

**Interview by ICCFA Magazine
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**ICCFA Magazine
author spotlight**

► **Gail Rubin**, The

Doyenne
of Death,
is author



of the award-winning book
“A Good Goodbye: Funeral
Planning for Those Who
Don’t Plan to Die,” and The
Family Plot Blog.

www.AGoodGoodbye.com



(Scanning the QR code
will take you to the web-
site)

[http://TheFamilyPlot.
wordpress.com](http://TheFamilyPlot.wordpress.com)

► In February, she started filming
“A Good Goodbye TV,” which will include 13
episodes filmed for a public access channel.
The episodes will be collected and sold on
four DVDs.

[http://agoodgoodbye.com/
a-good-goodbye-tv-series/](http://agoodgoodbye.com/a-good-goodbye-tv-series/)

► A Certified Celebrant, Rubin also is a
popular speaker who uses humor and films
to get the funeral planning conversation
started.

► She is a member of the Association for
Death Education and Counseling and the
International Cemetery, Cremation and
Funeral Association. She also serves on
the cemetery committee for Congregation
Albert, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and vol-
unteers with the *Chevra Kaddisha*, which
ritually prepares bodies for Jewish burial.

► Read Rubin’s “30 Funerals in 30 Days
Challenge” blog posts at [http://
thefamilyplot.wordpress.com/
category/30-day-challenge/](http://thefamilyplot.wordpress.com/category/30-day-challenge/)

► Her
funeral planning
conversation-
starter, “The
Newly-Dead
Game” is
available as an
electronic down-
load from [http://agoodgoodbye.com/
to-die-for-shopping/the-newly-dead-
game/](http://agoodgoodbye.com/to-die-for-shopping/the-newly-dead-game/).



PREPLANNING/MARKETING

The title of Gail Rubin’s book, “A Good Goodbye:
Funeral Planning for Those Who Don’t Plan to Die,”
references a fact of life that funeral and cemetery professionals
know all too well: The reluctance of people to face their own
mortality and plan for it. Rubin thinks humor can be the key
to getting people to have these conversations, and she’s spreading
the message through her book and blog, and now a TV show.

Keep smiling: The Doyenne of Death wants you to plan your funeral

Gail Rubin’s background is in public
relations and television, and she
knows how to come up with a good
sound bite, a catchy title.

“Just as talking about sex won’t make
you pregnant, talking about funerals won’t
make you dead.”

“Thirty funerals in 30 days.”

“A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for
Those Who Don’t Plan to Die.”

“The Newly-Dead Game.”

“The Doyenne of Death.”

OK, that last one’s a little tough. It *is*
alliterative, and it rolls off the tongue, but
Rubin admits a lot of people aren’t sure
what a “doyenne” is. Nevertheless, she
hopes the title will pique their curiosity,
and as Todd Van Beck says, even if they
don’t think they personally are going to die,
people *are* curious about death.

For the past three years, Rubin has fed
that curiosity by blogging about one funeral/
memorial service/graveside service every
day for a month, hence “30 funerals in 30
days.” Her descriptions of everything from
a motorcycle funeral to a memorial service
at an art museum to a service for a long-
married couple who died within hours of
each other make it obvious how personalized
services have become, and show that
funerals are not relics that should be
discarded but vital rituals that are evolving.

This year, she’s been taping a television
show, the anchor sponsor for which is
the FRENCH Family of companies:
French Funerals-Cremations, French
Advance Planning, Sunset Memorial Park,
Cremation Society of New Mexico, Best
Friends Pet Services and Best Friends
Forever Pet Cemetery of Albuquerque,

New Mexico, where Rubin lives.

ICCFA Magazine talked to Rubin
about her career and what she is trying to
accomplish with her blogging, book and
television show.

*What was your background, since I
assume you didn’t start out to become the
“Doyenne of Death”?*

I come from a public relations background.
I was a TV producer right out of college,
and after about five years I had been pitched
by PR professionals as a producer, and I
thought, well, I could do this. And I wanted
to do more writing. So I went into the
public relations field.

When I got married for the second
time in 2000, I had a very creative Jewish/
Western wedding. I wanted to write books,
and this wedding inspired me to write about
creative life cycle events—weddings, births
and deaths. The book was originally going
to be called “Matchings, Hatchings and
Dispatchings.”

