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Even in Death, Mobility

By MICHAEL T. LUONGO

It was a business trip Dominic Carella will long remember. “The solemn time came when the cargo opened up and the remains came out,” he said.

Mr. Carella, vice president and senior counselor of Frank E. Campbell Funeral Home in Manhattan, was recalling the funeral arrangements for the Cuban-born salsa singer [Celia Cruz](#) in 2003.

She died in New Jersey, but her body was first taken to Miami so her fans there could pay their respects. Mr. Carella chartered the plane to Miami. “We had 178 people on the flight along with the remains. It was very important that the staff and her family and friends and the remains were together.” He added, “I was in constant contact with the body.”

Her body was then brought back north, and now rests in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

Mr. Carella said funeral directors rarely travel with the deceased. Still, Ms. Cruz exemplifies a developing funeral industry trend: Americans as mobile in death as in life. This has become the case more often as an increasing number of immigrants return to their native lands for burials, Americans are buried in distant birthplace graveyards or die on vacation or business trips and must be brought home.

While no one keeps data on how many funerals involve travel, everyone involved in the process — airlines and funeral directors among them — agreed that the numbers have been going up.

Muneerah Warner, funeral director of Warner Funeral Home in Philadelphia and founder of the women’s funeral industry association Funeral Divas, has arranged South African funerals for clients born there. She has not traveled with the bodies, but added, “You would like to go because your work is being finished on them in another country.”

Still, most of Ms. Warner’s funerals involve moving bodies from state to state in the United States. Complications in those instances, she said, “depend on how far you’re

going. If it is one state over, you can drive the body over.” Farther away, remains can be flown.

Andy Kirschner, director of North American sales for Delta’s cargo division, said Delta was the world’s largest carrier for both passengers and human remains, moving about 25,000 bodies a year. Demand is rising at the Delta Cares division, which coordinates flights for remains and passengers heading to funerals and has existed for over 30 years. “People are traveling more,” Mr. Kirschner said. “They pass away when they vacation, or in different areas when they are away from home, and this is why we see an increase.”

Human remains shipping varies geographically and seasonally, with winter traffic between Florida and New York reflecting vacation patterns. Mr. Kirschner said remains are shipped as cargo but with “a lot of additional communication.” As with travel agencies, funeral homes with high volumes of shipments have preferred status.

Like other airlines, Delta has a military program that brings home the remains of American soldiers after they are returned on military flights. In some cases, the soldiers’ bodies receive personal military escorts on the commercial flights.

The increasing flight transport of the dead led to the establishment of Eagle’s Wings Air in 2007, which Frank Kaiser, one of the founders said, is “not an airline, but a transportation manager working with 13 domestic and international airlines.” Funeral directors, he said, “are trying to manage this from their funeral homes, and that is not their main competency.”

The movement of remains is under capacity constraints, similar to passengers. “Whether domestic or from the United States to the Philippines or to Mexico,” Mr. Kaiser said, “during the seasonal period is a problem because capacity on the airlines is reduced because of heavy tourist traffic, because of luggage, so to move the deceased on a commercial airline, we are fighting for space.”

International transfers are also more challenging, he said, because of consulate paperwork. “That process can take days, or in some cases it can take weeks,” he said. He estimated that about 20 percent of the 15,000 transfers the company would do in 2011 were international.

Neil O’Connor, chief executive of O’Connor Mortuary in Laguna Hills, Calif., said he had been working with “more transient populations than in the past.” Funerals for Iranian immigrants are difficult and increasingly common in Southern California, he said, because the United States does not maintain diplomatic relations. Mr. O’Connor said

that burials in the Philippines and Mexico were common, adding that “Canada or England are simpler ones.” Mr. O’Connor said clients had died on vacations or business trips. For clients in the process of planning their funerals, he now offers, for \$285, an option that works similarly to travel insurance covering what may cost thousands as an emergency.

Sometimes, funeral-related business trips are about making the dead look their best. Rob Matt, a hairstylist with salons in West Hollywood and Palm Springs, said he had traveled to render what he called “hair services for end-of-life care,” usually to longtime clients, “to be there to see how they appear to others when they pass.” He added, “I have traveled across the country to the East Coast quite a few times, through the years. I traveled once to Paris to take care of someone.”

Mr. Matt said he did not take payment when traveling for funerals, other than occasionally for expenses.

David Kessler, a grief counselor in the Los Angeles area, said he also refused payment. Mr. Kessler is co-author, with the late Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, of “On Grief and Grieving” (Scribner, 2005). While most of his work is in Los Angeles, he travels to New York or Washington two or three times a year.

“I get called in when someone notable is dying and will follow through all the way,” he said, adding: “People look to celebrities to see how do they grieve. I will be called in by a publicist, agent, a business manager — someone who just wants to make sure all this goes well.”

“I might be the person who brings in the funeral director and helps the family manage all that,” he said.

Not all travel is an emergency. Ron Browning, chief executive of Forever Legacy, a mausoleum company in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., said clients often bought his products, which start at \$1 million, “decades before they ever need it.” Mr. Browning said business trips could run one to five days, “sometimes off in very remote places. We meet with the engineers and will take a number of trips back and forth. This can go on for over a year.”

The body of Celia Cruz, meanwhile, might take flight again if Cuban politics change. “Her manager stated that she wanted to go to Cuba,” Mr. Carella said. “No one knows. Time will tell on that one.”