

# Roundtable

By Lisa Howard-Fusco

## Celebrants

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Austin Bremner



Glenda Stansbury



Gail Rubin

**As the nature of funeral service continues to change, professional celebrants have become more of a presence within the industry. But just what do they provide for bereaved families, how are they trained, why is their popularity on the rise and should you hire one at your funeral home (or train to become one yourself)? To answer these questions we turned to three successful celebrants in the field, Austin Bremner of Bradley & Son Funeral Homes with five locations in northern New Jersey, Glenda Stansbury of The In-Sight Institute in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and Gail Rubin of Albuquerque, New Mexico, a certified thanatologist and celebrant, also known as The Doyenne of Death.**

**Increasingly, we are hearing about celebrants in funeral service. Why is the trend growing?**

**Bremner:** Families are looking for a more personal tribute for their loved ones, instead of a traditional service with clergy that's more about religion and less about the individual.

**Stansbury:** It is due to the precipitous increase in the families who fall

into the group defined as the "Nones" with no church affiliation and no desire for a religious funeral experience. The latest Pew Research Report (May 2015) shows the overall number at 23 percent of the American population, and over 35 percent for Generation X and millennials. Almost one-in-four people walking into any given funeral home on any given day identify themselves

as spiritual but not religious. Also, there is 'the cremation effect': Families will no longer accept the 'rent-a-minister' option that has been offered for decades; with the rise in cremation, they have the choice to take the urn and design a tribute on their own. I tell funeral homes all the time – to cremation families you are optional. From all data gathered, this is only going to increase, so firms are

faced with either providing an officiant that fits these families, or losing their business completely. Some of our firms have changed their policy and no longer refer families to outside clergy. If the family is not affiliated with a church and/or does not have an officiant, then they are automatically connected with the firm's celebrant.

Additionally, more funeral homes are leading by example, and have adopted celebrants as an option that is offered to all families who need one, putting the option on the General Price List and seeing a significant increase in revenue and satisfaction. When a funeral home owner hears from one of his trusted colleagues that this approach is working and paying off, then they are much more interested in having one or more for their firm. There are also more celebrants available to work either as independent contractors or to work for a firm. As of the beginning of 2015, the In-Sight Institute had trained over 2,500 celebrants, and has 18 training sessions scheduled for this year.

**Rubin:** Americans who choose 'none' as their religious affiliation have few rituals to guide them when a death occurs. Many don't know what to do for a funeral or memorial service, and may opt to do nothing. Though a funeral director might seem a logical choice to turn to for guidance, a fear of being 'sold' may keep the 'nones' away.

In addition to the 'nones,' there are those who haven't been to religious services in years and feel uncomfortable around members of the clergy. But when Mom or Dad dies, they may feel the need to have a religious official do a traditional funeral service. Unfortunately, a cookie-cutter service that isn't individualized doesn't help family and friends process their grief.

The civil celebrant movement started in Australia in 1973. The Anglican and Roman Catholic Church liturgy wasn't working for

the general population, especially those who were divorced. The government started licensing celebrants – non-clerics who could perform weddings and funerals outside of a religious ceremony. The movement recognized that nonbelievers and secular people have a place of equal respect in society.

#### **Other than presiding over a funeral, what else do celebrants offer a family?**

**Bremner:** Aside from structure, a quality celebrant can offer a cathartic experience by simply asking questions and getting to know the family and their loved one. Depending on the individual celebrant's training, he or she can arrange receptions, create memorial keepsakes and creatively personalize each and every tribute. A good celebrant can get the family to participate in any number of ways. Getting families to play an active role beyond a eulogy not only empowers them, but also helps them heal.

**Stansbury:** The family meeting with the celebrant is one of the most vital and healing aspects of a celebrant's work. Not only is that one-to-three hour gathering a time to hear the family's stories about the deceased in order to design and write a personalized service for their loved one, it is also an important time for the family to share stories, to begin to grieve together and to develop safe places with each other for their memories. Also, some celebrants provide a small giveaway to attendees that will remind them of the deceased or ties to a story about the deceased. Not all celebrants do this, but some of us have become fairly well known for the giveaways that accompany the service.

**Rubin:** Celebrants provide completely personalized memorial services that reflect the personality and lifestyle of the deceased. They incorporate those unique stories, songs and experiences that defined that person. They have a library of resources available for readings,

music, ceremonies and personal touches. Celebrants know how to construct a meaningful, memorable, 'good goodbye' for all kinds of situations.

