

# It's My Funeral and I'll Serve Ice Cream if I Want To

By JOHN LELAND

Photo



Harry Ewell's 2003 funeral in Rockland, Mass., was as personal as they come. He had driven an ice cream truck for many years, and mourners were treated to ice cream at graveside. Credit Greg Derr/The Patriot Ledger

ROBERT TISCH, who ran the Loews Corporation, had a marching band at his memorial service and a packed house at Avery Fisher Hall, all orchestrated by one of New York's most prominent party planners. Estée Lauder's had waiters passing out chocolate-covered marshmallows on silver trays. At Nan Kempner's memorial, at Christie's auction house, guests received a CD of Mozart's Requiem. Ms. Kempner had wanted a live performance of the Requiem, but the logistics — full orchestra, chorus and soloists — were too much.

At a time when Americans hire coaches to guide their careers and retirements, tutors for their children, personal shoppers for their wardrobes, trainers for their abs, whisperers for their pets and — oh, yes — wedding planners for their nuptials, it makes sense that some funerals are also starting to benefit from the personal touch. As members of the baby boom generation plan final services for their parents or themselves, they bring new consumer expectations and fewer attachments to churches, traditions or organ music — forcing funeral directors to be more like party planners, and inviting some party planners to test the farewell waters.

The planning for most funerals still falls to the nation's 22,000 funeral homes, which bury more than 2 million Americans each year, at a price tag of \$13 billion. But some families are beginning to think outside the box-provider, said Mark Duffey of Houston, who last year began what he calls the first nationwide funeral concierge service. For \$995 or a monthly subscription fee, his company, Everest Funeral Package, has helped several hundred families plan their final rites, providing concierge services that range from writing obituaries to negotiating prices with undertakers.

"Baby boomers are all about being in control," said Mr. Duffey, who started his company after running a chain of funeral homes. "This generation wants to control everything, from the food to the words to the order of the service. And this is one area where consumers feel out of control."

What they want, he said, are services that reflect their lives and tastes. One family asked for a memorial service on

the 18th green of their father's favorite golf course, "because that's where dad was instead of church on Sunday mornings, so why are we going to church," Mr. Duffey said. "Line up his buddies, and hit balls." Another wanted his friends to ride Harleys down his favorite road, scattering his ashes.

The biggest change, Mr. Duffey said, is that as more families choose cremation — close to 70 percent in some parts of the West — services have become less somber because there is not a dead body present. "The body's a downer, especially for boomers," Mr. Duffey said. "If the body doesn't have to be there, it frees us up to do what we want. They may want to have it in a country club or bar or their favorite restaurant. That's where consumers want to go."

Mr. Duffey has a suggested time limit for speeches: five minutes. "We urge them, 'Don't ad-lib. Get up and read it. It's O.K., people expect it.'"

Requests for unusual services, while still in the minority, have stretched the creativity of funeral directors, said Ron Hast, the publisher of the trade journals *Mortuary Management* and *Funeral Monitor*. As funerals move away from traditional settings like churches or funeral homes, he said: "we're heading in the direction of event planners. Forward-thinking funeral directors are bringing in hospitality like food." This can pose a challenge, especially for businesses that have done things the same way for generations, he added. "In New York and New Jersey, it's illegal to serve even coffee or any food in a funeral home," Mr. Hast said. "So they don't have the comfort foods that people expect."

Funeral homes do not always appreciate competition from entrepreneurs, whom they may consider interlopers, said Bob Biggins, the president of the National Funeral Directors Association.

"It's not like planning a wedding or helping out with a reception," Mr. Biggins said. "Funeral directors respond to families' needs at any hour of the day in a short period of time."

Mr. Biggins said funeral homes can do anything that party planners can do. At his own funeral home in Rockland, Mass., Mr. Biggins arranged a service for Harry Ewell, a man who had been an ice cream vendor. Mr. Ewell's old ice cream truck led the funeral procession and dispensed Popsicles at the end. "If you call that over the top, then I guess I'm guilty," Mr. Biggins said. "But our business reflects society as a whole. Today's consumer wants things personal, specific to their lifestyle, whether it's highlighting a person's passion for golf or celebrating someone's deep devotion to knitting or needlepoint."

