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### ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

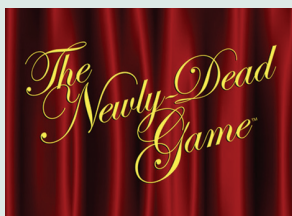
►Rubin is a member of the ICCFA, Association for Death Education and Counseling, the

cemetery committee for her synagogue and the *Chevrah Kaddisha*, volunteers who prepare Jews for burial.

►She speaks regularly to groups on starting funeral planning conversations and published an award-winning book, "A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for Those Who Don't Plan to Die."

[www.AGoodGoodbye.com](http://www.AGoodGoodbye.com)

<http://TheFamilyPlot.wordpress.com/category/30-day-challenge>



►Rubin's "The Newly-Dead Game" is available as an electronic download from

[http://agood-](http://agood-goodbye.com/to-die-for-shopping/the-newly-dead-game/)

[goodbye.com/to-die-for-shopping/the-newly-dead-game/](http://agood-goodbye.com/to-die-for-shopping/the-newly-dead-game/).



Just as talking about sex won't make you pregnant, talking about funerals won't make you dead—and your family will benefit from the conversation. "A Good Goodbye" addresses the Baby Boomer generation with gentle humor

on the vital information about funeral arrangements that most people don't learn about until faced with a death in the family. The book provides the information, inspiration and tools to plan and implement creative, meaningful and memorable end-of-life rituals for people and their pets. It will help families avoid emotional and financial disaster.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

How can you overcome people's reluctance to talk about death, which of course makes them reluctant to discuss preneed planning? Why not get them laughing?



Rubin talks about Jewish funeral traditions and rituals, using movie clips from "My Mexican Shiva" and "Nora's Will" to help make her points.

## Using humor and movies to help talk about death and preplanning

Larry Mandel is one media-savvy funeral director. When I contacted him in December to let him know I'd be in Chicago in late January to be on the WGN-TV Midday News program, he jumped at the chance to set up community outreach events around my visit.

Mandel is a fourth-generation funeral director who worked at WGN radio in advertising and promotions early in his career. He leveraged this opportunity to arrange upbeat, informative events to raise visibility for Piser Funeral Services of Skokie, Illinois (a Dignity Memorial company).

Why would you want to undertake such community outreach events? As we know, advance funeral planning can be a hard conversation to start. Raising your funeral

home's visibility and your own personal accessibility with non-funeral events helps open the door to increased preneed and at-need business.

"The funeral director, as a personality in their community, today needs to leverage everyone around and develop a system of 'power partners,'" said Mandel. "These are people who just by their association can work together in the development of greater understanding, sales and profits."

### The terror management theory

One reason many individuals avoid the topic of funeral planning is a psychological construct called the Terror Management Theory. It's based on the work of Dr. Ernest Becker, who wrote "The Denial of Death," a

There was “My Big Fat Italian Funeral” home celebration of life, a service that featured a jazz quartet in a club and a ceremony in a Japanese garden.

## Lessons from attending 30 funerals in 30 days

**Y**ou can learn a lot by attending 30 funerals in 30 days. I found an amazing range of creative services for people who died during the month of October 2011 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I didn’t personally know all these people, but met them through the local obituaries. I documented their goodbye services on The Family Plot Blog as the 30 Funerals in 30 Days Challenge. The funerals and memorial services covered were picked out of news and classified obituaries that announced the time and date of each event and were open to the public.

I witnessed a memorial luncheon in a bowling alley bar, a funeral for a Dallas Cowboys fan, a memorial service for a young TV news reporter and a celebration of life for a hot air balloon pioneer. There was “My Big Fat Italian Funeral” home celebration of life, a service that featured a jazz quartet in a club and a ceremony in a Japanese garden.

Of the 30 events, almost half of these deaths were unexpected. Since we never know when our number will be up, it’s vital to have a conversation today about how you’d like your life celebrated.

Some statistics about the 30 events:

- I attended memorial events for 17 males and 12 females, plus a September 11 memorial event.
- The oldest person was a 90-year-old; the youngest was 25 years old.
- Sixteen of the deaths could be considered expected (illness, advanced age) and 14 were unexpected (heart attack, stroke, accidents, medical mishap).
- There were 14 funerals with the body present or burial of cremated remains. Of the 12 funerals with a body in a casket, seven were open, five were closed.
- After one funeral, the body was cremated.
- Of the 16 memorial services, seven had

cremated remains present. (Either the body was buried elsewhere, donated to science or cremated but simply not there.)

- Ten services were at a funeral home, six were at a house of worship, five were in a cemetery and eight were held in other settings, including a home, Balloon Fiesta Park, the Japanese Garden at the Bio-Park and the German American Club.

- Thirteen of the events were creative celebrations of life with little or no religious references, or some religious readings but not a religious service.

- The 17 religious services included Catholic, Baptist, Evangelical, Methodist, Presbyterian, Jewish, and Latter-Day Saints (Mormon) services.

