

Memorialization: So Many Ways, So Little Awareness

{ by Wayne Stellmach }



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Kudos to the Funeral and Memorial Information Council (FAMIC) for their "Have a Talk of a Lifetime" campaign aimed at educating families on the importance of discussing with loved ones the things that matter to them and life stories, often leading to more meaningful memorialization. FAMIC points to the trend of less memorialization, despite consumer studies documenting the value they place in funerals and memorialization. "Have a Talk of a Lifetime" recognizes this disconnect and provides materials to funeral professionals to use to build awareness among the families and communities they serve. FAMIC is hoping funeral professionals rally behind this initiative. I couldn't agree more.

Being fairly new to this industry, I continue to be amazed at all the wonderful ways there are to memorialize a loved one. But isn't it telling that I'm so amazed at the choices? If I was educated as a consumer - before I came into this industry - the wide array of memorialization choices wouldn't have been all that much of a revelation. I've made funeral arrangements with my family in the not-too-distant past and do not recall being encouraged to consider memorialization options. Were we in the minority?

FAMIC and others who promote better consumer education will improve families' experiences and benefit the industry. Let's first consider cremation, which seems to engender a lot of collective industry teeth-gnashing over perceived consumer indifference to services and memorialization. However, we're seeing that families do indeed desire some sort of memorialization of their loved one. They just may not realize that conventional funeral homes are positioned to help them create that personalized memorial service and can be quite flexible in the types of services offered.

And what about the myriad memorialization product options for cremation? Personalized urns, keepsake jewelry, mementos that allow the family to share cremains or simply display in their individual homes...the list goes on and on. My gosh, we in the industry are almost inundated with the avalanche of choices! But that's us. What about consumers? Are they really tuned into what is available in both products and services? Products and services that you can provide? When I lost my older brother three years ago, we didn't know, nor were we told, about all these possibilities. So many ways, so little awareness.

But are we fully educating consumers even on the traditional burial side? Again drawing from personal experience, ninety-five percent of my family and friends who died were buried. About fifteen percent had a graveside service. Zero percent involved a personalized burial vault carapace, which by my affiliation I now know is available. Granted the families may have been presented with options and chose against them. But were they?

From emblems and symbols reflective of the loved one's life or interests, to beautiful scenery emblazoned across the carapace, to full-length photo collages of the loved one and family photos, vault carapaces can be stunning focal points at the graveside service. Family and friends often gather around the carapace, sharing stories and even taking cell phone photos as a treasured memory or to send to others who could not attend the service. It's not unusual to see hand-written tributes on the vault carapace, or inked thumbprints or handprints. I heard of one touching story of a high school football team taking turns to sign their names and write tributes on the carapace of the burial vault for their teammate. These shared rituals all form part of the fabric of meaning and lasting memories for all.

There is so much opportunity for elevating the consumer experience through elevating their awareness of memorialization options. And consider the increased awareness by those who attend that service, seeing and experiencing meaningful memorialization. Many consumers are touched by the poignant tributes and services for fallen first responders or other public tragedies, but do they realize that type of memorialization is possible for their own loved ones? I always thought those were reserved for heroes or public figures. Call me...well, uneducated.

Join the grassroots initiative of FAMIC's "Have a Talk of a Lifetime" to educate consumers on the importance of memorialization by downloading their materials and linking to their videos on your website. To learn more, visit www.famic.org to view all of their resources. Ask your vendors about educational material that they may have that will help you build consumer awareness about memorialization options. But above all, be sure that everyone on your staff takes the time to educate families on how they can create, with your help, meaningful memorialization that will commemorate their loved one's life with respect. **FBA**