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ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

► Burn is director of cremation services for the ICCFA. She is an ICCFA University faculty member.

► She previously was cremation services manager at Wilbert Funeral Services Inc., Forest Park, Illinois, having started as manager of funeral service communications in 1991.

More from this author



► Go to www.iccfa.com to the Cremation Coaching Center for information about the ICCFA's First Impression Cremation Phone Shopper Program, which allows you to monitor the first impression your company is making on callers. Burn makes the calls, acting as a consumer requesting information on cremation.

► Go to www.iccfa.com to the Cremation Coaching Center, where you can post a question for Burn to answer.

► Burn will be at the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on December 2 for a one-day Certified Cremation Arranger Program. For more information and to register, go to www.cremationcoach.com



► Burn, along with Doug Gober and Nectar Ramirez, will present a "cremation crash course" as part of the ICCFA's 2012 Wide World of Sales Conference, January 18-20, Bally's/Paris Resort & Casino, Las Vegas, Nevada. The full program, registration and hotel information are online at www.iccfa.com under Education/Events.

CREMATION

Have your cremation business practices changed much in the past 10-15 years? If so, did the changes add value for cremation families or simply costs to your operation? Is regular training on cremation a part of your staff development plan?



Julie Burn, Christine Hunsaker and Mary Ziegler at a "Death of a Trend" presentation in 1999. All three are still very much active in the cremation segment of our profession.

That was then ... this is now

I recently took the time to sort through several boxes full of cremation articles dating back to 1995—yes, the 20th century. It was also the year I began my career in the area of cremation. Back then, it was important to me to learn as much as I could about cremation, and today I still feel the same way.

As I tried to decide what I could throw out, I found myself reading a lot of materials by people who were considered "change agents" about how to embrace cremation, how to communicate effectively with families, how to show value in services and ceremonies and how to effectively demonstrate the importance of cremation memorialization.

I discovered that a lot of the

information being presented at the end of the (20th) century could be used in a magazine or presentation today. Many of the messages have remained the same, and many bear repeating.

Let's take a look back and compare "then" and "now."

THEN

"Education, innovation and choice—staying competitive in the cremation field," 1996 article.

The overall message in this article, which ran in *Southern Funeral Director*, was that we need to educate, innovate and offer choices. The article talked about the importance of training staff to effectively serve cremation families and said training

Twelve years later, we still find ourselves struggling with helping cremation families see value in memorialization.

would be the main challenge facing funeral establishments in the year 2000 and beyond.

The article also addressed the importance of never assuming families know everything about cremation and noted that many families have preconceived notions about cremation and don't know about many of the available choices. Finally, the article said that mortuary colleges need to be proactive in teaching today's students how to market cremation services.

NOW

More than ever, funeral establishments are seeking out cremation training for their staff. Anyone who plans to stay in business realizes all staff members must become cremation specialists. Successful establishments realize the need for continuing education in all areas, including and especially this one.

An integral part of cremation training is finding ways to educate families on the importance of a ceremony, gathering or tribute. Part of this involves staff learning never to assume that when a family says "we don't want anything," a so-called "direct" cremation with no ceremony is implied and inevitable.

Today's cremation training stresses how to effectively present the many options cremation creates for families.

As far as the availability of cremation education in mortuary schools, changes have definitely been slow. Not until the last couple of years have we found a handful of schools adding cremation-related subjects to their curriculum.

The ICCFA, realizing the importance of being a part of educating our future professionals and taking an active part in the American Board of Funeral Service Education, has begun offering our cremation arranger certification program to schools.

The supplier/vendor segment of our profession has really stepped up to the plate in recent years in terms of providing innovative products and support materials.

For example, I remember looking over a Wilbert brochure developed in the 1980s that scripted funeral directors on how to

convince a client family that cremation wasn't a good choice. That all changed in the mid '90s, when the company spent tens of thousands of dollars on cremation consumer focus groups, resulting in creative products and consumer-friendly promotional materials.

THEN

"Death of a trend," 1999 presentation.

While I was at Wilbert Funeral Services Inc., I had the wonderful opportunity of joining two other cremation professionals—Christine Hunsaker, then with SCI and now with Stewart Enterprises, and Mary Ziegler with Options by Batesville—in a cremation presentation titled "Death of a Trend."

Originally presented at the 1999 ICCFA Convention, demand for the presentation led to engagements at other national associations that year.

