

FCA REPORT

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FCA-GKC

The hybrid funeral experience

By Sally King, MSW, LCSW
FCA-GKC board member

My mother, Cynthia Kneibert, was no ordinary woman. Clinical social worker, artist, flutist, horse trainer, wife of nearly 55 years, mother of three, devout Catholic – she was also a bit of an alternative thinker when it came to her own funeral plans.

Having been diagnosed with lung cancer nine years ago, a lifelong non-smoker at that, my mother never assumed the victim role in her cancer treatment. She never asked “Why me?” nor did she blame God. She handled her disease with grace, acceptance and a reserve of courage we never knew she possessed, plus some humor thrown in from time to time.



Sally King and her mother, Cynthia Kneibert, shortly after Cynthia entered hospice care.

As a fellow clinical social worker, my mother was my mentor, best friend, and someone I would often confer with on tough mental health cases as well as how to start and build my own private practice. We even created a “Mother/Daughter

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Nancy Jobe takes helm of FCA-GKC

I am pleased to take the helm in 2014 as the Board President of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City. I would like to thank Sally King, immediate past president, for her commitment and service last year. We look forward to her dedication as she continues to serve on the board.

Let me introduce myself. Some of you may know me from articles I have written or presentations I have made about the natural burial of my husband, Randy, in 2012. (See the story in our fall, 2012, newsletter at www.funeralskc.org.) Having experienced the deeply meaningful benefits of a natural burial ceremony, my passion is educating others about this option. While many may believe a natural or green burial is something new, it is quite frankly the opposite. Basically, a natural

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Sr. Regina's natural burial

By Steve Nicely
FCA-GKC board member and Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth Associate

The oldest head stone in the cemetery of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth marks the grave of Sr. Regina McCrain who died November 21, 1861, three years after the arrival of the first group of charities from Nashville. It was a natural Burial, probably in a wooden coffin.

That was before the practice of embalming or the use of steel caskets and concrete grave liners.

The cemetery's latest burial



Sr. Regina Marie Allgaier

took place March 17 for another Sr. Regina -- Sr. Regina Marie Allgaier -- who died at the Motherhouse March 12 at the age of 95. That, too, was a natural burial, the first one in perhaps a century. The religious order began offering the option of natural burial again last year and Sr.

Regina Marie was among the first choose it.

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Newcomer's and McGilley merge

By Jim Fitzpatrick
FCA-GKC treasurer

Most consumers probably aren't aware of it, but the funeral home industry is changing dramatically in the Kansas City area. In January, the two biggest funeral-home chains in our area – **McGilley** and **Newcomer's** – came under common ownership through a big corporate buyout.

The McGilley and Newcomer properties will keep their respective names, but now all will be part of the **Dignity Memorial** network, which is the marketing banner of Houston-based **Service Corp. International (SCI)**.

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Nancy Jobe's vision as FCA-GKC president

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or green burial is just going back to the basics before there were funeral homes and directors. Family took care of their own in their home parlor. Interesting how life goes full circle.

My vision for the FCA-GKC is to be a strong volunteer, mission-driven, membership organization. I want our mission, "to educate and support individuals and families in making informed decisions about death-related services, consistent with their values and lifestyles," to become our focus. Concentrating on outreach and education will enable us reach and help more people make informed decisions.

We are focusing on four services this year: outreach, a new funeral price survey, membership and volunteers. As a volunteer-driven organization, nothing is possible without your help. FCA-GKC has a board of seven people. Obviously, we need your help to spread the word to accomplish our mission.

I was recently looking through past Funeral Consumer Alliance-GKC newsletters posted on our website and was proud of all the educational, informative and interesting articles the FCA-GKC has published over the years. Steve Nicely has done an excellent job coordinating the newsletter articles contributed by board members, developing the layout and following through to publication. Just an example of the great volunteers we have at FCA-GKC.



Nancy Jobe

Outreach and Volunteers: We need volunteers to locate and staff health fairs and other events. Too many organizations do not know about the work of FCA-GKC. We need to inform a broader audience about the important work of our organization. If your talent is social media, we could use your help maintaining our website and Facebook page. Volunteers also are needed to place FCA-GKC flyers at senior centers, libraries, hospices, churches and other institutions. If you don't want to leave home, how about helping us check and answer our email and phone messages once a day.