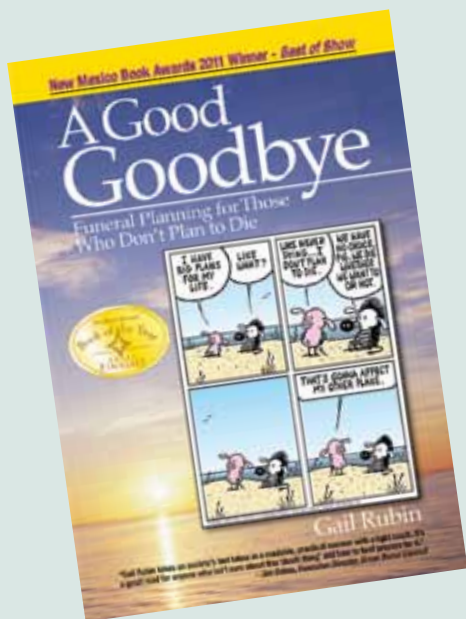
I did a column in my local paper by
that name, and the columns on death and
funerals got the most reader response. So
I started focusing on funerals, and that
actually changed the course of my career.

I became a Certified Celebrant. I
wrote “A Good Goodbye,” about funeral
planning. While doing that, I preplanned
for my father-in-law as a kind of test case;
I was surprised how much information was
needed.

All of that resulted in me becoming the
Doyenne of Death.

*I wondered how you came up with that
title, and why.*

It was a name my brother suggested. A lot



The contents of “A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for those who don’t plan to die.”

Introduction: Over My Dead Body: Who’s the funeral for, really?

Chapter 1: How Do I Work This? Event planning under pressure

Chapter 2: A Grave Undertaking: Working with a funeral home

Chapter 3: We Can Do That? New trends in death care

Chapter 4: It’s My Party and I’ll Die if I Want To: Unique memorial ceremonies, remains disposal and receptions

Chapter 5: I Have Some Sad News: How to handle communications

Chapter 6: Lend Me Your Ears: Writing ethical wills, eulogies and funeral oratory

Chapter 7: Amazing Grace: Religious customs for death

Chapter 8: I Got It at Costco: Minimizing funeral and burial costs

Chapter 9: Where’s Fido? What to do when a pet dies

Chapter 10: ‘What if’ Questions: Pondering out-of-the-ordinary situations

Chapter 11: As Time Goes By: Remembering the deceased

Chapter 12: Just the Facts: Planning forms and online resources

PREPLANNING/MARKETING

Funeral directors have a great sense of humor; I’ve hung around enough of them at conventions to know that. I think doing community outreach with funny film clips the way I do can really help people to get to know them outside of that (funeral home) setting, and can open the conversation about preplanning.

of people don’t know what a doyenne is. She’s a woman who’s considered senior in a group who knows a lot about a particular subject. So that would be me, when it comes to the subject of funerals, the parties no one wants to plan.

I actually approach funerals as a life cycle event, party. And by having a conversation about it and planning ahead, you can realize a number of benefits. You can reduce stress at a time of grief, minimize family conflict, save money and create a really meaningful, memorable event, what I call a good goodbye.

And who else is going to take the moniker “Doyenne of Death?” But I trademarked it anyway. Of course now that I’m going on television as the Doyenne of Death, maybe someone will want to knock me off my pedestal. But I’m hoping the show will take the funeral planning conversation to a whole other level.

What is the television show going to be about, exactly?

It’s going to be a 13-part series where we’re going to look at different topics in each episode. Since you can get about two hours of programming onto a DVD, we’re going to group the topics onto four DVDs.

One will be “Over My Dead Body: The Essentials of Funeral Planning,” talking about the benefits of preplanning, cremation, memorial services, cemeteries. A lot of people are surprised to find out that cemetery services are separate from the services of the funeral director.

Another will be “Trending Topics: Pets, Funeral Parties and Going Green,” talking about eco-friendly funerals and green dispositions, how celebrants and life celebrations are changing things and about pet loss. People love their pets.

Anybody who’s on Facebook knows that.

Right. The third DVD will be “Death and Taxes: A Primer on Finances and Funerals,” talking about estate planning, cost management and financial issues before and after a funeral.

And the fourth DVD will cover topics

such as Medicaid, body donation and veterans benefits; end-of-life topics such as hospice and advance directives; and grief counseling.

