



Click here to visit other RealCities sites

Star-Telegram.com

Our Local Channels → News ▾ Business ▾ Sports ▾ Entertainment ▾ Living ▾ Classifieds ▾

Help Contact Us Site Index Archives Place an Ad Newspaper Subscriptions

Our Site Tools

- Weather
- Dallas/Fort-Worth ↑88 ↓65
- Local Events
- Yellow Pages
- Discussion Boards
- Maps & Directions

Star-Telegram.com

- » News 2 Use
- » Fort Worth
- » Arlington
- » Northeast Tarrant
- » Dallas
- » Texas
- » National
- » International
- » Business
- » Tarrant Business
- » Sports
- » Cowboys/NFL
- » Mavericks/NBA
- » Rangers/MLB
- » Stars/NHL
- » College
- » Horse Racing
- » Motorsports
- » Sports Zone
- » Life & Arts
- » Food
- » Travel
- » Books
- » Home
- » Star Time
- » Opinions
- » Cheers & Jeers
- » Letters to the editor
- » Columnists
- » Special Reports

Back to Home > Star Telegram >

Thursday, Sep 26, 2002

Star-Telegram

Select a day: M | T | W | Th | F | S | Su

Posted on Thu, Sep. 26, 2002

Star-Telegram

Burying on a budget eases financial grief

David Casstevens
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

FORT WORTH - Davis Funeral Chapel doesn't have a snappy slogan, like "When The Chariot Swings Low, There's A Cheaper Way To Go."

But Bob Davis believes in advertising.

Right now, in fact, the funeral director is offering, to quote his newspaper ad, a "Free Casket!" with the purchase of a \$2,500 graveside or \$2,900 traditional church service.

The offer, like every human life, will expire.

So Davis urges smart shoppers and those for whom time is of the essence to call today, or better yet, come on down to the showroom and let Budget Bob put them or a loved one in a brand new 20-gauge-steel "JFK."

Davis named the model after the former president because he said it looks similar to the flag-draped casket that rolled along the funeral route behind the hollow clip-clop of a horse-drawn wagon almost 40 years ago.

"At other funeral homes, it's \$1,500," Davis said of the JFK. "I sell it for \$850 outright and throw it in the funeral package for free.

"There's a white one," he said, "for the ladies."

In another casket ad, Davis vows to beat anyone else's price or he will give the customer a headstone free.

Marketing always has been a sensitive issue for the death-care industry. Many feel uncomfortable in the presence of funeral professionals who console and assist the sorrowful and provide essential services with practiced ease.

In *The Loved One*, a movie satire about the excesses of American funeral rites, based on a best-selling book about the industry, Liberace is

Shopping/Services

Find a Job:
Look who's hiring

careerbuilder

Find a Car:
Buy, Sell, Trade

cars.com

Find a Home:
Agents and more

Real Estate CHANNEL

Find an Apartment:
Rental Listings

apartments.com

Classifieds:
Search our online
Newspaper Classifieds

Shop Nearby:
Your online source for
Local Shopping

Market Information



Stocks

Enter symbol/company name

Resources

- » Obituary Notices
- » Weddings & Announcements
- » Automotive
- » Real Estate
- » Star-Telegram Store
- » Press Pass
- » Events
- » Press Releases
- » Newspapers in Education
- » Photo Sales
- » Employment Opportunities
- » Reprints & Front Pages
- » Market Guide
- » Subscriber Newsletter

Knight Ridder Washington Bureau



Making sense of Washington and the world.

» Washington Bureau

more >

Search

Search the Archives

Place classified ads in the Star-Telegram

It's as easy as 1-2-3 to compose, schedule and place your classifieds ads.

Place S-T classified ads here

a casket salesman at a lush Hollywood mortuary.

"Tell me," he coos, "was your uncle a *sensitive* man?"

The pallid agent at Whispering Glades points out that rayon "chafes" and deftly ushers the grieving relative away from an economy box and sells him an expensive upgrade, lined with silk.

Davis champions himself as the antithesis of the smarmy movie stereotype. The 57-year-old entrepreneur is an industry maverick, in his words a "black sheep" of the family, because of his unorthodox merchandising and outspoken criticism of what he calls funeral homes' predatory pricing.

"He shouldn't make blanket charges against the industry as a whole," said Pam Moore, director of the independently owned Winscott Road Funeral Home in Benbrook. "In the past, not everyone has been treated fairly. But there are many reputable funeral homes. They've been in business many, many years. They're highly offended by his comments."

Moore said the public is much better informed today.

"I'm seeing educated consumers. They're not walking in and plopping down \$12,000 for a funeral. They're getting price lists from at least three or four sources. They're visiting funeral homes. They're asking us to mail them price lists."

Michael Land, co-cowner of Forest Ridge Funeral Home in Hurst, said Davis and other casket wholesalers "appeal to a certain niche, and that's great that they do."

According to the annual price survey conducted by the National Funeral Directors Association, the industry's trade group, a typical American adult funeral in 2001 cost \$6,130.

Cemetery charges such as grave space, interment and marker increase the total by several thousand dollars.

That's what makes people like Davis appealing to some. Cut-rate caskets can be ordered over the Internet with overnight delivery, and consumers can buy from Davis, who also is president of Budget Caskets -- a sort of Costco of coffins.

He operates four Texas stores, two in Tarrant County. Davis sells for less and still turns a profit.

He has a ready answer to allegations by fellow funeral directors that his wares are substandard or damaged goods. Davis said his critics sell the same brands.

