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Planning That Final Party

Funerals are changing—and people are taking matters in their own hands

By KATHLEEN A. HUGHES

When my friend Margaret Goldsmith, a stylish Los Angeles real-estate agent, was battling ovarian cancer, she spent hours on the phone with her sister, Elizabeth, planning the details of her own memorial service.

"She called herself the ultimate party planner," says Elizabeth. Margaret wanted the gathering at the Ebell of Los Angeles, a historic landmark; she wanted a friend to play bagpipes and another to sing "I'll Fly Away" from the film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?"

After she passed away last year, at age 55, the service was spectacular and moving. Her husband, a cinematographer, assembled a slide show about her life. Her best friend told hilarious stories about their European travels in the 1970s. Her brother-in-law, a screenwriter, delivered an entertaining story about his entry into the family.

Laughing and crying, I had another thought: If something suddenly happened to my husband, how would I ever put together such a wonderful ceremony in a state of grief? And what if something happens to me suddenly? My husband is really busy. Maybe I should make my own memorial slide show now, at age 55. He'll never get it done.

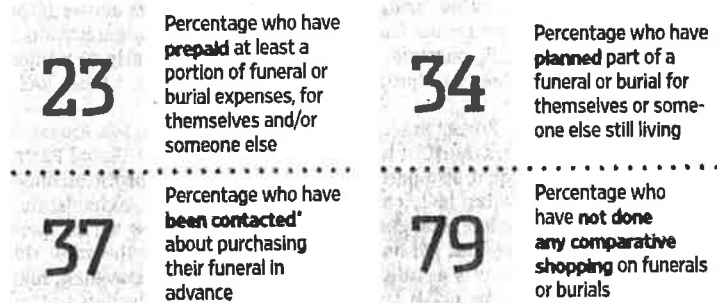
While religion and family tradition have dictated last rites for hundreds of years, funerals today are changing dramatically. Baby boomers, in particular, are shifting to more personalized—and less religious—memorial services, often calling them "A Celebration of Life."

The Internet is helping propel and shape the changes. Some funeral homes will stream a funeral service or create a webcast for those who can't attend. Online videos offer tutorials to help choose between cremation and burial. Burial plots are now listed on eBay.

"A lot of this is happening so fast that we are grappling to keep up," says Ronald K. Barrett, who specializes in death and dying as head of the psychology department at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. "It's having a major impact on how people grieve."

Making Arrangements

Funeral planning by the numbers, among individuals age 50-plus:



*By mail, telephone, in person or online

Source: AARP

And on how they plan. A website launched three years ago, MyWonderful-Life.com, helps people design their own funerals. Those who sign up can enter their wishes in an online book and send loved ones a link by email.

The home page of the site—which has almost 10,000 members, according to its owners—says, "You only get one chance to make a last impression." There are sections on trends in funerals, including "going green in the grave" with a biodegradable coffin, and fall-themed tips on flowers and on pumpkin cocktails for toasts to the deceased.

Starting the Conversation

Logging on may make it easier to have a conversation about death. After Bobbie Jo Ryan's father, Robert Cox, was placed in hospice care two years ago, she called him and said, "I'm coming up there to plan your funeral with you." Ms. Ryan, a 33-year-old graphic designer, drove for 20 hours to her father's home in Linn Grove, Iowa.

After a day of visiting, Ms. Ryan took out her laptop and logged on to the site. Her father told her he wanted a fishing theme. He had been an avid fisherman and hunter until arthritis and a boating accident left him disabled in a wheelchair. He didn't want a church full of flowers. He wanted donations to a charity that helps disabled children learn how to ice fish. He also requested a

cookout by a river with a keg of beer. They calculated the exact cost in advance together.

"He wasn't a famous person. He wasn't rich. He always felt like he wasn't worthy of his family and couldn't provide for us through work because of his disability," says Ms. Ryan. "This gave him the ability to leave this earth knowing that he meant something to other people and that he was making a difference."

Some people become interested in planning a funeral after attending someone else's. Even the most uninspired funeral can be inspirational. When Kathy Cartwright, a real-estate agent in Palos Verdes Estates, Calif., went to a funeral with her parents, both in their early 80s, the service seemed impersonal. There were doughnuts left over from an earlier church service, and no coffee. "It was really awful," she says.

On the way home, Ms. Cartwright told her parents, "We need to talk about what you want. What kind of food? What kind of dessert? I need a budget, and I need it now." They quickly agreed.

Then there are those who start planning early simply because they enjoy it. Kimba Hills says her mother, Sylvia Hills, who lived in Jackson, Tenn., started planning her own funeral 40 years ago when she was in perfect health. "My wedding and her funeral were the two most important events in

her life," Ms. Hills says. The elder Ms. Hills loved the idea of departing in a hot-air balloon but finally rejected that plan as "treacherous."

When Ms. Hills became terminally ill from breast cancer, she began to plan with great detail. She chose a casket and pallbearers, the scripture readings and the hymns. She wanted a soloist, because, she explained, the congregation "is always off-key." She selected white silk pajamas to wear in the closed casket. Her daughter, the owner of Rumba, a furniture store in Santa Monica, Calif., wrote her mother's eulogy and read it at her bedside. Her mother gave critiques: "I liked it better when you read it the first time," she said in her Southern drawl. "You put more emphasis on 'when you go h-o-o-o-m-e.'"

The service went beautifully. Ms. Hills says she thinks the funeral planning helped take her mother's mind off her own death. "Being proactive takes the anxiety out of it," she says.

A Laugh and a Shrug

All this led me to call my 81-year-old father, James Hughes, to at least broach the issue of funeral planning. He has had a stroke but is otherwise healthy. So I was surprised to find he has been hard at work on his own obituary. My stepmother asked him to begin writing it, saying she will be too distraught when he passes away. He is now trying to shorten it after discovering that newspapers charge by the line.

"In my zeal to be honored with glorious words, I chose too many glorious words," he says with a laugh. "It's not something I was enthusiastic about doing. But you don't want it to suddenly fall to everyone else."

Indeed, I logged on to MyWonderful-Life.com and tried to plan my own funeral. But the job is...daunting. I picked cremation, but I'm having a hard time deciding where to be scattered. The ocean seems cold.

When I asked my husband, he said he hasn't decided whether to be buried or cremated. "It doesn't seem imminent," he explained, shrugging.

I have warned him that if he doesn't decide soon, I'll cremate him.