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Trends

By Patti Martin Bartsche

There's No Place Like Home

When Lisa Carlson first published “Caring for Your Own Dead” in 1987, the book raised a lot of eyebrows in the funeral profession, and quickly earned Carlson a label as a “freak.”

“Home funerals just weren’t done; writing a guide for people who wanted to handle funeral arrangements themselves, well, it just wasn’t popular,” Carlson recalled. “We couldn’t even give the book away to hospice. We thought that was a perfectly logical extension of the hospice ideal, and a logical audience for the book. But national hospice organizations wanted nothing to do with it.” At most, Carlson was getting contacted once a month from someone wanting to know what to do and how to do it.

Fast forward to 2011. In June, Carlson, now the executive director (and founder) of the Funeral Ethics Organization, published “Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death” with Josh Slocum, executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, which is based in Vermont. This time, the response was decidedly different. “There’s been an explosion of interest in home funerals,” Carlson said. “People want to take control ... they want to be involved.” These days, Carlson is contacted several times a week by families who want to know more about caring for a deceased loved one at home.

While the work of caring for a family’s own dead until burial or cremation goes by many names,

“Undertaken With Love: A Home Funeral Guide for Congregations and Communities” offers this definition of a home funeral:

A ‘home funeral’ is a noncommercial, family centered response to death that involves the family and its social community in the care and preparation of the body for burial or cremation, and/or in planning and carrying out related rituals or ceremonies, and/or in the burial or cremation itself.

A ‘home funeral’ may occur entirely within the family home or not. It is differentiated from the ‘institutional funeral’ by its emphasis on minimal, noninvasive care and preparation of the body, on its reliance on the family’s own social networks for assistance and support, and on the relative or total absence of commercial funeral providers in its proceedings.

Home funerals can encompass a viewing, wake, memorial service or any combination or variation. By its very definition it’s an intimate experience with family members and friends washing and dressing the body, building and perhaps decorating a casket, planning a memorial service or accompanying the loved one to a crematory or final resting place.

Carlson said it should come as no surprise that home funerals are gaining

in popularity, especially with the baby boomer generation. “They are the generation that recycled, had natural childbirth, home-schooled their children and opted for alternative medicines,” Carlson pointed out. “Many wrote their own wedding vows and blended families in a new way. Why wouldn’t they want to be in control of their funeral experience?”

Lee Webster, vice president of the Everett, Wash.-based National Home Funeral Alliance, agrees. “These are people that did things their own way all throughout their lives,” she said. “Why should it be any different in their deaths?”

While no one is willing to label the increase in home funerals as a trend – hard and fast numbers are hard to come by because most states do not keep such statistics – there is no question that home funerals are becoming a more talked about option.

In recent years, Smithsonian Magazine, The New York Times and The (Minnesota) Star Tribune have all featured lengthy stories on home funerals. Heidi Boucher, a home funeral guide and writer, producer and director is currently producing and directing a documentary film, “In The Parlor: The Final Goodbye.” And 14-year-old Kayla Margush of Garrettsville, Ohio, lovingly chronicled

her father's life and home funeral in a documentary as a speech class project.

"I think the more the media covers home funerals, the more conversations we're going to have," Carlson pointed out. "And that's a good thing. Out of the total number of funerals each year, home funerals are likely to be only a few ... but shouldn't everyone have a chance to decide for themselves whether this is something that they (and their family) would want?"

Home funerals can offer families a multitude of benefits: healthy grief, familiar surroundings, empowerment, closure, intimacy, bonding of friends and family, economy and a return to ancient ways, according to home funeral advocates.

"There's something about touching, watching, sitting with a body that lets you know the person is no longer there," Boucher said.

Boucher, who has been helping guide families in their home death-care options for 20 years, was 15 or 16 when she was first introduced to the concept of a home funeral. She was living with a family in Sacramento, Calif., that was adamant about taking care of their elders at home, including a grandmother who was dying. "We were kids running around the house, knowing that grandma was in the next room dying," Boucher recalled. "Then there was a casket in that room after she died, and it just felt right. It was the way it was supposed to be."