Projects: This year we are updating our funeral price survey, so volunteers are needed to help collect and compile the prices charged by 90 area

funeral homes and cremation services. Volunteer advocates also are needed to help develop more green burial space in our area.

Fundraising: This is what keeps FCA-GKC going and what will help us build our membership. If you know how to apply for grants, please lend us a hand. Grants have kept us alive and well numerous times in the past. We pinch our pennies. We just need more of them.

Do you have a talent to share with us? Please reach out and help. Go to our website www.funeralskc.org and apply online. Or you may send an email to fca.gkc@gmail.com or call 816-561-6322 to request a volunteer application.

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U.S. Post Office changes policy for shipping cremation ashes

The U.S. Postal Service, the only shipper that allows the shipment of cremated remains, now requires using its Priority Mail Express service instead of registered mail. The Post Office offers a "how to" brochure for shipping to domestic and international destinations.

Free Priority Mail Express boxes and shipping labels identifying the contents as cremated remains may be obtained at the Post Office. It recommends placing the container of ashes in a sealed plastic bag and labeling it with the name and address of the sender and its destination in case the outside label is damaged during shipment. Also recommended is the use of foam peanuts or air bubble wrap to stabilize the contents.

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Sr. Regina returns unencumbered to Mother Earth

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During the 153 years between the burials of the two Reginas, some 840 simple headstones appeared in the cemetery marking the graves of women who dedicated their lives to God through their service to others. Sr. Regina Marie's primary service lasted 54 years as a teacher of young children. She was a born educator who spent a lot of extra time with students who had trouble learning.

When the American culture embraced the chemical preservation of bodies before burial, the Charities of Leavenworth followed suit. It was convenient. It allowed more time for the arrival of family and friends for services. The bodies looked better and could be viewed at the vigil service the evening before burial. The casketed body could be present at the Mass of Christian Burial, be incensed, sprinkled with holy water and prayed over.

The body was not present at the vigil service for Sr. Regina Marie. Her untreated, shrouded body was stored in the refrigeration unit at the R. L. Leintz Funeral Home in Leavenworth. And it wasn't present at her funeral mass on St. Patrick's day, just a photograph of her on a table in front of the altar. The body was delivered in a plain wooden box handcrafted by Ray Krueger, head of maintenance at the Motherhouse, for the burial ritual after the service.

The new procedure seemed strange to Sr. Lucy Walter, who coordinates all of the funerals at the Motherhouse.

"Personally I was very anxious because of this being our first and because she was a very dear friend," she said. "I even wondered if I would have enough courage to go down there, but I knew in my heart that Regina Marie wanted me there. The body did go into the grave with grace



The Catholic burial ritual for Sr. Regina Marie Allgaier is performed by the Rev. Dennis Schaab and Sr. Maureen Hall, Community Director of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth (foreground left). Sr. Joan Marian is next to Fr. Schaab. Photo by Ron Cox, SCLA.

thanks to our wonderful grounds people, and I was also able to go and place dirt on the body."

With straps attached to the shroud, four workers lifted the body from the box and lowered it into the grave.

Another close friend, Sr. Barbara Wieseler, said Sr. Regina Marie's burial choice reflected the spirituality of her entire life. Simplicity and doing with less so others might have more were key values for her. She considered natural burial with no toxic chemicals as the most friendly to the earth.

"Just her body was laid to rest -- no casket or liner was needed," Sr. Barbara said. "Her body would more quickly become part of the earth so it could continue the cycle of life,

providing nourishment to the soil so it could give life once again. . . I was moved deeply seeing her shroud lowered into the earth."

Sr. Maureen Hall, community director, also was moved by the burial. She recalled a recent homily at mass about the story of Lazarus as she watched Sr. Regina Marie's white-shrouded body being lowered.

"I imagined Jesus, Martha and Mary standing at the edge of the grave, and Jesus said to them, 'Your brother has not died. He lives, and I will raise him up on the last day.'"

Eventually, Sr. Regina Marie's body will be joined by those of 16 other sisters who have chosen natural burial in that new section of the cemetery.

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Newcomer's now under McGilley-SCI ownership

Continued from Page 1

The reduced competition is not an appealing prospect for consumers, especially considering that Newcomer's and McGilley already had higher prices than most other area funeral homes.

