

Commemorating Life with Burial Vaults

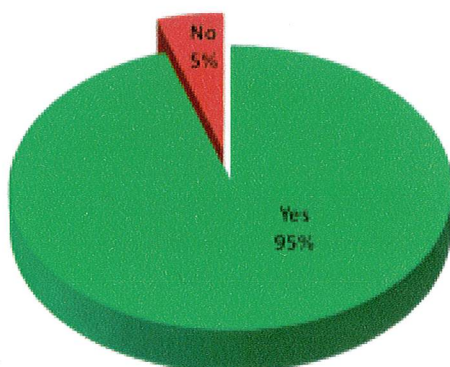
Wayne Stellmach, Wilbert Funeral Services, Inc

To commemorate the life of a very young man who had been an avid hockey player, the funeral director collaborated with the burial vault provider to display the photo-montage vault carapace at the visitation. Friends and family were invited to inscribe tributes or notes to their loved one and sign the carapace. The turnout was impressive as was the line of friends and hockey teammates waiting to write their special notes on the carapace. Seeing how much it meant to the young man's mother, the funeral director decided to ask her whether she would like to keep the carapace rather than bury it. "No," the mother said, "that goes with my son. It will keep a part of his friends with him forever."

This story from a funeral director touches on what arguably is the nexus of funeral service: providing supportive experiences that help families commemorate and remember their loved ones. "Nexus" is defined as (1) a means of connection, such as a connected group, and (2) the center or focus. Both definitions apply to the commemoration of a life during a funeral or memorial service. The connected group of family and friends gather to grieve, pay respects, share stories and support each other with the focus being the commemoration of their loved one.

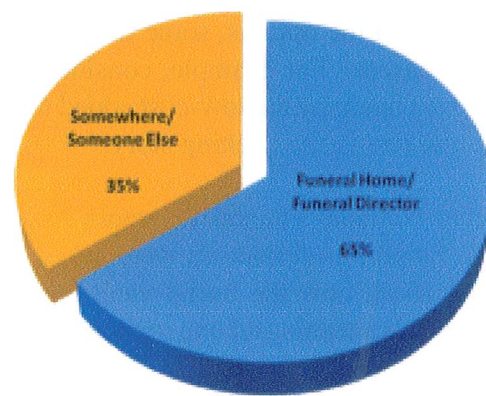
Funeral professionals facilitate this process, providing the dignified environment and helping to create meaningful commemoration. In a sense, the funeral professional "connects the dots" through understanding the dynamics of this difficult experience and what needs to be done to make that experience easier and fulfilling for families. From that experience flows suggestions for the family on what they might do to tailor a commemoration for their loved one. This is perhaps one of the greatest services that funeral professionals can provide.

Are funeral & memorial services a valuable part of commemorating the life of a loved one?



Source: Funeral and Memorial Information Council, Study of American Attitudes Toward Ritualization and Memorialization, 2010

Who do you turn to as the authority on funeral planning?



Despite differing viewpoints on cremation versus burial, traditional versus green, visitation versus expediency, religious versus secular and so on, a singular common desire is to memorialize the deceased in some way. Ninety-five percent of American consumers aged 20 and over said that funeral and memorial services are a valuable and important part of commemorating the life of a loved one. This 2010 survey was conducted by leading research firm Harris Interactive and commissioned by the Funeral and Memorial Information Council (FAMIC).

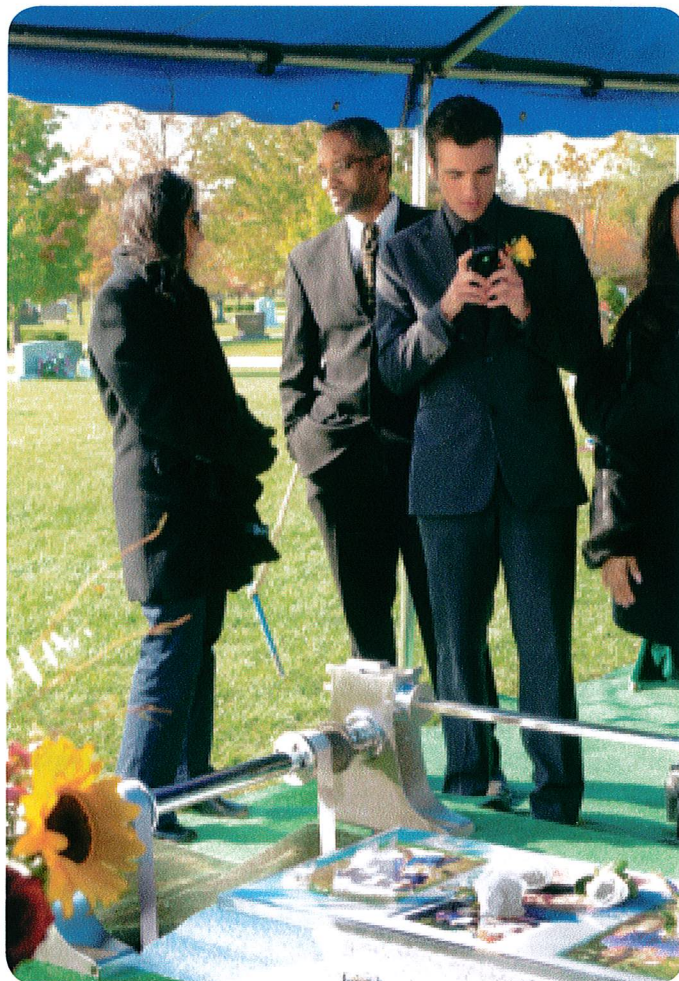
The FAMIC study also found ninety-two percent of those 40 and older believed that the funeral industry provides meaning and value to the arrangement process. Yet at the same time, over one-third of the respondents have looked to others besides funeral professionals for funeral planning ideas. This good news/bad news scenario might suggest that funeral professionals may need to be more assertive in educating consumers both pre-need and at-need. Perhaps the understandable hesitation to suggest products and services for fear of being perceived as high-pressure salespeople merits

