

Published: July 6, 2011
Updated: 11:07 a.m.

Mortuary chief urges families to discuss options



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Woody Allen summed it up for everyone: "It's not that I'm afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Neil O'Connor, CEO of O'Connor Mortuary in Laguna Hills, likes to use that quote when he talks about the different styles and perspectives baby boomers use when talking about death.

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"They want reliable resources and information," O'Connor says. "And they want options that speak to them."

O'Connor Mortuary, which also has arrangement centers in Irvine and San Juan Capistrano, encourages conversation in families and planning whenever possible, he says.

Q. Boomer parents had viewings and caskets and cemetery plots. What's different today?

A. I see things changing, even with the traditional faith-based models. There is nothing boilerplate about funerals or memorials anymore.

The cremation rate is now about 55 to 60 percent here. It was about 25 percent when I began as the fourth generation from my family in this business.

We now do webcasting of services, for example. So if people can't afford to come a distance for the event or they have some other reason why they can't get here, they can go online and have some interaction.

Q. You also do DVD presentations now?

A. Yes. We can put together a DVD of photographs. The cost is under \$300 for about 25 photos.

Q. Now we are talking money. I mean, what do people spend on the average funeral or memorial service today – plus preparation of the body?

A. Well, the average wedding, they tell me, costs \$32,000. The national average spent on a death is about \$6,500. Add about \$2,000 if you want a cemetery plot.

There are three areas of expense: the mortuary staff involvement, the memorial product and the casket or vault or whatever. It's a matter of definition.

A cremation is about a \$3,500 to \$4,500 expense.

Q. Do people opting for cremation also buy a cemetery plot?

A. In our region, about 45 percent opt for burial.

There seems to be a small shift in people's goals. Some want a physical spot where they can go and meditate or pray. Others want the Pacific Ocean.

We always encourage personalization. If they want a Harley in the chapel, so be it. People need to move beyond the death in some type of ceremonial way.

Q. Do boomers see the relevance of tradition?

A. Absolutely. And we encourage people to educate themselves; start the conversation with their loved ones; discover what preplanning is all about.

Also, ask the mortuary some questions – like, how will you serve me and how can I trust you?

I see people in crisis blindly relying on others for advice. Try to comparison-shop. There are 60 to 80 mortuaries to select from in Orange County alone.

Q. What happens after the boomers? What about the younger generations?

A. There always needs to be some recognition of the person who has passed. The community – friends, neighbors as well as relatives – needs to come together.

I see people still wanting ritual and ceremony.

Q. What are families doing in today's economy?

A. I agree that people often need to cut corners, and we try to work with families on aspects of funerals that can or should be cut. But I've also seen families that have done very little or almost nothing to memorialize the person who has died, only to be distraught about this later.

Economics are important, but you must consider the emotional aspect.

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