The quality of service is another matter. A combined McGilley-Newcomer operation does not necessarily mean customer service will suffer, but it could, if corner cutting and a one-size-fits-all service model take hold. SCI's top local administrator, **Mark McGilley**, says that will not happen. Before we get deeper into that discussion, however, here is how this significant shift came about.

Several years ago, the McGilley and Newcomer families – which have operated here since the 1890s – sold out to national, publicly traded companies. SCI bought the McGilley properties – as well as three other local funeral homes – while a Louisiana company, **Stewart Enterprises**, purchased the Newcomer funeral homes and cemeteries. Then, in May 2013, SCI announced a proposed purchase of Stewart – the smaller of the two companies – for \$1.1 billion.

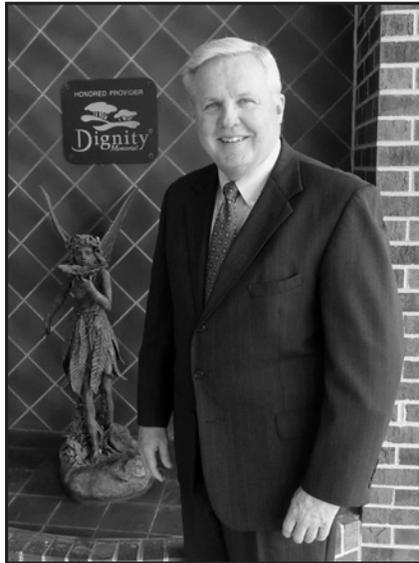
The Motley Fool, a financial services firm whose work includes stock analysis, called the proposed purchase “one of the final steps for [SCI] to create a nearly unshakable dominance of the death-care industry.” The U.S. **Federal Trade Commission** (FTC) gave its blessing to the buyout – although it required SCI to sell some of its funeral homes and cemeteries – and on Jan. 6, the acquisition was finalized.

SCI now controls about 15 percent of the U.S. death-care industry. It has nearly 1,600 funeral homes, about 475 cemeteries and about 260 combined funeral homes and cemeteries, with annual revenue of about \$3 billion.

SCI divests four properties

As ordered by the FTC, SCI is selling three of its properties – **Mount Moriah Terrace Park Funeral Home and Cemetery in the Northland**;

the **Newcomer's Johnson County Funeral Chapel and Memorial Gardens**; and the **Newcomer's Overland Park Chapel**. (Using a formula aimed at maintaining a competitive balance, the FTC



Mark McGilley, area manager of McGilley and Newcomer's funeral homes.

designated which properties and how many SCI had to sell in each market.) Separately, SCI decided to sell **Newcomer's Longview Funeral Home and Cemetery**. A private company, **The Signature Group** based in Albuquerque, N.M., is buying the four properties.

The reshuffling will leave SCI with 15 funeral homes and eight cemeteries in the Kansas City area. The company has about 300 employees locally – about half of whom are full time and half part time.

Mark McGilley, a fourth-generation McGilley family funeral director, is SCI's “market manager” in the Kansas City area. In a March interview, McGilley, 63, said SCI had not changed the prices at any of the SCI chapels. It has followed a policy of charging different prices for services at different locations based on differing overhead costs. However, pricing for merchandise has been uniform.

McGilley said the higher prices charged by SCI here and elsewhere are based on studies showing that people place great value on personal service and that's where SCI places its emphasis.

Amos faults corporate model

One local SCI competitor, **Greg Amos**, president of the **Amos Family Funeral Home** in Shawnee and the **Cremation Center of Kansas City** in Roeland Park, said he believed customer service would inevitably suffer as corporately owned funeral homes gathered in more of the business. He contends they spend less time with customers and are more focused on volume than service.

“The family-owned business is so consumer friendly,” Amos said. “I think in the long run it [corporate ownership] will bring down the consumers' expectations of the funeral business.”

McGilley responded by saying that as part of the Dignity Memorial network, the SCI providers are held accountable to a national standard. In addition, he said, SCI offers several family support benefits that family-owned operators cannot match. Those benefits include help with travel arrangements for out-of-town family members; access to licensed grief counselors through a 24-hour “help” line; and assistance from an “aftercare planners” package that provides advice on estate management and other post-death matters.

“We have every reason to provide higher quality service than our competitors because of our national reputation,” he said. “The Dignity Memorial brand means that consumers can expect consistent, quality service from all providers within the Dignity Memorial network.”