"I've never heard of any [consumer] complaints," said Chet Robbins, executive director of the Texas Funeral Services Commission. Casket

handles breaking off? Bottoms falling out? "I call it 'f-u-m-o-r.' That stands for funeral director rumor. Caskets are a consumer's choice. You don't even have to be buried in a casket in the state of Texas."

A former publisher of *Auto Trader*, a used-car newspaper, Davis doesn't fit the image of a dark-suited mortician. When he's not overseeing a funeral, he wears jeans and snakeskin cowboy boots and attempts to close the distance between himself and uneasy customers by offering straight talk about the purchase they dread making more than any other.

"My dad raised cattle," Davis said. "A water trough for horses costs \$60. A casket's about the same size. It's just got a lid on it and a little froufrou and they want \$4,500."

At his Fort Worth location, on East Lancaster Avenue, rows of caskets are lined up, end to end. The warehouse store looks like a freight station, filled with small trains, their coupled boxcars fashioned from reassuring steel and handsome polished wood. Mahogany. Cherry. Poplar. Pine. The lightest steel is 20 gauge; 16 gauge is the heaviest.

Most consumers view the inventory from arm's length. Few shoppers feel tempted to run a caressing hand along the glossy exterior or lean in and inspect the crepe pillow under the hood. Davis' prices range from \$450 to \$2,950, plus tax.

The raised cap panel of one dark blue box features a likeness of the American flag, ringed with gray stars. Another pictures a golfer, club in hand, eyes fixed in perpetuity on some distant flagstick. Given 24-hour notice, Davis can swap out the golfer for a hunter or fisherman, for \$100, plus freight cost.

Lingering beside one model, priced at \$1,450, Davis silently studied the detailing on the underside of the open lid. Embroidered in blue Old English lettering were two sobering words: "Going Home."

While no one among the living knows precisely where "home" is, the flight of four doves seemed to suggest that eternity awaits at altitude, high above the clouds.

When Davis gazes at the representation of departure, he doesn't see birds. Instead, he sees a thick stack of greenbacks on the wing. The memories still anger him.

• • •

Howard Davis knew the value of a dollar. A country boy, he grew up during the Depression. He worked all his life and drove the same pickup for 25 years.

Ten years ago Davis was laid to rest in a "Going Home" casket. Bob Davis selected it the day he handed over his father's \$20,000 death benefit to a

He still can see himself, in hindsight, being gently kneaded and pulled like modeling clay.

"He had all these cheap, ugly looking things lined up and that was the first one that looked decent," Davis recalled. "I was crying. I wasn't thinking. I wanted the best for my dad."

The casket cost \$7,950. When the funeral director discussed the service and burial, Davis said he was told: "I'll do what I did for your mom. I know that's what your dad wanted."

Six weeks after the modest service, Davis returned to the funeral home. The director greeted him warmly and mentioned that they should visit again soon and select a headstone. Then he handed Davis an envelope and shepherded him to the door. When Davis reached his car, he broke the paper seal. Inside was a check for the amount remaining from the insurance -- \$74.

He stared at the check, stunned.

"My dad used to bury money in a coffee can," he recalled. "He would *never*, absolutely *never*, spend that kind of money on a funeral. If he knew what I'd done, he would have taken me behind the barn and beaten me with a water hose.

"The more I thought about it, the madder I got. It was his money. Out of respect for him, I felt like I had to do something."

• • •

In his youth, Davis spent his summers in Iowa, helping his grandfather who manufactured burial vaults and delivered them to cemeteries.

From afar, the 12-year-old observed the somber ritual as funeral directors set up tents and chairs and placed caskets on their lowering devices above the open graves.

Once mourners had said their tearful goodbyes, he and his grandfather approached to "finish up."

Davis said that "six out of 10 times" the funeral director instructed them to dump the body into the concrete vault and load the casket back onto the hearse, presumably so it could be resold.

"Grandpa wanted to send me to school to be a funeral director," Davis said. "I thought, 'Hell, no. No way I'll do that.' But later in life, after going through what I did with my dad, I changed my way of thinking."

• • •

Davis began selling caskets eight years ago. Later, he received his funeral director's license, after attending the Dallas Institute of Mortuary Science.

"They talked a *lot* about the Egyptians," he recalled, with head-cocked amusement. "That and how to sell this, and how to sell that."

A casket is the single most expensive item in a traditional funeral, so most funeral homes discourage bargain hunting. But federal law requires a funeral provider to accept a casket purchased elsewhere.

"We take whatever comes in," said funeral director Land. "The only complaint we had was when a casket purchased somewhere else was loaded into a Ford Bronco, sort of halfway wedged in, and when it got to us it was scratched and dented. The family asked, 'What happened here?' It was a matter of us saying, 'Well, this is the way it was delivered.' "

In Land's view, come-on ads offering free caskets show a lack of professionalism.

Moore said, "To be real honest, they're comical to me."

Davis doesn't expect to be voted Metroplex funeral director of the year. One day he was dining at a local restaurant when a fellow funeral director approached.

He said the man, in full view of the lunch crowd, jabbed a finger in his face and said, "Bob, I just want to say one thing. You've cheapened the funeral industry by 40 percent in Texas" and stormed off.

"I thought, 'Wow, 40 percent!' " Davis said.

As a smile lit his face, Budget Bob clasped his hands and swung them behind his right ear, then his left, in an old-fashioned gesture of self congratulation and achievement.

David Casstevens, (817) 390-7436 dcasstevens@star-telegram.com



[email this](#) | [print this](#)



[News](#) | [Business](#) | [Sports](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Living](#) | [Classifieds](#)

[Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Archives](#) | [Place an Ad](#) | [Newspaper Subscriptions](#)

[About Realcities Network](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Press Center](#) | [Copyright](#)