Her decision in 2009 to start filming a documentary was not made lightly but rather was borne out of a desire to demystify the dying process. "Ninety nine percent of the time people who have seen a clip or who are talking to me about it are completely intrigued," Boucher said. "That they have no idea that it is an option speaks volumes about how death is portrayed in this country; people just don't know what they can and can't do."

For the past year, Boucher has been

meeting with the family of a woman who is dying. The woman's story includes building her casket, remodeling the room where the woman wanted to be (for her service) and what tasks each of her siblings will do after she dies – from deciding who will drive her body to the cemetery, who will dress her, who will do her makeup and who will dig her grave. "To get their perspective is incredible," Boucher said. "That they are willing to share their story to show that this is an option, is a great gift."



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The opportunity to make such a film also offers Boucher a chance to dispel a misconception long-held by many traditional funeral professionals. "From my observations the families that choose home funerals are regular, normal people ... they're not tree-huggers, granola eaters or hippies," she said. "Many of the families I've seen and been in contact with, they know they want something, but they're not sure what it is. They're not sure that they want to let the body go with a stranger, no matter how kind and friendly that person may be. The more involvement they have over the two or three days (before the final disposition), there's a great sense of completion that is really healthy. They are grateful for that time; there is a sense of empowerment instead of helplessness."

It's that sense of closure, advocates

say, that families want – but don't always understand how to get. In many cases, they turn to a funeral home because they think it's their only option. In all but eight states (Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey and New York), family members are not legally required to consult a funeral director at all.

New York is one of the eight states that has laws requiring that a funeral director handle human remains at some point in the process.

Randy L. McCullough, deputy executive director for the New York State Funeral Directors Association, pointed out that funeral directors are well-versed in local and state regulations, as well as customs and traditions.

"Funeral directors understand the legal processes necessary because they deal with them every day," McCullough noted. "Families do not."

And under a time of extreme emotional distress, a funeral director's professionalism, compassion and respect is what many want and need. "At the end of the day, funeral directors are there to serve their families with respect and dignity in whatever way a family wishes."

Funeral directors, McCullough said, will work with families to create the service a family wants. "We believe that a funeral director's assistance is

invaluable to a family,” he said.

While there is a group of people who are helping families do services in their homes and would prefer no funeral home involvement, that is just not possible in Connecticut, said Shauna K. Molloy, past president of the Connecticut Funeral Directors Association. “In Connecticut, laws are in place ... that can’t happen,” said Molloy, a funeral director at Molloy Funeral Home in West Hartford. “In Connecticut, we can do wakes in the house, (but) the funeral home is involved in the planning process.”

Molloy understands a family’s desire to want to have a wake at home, but she pointed out that a lot of things happen from a public health standpoint very quickly. “What could start out as a pleasant experience for a family can turn out just the opposite,” Molloy said. “I can understand the emotion and intent, but the practicality is just the opposite. That’s what we do for a living, and I wouldn’t want things done any differently.”

Carlson said it’s never been a case of “us against them,” but rather an opportunity to educate families about what all their options are – not just ones funeral directors feel comfortable talking about.

And while changing decades of “old school thought” may take time, advocates say there are progressive funeral directors who are helping families with whatever choices they want to make.

It Just Makes Sense

Steve Willwerscheid of Willwerscheid Funeral Home & Cremation Service in St. Paul, Minn., believes the industry is slowly becoming more accepting of families’ requests for options like home funerals.

“Home funerals are really being supported by the baby boomer generation and hospice organizations,” Willwerscheid pointed out. “It is a very natural progression from the hospice perspective.”

What families want, Willwerscheid

believes, is more involvement. “They don’t necessarily want to do everything and they need help on certain things, but they want to do something,” he said.

Willwerscheid, who says he’s one of two funeral directors in Minnesota who think home funerals are not a bad idea, understands the reluctance for the industry to embrace home funerals. “Part of it is stepping into the fear of the unknown,” he said. “Many people were blinded by cremation and the serious changes it brought to our industry. Any change that has the potential to impact your bottom line is a scary thing.”

