

The M essenger



A Publication of the Funeral Consumers Information Society of Greater Detroit

Founded in 1961

Winter 2008

Demystify Death

By Holly Gilbert

My friend Diane e-mailed me this week to lament the passing of Dan Fogelberg. Besides putting her on the edge of tears, news of the singer's passing prompted her to reiterate the funeral plan she drew up years ago; it opens with Fogelberg's "Part of the Plan" and closes with "Nether Lands."

Annual Dues and Donation Drive

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"I got on his website this morning to see if I would still choose those songs and I would," she wrote.

Then she implored me to remind her husband of this if I was around when the time comes.

Talk of funeral "playlists" really gets my 14-year-old son's hackles up. He finds any discussion about the other "F" word gratuitously maudlin, and he is not alone.

Phrases like funeral, or casket, or burial cast a palpable pall on most any conversation. Yet death is, as the cliché goes, about the only thing besides taxes that is guaranteed in life.

Even so, the process is mired in such cringe-factor that we are all-too-often left to whisper about it in the decorous anterooms of funeral parlors, where, of course, it's already been done.

It is time, as FCIS board member Wendy Lyons says, to "demystify death."

So, this summer, we're unveiling a companion to the FCIS Web site, www.yourlastwrites.org, where we will proceed to champion the mainstreaming of end-of-life issues like funerals, obituaries, eulogies, burials, cremations, memorials and, yeah, death.

Our goal is to liberate death and dying from its unfairly assigned stigma.

But we can't do this alone.

So here's our deal: We'll do all the grunt work necessary to provide you with information, news and resources about everything from writing obituaries and eulogies, planning meaningful memorials and even penning the perfect epitaph. But in return, we ask you to do your part in making this a conversation.

Talk back.

That's right, we can make a bigger difference faster if we do this as a team. We'll provide you with plenty of opportunities to share your stories, your knowledge, your concerns and your questions about all things end of life.

That includes playlists.

It is time to make death part of the living vernacular instead of a vocabulary reserved for the back seats of black hearses.

*Holly Gilbert
is a journalist
and a FCIS
board member.*





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President's Remarks

Conflict: Real or Imagined

By Carter Stevenson

I think it was Eleanor Roosevelt who said: "People sometimes make me so upset. They never are as I imagine them. They are what they are."

And so it is with the funeral industry, the providers, the lawmakers, the bereft, the consumer advocates.

We never are as we are imagined. We are what we are.

One thing that is certain: Loved ones die.

Traditions have institutionalized final rites, where memories and deeds are cherished and the finality death is assuaged.

There is the funeral industry designed to help in our time of need, to assist as we find the internal resources to relate to the inevitability of death.

There are laws and lawmakers who legislate what is right and proper regarding the issues that

citizens face in most matters of our daily living and, in this case, dying.

There is also us — Funeral Consumers Alliance nationally and Funeral Consumers Information Society locally. We provide consumer information and advocate for contemplation of the death that we will all experience.

This takes us to places and interactions with people in situations that both stimulate and encourage us to keep the faith and the fight going.

Read on, and please know that your membership and donations help.

Carter Stevenson is FCIS board President.



What Do We Owe the Dead?

By Thomas Madsen

"He (or she) is gone!" we may exclaim as the last breath leaves someone's dying body. He's gone! The body that remains is his, but because it no longer breathes, it is no longer him. He, as we say, has departed.

Where he or she has gone has haunted the human imagination for centuries and provided many contradictory answers. But whatever services are rendered by a funeral establishment are of only temporary moment.

The only real offering that the living can make to the dead is memory. Through memory, he or

she lives for a time again in our imagination.

All this is a preface to noting that originally and for many years our society was called a memorial society, the Greater Detroit Memorial Society, organized along with many others like it to plan for fitting memorialization of our dead.

A funeral home usually had some part in what was to be done, but we, the living, were to be a major part in planning what was to happen to our earthly remains when we departed from them.

Of course, we might go for the bronze casket with marble tombstone and lines of people staring

down at our embalmed body trying to convince one another that we look just like ourselves.

