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**ICCFA Magazine
author spotlight**

➤Rubin, The Doyenne of Death, is based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is a Certified Thanatologist, a death educator who

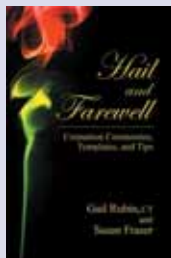
uses humor and funny films to teach about end-of-life planning issues, grief and religious funeral traditions. She “knocked ‘em dead” with her 2015 TEDxABQ talk, “A Good Goodbye,” a thought-provoking eight-and-a-half minute discourse on the need to prepare advanced medical directives and do preneed funeral planning. See the TEDx talk online at: <https://youtube/r9qR4ZiGX2Y>



➤She’s the author of the award-winning book and host of the TV and radio shows “A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for Those Who Don’t Plan to Die.”

Her newest

book is “Hail and Farewell: Cremation Ceremonies, Templates and Tips.” She also creates Mortality Minute radio spots and online videos.



➤She is a Certified Funeral Celebrant and a pioneer of the Death Café movement in the United States. Her certification in thanatology comes from the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC).

➤Rubin regularly contributes to ICCFA Magazine and other funeral trade magazines. You can see her coverage of previous ICCFA expos and other industry conventions at The Family Plot Blog: <http://agoodgoodbye.com/category/tools-of-the-trade/>

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

When you carve out a career for yourself as an expert about death, you’re going to get some interesting questions from the public, and you’d better have some answers ready.



Lola, the Albuquerque Death Café mascot, with Bech Hemmerich, the coordinator of TEDx Adventures. Gail Rubin, CT, CC, gave a TEDx talk about advanced medical directives and preneed funeral planning.

Questions people ask about death—and death care

When you’re The Doyenne of Death and you put your phone number on your website, you get asked some strange questions.

The phone call came late on a Wednesday afternoon. A woman calling from Atlanta started by praising my blog, The Family Plot. Then things got weird.

She began a rambling story about her mother’s death while being served by hospice, saying, “She was ready, she needed to die.” Her sister, who was the mother’s caregiver in another state, didn’t tell the caller that Mom had died until 30 days after her passing.

By then Mom had been cremated without an autopsy. The will had been changed in the sister’s favor, and she was suspicious that Mom had been killed and cremated to cover up the deed.

She wanted to know if I’d heard about other such suspicious deaths and wanted me to write about it. I suggested she call the police or hire a private investigator to get the real story. She sent a follow-up email, accusing me of hiding the truth. “You know how the system works and that thousands of people are killed before their time every day.”

That was one of the wackier questions

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

After the tour, one person asked me, “How do you start the funeral planning conversation with someone who doesn’t want to talk about it?” My top two recommendations: lead by example, by making your own funeral plans, and watch a funny film or TV show related to funerals.



Rubin, some participants in a Death Café at French Funerals & Cremation and Lola, the Albuquerque Death Café mascot.

I’ve received.

By phone, by email and at in-person presentations, people have lots of questions about death and the funeral business. I do my best to provide sound answers. What follows is just a sample of the questions I get.

By email and online

“Hi. I came across your website through

a Google search. I am a business development guy working for a pathology office. They have asked me to look into the possibility of offering brain autopsy services for families who seek closure/ answers on a loved one’s dementia. You may know that dementia types can’t always be accurately diagnosed but autopsies can bring answers.

“I am looking for someone in the hospice or funeral care industry who may

be able to help me identify a logistics route for such a service. The requirement for a brain autopsy is for a full brain autopsy so (sorry to point this out) the full brain organ needs to be looked at.

“To keep this brief, I am looking for an expert in the funeral business or hospice care, or both, who may be able to offer some advice as to how to best handle the logistics of such a service, meaning would it make sense to offer such service through funeral homes or hospice or other, and would funeral homes support the idea or not want the hassle.

“Hopefully this is not one of the stranger emails you have received.”

In fact, this email does take top prize, at least to date. I suggested he get in touch with funeral business consultant Dan Isard to see if he had any good thoughts on the idea. (You’re welcome, Dan.)

Online, one of my most popular blog posts on The Family Plot Blog concerns Greek Orthodox funeral traditions. Fifty questions and comments have been posted, including questions about *kolyva* (a baked treat served at funerals), whether it’s proper to send a Mass card (no, Greek Orthodox don’t do that) and post-funeral mourning traditions.

