



Posted on Mon, Feb. 18, 2008

## Funeral homes find personalization takes precedence over formal rituals

By ROBERT COLE  
 The Kansas City Star

When Mark McGilley's family first entered the funeral business in 1899, undertaking was in its infancy.

Though the funeral industry began to take shape following the Civil War, embalming did not become standard practice until early in the 20th century.

Many undertakers had connections to furniture making and a growing interest in producing coffins.

Even in the 35 years since he has been in the business, it has changed significantly, said McGilley, market director for **DignityMemorial Providers of Greater Kansas City**.

Funerals then typically adhered to a strict regimen that included visitations, a memorial service and burial.

Now an increasing number of families are more interested in personalizing a funeral or memorial service to reflect an interest that's been significant in a person's life, rather than formal rituals.

Although it's important to meet a family's expectations during a difficult time, personalization doesn't necessarily make the funeral director's job any easier.

However, the personalized approach is forcing funeral homes to change with the needs of the society they serve, said Todd DeMint, a managing partner at **Meyers Funeral Chapel Northland** in Parkville.

Families typically pick a funeral home based on previous experience, but those unfamiliar with death care may feel unprepared to make decisions about caskets, urns and cemetery sites.

Funeral directors have to spend more time arranging services with some families because fewer clergy are involved. There is less emphasis on ministry, and the tone of visitations and services is more casual.

"They often say that 'We're doing it on our own,' " DeMint said. " 'We're going to have someone say a few words.' "

Memorial services and burials are increasingly performed weeks, even months, following death, according to an industry report last year by **Trust 100**, a North Carolina-based marketing firm.

In some instances, there is no local service, a process that can exclude the funeral director from body disposition and memorialization.

The industry has weathered several years of deteriorating margins and increased competition from nontraditional vendors for products and services. Total deaths declined about 2 percent in 2005, according to the Trust 100 report.

The number of cremations, which typically cost less than burials, is growing, according to the **Cremation Association of North America**.

Many personal funeral requests can be addressed when families come in for pre-arrangement consultations, a growing industry trend. Serving those requests is taking funeral homes in directions they couldn't imagine a few years ago.

**D.W. Newcomer's Sons**, which operates eight funeral homes and eight cemeteries in Greater Kansas City, recently added the Final Ride Motorcycle Hearse to its list of funeral service options. The glass-enclosed hearse is pulled by a three-wheeled Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

Newcomer's decided to introduce the custom-designed hearse because of the area's community of motorcycle enthusiasts, said John Frownfelter, director of operations.

“We felt like it would be an option that families would want to select as a memorial tribute,” he said.

---

To reach Robert Cole, call 816-234-4296 or send e-mail to [rcole@kcstar.com](mailto:rcole@kcstar.com).

---

© 2007 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansascity.com>