But we might instead wish to be remembered — along with whatever else — for our consideration for our survivors' expenses.

In any case, what is finally left on earth of those who have departed from us and what will be left of us when we depart is what can be remembered.

One modest but important goal of our society is to keep that humble truth from being overwhelmed by solicitations for elaborate display.

Family Embraces Life In Death

By Wendy Lyons

When Imam Abdullah El-Amin's closest friend died 18 months ago, he ritually bathed his friend's body, anointed him with oil and fragrant herbs and wrapped him in a simple white burial shroud.

It was not only his religious duty, El-Amin, of Detroit, said, it was an honor.

"We were together all down through the years," he said. "He was my best friend."

Throughout history, caring for the dead has been the duty of faith communities and families rather than undertakers. It's still that way across much of the globe. Even here in Michigan, El-Amin has provided after-death care for hundreds of people as part of his role as imam, or spiritual leader, of the Muslim Center of Detroit.

But what is common practice for El-Amin is unusual. Most Americans relinquish this job to funeral directors.



Imam El-Amin

While many are satisfied with this arrangement, others are not. They desire a more profound way to say goodbye.

From washing the body to creating a personalized funeral ritual, more and more families are taking back care of their dead from the professionals and doing it themselves.

"A person has the right to take care of and support their loved ones the way they see fit," El-Amin said.

Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann, of Detroit, walked out of Henry Ford Hospital September 2005. She

had just learned that the aggressive brain tumors she had been fighting for seven years had, once again, returned.

It was a turning point.

"Take a look back," daughter Lydia, 19 years old at the time, said.

"That's the last time you're ever going to be in that hospital."

Joy radiated from Jeanie's face.

The fight was over.

They determined to "live as best we could and enjoy this last time, to die the best we could, to be with one another as much as possible," Lydia said.

When Jeanie died at home under hospice care on New Year's Eve, around 60 friends gathered to assist. The men carried Jeanie downstairs where a group of women, including Lydia, washed her body.

"I washed her hair and washed her face ... mostly by washing her face with my tears," Lydia said. "It was just an incredible moment, probably one of the most amazing moments of my life."

Daughter Lucy, who had just turned 16 at the time, carefully selected her mom's clothing and jewelry. Over the last few months, Lucy had dressed her mom each morning making it a fun and exciting routine. Serving her, one last time, in this familiar way helped Lucy's grief.

After Jeanie was dressed, she was placed in a casket made by friends and cooled with dry ice.

Over the two-day home wake, hundreds gathered to sing, pray, tell stories, share meals, mourn and celebrate Jeanie's life as a community.

There was no urgency to say goodbye.

"It was like she lingered with us and gently helped each one of



Lydia and Bill Wylie-Kellermann

us move into this completely new time in our life," Lydia said.

Most people don't know it's legal for families to care for their own dead so they never experience what the Wylie-Kellermanns did.

But only seven states, including Michigan, require funeral-director involvement.

"Why any state agency would want to interfere with this private, intimate family ritual is beyond me," said Josh Slocum, executive director of Funeral Consumers Alliance, a consumer watchdog over the funeral industry.

It is legal for Michiganians to care for their dead, but a funeral director must sign the death certificate, obtain disposition permits and, as of 2006, provide supervision.

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Death Rights

A Eulogy to Consumer Rights

By Wendy Lyons

When you think of state regulations, you may automatically assume they exist solely to protect citizens, and that is often the case.

But other regulations simply come about from industry lobbying. These regulations are not meant to protect citizens, though they might appear that way on the surface. Rather, they are meant to further entrench an industry.

In 2006, a law was passed stating "The handling, disposition, or disinterment of a body shall be under the supervision of a person licensed to practice mortuary science in this state."

One would think that such a far-reaching law governing the disposition of dead human bodies would be found, say, in the codes

that govern the disposition of dead human bodies, right? How about the occupational codes for mortuary science?

Nope.