So the series is going to cover quite a bit, and like my book, it will deal with a serious subject with a light touch, because I find that humor really helps open the door to having a conversation. You know my slogan: “Talking about sex won’t make you pregnant, and talking about funerals won’t make you dead.”

Funeral directors have a great sense of humor; I’ve hung around enough of them at conventions to know that. But the general public might not know that, if they only go to the funeral home when there’s a funeral.

I think doing community outreach with funny film clips the way I do can really help people to get to know them outside of that setting, and can open the conversation about preplanning.

I think “A Good Goodbye” on TV is definitely going to help open the funeral planning conversation even further. It’s starting here in Albuquerque, and up and down the Rio Grande Valley, on public access TV.

There’s a clearinghouse of 2,700 cable access channels across the country that are hungry for good content. And once the program is finished, it will be offered to them. It will also be available on DVDs. There will be YouTube teasers where you can see 10 minutes of the program, and then if you want to watch the rest of it, it’s a pay-per-view download.

I’ll be interviewing people in the industry, and it will be another way of getting that conversation going.

I was surprised at how much you got into your book while still keeping it fairly compact, and very readable.

It’s won awards. It was a finalist in ForeWord Review’s Book of the Year award, in the family and relationships category. And it was Best in Show in the New Mexico Book Awards.

And I am so gratified when I hear back



Representatives of the FRENCH Family of Companies: from left, Barbara Stewart, community liaison; Susan Broersma, executive office manager; and Tom Antram, president and CEO. FRENCH is the anchor sponsor of Rubin's new television show, "A Good Goodbye TV," which is producing 13 half-hour episodes about "everything you need to know before you go." Filming began in February.

from people who say, "Your book was so helpful to me." That's part of my mission.

One chapter that seemed unusual to me was "I have some sad news: How to handle communications." It covers everything from what to say when you call or email about a death to how to write condolence cards, letters and thank-you notes. It was very practical, useful advice.

That's the communicator in me. I wanted to help people with what to say, because it's something most people don't do a lot.

About that "Matchings, Hatchings and Dispatchings" newspaper column you wrote: Were those feature stories?

They were monthly features. I would go out and talk to people and do a pretty substantial article. For example, I covered one woman who was shopping for a wedding dress. I went to a place where they coach people about home birthing. I wrote a profile of a rabbi who's not affiliated with a synagogue but is the "go-to" rabbi when an unaffiliated local Jewish person dies. And the story I did about pet loss got a huge response.

I interviewed folks from Best Friends Pet Services, which is run by The FRENCH companies. There was a woman who had worked there and was a big dog lover. She

had the cremated remains of several of her dogs buried in her back yard, like a little memorial cemetery corner for her dogs. She said, "If I ever move, I'm digging them up and taking them with me."

You said the columns you wrote about death were the ones that got the biggest response from readers. Why do you think that is?

I think it's because people are looking for a way to have the conversation. There's a natural avoidance to talking about death and funerals, and yet when there's something people can read or watch, it can open the door to starting a conversation.

In your book, you're described as an event planner. Did you actually study event planning? I assume you didn't go to mortuary school.

Because of my public relations background, event planning was part of what I did. No, I didn't go to mortuary school. But I am a Certified Celebrant, through the ICCFA's College of 21st Century Services. I'm also a volunteer with the *Chevra Kaddisha*, the Jewish burial society, so I have been backstage at the funeral home to wash and dress bodies.

Since you can't necessarily make a living selling books, I also became a

licensed insurance agent so I could offer final expense insurance.

And I am on the cemetery committee for my synagogue, Congregation Albert. We've sold plots to our members and to non-members as well, and are dealing with cemetery management issues.

So while I didn't go to mortuary school, I do have real-life experience with a lot of hands-on issues related to funeral homes and cemeteries.

It seems like you're pretty busy with writing and marketing. Do you conduct many celebrant services?

Not very many; I've only led a few. It's not a major part of my business at the moment, but I would like to do more. A funeral home called me yesterday, but when I told them my fee, they said, "The family will never pay that."

So they wanted something really inexpensive.

Yes, and a celebrant interviews the family, writes a script and obtains a meaningful memorial item. That takes time, and he was offering me something like \$100. I could be an emcee for that, but not a celebrant. The typical clergy honorarium in this town is much more than that!

What was your goal in writing "A Good Goodbye?"

