

Cooperative Funeral Fund Inc.

Once You Die, There are No Do Overs

as seen in:



The following article was first published in the March/April 2020 issue of Funeral Business Advisor magazine, and is reprinted with permission.



ONCE YOU DIE, THERE ARE NO DO OVERS

BY ANN MARIE ST. GEORGE

It has been 24 years since our family arranged my sister's funeral and I still struggle with wishing we had done things differently. It wasn't a sudden death and there were opportunities to plan for what we hoped would never happen. However, for whatever reason, the definitive plans never got made and as most of you realize after someone is gone there are no "do overs."

My sister was diagnosed with a glioblastoma Multiforme Stage IV after having a grand mal seizure the night our brother's little girl was born. This type of malignancy had her in and out of hospitals between surgeries and treatments for about a year and a half. Having a flexible work schedule, I was her self-appointed partner in this unjust struggle with cancer. One brilliantly sunny warm summer day following one of several of her radiation treatments we treated each other to lunch. As we sat outside enjoying our delicious meal Lisa reached across the table and plucked out my first gray hair. As she held it up giving me one of those famous Lisa smirks she said, "I really had no idea what "this" was doing to you." We both guardedly laughed, and it was at this pivotal point my funeral director brain said, "okay, it is now or never." I turned watchfully to my beautiful, witty, kind-spirited sister and said, "Lisa, I hope you fully recover from "this" however if you don't, what do you want me to do?" I saw a flicker of "I thought you would never ask" seep into her eyes, her shoulders relaxed, and a devilish smile spread across her face; Apparently, she had been giving this some thought too.

In true "Lisa-style" she described in detail how she wanted to be cremated followed by a huge party with music, food and drinks and after her cremains "ashes" were to be passed out as party favors in clear plastic bags, which now in some states may be illegal. Now, I can hear a few of you saying, "Say what!?" while others are saying, "Wow, what an awesome idea!" Her ask was that people would take her on a trip and spread her "ashes" wherever they may go. At one point in her short life she was a flight attendant and she truly loved, loved, loved the fact that she got to travel so much; She wanted to continue doing so, at least in spirit. Her life may have been short however, she lived more in 29 years than most people live in a 100.

I always enjoyed my sister's willingness to create situations that were outside the norm. She loved taking one beyond their comfort zone and most people appreciated her for taking them there. I totally respected my sister's wishes and personally thought it was a fanf...ngtastic idea; However, I had no idea how the hell I was going to explain this one to my parents. The absolutely "crazy" part of her request wasn't the logistics, but the fact she and I never discussed it again. The next time it was brought up, we had gathered as a family to be with Lisa as she took her last breath. As our hearts were breaking my mother turned to me and said, "I know Lisa told you what she wanted, and I am sure I am not going to be totally okay with it, but can you please take care of it..." To most I am sure this is not the most favorite part of our chosen profession, being "the family" funeral director. It was in that moment that I knew I would have to find a happy medium. Something that my parents would be okay with while still honoring my sister's wishes; Hopefully, so she wouldn't haunt me for the rest of my life.

The compromise was a one-day wake, Catholic mass with her body present and then cremation (her death was before the catholic church changed their view on cremains being present in church). Part of her cremains were put into a marble bench in a local cemetery where we can sit and talk to her when we visit and the rest of her "ashes" were set aside for her "party", which now we refer to it as a "celebration of life." Yes, we did have that big party she asked for and yes, I did pass out her "ashes"; However, I passed them out in little glass bottles from Pier One instead of the little baggies she wanted. We also designed t-shirts with "Life's Philosophy Live, Love, Laugh" on the front and "The Lisa Moll Ball" with the date (March 2, 1996) on the back and we handed them out to everyone. I still have one that I wear on special occasions, though over time it has become a different color. Surprisingly, many of the people I gave them to were so honored they asked if it was okay to keep them/her instead of scattering them/her. I gave assurances Lisa would have been happy with whatever they chose to do. Over the years I have received countless pictures of friends and family scattering her cremains. Personally, I have scattered them in a myriad of countries like Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, China,

Ireland, Scotland, England, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Prague, and Dubai. A few years ago, on what would have been Lisa's 50th birthday we traveled to Sicily where on a breathtakingly beautiful no cloud in the sky day we hiked down into the craters of Mt. Etna one of the most active volcanos in the world and we covered her ashes with ashes.

Okay, so why am I sharing my story with you? Besides it being a story I love to tell, it is a perfect example of why we need to initiate one of the hardest conversations we will have with those we love during their final days. As Funeral Directors we always talk about the importance of prearranging one's funeral and generally when we do so, it is with families where imminent death is far into the future, well at least that is what everyone is anticipating. What I am wishing is that this story will help open your eyes, minds and hearts to helping families initiate conversations with loved ones who are dying. If I hadn't found the courage to ask my sister that very hard question... I might not have a Catholic Priest who is still mad at me for separating her ashes, apparently there is some rule in the catholic church about keeping them all together, you would think after 12 years of catholic schools I would have remembered that one. I do know if I had not asked Lisa, "What do you want me to do?" I would not have been able to make new memories about my sister who has been gone for 24 years.

Now I know in the beginning of this article I mentioned I wished I had done things a little differently, well that was more about her service and the words I was unable to say. I gave her eulogy however it was more of me reading an inspirational poem. It was one I had saved from an Ann Landers column that I thought one day I would be reading at my parent's funeral, not my little sisters'. I wish we would have continued our "what do you want me to do" conversation, I should have made them a part of our little time left together, instead we got caught up in "stuff" that was just "stuff." If we had, I would have been reading a letter directly from Lisa to all her family and friends; Something that would have been way more impactful and meaningful than an inspirational poem. I share this trusting it will help someone else. I realize there are many of you who are already "on it", and to you, thank you!! You obviously realize once that loved one is gone there are no "do over's". **FBA**

Ann Marie St. George, CPC, a first-generation funeral director has worked for the past 20 years as a Regional Manager for Cooperative Funeral Fund, a preneed and cemetery care fund management company. Thriving in the industry for over 35 years as a funeral director/embalmer she was pulled into the world of national disasters starting with 9/11 where she lived 11 blocks north of the World Trade Center. She is a Mortuary Officer for both DMORT Region II and Kenyon International Emergency Services. The devastation and grief she has been exposed to has contributed to her unique sense of humor which she does admit may also be due to genetics. She encourages anyone reading her articles to reach out by email at AnnMarie.StGeorge@cffinc.com Suggestions for topics are always encouraged. For more information visit www.CooperativeFuneralFund.com or call (800) 336-1102.