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UpFront

## Thirty Funerals In 30 Days

When I met Gail Rubin, she was standing outside the Riverside Funeral Home at San Mateo and Central in Albuquerque, notebook in hand, as friends and relatives filed in to pay their respects to Kimberly Sauter, a 47-year-old mother of two who had died of breast cancer.

It was Day 12 of Rubin's self-imposed challenge, which was to attend 30 funerals in 30 days.

Rubin had an OK from a family member to sit in on the service and write about it, and she took a seat in the fourth row of the chapel, on the right, and took notes through the eulogy and the pastor's talk. When it came time to rise and sing "Amazing Grace," Rubin's voice rang out in the crowded room.

The chapel was awash in purple, Sauter's favorite color. And by the end of the funeral, I had laughed at Sauter's brother-in-law's description of her amazing hair and her booming laugh and teared up when he read from a letter Sauter had written to her daughters in January, when it was apparent she would not survive.

Rubin took notes during the service, and, within a

few hours, she had posted a detailed account of the funeral, along with photos, on her website, [www.agoodgoodbye.com](http://www.agoodgoodbye.com). She had also made a video about the service, which she recorded outside the chapel as Sauter's casket was being placed in a hearse bound for the cemetery.

If this all sounds weird — invasive, maybe, or a little ghoulish — allow Rubin to explain.

"I'm not goth. I'm very life-affirming," Rubin told me. "I'm actually a very upbeat, positive person, and I think that comes through."

She's also committed to changing the way Americans approach death and plan for their funerals, which is generally to bury their heads in the sand and pretend they will never die.

"Avoid talking about it for as long as possible," is how Rubin describes our approach to the inevitable. "Even people who know they are going to die will avoid talking about it. It's the party no one wants to plan."

Rubin breezily refers to herself as the "Doyenne of Death" and in fact she has registered the trademark on the name. She might, as she did the other morning, wear a concha belt and boots, both adorned with skulls. She told me she finds that being straightforward and using humor helps cut through the hang-ups we hold about death.

"I'm just trying to get people to talk about the subject by bringing a light touch to it," she told me. "I've found that humor tends to



ADOLPHE PIERRE-LOUIS/JOURNAL

Gail Rubin, the self-proclaimed "Doyenne of Death," stands in the Congregation Albert Cemetery. Rubin says funerals are "the party no one wants to plan."

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GAIL RUBIN, ON FUNERALS

short-circuit that avoidance."

Her humor, of course, is confined to talking about the business of funeral planning well before the event. At actual funerals, she acts like just another respectful guest, although one who is a stranger and has a notebook and camera.

The first time Rubin decided to tackle 30 funerals in 30 days, she chose funerals from among the obituaries in the Journal, showed up and sat in the back.

"I lurked," she said.

The next year, she decided to approach the families when she arrived and make sure they were OK with her posting an account of the funeral on her blog. "I

tell them that I'm doing this project, I have a blog and I'd like to write a story about your loved one and this service to honor their memory," she said. "And most people are cool with that."

So far this year — she's on Day 24 — she has been denied access to one service but was welcomed at the cemetery.

Rubin wears many hats, and most of them are death-related. She has written a book about funeral planning ("A Good Goodbye") and travels around the country to give talks on the topic, and she teaches a class in funeral planning. She is a certified funeral celebrant, which means she's been trained to organize and conduct services. She is also a member of the chevrah kadisha, the Jewish burial society responsible for cleaning and dressing the dead in preparation for burial.

In the world of the non-dead, she is a licensed insurance agent and teaches Pilates and yoga.

Since she launched this

year's 30-day funeral challenge, in which Rubin is trying to concentrate on funerals for baby boomers, she has been to a private burial on 40 acres in the East Mountains, to an art-filled memorial at the Albuquerque Museum, to various churches and chapels, and to services in the lobby of a senior living center and a conference room at the New Mexico Broadcasters Association.

Rubin attends strangers' funerals as a student — to learn more about how people approach the final goodbye. Anything that honors the dead while giving the living an opportunity to reflect, remember and celebrate, Rubin said, is a good funeral.

Rubin has learned a lot in the five years she has been concentrating on end-of-life rituals. She can't emphasize enough the role that planning ahead plays in a creating a service that honors the wishes of the deceased while taking some of the emotional and financial stress off survivors.

"You really leave your family in a better spot if you preplan," she said. "You don't have to prepay, but make some arrangements and be prepared with your information in advance, and let your family know where they can find it."

Rubin, for her part, plans a traditional Jewish funeral with a kosher casket and room set aside to display her collection of a dozen pairs of cowboy boots. She also wants to make sure there are plenty of chairs. Like all of us, she's hoping for a big turnout.

UpFront is a daily front-page news and opinion column. Comment directly to Leslie at 823-3914 or [llinthicum@abqjournal.com](mailto:llinthicum@abqjournal.com). Go to [www.abqjournal.com/letters/new](http://www.abqjournal.com/letters/new) to submit a letter to the editor.