re-examination. Families are looking for the best way to honor and commemorate their loved one. Certainly they may already have ideas in mind, but that doesn't mean they are aware of other possibilities.

A perfect example of this is burial vaults, many of which can be personalized and play a very meaningful role at the graveside committal service. How many families know about this? Indeed, an independent survey by research group PAR found that only forty-two percent of burial families even expect to buy a vault, let alone realize that some can be personalized. Yet how many times are families pre-judged as "probably not interested" or "probably can't afford" or "really don't need" such a vault? Perhaps they would have at least liked to have known about the options, some of which are not even that expensive. For example, consider the huge impact that was made by the low-cost added touch of a few magic markers in the opening story.

At the recent National Funeral Directors Association convention, funeral professionals were asked to share some stories about how the burial vault was used to create particularly meaningful experiences for some of their families:

"I always try to put action with emotion, which I find helps people work through their grief while paying tribute to their loved one. One example is how we give each pallbearer a white rose, symbolic of remembrance, and pin it to their lapels to wear throughout the service. At the end of the graveside committal service, each pallbearer places the rose on the vault as an active way to connect with their loved one and pledge that they will always remember him or her. Then family and friends are invited to come forward and place

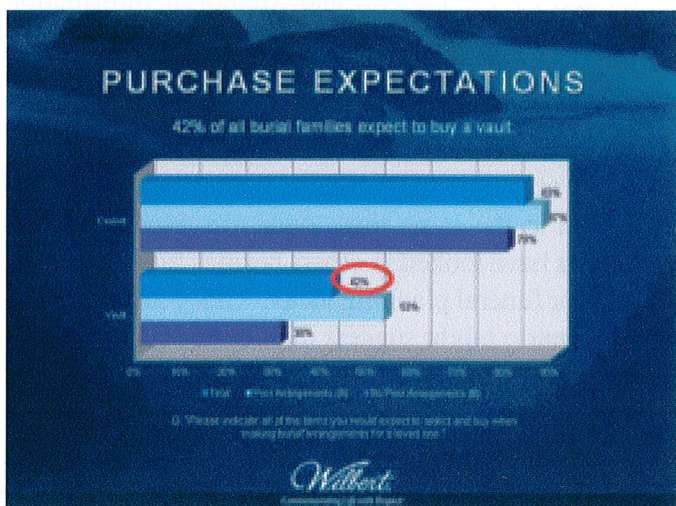


White roses placed on the vault signify connection with loved one

their hand on the top of the vault as a last touch, just as that person touched them in life. I get many positive comments about these simple actions which many were unaware could even be done. They find it very touching and it gives the family the opportunity to actually see the vault that they had chosen at the funeral home, see their loved one's name on it, see any special symbols or emblems. I explain all of this to them and I find that an educated consumer is a content consumer." - Paula Staab Polk, Staab Polk Memorial Home & Cremation Services, Chatham, IL

"The technology and what you can do to a concrete vault to make it personal and memorable is so much better now for the family compared to just having a name, date and cross on it." - Ronnie Holloway, Heritage Funeral Home, Brady, TX

"One story that comes to mind was a service we did for a World War II veteran. We put a World War II three-dimensional image on a stainless steel vault carapace



and it was so stunning that everybody was in awe... even the military just stood there and looked at it for a long time. Everybody was taking pictures of it for remembrance. This was 2-1/2 years ago and we still get comments about it.” - Randy Holloway, Heritage Funeral Home, Brady, TX

Personalization has been one of the key factors in our success...making it unique for each family is the most important thing, in my opinion. But you have to educate the family on the value of the burial vault and why they might choose on vault over another. We use Wilbert’s video display to educate families and it really helps.” - Matt Shannon, Holman-Howe Funeral Home, Lebanon, MO

“On more than one occasion we’ve taken family photographs and put them on the carapace for the family as a surprise and display it at the cemetery. The response is just overwhelming. We work very hard to create value that anyone can see. From special touches to the high quality of the vaults, people go away from that service knowing that their expectations were exceeded.” - Kenneth Howe, Holman-Howe Funeral Home, Lebanon, MO

Don’t miss out on the opportunity to add ideas – and value – to families as they plan funeral services, whether pre-need or at-need. Take advantage of the Internet to reach people even as they are researching funeral planning, whether via your website, Facebook page, YouTube or other social media channels.

Convey ideas and perhaps share stories on how you’ve helped families create highly-personalized commemo-

ration through products as well as services. Post videos that educate consumers so that they can arrive at their own decisions.

Wouldn’t you prefer that families say, “I never knew we could do that!” when they are making arrangements rather than after the fact? They probably would.



Family photos on vault carapace are very impactful



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