The idea was to reach out both to people in the industry, who could use it as a tool to help them start funeral planning conversations preneed, as well as to the general public, to encourage them to have that conversation about preneed planning. I wanted to help people think about what they want, what it will cost and how they're going to pay for it.

I believe humor can attract people to the topic of death and funeral planning, which is something they resist psychologically. I've written about the terror management theory, based on Ernest Becker's "The Denial of Death," which basically says it takes good self-esteem to be able to consider your own mortality and take some action.

There are studies that say that two-thirds of the population has low self-esteem. Keeping Becker's idea in mind, those studies are kind of borne out when you see that only about 25 percent of the adult population actually does preneed planning.

I love the "Pearls Before Swine" cartoon on the cover. Pig tells Zebra he has big



Rubin and Toby Younis, manager of uPublic.TV's studios, in front of a green screen, which will allow the insertion of different kinds of backdrops into the show.

plans for his life, one being that he doesn't plan to die. After Zebra informs him that everyone dies, whether they want to or not, Pig says "That's gonna affect my other plans." That's a great cartoon.

I had to get a special dispensation from cartoonist Stephan Pastis to use it, and pay to get the rights to use the cartoon on the cover. Along the same lines, I was trying to get in touch with a record company to get the rights to use William Shatner's song, "You'll Have Time," on my television show. The refrain is, "You're gonna die."

I thought it would be great music for the television show, but they wanted to know how much money I'd pay. Instead, I worked with a local music group to record our own theme song.

Your book was printed in 2010, and it has all five-star reviews on Amazon. How are sales going?

They continue along. It's not a bestseller off the charts, but I do get money coming in every month from sales through the bookseller and my own efforts. I do radio interviews and do talks. And there's my "30 Funerals in 30 Days" article.

Is the book aimed primarily at baby boomers?

Absolutely, especially the ones who are planning and carrying out plans for their parents, as well as for themselves.

How did you come up with the "30 Funerals in 30 Days" challenge?

Last year was the third year I've done it; I started doing it in 2010, just before the

book came out. So part of the intent was promotional, but it's also good research, learning what's going on out there in the front lines. And every year I discover something new, some change that brings positives or pitfalls.

Could you give us an example?

Well, in 2012, it seemed like more families were bringing in their own media to be used during the funeral, and I witnessed a couple of episodes where the media the family brought in would not play on the funeral home's system. So that's something

for funeral homes to be aware of.

Maybe funeral directors need to tell the family that if they're bringing in a CD or DVD or whatever, that's OK, but they need to bring it in early to make sure it will play.

Exactly. And then I saw some wonderful, creative things people do—and their need to do it. One of the services I attended was a memorial luncheon in a bowling alley, and I thought, "Wow, this is interesting."

The story behind it was the widow had said "We're not going to have a funeral for him." Who knows, maybe he was spending too much time at the bar in the bowling alley. In any case, one of the bartenders decided they had to do something, and she organized the event. He was a big supporter of YMCA summer camps, and was a member of an Optimist group, and the community got together at the bowling alley.

This showed that not only the family but also the community wants to recognize that someone has died, wants to honor the person's memory. It's really quite unfair of the family to say, "We're just doing something private," or "We're not doing anything." It really does hurt the community.

You mentioned making plans for your in-laws. What have you done about planning your own service and memorialization?

My husband and I have preplanned. We're an example of how religious traditions inform your choices. Being Jewish, I'm very happy that our funeral traditions are

the closest you can get to "green" in a conventional cemetery. No embalming, a plain pine box or something else that will biodegrade. My husband does the laundry in our family, so we chose a wicker basket casket for him, and I get a simple pine box.

We'll be buried in a Jewish cemetery. I do want my 14 pairs of cowboy boots on display afterward when everybody comes back to the house to get together. And I would like something that I read at my bat mitzvah to be read at the service. So I've got some ideas for a few "fun" things.

I would, of course, love to be remembered as the author of "A Good Goodbye" and as someone who preplanned. I do have all my information pulled together, so I've done what I say people should do, and I know some people who don't.

I remember a prolific blogger who wrote a book about funeral planning. He had health problems and then died and left his wife in a heap of trouble. No insurance, no idea of what he wanted done with his remains. She had to scramble to find an inexpensive cremation and, the last time I talked to her, she still had his cremated remains sitting in the dining room. It was so sad.

