



Help for grieving families

Nonprofit advises those who could be gouged by high funeral prices.

By Molly Tanenbaum, Palo Alto Weekly

When Barbara Hultgren's husband passed away a few years ago, she was able to focus on grieving rather than worrying about funeral arrangements. She and her husband made all the necessary preparations in advance.

"I didn't have to make any decisions. I just called the mortuary," she said.

But many are reluctant to prepare for their own deaths, leaving grief-stricken families paying costly mortuary fees. The Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA) works to shelter individuals and families from such hazards.

"I think it's dreadful when people are stressed and sad, they have to sit down and talk to a mortuary. It's unfortunate for them," Hultgren added. She has volunteered and served on the FCA board for more than a decade.

The Palo Alto nonprofit encourages preparing for one's death and protects consumers from exorbitant mortuary costs. For a one-time \$40 fee, individuals receive a lifetime membership including discounts of up to \$400 at cooperating mortuaries and assistance with end-of-life planning.

"So many families don't know what to do. They make no plans. They suddenly have this death occur and they don't know what mortuary to call. When they do call one, they usually get taken advantage of," Hultgren said.

Upon joining, members complete a form detailing the type of burial they desire, their next of kin, and other relevant information. The FCA keeps the form and provides the next of kin with a copy, so families know what plans to make when members pass away.

Those dealing with an unexpected death may also call and join over the phone to receive immediate help.

The volunteer-run organization distributes numerous helpful brochures covering topics from "Twelve Reasons Why People Spend 'Too Much' for a Funeral" to "Eco-friendly Death & Funeral Choices" to "When Someone You Care About is Grieving."

The FCA refers members to cooperating mortuaries who provide the entire range of services including funerals and cremations. The nonprofit regularly re-evaluates these mortuaries to ensure ethical prices and practices.

"We know that the mortuaries and crematoriums live up to a decency standard and will not try to gouge a customer," said Harry Anisgard, FCA president.



Funded by membership dues, grants and donations, the Funeral Consumers Alliance has about 120 chapters throughout the country. The Palo Alto branch, which was the first in California, serves Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

Out of frustration with the mortuary business, a Quaker woman founded the local chapter in 1952.

“She got disgusted because even though she wanted a very simple funeral, she was made to buy much more than she wanted from the local mortuary. So she started talking to other friends and went around to other churches and enlisted other ministers and there was sort of a preaching campaign.” said Marjorie Bridges, president of the Funeral Education Foundation, the FCA’s partner organization.

Hultgren agrees with the nonprofit’s original sentiment. “I think people should spend their money when they’re alive for things that make sense that they can enjoy,” Hultgren said.

In addition to end-of-life planning assistance, the nonprofit offers educational talks to local hospitals, senior centers and hospice agencies through the Funeral Education Foundation (FEF).

Hultgren has educated many health-care providers and seniors about the importance of end-of-life planning. She prefers a conversational atmosphere where attendees feel comfortable enough to ask questions.

“I think the most important thing is just getting them to talk informally in a small group about death and about people making plans,” Hultgren said. “Otherwise, if they just keep it to themselves and they don’t share ideas with anyone else, they just keep it plugged up inside of them.”

Hultgren pointed out that often, denial prevents individuals from planning for their own deaths. “It’s easy for a person to put it off and not think about it and act like it’s never going to happen,” she said.

Susan Wriggins, FCA’s office manager and former hospice nurse, has found that her prior work experience aids her in talking to callers about death. “It’s mostly knowing that this is a true thing that happens, and you just be patient and talk it out as much as a person wants to,” Wriggins said. “They finally say they want to make these plans but want to make it very clear that ‘I’m well and healthy!’ It’s almost that they need to say it to themselves so it’s not weird to talk about.”

Since its inception, the local FCA chapter has served almost 15,000 people; the organization currently has almost 5,000 members, Bridges said.



Through additional outreach and education, the nonprofit hopes to increase the number of low-income members who could benefit from end-of-life planning and avoid overly expensive mortuary services, Bridges said.

On April 3, the FCA will hold its annual meeting. This year's topic is body and organ donation. All are welcome to attend the meeting at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto at 505 E. Charleston.

The Funeral Consumers Alliance is located on the second floor of Wesley United Methodist Church at 463 College Avenue, Palo Alto, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Monday through Thursday. Those interested in volunteering or becoming members may call (650) 321-2109. A volunteer is also available to answer questions during evenings and weekends. For further information, visit www.funeralconsumerinfo.org.

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