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Funeral services with a personal touch

By HELEN T. GRAY
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Despite the faltering economy, Cathy Boomer decided to start a funeral business this year.

She wanted it to be warm, intimate and inviting, and she is partnering with area churches.

The idea came nine years ago while she was in Sydney, Australia, where she saw a funeral home that caught her attention.

"It was on a cute street and looked like a shop you would want to go to," she said. "It had flower boxes out front and looked like a charming place that offered caring comfort for families."

She lost a sister "before her time," so Boomer knew what it was like to plan a funeral.

It took seven more years, which included a surgery and an apprenticeship, before she launched her business, Signature Funerals, in January.

"Along the way, I found that this is what I am supposed to do with my life, to help families at this time of their lives," she said.

During her apprenticeship, Boomer met Michelle Parks, who has 19 years' experience as a funeral director. Parks is now Boomer's assistant.

Signature Funerals is in a strip mall at 8019 State Line Road in Leawood. Large pots with real flowers frame each side of the door. The inside is "peaceful, inviting and warm," Parks said. The lights are soft, the music soothing and there's a bit of fragrance.

Boomer's idea is to work with churches and families who may want a church setting for the service but don't belong to a particular church, although some people have a church preference.

The pastor at one of the churches Boomer works with, the Presbyterian Church of Stanley in Overland Park, commends her for working with churches and for trying to keep costs down.

The Rev. Eric Laverentz said he likes the personal touch a small funeral home, like Boomer's, can provide.

"With Boomer onsite, she functions almost as part of your staff, like you would have a wedding coordinator," Laverentz said. "Volunteers help her, and it has more of a feel like a family helping with the funeral."

The funeral for the sister of Jane Borcharding of Leawood was done by Boomer at the Stanley church.

"I liked the way she handled little details that I've seen fall through the cracks at other funerals," she said. "For example, when I arrived at the church, Cathy had the table set with pictures of her sister, a basket for cards, visitation guest book and a pedestal for the memory box for people to write and drop in memories of my sister."

She also had details ready for donations in her sister's name. And she was helpful in finding a reasonably priced cemetery, Borcharding said.

When the deceased doesn't belong to a church, some funeral homes often ask a pastor to conduct the service at the funeral home, said the Rev. Douglas R. Valentine of First Baptist Church, 100 W. Red Bridge Road.

"I do that several times a month," he said. "With Cathy, usually the service would be at the church at a significantly reduced cost to families, since Signature doesn't have the huge overhead of funeral homes

that have extensive real estate, multiple large chapels, meeting rooms, etc. that they must build into their fee schedules.”

“By partnering with local clergy and churches, Signature Funerals has greatly decreased the cost while still providing all the competency and compassionate care needed,” Valentine said.

Then there is the matter of flexibility.

“One of the first questions we ask the family is to tell us about their loved one, how they lived their life, what their interests were, what they liked,” Boomer said.

“Every life has a story. We like to offer a lot of options, and because we are small we usually can help the families with anything they want.”

Although there is no chapel, there is a room large enough for the family to have a private viewing, and also a small funeral of up to 30 people can be held in building.

Flexibility means funerals can be done almost anywhere.

“We work with the family to have the funeral in the right place to make it a memorable experience,” Boomer. “It’s more time-consuming, but such a humbling experience to work with the families.”

One family said the deceased loved gardens, so her funeral was at an arboretum.

In another case, Boomer was told that a hospice patient was agnostic and would have about 100 people at the service.

“She was a pilot,” Boomer said. “So we suggested that her funeral would take place at the Airline History Museum at the Downtown Airport. That would be a way to honor her nonreligion and a way to honor her life.”

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