Fortunately for consumers, the Kansas City area has about 90 funeral and cremations operations. One company, SCI, now owns 15 of those, or about 17 percent of the local funeral home industry. So competition will continue to be keen...There just won't be as much of it.

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Burying a mother: The hybrid experience

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Look at Cancer and Mental Health” CEU class that we did for social workers – providing a glimpse into the professional and personal issues as two social workers coped with cancer. My mom sometimes struggled to straddle the line between being a “liberal-minded social worker” and a social conservative in other areas of her life.

As I embarked on my own journey of coming to terms with probably losing my mother sooner than I had hoped, I became increasingly involved in the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City, eventually serving as president in 2013. As I advocated, and educated my colleagues about the facts and myths of the funeral industry, I was also discussing with my mother --- who went into hospice in the spring of 2013 --- what her wishes were at the end of her life.

Mom always believed in living the “natural life.” This often meant using unusual home remedies. I remember one time she slathered her body in olive oil after a sunburn and then promptly broke out in hives. When it came to food, she was a stickler about avoiding as many chemical additives as possible.

This natural approach led to some candid conversations about a desire not to be embalmed. As you may or may not know, embalming is not mandatory under Missouri or Kansas law. So, thanks to an open-minded mortuary, McLaughlin Funeral Chapel in Sedalia, arrangements were made for her body to be refrigerated until burial, with no viewing.

It was also important to her that her body truly go from “dust to dust.” This meant asking the cemetery to place the mandatory concrete vault upside down on top of her wooden coffin, with no top, so the coffin stayed in contact with the dirt and would not be encased forever in concrete. (Most cemeteries require such grave liners for ease of maintenance because they keep the ground from sinking. They are not required by law.)

Mom was also open to a personal approach to her post-death care. Along with several of her best friends and her sister, I was allowed to wash,



Cynthia and her young daughter, Sally, watching a parade on a rainy day.

lotion, primp and dress her body in the privacy of her home, rather than have the funeral home do this. I cannot tell you what an honor that was to clothe, paint my mom’s nails, put makeup on her the way she liked, and to ultimately pray a blessing over her after she died, surrounded by her family, the evening of Aug. 22. (Many thanks to Joyce Thompson, home funeral celebrant out of Columbia, Mo., who guided us through this process).

Having lost my mother, I reflect

with pride that we both got the death experience we wanted and deserved, simply by being informed and asking for it. As our family continues to grieve the loss of Cynthia, we are slowly acclimating to a “new normal.” I found that this personal “hybrid” approach to caring for my mother – utilizing some funeral home services but doing other things ourselves -- helped me be more involved in the process of not only saying good-bye physically, but emotionally. It is a gift that I continue to savor, despite the tears.

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Fitz reports finances

By Jim Fitzpatrick
FCA-GKC treasurer

We had a close call on finances last fall: Our checking account balance (our only account) fell to about \$11. It was worrisome. But once again, you, our supporters and contributors, came through. More than \$600 came in after publication of our fall newsletter.

And then, in mid-November, we had a nice windfall: **Crossroads Hospice** gave us a \$5,000 grant! We are very grateful to Crossroads, which has its care center in Gladstone. (Learn more about Crossroads at www.crossroadshospice.com.) At this writing, our unencumbered balance is slightly more than \$5,400.

Although we are in good shape now, I don't want to give the impression that we are set indefinitely. During my three years as treasurer, I have seen the balance rise and fall quickly. That's the sign of an active organization, and that's the way we want it.

It costs about \$1,500 to print and mail each newsletter – more than \$1 per copy – and we have some recurring expenses, including for telephone service, office supplies and printing. So, I trust that you will continue to favor us with your contributions. I think you know that we put your money to good use. Josh Slocum, executive director of the national Funeral Consumers Alliance, has said that we have far and away the best newsletter among its 80 affiliates.

We are proud of the newsletter quality, and, as you know, we also conduct a periodic survey of funeral home prices. We are doing one this year, so be on the lookout for the results in the fall newsletter.