This new law was neatly tucked away in the Estates and Protected Individuals Code, Act 386 of 1998, Section 700.3206 (1), which governs estates, wills, trusts, probate, etc., not the disposal of dead human bodies.

Certainly, FCIS supports the strict regulation of the funeral industry. After all, it was our national organization that is, in large part, responsible for getting the Federal Trade Commission to begin regulating the funeral industry in 1984.

What we do not support is industry regulations and protectionism trumping our basic civil rights.

Think of it this way: Just because there are certified accountants doesn't mean we should be forced to hire and pay them to do our taxes. Just because there are licensed real-estate agents doesn't mean we cannot sell our homes for sale by owner. To become a medical doctor, one must be licensed. Yet, that does not mean that we are legally obligated to seek their care when we get a sniffle or, for that matter, even if our life is in jeopardy.

It is no different with funeral directors. The decision to entrust our dead to a licensed funeral director should be a consumer choice, not a mandate. It is upon this foundation that all other civil rights rest.

For that reason, FCIS has developed legislative goals, which will restore the rights of more than 10 million Michigan funeral consumers and bring our funeral laws in line with the majority of the country.

Yes, it will be a challenge, but as Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Annual Dues and Donation Drive

Included in this edition of *The Messenger* you will find an envelope to use for sending in your yearly dues and donations.

As you know, FCIS is dedicated to providing information and advocacy to its members and the public on funeral-related matters.

This volunteer service is made possible only through the tax-deductible financial support of our membership fees and donations from those who value the work that we do advocating for the rights and rites of Michigan's funeral consumers.

As with any organization, our influence and educational outreach can only be in proportion to our funding, so please be as generous as you can when sending in your yearly contribution.

We have big plans for 2008. We love our work. We hope you do, too.

*Wendy Lyons
is FCIS
board Vice
President.*



Death Writes

January 5, 2005

I Never Knew Death

By Lydia Wylie-Kellermann

Reprinted with permission

I never knew death to be so cruel
The mantra sounds through my head
As the days slip faster than I knew
She moans out in pain
She struggles to say "I love you"
She tells me she's unhappy

Why must one leave this world in pain
Leaving is hard enough
But why must she struggle so
I want to be inside her head
Calm her pain
Let her know she is not alone
And hold her heart in my hand

In the end,
Or what I know to be the end
She slipped through that door
Peacefully and gracefully
The hour sooner than we had planned
But precisely the moment she planned
Taking care of each of us
To the final moment

A phone call
Tells me she is dead
Shocked and filled with immediate
Guilt and anger
I rush home
Run the stairs three at a time
And collapse on top of her dead body

I hold her tight
Not wanting to ever let go
Her body is still warm
I hold her hands
Trace her face
Take her warmth as my own
I begin to wail
I am no longer conscious of anything
My body, my heart
I let it all go
Covering her in my love and pain

Surrounded by women, light, and music
I cleanse every inch of her face and her head
My tears pour down my face
As if they are endless

They fall upon her cheeks and her eyes
Washing her with my tears
I wash her hair
Deeply feeling her head
Misshaped from the wounds
Of her battle

The room was filled with tears, prayer, and laughter
I fall into the arms of friends
They rock me back and forth
I weep
Knowing my deep love of my mother
Knowing that I did indeed show her how deeply I loved her
Knowing that she loved me more deeply than I can ever know
Knowing that at that moment
She was falling into the arms of her
Father
Brother
And all the saints
And indeed into the arms of God
I knew that she was laughing
And dancing
And at home
And at the same time
Here with me
Being the arms that hold me
It was at that moment
That a new mantra began
I never knew death to be so beautiful

To submit your original poem on death and dying for publication in our newsletter, please e-mail it to fcis@juno.com.

According to the Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth 2007:

2,161 mortuary science licensees
3 funeral directors (not licensed to embalm)
74 mortuary science trainees
763 funeral homes

According the Michigan Department of Community Health:

2006 Michigan Population: 10,095,643
2006 Michigan Deaths: 85,945

Where Your Money Goes

By Thomas Madsen

A recent note from a FCIS member asked what portion of the dues he pays each year is a donation to the society and what portion goes toward the value of goods and services he gets through membership. Since we are a true nonprofit organization, our books do not reflect profit and loss but incoming tax-deductible dues and donations and outgoing expenses for operations.

