POPULAR CULTURE

These days, a funeral and permanent memorialization are no longer “givens” when a death occurs. Yet Walter White, a fictional character, got both—courtesy of grieving fans.

‘Breaking Bad’ fans mourn end of show with a funeral

S poiler alert) Now that the highly acclaimed TV series “Breaking Bad” has finished its run, if you still haven’t gotten around to watching it but plan to and don’t want to know how it ends, don’t read this article.

Still reading? Don’t say I didn’t warn you. The main character, Walter White, who evolves (devolves?) from mild-mannered science teacher to meth manufacturer and drug lord, dies in the last episode.

Here in Albuquerque, where the series was based and filmed, local fans released a torrent of emotion. Their tributes included a paid obituary in the newspaper and a funeral—for a fictional TV character!

The outpouring provides an interesting commentary on the value of funeral services.

On October 3, David Layman, an Albuquerque high school science teacher, and members of the “Unofficial Breaking Bad Fan Tour” Facebook page placed a paid obituary in the Albuquerque Journal.

A descanso (roadside memorial) for fictional character Walter White of “Breaking Bad,” considered one of the best TV shows of all time.

A fan paid for an obituary for Walter White after “Breaking Bad” ended with his death. It was run in a separate section from the newspaper’s real obituaries.

After five seasons of watching “Breaking Bad,” Layman had grown to love the character and the TV show. He

MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR

➤ Rubin will present “Jewish Funeral Traditions on Film” during the JFDA program at the ICCFA Convention & Expo, April 8-11, at the Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas, Nevada. She will use comedic film clips to illustrate key information.

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www.AGoodGoodbye.com
http://agoodgoodbye.com/the-family-plot-blog/

➤ She is a death educator, Certified Celebrant, and pioneering Death Café host who uses radio, television and funny films to help start funeral planning conversations.

http://agoodgoodbye.com/radio-tv/a-good-goodbye-tv-series/

➤ Read Rubin’s “30 Funerals in 30 Days Challenge” blog posts at http://agoodgoodbye.com/30-day-challenge/

➤ Her funeral planning conversation-starter, “The Newly-Dead Game” is available as an electronic download from http://agoodgoodbye.com/to-die-for-shopping/the-newly-dead-game/.

A descanso (roadside memorial) for fictional character Walter White of “Breaking Bad,” considered one of the best TV shows of all time.
"[Walter White] lived a lifestyle that is common in New Mexico—drugs are prevalent everywhere. We thought this would be a great opportunity for people to realize that living that type of lifestyle ends up at the cemetery."

—Tom Antram, CEO of FRENCH Funerals-Cremations

From the start, the funeral was designed to be a fundraiser for a worthy cause. With series creator Vince Gilligan’s blessing, Buzzell contacted Bernalillo County Sheriff Dan Houston to ask his advice about which charity should benefit. Albuquerque’s Health Care for the Homeless organization, which helps many whose lives have been damaged by drug abuse, was selected.

Buzzell then approached FRENCH Funerals-Cremations about holding a graveside funeral service for Walter White at Sunset Memorial Park. They agreed to hold the funeral after being assured they could remove the memorial should it become an attractive nuisance.

“The goal was, number one, to raise money for a good cause,” said Tom Antram, CEO of FRENCH Funerals-Cremations, which operates Sunset Memorial Park.

He continued, “Number two, it was to raise awareness of what [Walter White] died from. He lived a lifestyle that is common in New Mexico—drugs are prevalent everywhere. We thought this would be a great opportunity for people to realize that living that type of lifestyle ends up at the cemetery.”

The idea evolved from theory to reality within four days—much like a real-life funeral. More than 200 people attended the event on October 19. Fans came from...
Fans felt they knew and loved Walter White and wanted closure when the series ended. This was one stellar example of community grieving and the closure funerals can help provide. When families don’t hold a funeral, one might ask: Just what does it take to be a beloved star in one’s own life?

Pins combining Albuquerque’s famous balloon fiesta with Walter White’s “Heisenberg” persona were a big seller at the 2013 festival.

Worthen Memorials in Albuquerque created a memorial for the character.

Links:  
walterwhitefuneral.weebly.com/  
www.facebook.com/groups/161417077202383/
mementos from the show, which was to be buried at Sunset Memorial Park, also will be interred nearby.

**Funeral, merchandise sales raised thousands for charity**

More than $30,000 was raised for Albuquerque’s Health Care for the Homeless from proceeds related to the funeral, which fans paid $20 each to attend. Sales of programs, T-shirts, special VIP receptions and baby blue silicon bracelets imprinted with Walter White’s name contributed to the total.

Other folks jumped on the merchandising bandwagon. During the 2013 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in early October, the hottest item in balloon pins was a Walter White/Breaking Bad pin.

Balloon pins are usually created for real balloons. There is not currently an actual Walter White balloon, and this was not a fundraising item associated with the funeral. Nonetheless, there was a run on the limited edition “Ballooning Bad” pin.

The fundraising isn’t over yet. The Vernon’s Steakhouse Walter White Endowment Fund at the Albuquerque Community Foundation continues to receive money from sales. There will likely be other celebratory events in the future, perhaps a party on the anniversary of Walter White’s “death.”

Michael Baird, owner of Vernon’s Steakhouse said, “Walter White’s legacy and final amends will have a positive impact on Albuquerque for many years to come.”

Buzzell said of the series ending, “It was a perfect ending, absolute genius. It couldn’t go on forever.” He noted a prequel to “Breaking Bad” is in the works, called “Better Call Saul,” which focuses on Walter White’s crooked lawyer. Buzzell may have a shot at getting a part in that show.

Why did so many get caught up in memorializing a fictional TV character? And why do people hesitate to do the same for real people in their lives?

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