

Local Business

Morticians learn to cater to new immigrants' burial customs

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By Vikki Ortiz

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CHICAGO -- As a first-generation immigrant, Chandrakant Modi often found himself at funerals mourning not only his relatives but also the loss of sacred rituals, such as the sandalwood floral garlands placed around the neck of the deceased and the holy water from the Ganges dripped onto the loved one as a blessing.

So Modi is launching the Hindu Cremation Society and its Web site, which will list local funeral homes versed in Hindu customs. The society also would help residents conduct funerals in their homes, as their faith dictates. "There's a great need," said Modi, who lives in Skokie. "We are 100,000 Indians that are needing this service."

As the Asian population continues to expand in the Chicago area -- it grew 15 percent in Cook County between 2000 and 2006 -- funeral homes have joined hotels, restaurants and other businesses in accommodating their needs.

An estimated 10 to 15 specialty funeral companies opened in the Chicago area in recent years, mostly to accommodate Hindu, Muslim, Korean and other Asian cultures, according to Stephanie Kann, program director of Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Wheeling.

Instructors at the college -- one of only two in the Chicago area -- have added material on Asian burial customs to its curriculum.

"I think funeral homes are realizing that Chicago is and always has been a melting pot of different communities and ethnicities," said Greg Lindeman, funeral director at Weinstein Funeral Home on Devon Avenue in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood, where funerals are fairly equally divided between Asian and Jewish.

"People feel comfortable going to a place ... and not having to explain to the funeral director what my culture is."

When Tom Suh's mother-in-law died while living with him and his wife in Northbrook, they wanted to honor her in the traditional Korean way. But 10 years ago, few funeral homes in the area knew how to accommodate services that lasted up to seven days, or offered men black armbands and women white hair ribbons to wear in respect.

The Suhs settled for an American funeral before sending the woman's body back to Korea for a more customary burial.

In 1998, Suh started his own company -- Suh Asian American Funeral Service Ltd. Suh helps families plan services in their own languages, incorporate cultural and religious customs, even apply for funeral financing -- an unfamiliar concept for some immigrants, who come from countries where funerals are not as costly as in the U.S.

Suh oversees three or four funerals each week, mostly Korean, but also some Chinese, Filipino, Mongolian and Cambodian.

"I thought that's a good idea for (people) who need for their service their tradition," Suh said. "They are very happy. They talk about it after the funeral."

Similarly, when Haroon Firdausi's mother died in 2001, he and his family struggled to get funeral directors to understand Muslim burial traditions. These included not allowing embalming and arranging for a burial as soon as possible, sometimes on the same day as the death.

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Firdausi, an engineer, decided to enter mortuary school. In March 2006, he opened Muslim Funeral Services. Families are relieved when Firdausi instinctively knows to take off his shoes when he enters their homes, or when he makes sure bodies are buried facing Mecca.

"They would rather come to someone who is comfortable with their culture and who they know would take care of their family in a proper Islamic manner," Firdausi said.

The growing need for Asian funerals and burials was a challenge for longtime funeral home operators such as Lindeman, who 15 years ago knew little of Buddhism. When his neighborhood started changing, bringing Vietnamese and Cambodian clientele, Lindeman educated himself on their needs.

Today, he is not surprised when patrons look to the lunar calendar to pick the right day and time for burial. He owns several Buddhist statues, which he uses for services. He does not flinch when patrons ask to include extra buttonless shirts in the casket or to burn paper money at the service.

Removing the buttons allows a spirit to travel unrestrained on its next journey. Paper money is an offering for the next life.

"When you don't follow through with those, you've not just provided a disservice to the deceased, but you've also possibly brought bad luck to the family," he said.

Pravin Purohit, who is helping launch the Hindu Cremation Society, said it is gratifying to see more people embracing an array of cultural and religious traditions. He mentioned, for example, how Hindus drape garlands -- sandalwood for the most affluent -- over loved ones as part of the cremation process, so that the spirit can move on to the next life. The increasing acceptance of these funeral customs is a sign that cherished traditions are finding a new home, said Purohit, a Skokie resident.

"You want to go with the rituals that your family has set for you," he said. "We are trying to tell you our beliefs and how we want to do it."

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