In the two years since he designed his first service, David E. Monn said he has discovered the biggest threat to a well-orchestrated event: the long speech. Mr. Monn's business is organizing high-end events like museum galas or society benefits, but recently he has planned eight or nine funerals at the request of friends, including those of Henry A. Grunwald, the former editor of *Time* magazine, and A. M. Rosenthal, the former executive editor of *The New York Times*. Funerals, he said, require a firm hand.

"I have a pet peeve," he said. "No more than three minutes. It doesn't matter how much you loved someone, after you've heard someone drone on for five minutes you're annoyed. It's about poignant moments. Maudlin is not poignant."

Mr. Monn said that another challenge with funerals is that attendance can be unpredictable, especially those open to the public. "You never know if it's going to be 20 people or 2,000," he said. "Last year I did a funeral for a very young man on July 4th. It was a guessing game, would anyone come? Lo and behold, close to 1,500 people showed up. The church was packed."

The matter of seating arrangements can also be sticky, he said. "People feel their place in life means where they sit at someone's funeral," he said. "It's staggering to me, actually."

Lynn Isenberg, a writer and entrepreneur, had never heard of funeral planners or concierges when she attended funerals for her father and brother in 1998 and 1999. But the different experiences of the two funerals gave her an

idea for a novel. She called it “The Funeral Planner,” and it was about a young woman who found a niche doing you know what.

Ms. Isenberg is now developing a television pilot based on the book for the Lifetime channel, she said, and is under contract to write two more novels using the funeral planner character.

The book, in turn, gave her another idea: to start her own business, Lights Out Enterprises, in Venice Beach, Calif., which helps people plan their own funerals, with emphasis on the tribute video, which she calls a “spiritual biography.”

“I’m not talking about doing away with the grieving process, but I do think, why not experience a funeral service where you get to really know a person?” she said.

Though most clients want simple services, she said, one asked her for “an all-out disco party on top of their favorite mountain, with 360-degree views,” in order to remind friends of a happy period in their lives together. “And they want everyone to come dressed up in disco outfits.” For a former auctioneer, she recommended printing select words from the eulogy on auction paddles, so people could hold them up during the service.

“I see the day where our mainstream celebrities would make appearances at funerals to enhance the service,” she said.

Joshua Slocum, the executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance ([www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)), a nonprofit group, said that though people have more choices than ever, they often end up paying more than necessary for things they don’t want or could do themselves. “This isn’t rocket science,” he said. “It’s less expensive and more satisfying if you do it yourself rather than write a check to a third party.”

He added, “I’ve seen places advertise that they do Webcasts of the funeral. We get 10,000 calls a year from people, and no one’s ever said they wanted that.”

But for some, including Jack Susser, a real estate agent in Santa Monica, Calif., the sendoff can have benefits now. Mr. Susser, who is 57 and healthy, hired Ms. Isenberg to create a tribute video so that his future grandchildren and great-grandchildren could know his life in ways he’d never known his grandparents’. Ms. Isenberg developed a 20-minute video called “Jack the Mensch,” with an original script, professional actors, animation and a \$75,000 budget. The lead characters are Mr. Susser and a talking fish.

“At first I felt the title made me out to be too good,” Mr. Susser said. But creating the video helped him appreciate his life, he said. And as a former actor, he saw a surprising upside to the death business.

“I’m going to use it not only for my passing, but at my 60th birthday party,” he said. “I may even send it to agents, because I think there’s good work on it. This is professionally done.”

# No Ice Cream at My Funeral

Bassi  
Gruen

I was in eleventh grade when my classmate lost her mother to cancer. We had been praying for her mother's recovery for months, and we knew that the situation was getting worse, but somehow we never expected her to die. When you're sixteen years old, death seems very far away. But one day, the phone call came. She had passed away in the middle of the night. The funeral was to be held at 6 pm that very evening.



I had never been to a funeral before, and the prospect of being in such close proximity to a corpse frightened me. With trepidation, I made my way to the funeral home. The night was dark and dank, and I shivered from the cold.