Celebrants meet with the family, listen to their stories about the deceased, discuss what was important to the person, and learn about the impact of his or her life. Based on this family meeting, which provides the opportunity for the healing of grief to start, the celebrant formulates the elements of the memorial service – the setting, the eulogy, the readings and music, ritual participation, other speakers and a memorial takeaway gift for all attendees.

In some cases, the celebrant and the funeral director will both be involved when a memorial service is held at a funeral home. Alternatively, a family can work directly with a celebrant to construct a meaningful service after cremation has taken place.

#### **Why do celebrants have specific training programs, and what are they taught?**

**Bremner:** Training programs are important in order to learn the basics, structure, and 'do's and don'ts' when it comes to officiating a service. Over time, most celebrants will develop their own style; that was my path.

**Stansbury:** When we began our training program in 1999, we outlined what we thought were the most important elements any person serving as a celebrant would need to know. We knew that we would be training a wide variety of people – funeral directors, clergy, educators, hospice and medical professionals, retirees, bereavement specialists ... and the list goes on. But we wanted everyone to start at the same place when we talked about grief and the funeral and what a personalized service offers to families.

We are such passionate believers that the funeral service itself is an

important and sacred first step in a person's grief journey, that we want every one of our celebrants to be well-grounded in the value of the funeral, the elements that are important to grieving families and how to listen to and work with each family. Our training is also focused on the logistics of putting a service together – how to facilitate a family meeting, the art of ceremonial writing, the process of consultation and service planning, working with the funeral directors, aspects of public speaking, utilizing resources, music and readings. Also included is practical application: each of the trainees takes part in a funeral presentation created from an assigned death scenario, creates a life story, and from that story designs a complete funeral service and conducts it.

**Rubin:** Celebrants are trained to listen to family members without imposing the celebrant's own views. We walk with people at the start of their grief journey. Although many celebrants are not grief counselors, we can provide some guidance in the unfamiliar landscape of grief.

Celebrants are taught how to give mourners a safe space to grieve, to encourage participation in a memorial service, the elements of ceremony, and how to help the family recognize the reality and significance of the loss.

We incorporate all of these elements in the memorial service: selecting a theme, music choices, setting, memorial items to be displayed, the eulogies, etc.

In the United States, there are three organizations that offer celebrant training – The Celebrant Foundation & Institute in New Jersey, the In-Sight Institute in Oklahoma and the Humanist Society in Washington, D.C.

### **What can a celebrant offer a funeral home?**

**Bremner:** Celebrants can be a great resource to funeral homes, but

it really depends on the celebrant and what they want to do beyond the ceremony. In my case, my job description as a celebrant and tribute planner encompasses spirituality, hospitality, technology and event planning. At a minimum, the celebrant can be an advocate for the funeral home he or she works with.

**Stansbury:** It's a resource for families who do not have a clergy or a church, or do not wish to have a traditional service; it can be articulated at preneed, first call or at arrangement, and it's an option that gives those 'cremation/no service' families a reason to reconsider and actually have a service.

A large majority of those immediate disposition families are making those choices not from a financial need, but because they've experienced the traditional cookie-cutter or evangelical approaches to funerals and they want nothing to do with either of those. So they think their only option is to just not to have a service. If, instead, the funeral home tells them, 'We have someone who will create a service that will be a right fit for you and your loved one,' then that family is often willing to listen to what the funeral professional has to offer. So firms are finding that the celebrant offering keeps families at their firm and meets the needs of these families.

The fact of the matter is that when families and guests leave a celebrant service, they are touched, they are engaged, they are encouraged to grieve their loss in healthy ways and to be present for each other along the path. And they will come back. I've had families call me five years after a funeral to ask me to do a service for another family member. That says a great deal, when they wish to have another experience because the first one was meaningful so long ago.

One of our large firms that offers celebrants on a regular basis revealed an additional benefit: that

cremation families who utilize a celebrant for the service spend 37 percent more on goods and services.

**Rubin:** A study conducted by Foundation Partners Group revealed that 70 percent of baby boomers said they want to attend something different from the staid, somber funerals of their parents' generation. Yet, according to FPG, 99 percent of funeral homes offer the 'traditional' funeral experience.

A celebrant can give a funeral home options to offer a family that says, 'We don't want any kind of memorial service.' What they are really saying is, 'We don't want a rent-a-minister who doesn't care to know anything about our loved one.'

Celebrants can be the catalyst for a healing event that opens the door for the funeral home to generate more income. When families have a meaningful, memorable celebration of life, they positively remember the funeral home. Once a family has experienced a celebrant service, they and their friends get it and want it in the future.