Leading by example is part of what I wrote about when talking about shopping for cemetery plots. If you're a baby boomer and your parents aren't so eager to discuss the topic, you lead by example. So as part of my research, my husband and I went plot shopping. We said to his parents, "Hey, we're going plot-shopping. You want to come along?"

They agreed and they ended up buying plots, and it was painless. I would like to see more people doing that with their parents.

My parents have planned ahead; they bought plots back in the Washington, D.C., area where I'm from originally. They don't live there anymore, so there's going to be body shipment involved, but I know how to work with the funeral home to get it done, which is not something everybody knows about.

Tell us about the Newly-Dead Game.

In early 2010, I saw something about a festival in Nederland, Colorado, called Frozen Dead Guy Days. I knew my book would be coming out later that year, and I thought, "I've got to be there."

I was participating in a program called, "Your Quantum Leap," which is a business

This showed that not only the family but also the community wants to recognize that someone has died, wants to honor the person's memory. It's really quite unfair of the family to say, "We're just doing something private," or "We're not doing anything." It really does hurt the community.

marketing/coaching program. I told the man who runs it that I wanted to be at Frozen Dead Guy Days, and asked him what he thought I should do. We were brainstorming together, and he suggested the Newly-Dead Game, based on the old television show "The Newlywed Game."

"The Newlywed Game" quizzed newly married couples on how well they knew each other. My game involves couples being quizzed on how well they know each other's final wishes, such as what disposition they prefer or what kind of music they want played at their funeral.

At the festival, couples signed up to play, and everybody who participated got a copy of the book. The couple who got the most points won a bottle of champagne. I went back again in 2012 and got a lot of contact information from people attending. Maybe they won't buy my book right away, but they will later. I keep in touch.

What questions do you get the most from people outside the business when they find out that you're the Doyenne of Death? Aside from "What does 'doyenne' mean?"

They want to know about cremation scattering; so many people are starting to choose that option. And I'm seeing more interest from people in going green. I tell them that cremation does have a carbon footprint, that I'd have to generate electricity with the solar panels on my house in New Mexico for 14 sunny days to offset the carbon footprint from one cremation. When I put it that way, people start thinking more about green burial.

I explain that embalming is a choice, depending on what their funeral plans are—how soon they're scheduling the funeral, whether it's open or closed casket.

What exactly do people ask you about scattering?

They want to know about scattering on water or on public land. I basically tell them that there are no cremation police, but you wouldn't want to do it in front of a national park ranger. And I remind them that you can't set up a monument to somebody's memory on public land.

I actually did a YouTube video called "How to scatter cremated remains." I went

up to the top of the Sandia Mountain in Albuquerque, because I can't tell you how many hundreds of remains are probably already scattered up there.

I used dirt, and included disclaimers throughout the video saying, "This is actually dirt from the garden." I said you don't just dump it all out in one place, you scatter it hither and yon.

You're from the Washington, D.C., region, but you live in New Mexico, in a pretty progressive area. Do you still see large regional differences in what people are planning to do?

I'm always interested in what the annual CANA report indicates. And yes, the East Coast generally has a lower cremation rate than people the West, because when you move out West, you start to lose your connection to the family burial grounds, the funeral home the family has used for generations.

In the talks I do using humorous movie clips, I've got one that's just about cremation issues. There's a romantic comedy called "Elizabethtown," which features a really good illustration of that clash of cultures between Kentucky, which has one of the lowest cremation rates in the

country at 17 percent, and Oregon, where the rate is almost 70 percent.

In the movie, a family from Kentucky has moved to Oregon, and the father drops dead of a heart attack while visiting family back in Kentucky. The son is sent to Kentucky to have the body cremated and the remains brought back to Oregon. Meanwhile, the family back in Kentucky wants him buried in the family plot.

They wind up striking a compromise where the cremation does take place and basically they bury the father's blue suit, a photo of him and some other things in the family plot.

The cremation rate is still climbing and will continue to do so. I think the primary driver is the economy. But some people just say, "why should I bother with all that stuff when cremation is quick and easy?"

Well, we're all aware of Alan Wolfelt's great information about the need to stop and hold a ceremony, whether you choose traditional burial or cremation without burial. As I say in my book, maybe you don't care what people do about you after your death. After all, you won't be around to enjoy the party. But the people who love you care deeply. 