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US Funeral Planners Help the Living Go Out With a Bang

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By Virginie Montet

Washington (AFP) - According to funeral planner Mark Duffey, the trend is driven by the baby-boom generation born in the aftermath of World War II, many of them recently faced with the overwhelming task of arranging their parents' funerals.

Death for them is no longer a taboo subject and they are determined to do things their way, down to the last detail.

"They don't want to go slowly, quietly into the night. They want to go out loud, kicking and screaming," said Duffey, whose company Everest, billed as "the first nationwide funeral planning and concierge service," has helped organize some 65,000 made-to-measure funerals.

"They may not want a big fancy casket, but a rock band playing at a restaurant. They may not buy a huge monument in a cemetery, but they may make a very large donation for the wing of a hospital."

"Boomers want to have a personalized and thematic funeral that has some meaning to the person. They want to be remembered. They don't want to be forgotten, unlike their parents, the GI generation, who are much more conservative, and don't want to be a bother."

Honey Leveen agrees. She's only 48 and in good health, but has already set down in writing every detail of her funeral, from the type of urn for her ashes to the music she wants and even the caterers.

"We want to have a nice party. It'll be so pretty. It'll be held in a public park with fountains with a tent, and very good catering," said the insurance agent from Houston, Texas. And the music must have a water theme, she said, such as Beatles hit "The Yellow Submarine."

Why was she going to such trouble? "I love my family, I don't want them to have any stress."

Communication coordinator for the National Funeral Directors' Association, Jessica Koth, said many people wanted to spare family and friends the trauma of having to sort out funeral arrangements when already grieving their loss.

"There has been a dramatic increase in the number of individuals choosing to preplan their own funeral," said Koth. "This trend can be credited to aging baby boomers, known for their desire to control all aspects of their life and developing their own ideas".

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The increasing flexibility in funeral options is being helped by the growing trend for cremations, rather than burials. In 2005, 32 percent of the 2.4 million funerals in the United States were cremations, compared with 17 percent in 1990.

“It’s much easier if you don’t have to have a body there. You are not tied with a casket. You can do anything you want,” said funeral planner Duffey.

Negotiating every detail early and discarding some of the traditional aspects of funerals, can bring down the cost below the average 10,000 to 20,000-dollar (7,500 to 15,000-euro) price tag, he said.

And somber traditional funerals are increasingly being replaced by more personal celebrations of the deceased’s life.

“It’s about a shift in our perception, a shift in the way we approach funeral services. It’s a celebration of the life, especially a long life and well-lived,” agreed Lynn Isenberg, founder of Lights Out Enterprises.

The choices would seem to be endless.

“It may be a motorcycle tally through the woods, a fishing theme on a boat. You can do a party and it could be at a favorite restaurant, a park, a stadium where you played college football,” Duffey said.

Internet and video cameras are also popular. And online condolences books are now almost an obligatory part of every funeral.

“You are going to see in the next five years a virtual explosion in autobiographical video,” he added.

Earlier this year, popular US newspapers columnist Art Buchwald announced his own death in a video obituary released after he passed away, aged 81.

“Hi, I’m Art Buchwald and I just died,” he said in the video posted on The New York Times, which has also prepared several other such tributes.

Isenberg, based in California, hit on the idea of starting her own similar business after writing a book last year called, what else, “The Funeral Planner.”

“As I was writing the novel, I started to realize that this was a really good business”, she explained.

So using her experience as a Hollywood producer and writer she creates “original narrative tribute films for clients who are alive and well and want to plan ahead and do a video,” she said.

But this lasting tribute comes at a hefty price, around 20,000 dollars.

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