

# Cooperative Funeral Fund Inc.

What do you want me to do when you die?

as seen in:



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# Preneed

By Ann Marie St. George

## What Do You Want Me to Do *if You Die?*

When asked to write an article on preneed my brain glazed over. What aspect of preneed can be rediscovered? Don't you feel that you know most of what there is to know on preneed? Are you looking for that next best thing that will make your preneed program stand out from everyone else's?

I want to share with you something that as a funeral director you will appreciate. I must warn you, it may be a little outside that proverbial preneed box.

As I write this, I can't help but reflect on the 20th anniversary of my sister's death. She was 29 years young. I have been a funeral director longer than the years she lived – although Lisa lived more in 29 years than most people live in a hundred. My sister was diagnosed with an advanced brain tumor. It was the size of a golf ball. When told this, Lisa asked the doctors if they were going to chip it out. If any one thing helped her through this battle, it was her unique sense of humor — which, gratefully, is a noted family trait.

Reflecting on the day she was first diagnosed, I can't help but think of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief. Most of us have read her book "On Death and Dying" or have studied these five stages in mortuary school. More than likely we cannot forget DABDA – Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance.

Whether you are the person dying or a family member, you will experience one or more of these stages during the course of dealing with a terminal illness. Personally, I went right to a mix of anger and depression followed by the many times I bargained with God to make her healthy again. I remember sharing with my brother that I had to give

up drinking because I had bargained with God to make one of Lisa's scans clear of new tumors. My brother's response was, "You think that's bad – I have to find property to start building a church." Oddly, I never reached denial. However, my acceptance came the day Lisa and I talked about what she wanted me to do if she died.

As we sat eating lunch after one of her many radiation treatments, Lisa leaned across the table and pulled out my first gray hair. Pointedly, she looked at me and said, "I didn't realize what all of this was doing to you."

I smiled back seeing that twinkle in her eyes laced with a little bit of sadness. It was in that moment I realized that I was doing my sister a

disservice. Here she was battling a terminal illness, and I never once thought to ask her what her final wishes were. As a sister, I didn't want to upset her by talking about her death, and I understood that she didn't want to upset her family by talking about it either. However, as a funeral director I knew it needed to be discussed. Here was an opportunity for her to take control over something she had no control over.

When you are young and vibrant, prearranging your funeral is not something you worry nor even think about; it's something old people do. It's hard to picture a couple of 20-somethings texting each other about the casket one of them picked out with a vault. So when you're not old, being diagnosed with a terminal illness and having to discuss your funeral are so far removed from each other it makes things even harder to discuss. This is where you and I as funeral directors can make a difference.

I looked at my sister and took a deep breath and said, "Lisa, I hope and pray that you beat this cancer, but if you don't, what do you want me to do if you die?"

I saw the instant look of relief on her face as she shared with me her wishes. She wanted to be cremated, have a big party with live music, and she wanted her "ashes" to be put into plastic baggies and passed out to all her friends and family. Her thought was that she could still travel even though she was no longer here to do so. We sat and chuckled thinking of people's expressions as her cremated remains would be passed out like parting gifts at a wedding. While I was unsure what our mother would think, the important thing was the conversation had been started.

This simple act opened up an opportunity for similar conversations with others who wanted to talk about their deaths but were unsure how to initiate the conversation. As I donated platelets, I found myself in heartfelt discussions with family members of terminally ill patients anxious to understand their loved ones' final wishes and not knowing how to initiate the conversation.



**Ann Marie St. George, right, with her sister Lisa.**  
*(Photo courtesy of Ann Marie St. George)*

Waiting for my sister who was receiving yet another radiation treatment, I spoke with other patients who wanted so desperately to share their thoughts and wishes with their families but were worried about upsetting them. All these people so desperately wanted the same thing, but did not know how to bridge that gap. I was now on a new mission to help families open up the "What do you want me to do if you die?" conversation.

I realize there are plenty of articles and seminars that motivate us to increase our preneed sales. Whether we

are combing through our unfunded files or working our at-need families, there is money to be made. We are in a unique position to share ourselves with this special group of people looking to share their thoughts and wishes with family and friends. All they need is encouragement from caring professionals like ourselves.

Reach out to hospice or social workers in local hospitals by offering your professional help. Explain how you recognize the need to encourage these families to talk about their final wishes. This will help the family alleviate the uncertainty and stress of those looming at-need decisions. Offer to work with the individuals caring directly with the dying patients, and give them tools to initiate these conversations. As I mentioned earlier, my family benefitted greatly by openly discussing my sister's wishes before she died.

Who better to do this than a funeral director? It's easy to sit down with someone who comes to you to pre-plan their funeral. Reaching out will be challenging, especially in finding the right approach to assist families in connecting and sharing their end-of-life wishes. But it will be worth it.

If I hadn't been a funeral director I don't think I would have had the courage to ask my sister her wishes. I would have missed out on a precious moment in time when a dying woman and her big sister could laugh while discussing her funeral. That one conversation led to a family discussion filled with laughter and tears. So when Lisa died our focus was on taking care of her wishes instead of debating what to do. Share your gift. When you are out in the community working from the heart, the riches come in many forms. •