In Minnesota, Willwerscheid said, people spend a lot of money to become a funeral director. “When you have that commitment to become a funeral director you want a payback over the life of your career,” he said. “And then comes along something that could impact your bottom line. Our industry is being smashed around by everyone ... cremation, resomation, home funerals, the FTC and what directors are asking themselves is, ‘Who else is going to slap us?’”

Willwerscheid is convinced that the industry needs to step out of the box and embrace a new way of thinking. “We can’t rely on tradition any longer,” he said. “We have to develop new business models ... we have to be able to offer our families the something they are looking for.”

To funeral director Randy Garner’s way of thinking, home funerals should be a nonissue. “To be a death-care professional in the community means that you serve everyone that walks through your door, and you do everything you can for that person, including signing a death certificate if you’re asked,” said Garner, vice president of Day Funeral Home in Randolph, Vt. “When people walk through the door, the response should be, ‘If it’s legal, we’ll figure it out.’”

Not only is it the right thing to do, Garner added, but it also happens to be a really good business plan. “The chance that many of the people in the family (of the deceased) are going to want a home funeral for themselves is slim,” he said. “But when you shut part

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of your business, you don't have any idea what you're turning away (in the future)."

For Garner, it's quite simple. "I don't care what they want; when someone dies I want them to think of our firm," he said. "Ethically it's the right thing to do, but it also happens to be a brilliant business strategy. When someone dies, they think of us. We might not have taken care of anyone else in their family, but we pop into their head because we've been able to build up a reputation in the community. You have to be pleased to serve them all, no matter what they're asking."

It's a business strategy that has seemingly worked. In spite of increasing competition, Garner said he has been able to hold onto his business. "I can't stress this enough," he said. "If you want to stay in business, you have to serve everyone in your community ... you can't just choose the convenient ones."

Garner has assisted at several home funerals including one that included a full Catholic Mass at a private family residence. "For a number of reasons, the family wanted the service in their home," Garner said. "And have the service in their home they did ... but they got the casket and the vault from us."

In another case, a family initially came in to have the funeral home take care of the paperwork, a request Garner said he was happy to do at no cost. In talking with the family, the discussion turned to how the body was going to get to the burial site. Garner said the funeral home could take care of it if the family wanted. They did, and more than 100 people attended the graveside service. "People weren't standing around saying, 'I'm going to do this,'" Garner said, "but they were saying how wonderful it was that we were able to do it for the family."

And Garner had made it a point of letting families in the area know that he's there to serve by posting this on the Day Funeral Home website:

"We realize that in Vermont, there is no requirement that you use a funeral director or funeral home provided merchandise, or that you conform to a set of pre-determined packages or

options. We recognize the value of family involvement in any portion of the death care and funeral process, and will do our best to make sure that our charges are an accurate reflection of the duties you specifically ask us to perform."

Fellow Vermont funeral director Rodney Sayles, co-owner of Sayles Funeral Home in St. Johnsbury, Vt., says there's only one side to be on. "To me, joining in and helping people who want to do it themselves, it's the side to be on in your funeral service," he said.

"I have no problems with families that want to do it themselves," Sayles said. "On the other hand, if they want me to do it, I'm willing to do it."

A licensed funeral director since 1976, Sayles acknowledged that in these tough economic times, funeral directors are keeping an even closer eye on their bottom line. Home funerals, which cost a fraction of a tradition funeral, don't add much. What many funeral directors fail to realize, though, is that "you get more by dangling a

carrot than you do dangling a stick." In other words, he added, "When you're perceived as being helpful, families will remember that. And the next time they are in need of a funeral director for a traditional service, who do you think they'll call? You, who helped them, or the guy down the street who didn't?"

Carlson is encouraged by increased interest in home funerals. "It's not in the mainstream yet, but I think it is coming," she said.

Garner believes that requests for home funerals are similar to cremation. "Many funeral directors refused to embrace cremation because they didn't believe it would become that big," he said. "Back then, they turned down families who wanted cremation and pointed them elsewhere. Now I have to ask, 'How's that working for you?'"

It's better to be there to give your families what they want, Garner said. "I think that if funeral directors don't change, they won't be around," he said. "Families will go elsewhere and where will they be?" •

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