The funeral was every bit as painful as I feared it would be. My classmate, an only daughter who had been very close to her mother, was utterly devastated. The woman's many students were crushed, friends and relatives wailed. Her husband gave a eulogy, speaking of his wife's devotion to her family, describing her incredible attributes, attesting to the fact that in two decades of marriage he had never heard her raise her voice. I left deeply pained – and deeply inspired. This is what a woman can do with forty years of life, I remember thinking. And I went home and hugged my own mother very tightly.

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I'm idly scanning the New York Times headlines when one pops out at me. "It's My Funeral and I'll Serve Ice Cream if I Want To," it screams. Intrigued, I click, and start reading. John Leland is exploring new trends in funerals.

"As members of the baby boomer generation plan final service for their parents or themselves," he wrote, "they bring new consumer expectation and fewer attachments to churches, traditions or organ music – forcing funeral directors to be more like party planners and inviting some party planners to test the farewell waters,"

And the line between funeral and party is getting increasingly blurry. Robert Tisch, who ran the Loews Corporation, had a marching band at his memorial service, while Estee Lauder arranged for waiters to pass out chocolate covered marshmallows on silver platters at hers.

One family held their father's funeral on the 18th green of his favorite golf course, "because that's where dad was instead of church on Sunday morning, so why are we going to church? Line up his buddies and hit balls." Harry Ewell, who had worked as an ice cream vendor for many years arranged to have his ice cream truck lead his funeral procession, and had popsicles handed out at the end of the ceremony.

Others hold funerals in restaurants, bars, or country clubs. A client of Lynn Isenberg's Lights Out service requested a funeral that would include a wild disco party atop her favorite mountain so her friends could remember the happy times they shared.

Cremation makes all this easier. "The body's a downer, especially to boomers" says Mark Duffey, who runs the first nationwide funeral concierge service. "If the body doesn't have to be there, it frees us up to do what we want." So the body is reduced to a small pile of ashes and everyone can enjoy the party.

The Jewish approach to death and funerals could not be more different. One of the core beliefs of Judaism is that this world is merely a hallway leading us to the banquet hall – the World to Come. If this life is all there is, then it's not illogical to want a funeral which will provide one last fling. But Jews know that we come to this world with a mission to

fulfill, one that is entirely unrelated to the number of good times we manage to pack in.

The tragedy of death is the fact that it signals the end to our potential for growth. The Vilna Gaon, a towering sage who lived in the eighteenth century, was reported to have held his tzitzit and cried as he lay on his deathbed.

“How difficult it is to part from this world, the world of deeds,” he lamented. “Here, for a few pennies you can obtain the great mitzvah of tzitzit. In the World to Come there will be no more chances to do mitzvos.”

A Jewish funeral is a reflection of the tragedy of being able to do no more, as well as the realization that the person is passing onto a better place. A dead person is treated with extreme reverence. Burial is done as quickly as possible, and the body, dressed in pure white shrouds, is placed in the earth. While the soul rises to meet its Creator, the body is returned to the earth from which it was formed.

There are prayers and psalms to say at a funeral which underscore our acceptance of G-d's righteousness even as we are overwhelmed with grief. Eulogies are given, describing the greatness of the person just lost, and exhorting those left behind to learn the lessons the deceased's life embodied. The focus is not on the deceased's hobby, profession, or favorite pastime, but on his essence.

As the funeral of my classmate's mother showed me, a Jewish funeral can be an uplifting experience. It is not only a tribute to the dead; it's also a wake-up call for the living. It reminds us where we will all ultimately end up, and causes us to wonder- what do I want said at my funeral? How do I have to live in order to merit a eulogy like that? A funeral teaches us that no one lives forever, and we never know how much longer we have with our parents, spouse, and children. It propels us to reprioritize our life before it's too late.

But it's nearly impossible for any of that to happen if the funeral is taking place on a golf course, with the participants primarily focused on making a double eagle, or if it is run to the tunes of disco music. Having a funeral that blocks out, rather than highlights, the truths about life and death, is a disgrace for the dead, and a lost opportunity for the living. And that's why there will be no ice cream at my funeral.

*Bassi Gruen is a licensed social worker, a professional writer, and the Editorial Director of [Targum Press](#). She's published hundreds of articles in numerous Jewish publications. Bassi is the author of [A Mother's Musings](#), a collection of articles taking an honest look at the challenges and joys of motherhood. She lives with her husband, her children, and her dreams in Beitar Illit.*

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