Our income is entirely from dues and donations, which, of course, we always welcome. Our expenses are for a cubbyhole office at an outbuilding of the Grosse Pointe Unitarian Church, a one-day-a-week office manager (yours truly, whose salary is truly pocket

change), office supplies, photocopying, telephone bills, postage, the newsletter and occasional petty cash reimbursements to FCIS members for purchases made for our operation.

Our services are largely the providing of information relating to death and funeral practices through the newsletter, in pamphlets, on our Web site, in community-awareness presentations and over the phone. This is often not just general information, but specific information about choices you or your survivors may have at your departure.

A major effort of ours is to gather information about cremation and burial prices at funeral

homes in the Metro Detroit area through periodic surveys. Another is to answer your questions over the phone about matters at the end of life. By calling our office at any time and leaving a message, you can be assured of getting a return call from a volunteer member of FCIS that day or the next. In case of a death and the need for immediate information, you will be given a number you can call any-time day or night for help (again, yours truly).

Most of what we do is voluntary, and we do it because we feel that it should be done. If you feel the same way, consider volunteering or becoming a member of our board.

Family Embraces Life In Death

(continued from page 3)

Home funerals were once a natural part of family life, and adults knew what to do. Now, fear of the unknown causes most people to rely upon professionals.

Those who cared for Jeanie after death loved her. For them, it was a holy act.

"It's not a professional act," said Bill Wylie-Kellermann, Jeanie's husband and pastor of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Corktown. "It's a sacred community-based act.

"I felt like I got a lesson in what sacraments are. A sacrament is something that is very ordinary and necessary, like eating bread, which turns out to be the most holy and sacred thing there is.

"It's a practical necessity to wash the body, and it's a sacred ritual ... at the same time."

Even now, Jeanie's home funeral is a source of comfort.

"I can think back to any of those moments when I'm sad or feel like I need to be grieving," Lydia said. "It's just so powerful and so beautiful that every moment can make me cry in a really good way."

Caring for Jeanie's body at home was not only a death-changing experience, it was a life-changing experience.

"I wrote something for the funeral after that," Lydia said. "It was a poem that started out, 'I never knew death to be so horrible,' because those last couple days

when my mom was saying that she was in pain or things like that were just so hard.

"By the end of it, after going through this experience of washing the body, of having people there and the telling stories around her body ... the laughter and crying and the singing – just all this grief and celebration and life – by the end of it, the last line of the poem was, 'I never knew death to be so beautiful.'

"That's really completely how I felt."

State Reopens File On Funeral Home Client Dumped In Landfill

An excerpt from a letter to the editor justifying the role of licensed funeral directors in all body dispositions after The Detroit News ran a story on family-led funerals April 19, 2007:

“The handling of human remains, however, from transportation through final disposition, needs to be either performed by or under the supervision of a licensed funeral director. This assures Michigan’s citizens that human remains are properly and respectfully handled in accordance with each family’s wishes. ... The public is then secure in knowing that the handling and final disposition are appropriately carried out.”

— Roy Betzler, President
Michigan Funeral
Directors Association

State officials are reopening the investigation of a Michigan funeral home after a body in its care found its final resting place in a garbage dump.

The body of Erwin Jordan, 66, arrived at the Notier-VerLee-Langeland Funeral Home in Holland, Mich. Dec. 20, 2005. Jordan’s body, which was in a body bag placed inside a cardboard cremation container, was stored near a dumpster in the funeral home’s locked garage. On a routine garbage pickup Jan. 5, 2006, Priority Arrowwaste mistook the box containing Jordan’s body for garbage and dumped it in a Zeeland Township landfill. The body was never found.

The Jordan family filed a lawsuit against the funeral home and the refuse company suing for more than \$1 million for negligence. The case is still pending. Both Priority Arrowwaste and Notier-Ver Lee-Langeland are currently involved in countersuits.