Again, thank you for your ongoing support. We rely on your generosity to keep our chapter vibrant and relevant. With that, here's a list of the people who have contributed since publication of our fall 2013 newsletter:

Alvin and Mary Burrows, Overland Park; **Jess Rowland**, Kansas City; **Gerald and Dorothy Culp**, Kansas



Jim Fitzpatrick

City; **Kevin Day**, Parkville; **James Waltz**, Baldwin City, Kan.; **Jack Chaffee**, Oak Grove; **Margaret Henry**, Independence; **Allen and Margaret Ramsey**, Fairway; **Robert Kobler**, Blue Springs; **Marie Asner**, Mission; **Jan Holdeman**, Independence; **Paul Galatas**, Kansas City; **R.C. and L.K. Daily**, Blue Springs; **Richard and Charlene Charette**, Lake Quivira; **Gary Beemer**, Grain Valley.

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FCA-GKC launches price survey

One of the best services our organization offers is our periodic survey of Kansas City area funeral home prices. We are launching another one this year, and the results will appear in our fall newsletter.

In our last survey, we found that the average price of a standard funeral in our area rose just 1.4 percent between 2009 and 2012. We concluded that the late 2000s' recession and the slow recovery were largely responsible for the nominal increase. It will be interesting to see how much prices have changed since 2012.

Another thing to watch will be what happens to prices at the **McGilley** and **Newcomer's** funeral-home chains. Both groups have merged under the common ownership of **Service Corporation International** of Houston, which means they are no longer in competition. A detailed story about the merger begins on page 1.

FCA-GKC board members Jim Fitzpatrick and Frank Cockrell are coordinating the collection of general price lists of 90 funeral homes and cremation services in the Kansas City area.

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Presentations are available

Are you part of an organization or group that would benefit from an unbiased presentation about important practical aspects of funeral planning?

Contact FCA-GKC at 816-561-6322 or email us at fca.gkc@gmail.com. We will line you up with one of our members for a visit.



Life goes on in Fracassa household

By Marci Michnick
FCA-GKC vice president

Many of our readers' hearts were touched by the story in our spring newsletter last year of young Rachel Fracassa and the home funeral and natural burial that she arranged following her husband's sudden death in a car accident as he drove home from work. We were able to catch up with her recently to get an update on what she and her four children have been up to.

For emotional support Rachel has been meeting monthly with a group of women called *The Modern Widow's Club*, a group that was started in Florida with chapters in other states and an online magazine. "The women have just been really great to meet. They welcome you with open arms and understand the huge variations of emotions, and they are just so real," reports Rachel.

Rachel has also armed her children with as many resources and support as she can to help them deal with the loss. She feels as though the kids have been doing really well, but with some understandable ups and downs. Rachel found the weeks prior to the one-year anniversary of Tyler's death to be difficult, but once the day came, it wasn't quite as bad as she had built it up to be. Tyler died on his birthday, so the Fracassa family decided to have a celebration of his life for that day. Rachel reports that, "it was really nice to be surrounded by friends and family during that time."

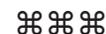
Rachel prefers not to put much emphasis on Tyler's grave. The family occasionally visits the grave, and the children bring flowers and sticks to put around it, but the family prefers to talk about Tyler's life, memories, and share stories about him. Rachel is glad that "we did it the way that we did" and having a home funeral and natural burial for Tyler helped Rachel ease through that strong connection with Tyler's body. When the time came to bury him she felt ready to let go of the body. "It really helped me to feel that I was able to give him one last loving gesture," she said. "We lost him so quickly, I'm glad that I was able to give that last gift."



Rachel Fracassa and her children, (from left) Gwynneth, Jonas Tyler, Arlo and Elliott. Only days after Tyler's death, Rachel found out she was pregnant with Jonas Tyler, who now is 10 months old. (Sarah Apple Photography)

Just days after Tyler's death, Rachel found out she was pregnant with their fourth child. Their son, Jonas Tyler, is now 10 months old. Rachel, a massage therapist, has opened a practice in Lee's Summit called Petrichor Bodywork, where she specializes in pediatric massage and working with children with

autism and other special needs. She hopes to launch a lifestyle-consulting portion of the business later this year. For more information about Rachel and her work, visit her website at www.petrichorbodywork.com



Annual meeting may be our best

By Marci Michnick, FCA-GKC vice president

Our 2013 annual meeting on Friday, November 1st may have been our best meeting yet! If you were able to make it, we are grateful for your attendance and hope that you were entertained, enlightened, and walked away with some new information.

