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Changing views on death spur new funeral traditions

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When 51-year-old Jane Anne Willis died in bed at her Greenhaven home in January after a long battle with cancer, her husband wasn't sure what to do next. So he invited the neighbors over.

"We kind of fixed her up," recalled her husband, Jim Gibson, a 50-year-old management consultant in Sacramento. "Before you know it, we made sort of a shrine around her bed, with flowers ... people came over. It was like a major informal event. They didn't take her body until midnight. All day, into the evening, people were paying their respects to Jane ... it was an extraordinary experience."

It's also emblematic of a whole new way of looking at death and its aftermath. As the baby boomers begin reaching the ages where they are burying their parents and facing up to their own mortality, they are creating their own ways of dealing with the avalanche of emotions that accompany the death of a loved one.

"When you look at the boomer generation," said Lisa Carlson, author of "Caring For the Dead," a consumer guide to making funeral arrangements, "it's the generation that demanded the right to natural childbirth, public breast-feeding and home-schooling their kids, so it's going to be a generation that makes their own funeral traditions, with or without a funeral director."

Those traditions cover a wide spectrum, from funerals via the Internet to



Mactavish, a West Highland white terrier, was seated in the front row at the memorial service in January for Jane Anne Willis, "his loving master."

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coffins that double as bookcases to having one's ashes hauled into outer space.

Many experts believe the changing ways of dealing with death have to do with changing attitudes toward dying itself, a greater awareness of it as a part of life. That awareness has manifested itself in movements such as the right-to-die crusade of Jack Kevorkian or the growing use of at-home hospice programs.

"So if there's a better way to die," said Tom Bruce, a psychologist and author who teaches a class in death and dying at Sacramento City College, "maybe there's a better way to grieve. Maybe we can develop alternative rituals that help people feel, rather than just cost quite a lot of money and leave you with no sense of any kind of healing."

Alternatives abound:

In Salt Lake City, an organization called Summum is offering to mummify people when they die. Calling itself "the source of all spiritual progression," the nonprofit group says it has signed up about 150 people since the mid-1980s, although none of them has died yet. The process involves soaking the body in embalming fluid, then wrapping it in gauze and covering it with polyurethane before putting it in a bronze shell and filling the shell with resin. Prices start at \$35,000.

For those who are planning a comeback, the Cryonics Institute in Clinton Township, Michigan, will freeze and store bodies for as little as \$28,000. "When future medical technology -- already in initial planning stages -- allows," according to the organization's Web site, "our member patients will be healed and revived, and awakened to youthful and healthy new lives."

And for those who aren't planning a comeback, Celestis Inc. of Houston will transport about seven grams of a person's cremated ashes, packed into a lipstick-sized container, into space on a commercial satellite rocket. Cost is \$4,800, and the company's fourth voyage is scheduled for September.

"Unless you're an astronaut, you're not going to get a chance to go into space," said Celestis President Chan Tyler. "This is a chance for ordinary people to fulfill a dream, even if it is after they've died."

Not everyone wants to go that far. For many, it suffices to combine the traditional with a little personalization.

When motorcycle enthusiast Joseph "Smoking Joe" Randone died last month, he was buried in a Catholic cemetery after a traditional Catholic funeral mass in east Sacramento. Arrangements were handled by an east Sacramento funeral home.

What made it different from most funerals, however, were the 40 or so Harley-Davidsons parked outside the church. The brigade of cycles led the way to the cemetery.

"Joe loved bikes, and we loved Joe," said Don Tucker, one of Randone's mourners who eschewed a dark suit for leathers and jeans. "This is our way of doing something that is something he would have liked."

Doing what Jane Willis would have liked was important to Jim Gibson. So was doing what felt right to him, which is why he invited friends and neighbors to the house right after she died.

"My informal wake for Jane was as important to me as the memorial service," he said. "This made the healing process a little better."

Five days later, in the chapel at Harry A. Nauman & Son, Gibson hosted a memorial service, which started with a bagpipe solo. Since Willis had studied classical piano, Gibson had a grand piano moved into the chapel, and Willis' teacher played selections from a favorite composer.

And seated in the front row, wearing nothing but a black ribbon around his neck, was Mactavish. Introducing the 8-year-old West Highland White Terrier, Gibson told the assembled audience: "Mactavish takes joy in regularly biting myself, and others, but he never ever struck at Jane, his loving master. In case you are wondering, no, Jane will not be buried in our back yard."

At the end of the service, a bugler played taps. Willis' remains were then cremated, and the ashes placed in an urn that Gibson keeps in the living room.

While Gibson used the services of a funeral home, Jeri Lyons did it herself. When Carolyn Whiting, a friend of Lyons, died in 1994, she left behind specific instructions that she wanted her friends, not a mortuary, to care for her. So Lyons and some other friends went to the hospital to claim her body.

"Most of us didn't even know this was legal or possible," said Lyons, who was then a Santa Rosa alternative health practitioner. "They (the hospital) had never heard of the request before, so they said they would need some time to check."