It’s ironic that a nice Jewish girl in Albuquerque, New Mexico, produced a top Google-ranking post about Greek Orthodox funerals. My go-to reliable source is our local friendly Greek Orthodox priest, Father Conan Gill.

Questions at live presentations

A crop of death-curious people attended the TEDx Adventure in follow-up to my TEDxABQ talk on end-of-life issues. At a Death Café held at a French Funerals & Cremations location in Albuquerque, the event included a full tour of the facilities, including behind-the-scenes areas.

The attendees peppered location manager and funeral director Apollo Miller with questions about funeral traditions, cremation, green burial, embalming and more.

After the tour, one person asked me, “How do you start the funeral planning conversation with someone who doesn’t

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

I'd love to see more funeral homes opening their facilities for tours as we did with French Funerals & Cremations. People have questions they want answered. The public needs to see funeral directors in their place of business during an event other than a funeral.



Funeral director Apollo Miller, location manager for French Funerals & Cremations, gives a tour, talking about cremation products and the prep room and listening to a question from one of the tour participants. The nearly one-hour tour is on YouTube.

want to talk about it?" My top two recommendations: lead by example, by making your own funeral plans, and watch a funny film or TV show related to funerals.

Watching the Emmy-winning "Chuckles Bites the Dust" episode of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" from 1976 is the best 30 minutes you can spend. The story involves the untimely death of the TV station's resident clown and what happens at his funeral. You'll laugh, relax and learn.

The program ends with the characters discussing what they want for their own funerals, which provides viewers with the perfect opportunity to start the same conversation when the show is over. The program is easily available online or through DVD rental.

At one of my public presentations called "Laughing in the Face of Death: Funny Films for Funeral Planning," members of the audience asked a wide range of questions:

Q: "Can you donate your organs and still donate your body to science to get a free cremation?"

A: It depends on where you plan to donate your body. Medical schools want intact bodies for students to dissect. You can still donate your corneas and have your body accepted for anatomical study. Some national body donation services such as MedCure, Science Care and the Life Legacy Foundation may accept a body that has had organs removed. You need to do your research before you make a commitment.

Q: "Can you get a free cremation just by donating your organs?"

A: No. While the recipients of your organs and their families will be eternally grateful for the gift of life you provide, there is no program that pays for a cremation after you donate your organs. Your estate is still responsible for funeral expenses.

Q: After telling the audience that the National Funeral Directors Association survey of funeral costs in 2014 indicated the national median average cost of a funeral with a viewing and burial was \$7,181, a vault brought the total to \$8,508 and a funeral with cremation was \$6,078: "What do you actually get for that amount of money?"

A: The breakdown of items included: non-declinable services fee (for handling paperwork and arrangements), removal/transfer of remains to the funeral home, embalming, other preparation of the body, use of facilities and staff for the viewing and funeral service, hearse, service car/van, basic memorial printing package and a metal casket.

Many eyes widened and jaws dropped when I said this did not include the costs for a cemetery plot, opening and closing of the grave, monument or marker costs, flowers or an obituary. They were amazed to hear the full costs can run \$10,000 or more and that these costs have increased by 28 percent over the past 10 years.

I also sketched out the differences between preneed funeral insurance and final expense insurance. You can

read about the pros and cons of both in this article at my website: <http://agoodgoodbye.com/celebrant-services/funeral-insurance/>.

By phone

Probably the most popular question that comes by phone is, "Where can I get the cheapest cremation in the area?" I give callers information on three local low-cost providers and encourage them to do their homework.

The prevalence of this question tells me the issue of cost continues to be a prime concern for funeral consumers, whether preneed or at-need. It also shows that many people are looking to experts who are not funeral directors for information about funerals—a disturbing reflection on the industry.

I'd love to see more funeral homes opening their facilities for tours as we did with French Funerals & Cremations. People have questions they want answered. The public needs to see funeral directors in their place of business during an event other than a funeral.

By the way, you can see a video of that funeral home tour on YouTube: https://youtube/7NeLS_9ofwY.

As a death educator, I've accurately and honestly answered most questions the public has sent my way. However, that one caller's wacky question about Mom's suspicious death and suspected cremation cover-up stumped the Doyenne of Death. What would you have told her? 