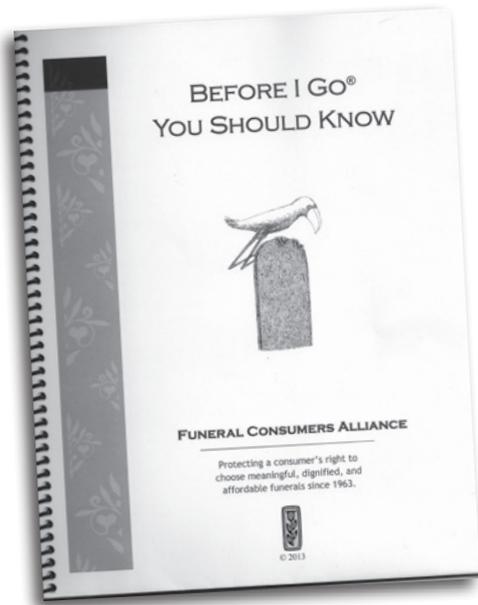
The event took place in the Truman Forum Auditorium at the Kansas City Missouri Public Library's Plaza branch with a turnout of nearly 90 attendees! Our keynote speaker was Josh Slocum, national expert on the funeral industry and executive director of the national Funeral Consumers Alliance in Vermont. Slocum is co-author of *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*.

Sally King, FCA-GKC's then President, gave the opening presentation, reinforcing FCA-GKC's mission of consumer education and advocacy. King also shared briefly about her recent experience in carrying out her mother's hybrid green burial (a more detailed account begins on page 1).

We received a great deal of positive feedback. Numerous individuals indicated on their evaluation forms that they were unaware of the variety of funeral and burial options available and that many of the perceived laws pertaining to funerals are in fact myths.

We are grateful to the KCMO public library for promoting Slocum's book and for providing FCA-GKC with the opportunity to educate the public on consumer rights around the purchase and planning of funeral services.

We are so appreciative of our supporters who continue to sustain our organization and enable us to carry out our mission. Thank you to all who joined us at our 2013 annual meeting.



“Before I Go” planning guides available now

By Jim Fitzpatrick
FCA-GKC treasurer

Attention, Funeral Consumers Alliance shoppers!

For a limited time only (ahem), we have available for purchase 50 copies of the wildly popular (yes, indeed) “**Before I Go, You Should Know**” planning booklet, produced and published by the *national* Funeral Consumers Alliance in South Burlington, Vermont. (We are one of about 80 local FCA affiliates.) The price is \$15 a copy.

This helpful, spiral-bound booklet has been around for years, but the national alliance expanded and updated it last year. It is a comprehensive guide to end-of-life planning, with more than 30 pages to record everything from your burial/cremation preference to how to close down your social media and online accounts.

It offers advice on things as routine as obituary preparation and as non-routine as full-body donation.

As a bonus, the booklet contains some interesting and funny illustrations by the well-known artist and cartoonist Edward Gorey. Gorey, who died in 2000, often placed his subjects in Victorian and Edwardian attire and settings. Among other things, he is well known as the designer of animated titles for the PBS “**Mystery**” series.

**Funeral Consumers Alliance
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If you have any questions, call us at **(816) 561-6322**. Leave a message and we will get back with you within a day or two.

Pre plan, yes, but not pre pay

Funeral homes like to see families arriving ahead of time to plan funerals and FCA does, too. The difference is the funeral home will try to sell a pre-paid plan and we advise against it. Normally pre plan, we say, but don't pre pay. Pre-paid contracts can be restrictive and vulnerable. What if you move? What if you change your mind? What if the funeral home is sold or goes out of business? What if you find you can't make the payments? What if someone raids your account? All those things have happened in our community.

We suggest opening a joint savings account at a bank or credit union with a trusted friend or relative who knows your wishes.



The local news station was interviewing an 80-year-old lady because she had just gotten married for the fourth time. The interviewer asked her questions about her life, about what it felt like to be marrying again at 80, and then about her new husband's occupation.

“He's a funeral director,” she answered.

“Interesting,” the newsman thought... He then asked her if she wouldn't mind telling him a little about her first three husbands and what they did for a living.

She paused for a few moments, needing time to reflect on all those years. After a short time, a smile came to her face and she answered proudly, explaining that she had first married a banker when she was in her 20's, then a circus ringmaster when in her 40's, and a preacher when in her 60's, and now – in her 80's – a funeral director.

The interviewer looked at her, quite astonished, and asked why she had married four men with such diverse careers.

“I married one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to go.”

featured on iFunny.com