The next day, they brought Whiting home from the hospital in a body bag. Then the friends bathed the body, dressed it and had a service in the parlor, laying the body on a futon. They sang and gave little speeches and read things, played music and lit candles.

"It really helped with our healing," Lyons said, "to grasp that she had really died, to share our feelings with each other and to have a part in the ceremony and the process. For one thing, we had a lot more time ... it wasn't like there was someone telling us to hurry up because the next funeral was starting."

The next day, they took Whiting's body, still on the futon, put it in the van and drove the body to the crematorium, where it was placed in a cardboard casket for cremation.

A cause was born in Lyons, who today is director of the Sebastopol-based Natural Death Care Project. The organization has helped about 100 families conduct do-it-yourself funerals, which are legal in California as long as death certificates and body disposition permits are obtained.

"When someone dies, you feel so helpless, and the home funeral gives everyone something to do; you can participate," Lyons said. "The media portrays death so negatively, and that is the only frame of reference a lot of us have. So it is a real learning experience as well."

Lyons' group is believed to be the only one of its kind in the country, and the idea of complete do-it-yourself funerals is not exactly soaring in popularity: A spokesman for the Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services said the department handles requests for home funeral paper work about five times a year. In El Dorado, Placer and Yolo counties, spokespeople said it occurred no more than once or twice a year.

Even if at-home funerals are no economic threat, the funeral industry is still well aware that the tastes of its seemingly unlimited supply of potential customers are changing.

Anyone doubting that wasn't at Death Care World Expo '99, an afterlife

exposition in Reno last month that featured exhibits of products from hearses to embalming tools and seminars such as "OSHA-Proof Your Funeral Home."

There were booths for caskets, funeral home financial help, clothes for the deceased, cremation urns that looked like toasters, metal body trays, flag cases, organs (the musical kind), Bibles and polystyrene headrests.

"The days of formula funerals are over," said Bruce Humphrey, the outgoing president of the International Order of the Golden Rule, the association of independently owned funeral homes that sponsored the expo.

"If you talk to funeral directors, they will tell you that no two funerals are alike these days ... more and more, people want to make a personal statement at funerals."

That's reflected in the cornucopia of caskets and urns being offered as vehicles for one's final departure. A Dallas company is customizing coffins by laminating color designs or photographs on the exterior. Batesville, the country's largest casket manufacturer, is offering "interior options," which are panels that go on the inside of the coffin and commemorate a particular interest of the departed, such as duck hunting or golf.

Discount Urns.com, a Virginia-based company that sells cremation urns via the Internet, has "memento urns" for sale. The mini-urns are designed to hold just a small portion of the departed's ashes, so they can be shared with other members of the family. And MHP Enterprises, a Canadian firm, suggests "reducing the burden of expensive funerals with unique alternatives," such as: caskets that serve as bookcases (\$995), sofas (\$4,495) and entertainment centers (\$3,495) until needed as final resting places.

Many funeral directors are embracing this brave new world.

"It used to be pretty depressing," said Dan Spolarich, manager of A.J. Nicoletti, Culjis & Herberger Funeral Home in east Sacramento. "Now a lot of families prefer to have more of a celebration. They want different music, eulogies, photographs, maybe a collage of pictures, maybe a video depicting the person's life. And this is true for the service with a casket, as well as for the memorial service."

"Everything used to be the same way," said Rita Morgan, who with her

husband owns North Sacramento Funeral Home. "Now it's a little bit more informal -- the way the family wants to do it. At a service the other day, all the grandchildren got up and did the hula. They all wore leis and they all wore Hawaiian clothes. It was very nice.

"It's not that people today are not sad; it's just that they're not projecting it like they used to," Morgan said. "But people seem not so depressed over the whole thing."

As with many baby boomer trends, the rush to "personalize" can lead to what some critics say is actually depersonalization, because the service is so isolated from communal experience. Several companies have explored the idea of showing funeral services on Internet sites for loved ones who can't attend in person. And at the World Wide Cemetery (www.cemetery.org), one can submit a text monument for \$10 or a monument with video or other media for \$15, and deliver verbal flowers.

But even keyboard eulogies can help fill the need for closure that is raised by the death of someone close.

"Funerals have been a way that people deal with their grief," said Al Murray, who with his wife owns Lind Brothers Mortuary in Carmichael. "You need to have some release when a loved one dies, to get beyond it and accept that they are gone, and funerals do that. We're humans, and it's natural to grieve, and this is how we deal with it."

And in the end, changes in attitudes toward death itself may be far more important than changes in funeral customs.

"We've gone to where death is coming out of the closet," said psychologist Bruce. "Death can be more humane, and grieving can be facilitated. Funeral services are more "come as you are" ... they're more a celebration of the life that was. People are standing up and sharing their stories.

"The song may be over, but it was a wonderful song. We're sad, but we're celebrating. In their tears, they're finding warmth, they're finding laughter. That seems to me to be optimally healing."

Jim Gibson agrees. On May 1, he will take half of Jane Anne Willis' ashes and scatter them from a hot air balloon above the wine country of Sonoma.

"The rituals you go through help you heal," Gibson said. "It doesn't matter

if it's traditional or not. It helps you."

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