The presentation focused on the market shift from traditional burials to cremation, talked about how cremation was the single largest growth segment in our profession and addressed product planning strategies and failproof techniques for discussing cremation ceremonies and gatherings.

To encourage participation by audience members, the second half of the presentation involved them in playing a cremation game in which they could make money by responding to some common questions and objections from cremation families. Topics covered included the value of ceremony, cremation containers and caskets, urns and cremation memorialization.

NOW

The market shift from traditional burial to cremation is still increasing and is still the largest growth segment in our profession. Many cremation training programs start by sharing current cremation statistics and projections. For some, it is an eye-opener and helps them realize cremation is not going away.

When developing your product-planning strategy, remember that using the features, advantages and benefits of both services and products is still an important element in serving today's cremation customers.

First we must listen to family members and then we can determine what is of value to them and suggest options for a ceremony/tribute and appropriate products.

The questions and objections Christine, Mary and I used in our "cremation game" are still relevant today. Families often have no idea what is involved in making cremation arrangements, and it is our job to respond to their questions in a clear and logical way.

Using some of the same material presented in "Death of a Trend," the ICCFA has developed a comprehensive list of common questions and objections, including how best to respond. You can find the list on our Cremation Coaching Center, www.iccfa.com/cremation/tools, along with other tools to help you successfully serve cremation customers.

THEN

"Tides of change: John F. Kennedy's burial at sea," 1999 article.

In October 1999, ICCFA Magazine held a roundtable discussion with five industry executives regarding the tragic deaths of John F. Kennedy Jr., his wife and sister-in-law.

The group discussed how they felt about the fact that their cremation arrangements entailed only minor assistance from a funeral home and did not involve a cemetery at all, and about the implications for the funeral and cemetery business of the Kennedy family's decision to bury "America's son" at sea.

It was a surprise to many of us when one of the best known Catholic families in the country chose cremation and scattering at sea. Cremation families have choices, and everyone involved in the roundtable discussion agreed some in our profession were not educating cremation families on memorialization options.

The late Dave Daly, CCFE, an ICCFA past president and at the time one of the most respected authorities on cremation, stressed the fact that we owe it to cremation families to explain the alternatives before accepting an order for an at-sea disposition.

Another discussion participation said funeral directors and cemeterians who thought there would be no impact from all

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the publicity surrounding the Kennedys' choice of disposition were deluding themselves.

NOW

Twelve years later, we still find ourselves struggling with helping cremation families see value in memorialization. Yes, we are seeing more beautiful final resting places with cremation gardens, benches and striking glass-front niches. But when a cremation memorialization rate of 40-50 percent is considered outstanding, it's obvious there's plenty of room for improvement.

I believe part of the problem stems from the fact that many funeral directors are not talking to consumers about cremation memorialization, presumably leaving that to cemeteries even though many cremation families never place a call to a cemetery, as they've learned to think "cremation *or* burial."

When I make "mystery shopper" phone calls to funeral homes, asking for information about cremation, staff

members—including company owners—can't or don't address what the family plans to do with their loved one's cremated remains after the cremation is performed. Yet that initial phone call provides an excellent opportunity to educate families on cremation memorialization.

We don't know exactly why the Kennedys chose cremation. However, we do know that the sea was an integral part of their lives and that is probably the reason scattering was chosen.

In any case, I think it is safe to say that the Kennedy family's decision has had the effect of adding to the increase in cremation. Whether we like it or not, some people do look to their heroes or celebrities for cues on what to do. Have we not all just read about the number of brides who want a wedding gown that looks like Kate Middleton's?

I could continue on in this vein for several more pages. In looking over articles and presentations being offered "then," I found a great deal of information

that could be incorporated into today's training programs. But maybe 10-15 years ago, some in the industry just weren't ready to hear it.

If you were slow to change, if you thought cremation families would never amount to more than 10 percent of your business, if you didn't grasp how much the inevitable growth in cremation would impact your bottom line, you have a great deal of staff training to do.

If, on the other hand, you've stayed on top of the trends, you know that the training never ends, because part of serving cremation families is accepting that the market keeps changing and you can never stand still.

The bottom line is, you can't serve today's consumer unless you can confidently say you are a cremation specialist. For those who can say that, it's a win-win situation. Being able to give cremation families the attention and information they deserve will bring your organization the reputation and revenue it deserves. 