### **If funeral directors are looking to hire a quality celebrant (or train one of their existing staff for the role) for their funeral home, what should they look for?**

**Bremner:** They should look for someone who truly wants to be a funeral celebrant and can get past the regular challenges celebrants face. A celebrant should be able to deal with public speaking, have a willingness to listen, can deal with death, crying and uncomfortable situations, and is not afraid to speak up when necessary. This individual should also be genuine, confident and have worked in the funeral business. Having their own personal experiences with death to draw upon is a plus.

**Stansbury:** They should look for someone who is comfortable with public speaking, has an ability to listen to people and be comfortable in difficult situations, has great

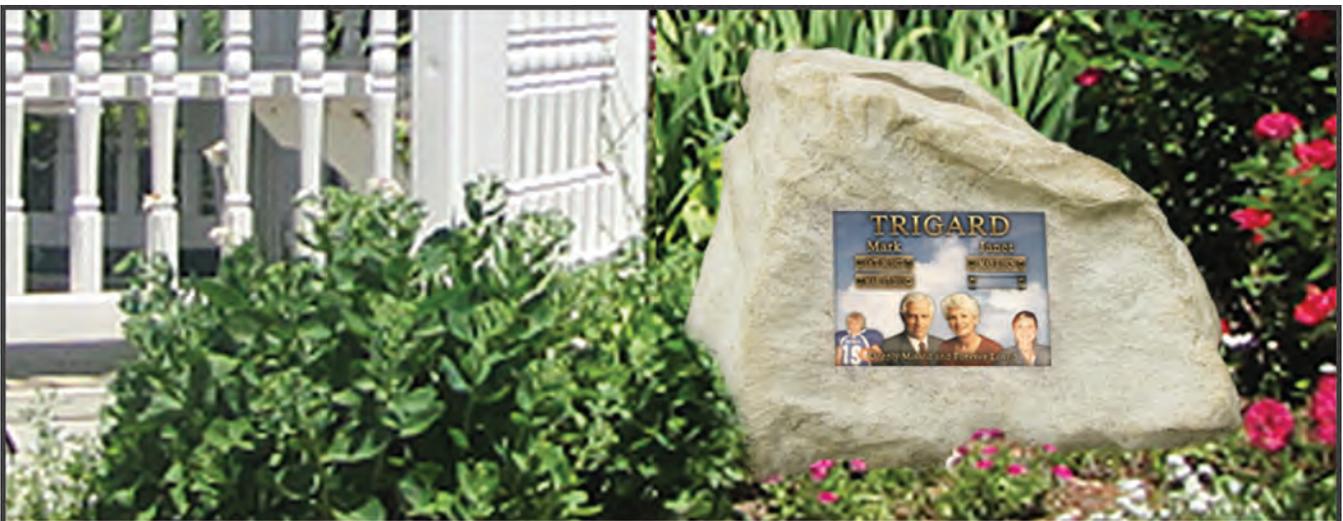
ceremonial writing skills, a sense of creativity, imagination and curiosity, and a heart for helping hurting people. The last one is mandatory. The rest are learned skills and can be built and improved upon. The best celebrants are the ones who can walk into a room of perfect strangers, sit among them and gain their trust by listening to their stories, their hurts, their grief, and then put together a service that honors that life and gives

voice to the memories and the needs of that family.

Celebrants live to hear two things: ‘You must have known that person very well’ (this means that we captured the essence and told the story in such a way that people thought we were sharing stories about a dear friend), and ‘We couldn’t have done it without you’ (this means that the family knew that we were walking with them on their

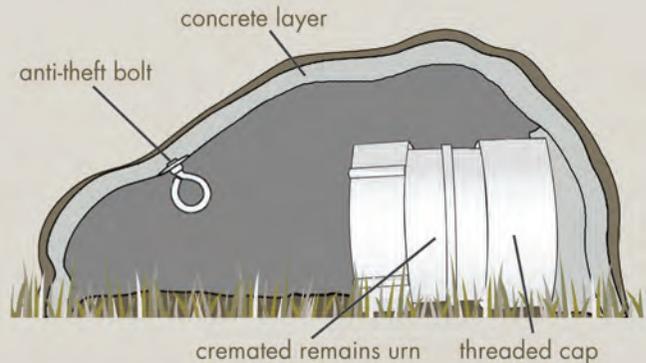
most difficult days, offering our talents to be their voice, and they felt heard, understood and comforted by our presence).

**Rubin:** A good celebrant is empathetic, a good listener, speaker and writer. It helps to have sound interviewing techniques, a calm and reassuring manner, compassion, honesty, commitment, good character and consideration for others’ needs. •



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