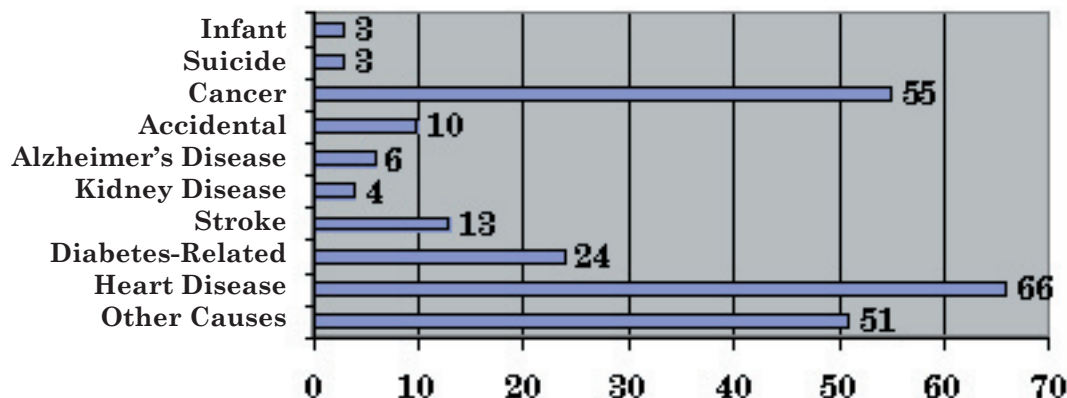
Last March, an Ottawa County Judge ruled that the funeral home breached its contract with Priority Arrowwaste by placing the body in a garage where the trash collector routinely picked up waste. A month later, the judge reversed his decision and transferred the blame to Priority Arrowwaste.

Following a Nov. 20 meeting of state officials and lawyers for the Jordan family, Priority Arrowwaste and Notier-Ver Lee-Langeland, the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth, which oversees the licensing of funeral homes and mortuary science practitioners, sent the funeral home a letter announcing its decision to reexamine the case.

— compiled by Wendy Lyons
from articles printed in the Muskegon Chronicle

Michigan Department of Community Health

On an average day in Michigan during 2006, the following deaths occurred:



Become The Eyes and Ears of Over 10 Million

How would you like to be involved in overseeing Michigan's 2,238 funeral directors and 763 funeral homes?

If your answer is: "Where do I sign up?" our answer is: The Michigan Board of Examiners in Mortuary Science.

The mortuary board consists of six professional/funeral director members and three public members. Unfortunately, there has been a public member vacancy for at least a year, so the layperson's perspective is sorely underrepresented.

We encourage you to become the eyes and ears of more than 10 million Michigan funeral consumers. All you'll need to do is travel to Lansing one or two days per

year to attend board meetings for a four-year period.

To apply, contact the Governor's Appointment Office at 517-335-7812 or go to www.michigan.gov/gov and click on the Gov. Appointments link. Appointments are made in June, so get your application and resume in by May 2008.

Correction

In the Spring 2006 Messenger in the article "State Mortuary Board Opposes Inexpensive Funeral" the A.J. Desmond & Sons Funeral Home/Vasu, Rodgers & Connell Chapel (in Royal Oak) was incorrectly referred to as the John E. Desmond Funeral Home. Our apologies.

Workshop on Caring For Our Own at Death

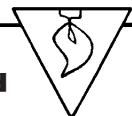
Family-directed-funeral educator Beth Knox will be teaching a comprehensive two-day home-based-funeral-care workshop in Ann Arbor, Michigan **January 11-12, 2008**. Knox, who provided after-death care for her 7-year-old daughter Alison, is featured in the PBS documentary "A Family Undertaking." To date, Knox has helped about 100 families care for their dead.

The cost of the seminar is \$125, which includes lunch and a resource guide. To register, contact Susan Schilperoort at 734-994-9480 or ss.ck@sbcglobal.net. Registration is required, and seating is limited. For more information on Crossings, visit: www.crossings.net.

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