. There may be a performance of sorts, including less than traditional music and eulogies. Many family members and friends are now replacing clergy as the main speakers at funeral services. When selecting caskets, family members may choose to add The Memory Safe Drawer, where families can place notes, special mementos, or the TV remote. (No kidding.)

As Joseph P. Kahn, of the Boston Globe, wrote in an article, "Taking the Grim Out of Reaper", Boomers will be literally "thinking outside the box." He writes "It is highly unlikely that they (Boomers) will go quietly-or conventionally- when their time comes." Hang onto your seat belts America, because you will need them, at some of today's funerals.

What can you expect? According to Darby O'Brien, publisher of a quarterly that tracks present trends, "Baby Boomers want to go out having as much fun as they had when they were here....Black will be out-black suits, black cars-as a general loosening up takes place. The Big Chill generation will go for "Stairway to Heaven" over "Amazing Grace." He further comments, "Everything the Boomers move on, they shake up. Everything they do becomes a style statement..."

Some of the newer trends in funerals include a favorite video of the departed, playing beside his open casket, on a wide screen TV. Many funeral directors have become "event managers" and video is playing a big part in that. Two plasma screen TVs hang in the funeral home of Robert Biggins, President of the National Funeral Directors Association. He comments, "If you told me three years ago, that I would have these here, I'd have said you're crazy." (Now he considers them essential.) Biggins stresses that the trends are moving away from expensive, fancy, morbid funerals with garden sized flower arrangements, black suits and solemn funeral parlors. He warns that funeral directors will need to "think more creatively" or face extinction. The focus needs to be on services, rather than products.

A teleconference on the Directors Association's web site suggested service themes. One was for "an avid cowboy or cowgirl who may want to ride off into the sunset one last time." A covered wagon replaces the traditional hearse, and mourners attend a barbecue after the service. Families today

are not focused as much on the death, as they are on the celebration of life. At his funeral home in Rockland, Massachusetts, Biggins arranged a service for Harry Ewell, an ice cream vendor. Harry's ice cream truck led the procession, and Popsicles were given out at the end of the service, at the cemetery.

Ron Hast, publisher of Mortuary Management magazine and the Funeral Monitor newsletter, said, "It's about hospitality and refreshments-comfort food." He mentions, that in a seaside community, "Someone may be cremated, and then people go to the Yacht Club for Sunday brunch, and to watch a video tribute."

A St. Louis funeral director, at the Wade Funeral Home, has won awards for his innovative idea of themed viewing rooms. One is called "Big Momma's Kitchen", and is a Sunday dinner setting, complete with a platter of real fried chicken on the stove, and a loaf of Wonder bread on top of the refrigerator. Another favorite themed room is a living room set with antique furniture. Family members can bring their own pictures to hang on the wall, as well as personal items of the deceased. The sets are constantly in use and have received an "overwhelmingly positive" reaction.

If you want to go out with a bang, the Celebrate Life Program will turn your cremains into a private, personalized fireworks display. If a heavenly send off is desired, at Celestis.com, your remains can be launched into Earth's orbit for \$5,300 or to the moon for \$12,500. The trip can be tracked online, as an extra bonus for friends and relatives. For college sports fans, WhiteLight, a Texas based casket company, offers models with school colors and logos.

If a traditional hearse seems morbid and outdated, Biker Burials, of Wrightsville, Pennsylvania, offers a custom-built hearse attached to a 2000 Harley-Davidson Road King, sidecar style. The company promotes it as "the ultimate ride for those in search of an extraordinary farewell." LifeGem will scrape carbon from your loved one's ashes, and make them into a high quality gem. A unique .75 carat stone costs \$17,000. Of course, there are many other choices available to those who would like to turn the cremains of their departed into wearable jewelry.

Eternal Reefs, a Georgia company, offers underwater, eco-friendly burial. They mix human cremains with concrete, and create "reef balls", which are then submerged. The reefs then become the living habitat of ocean coral and sponges. The costs range from \$850 to \$2,300. An even more intriguing concept has been marketed by a company named The Neptune Society. It has designed an underwater city, resembling the lost continent of Atlantis, where ashes of a loved one are used in the marble columns, starfish, lions, and other sea related artifacts. A video of the underwater cemetery features incredible architecture, and beautiful natural sea creatures. It will also be a tourist attraction for scuba divers and explorers.

Baby Boomers are also showing a preference for cremation. Many are choosing to have their ashes scattered across lakes, mountains, golf courses, or the ocean.

While not every Boomer wants to be shot into outer space, submerged as a coral reef, or made into exquisite jewelry, they are interested in alternatives to traditional funerals and burials. Funeral directors across the nation have acknowledged this trend, and are aware of the necessity of making nontraditional choices available. Some have even had their hearses painted in colors other than black.

Boomers want to be remembered in life, and on their way out. According to a survey, by industry leader Batesville Casket Company, almost half of them, want their friends and family to throw a big party when they die. Organ music is out. Jazz, pop, and rock are in, with the casket resting on stereo speakers, playing the deceased's favorite tunes. Funeral directors have become less somber, and more like party planners. There are actual funeral planners now available, with services separate from the funeral home.

From exotic dancers to tractor processions, today's funerals are anything but boring. And it's all about how a person lived their life, not how they died. Jeffrey Seeley, Batesville Casket Company Vice President of Strategic Marketing, sums it all up by saying, "Baby Boomers are truly shaping the funeral of the future. They're adding personal touches to make the ceremony a unique celebration of an individual's life, rather than the mourning of a death."

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