- Almost half of the 30 services featured a video photomontage or photo board about the deceased (14 total).

—Gail Rubin

The January/February 2012 issue of AARP Bulletin identified funeral homes as “The New Party Spot.” Participants discussed non-funeral events held at their facilities, including a 40th birthday party and an anniversary party.

book that won a Pulitzer Prize in 1973.

This theory holds that all human behavior is ultimately motivated by the fear of death. Death creates anxiety because it can strike at unexpected and random moments and its nature is essentially unknowable. We develop culture and religion as ways to reach for immortality and explain the unknown.

The awareness of our own eventual death, called “mortality salience,” affects our decision-making in the face of this terror. It takes good self-esteem to even consider our own mortality.

It’s estimated approximately two-thirds of the population has low self-esteem. Hence, many people decide to avoid the topic. This is reflected in the estimated 24 percent of the population that has made preneed funeral arrangements.

One way to help those who might not otherwise consider the conversation is to use humorous films and popular culture to catch people’s interest.

Offering needed continuing education credits to social workers, hospice workers



**Larry Mandel believes “soft” program sponsorships that focus on telling people about funeral service are better for business than, say, sponsoring a bowling team.**

and medical professionals is another way to connect with key people who can send you business.

### Funny films and Jewish traditions

Piser, a Jewish funeral home, sponsored two talks at synagogues on Jewish funeral traditions. I’m a member of the *Chevrah Kaddisha*, those who wash and dress the bodies of Jews according to tradition, and the cemetery committee for my synagogue. I provided insights about rituals for Jewish funerals—before, during and after the event.

We also talked about ways to be prepared before there’s a death in the family. Certain elements of Jewish funeral traditions were illustrated with clips from

two comedy films, “My Mexican Shiva” and “Nora’s Will.”

During the presentations, Mandel connected with local people, making a personal impression well before any of them would need to arrange a funeral. He provided them with helpful planning packets that included Piser contact information. Attendees found out about the event through synagogue flyers, Jewish newspaper news briefs and personal contacts by Mandel.

Mandel also held a champagne reception and talk at Piser’s Skokie chapel about funeral planning issues illustrated with funny film clips. He leveraged his local Chamber of Commerce membership to help get the word out about the event.

Through his networking contacts with Elderwerks, a free senior housing and care resource network, he made the event a continuing education credit opportunity for social workers. That element alone provided a major draw for the event.

Mandel also promoted the event at his

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

funeral home with a news placement in a popular Chicago Sun-Times column and calendar news items in other outlets.

“You can actually visit a funeral home and not be sad,” Mandel said to the audience. “Gail Rubin helps start the funeral planning conversation in a fun, interesting way and we’re so privileged to have her speak here in Chicago.”

Mandel later noted: “Today’s funeral director needs the soft program sponsorships, where the story of what a funeral director really does can be told and demonstrated. This type of soft sponsorship will do more over the long run than sponsoring bowling teams and Little Leagues, because it creates understanding and tells the funeral planning story.”

### The funeral director on film

Separately from the Piser events, other speakers and I talked about outreach activities to engage the community during a two-hour continuing education class held by The Funeral Directors Services Association of Greater Chicago (FDSA) at Worsham

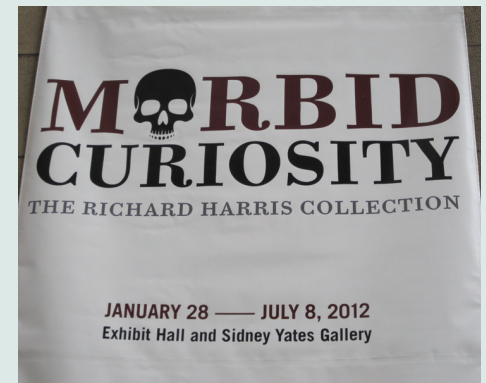
College of Mortuary Science.

The January/February 2012 issue of AARP Bulletin identified funeral homes as “The New Party Spot.” Participants discussed non-funeral events held at their facilities, including a 40th birthday party and an anniversary party.

Film clips were used to teach about changes in the funeral industry. Scenes from movies such as “The Loved One,” “The Living Wake,” “Get Low” and “Happy Funeral” kept the funeral directors engaged and attentive the entire time.

In addition to watching the “Funny Films for Serious Funeral Planning Conversations” presentation, we discussed other outreach activities. “The Newly-Dead Game” and the “Tell Your Life Story in 500 Words or Less Workshop” are described in the October 2011 issue of ICCFA Magazine.

You have no doubt seen the impact of storytelling at the funerals services you have put together for families. Put that storytelling power to work for your business with community outreach activities that are “outside the box.”



**This banner for an art exhibit in Chicago is one example of a way funeral directors can connect with popular culture in their communities (thinking “outside the box”). Morbid Curiosity showcases almost 1,000 works of art which explore the iconography of death. This show runs through July 8 at the Chicago Cultural Center. A media-savvy funeral director could attend the show and contact local news media to offer insights about the art on display compared to real world funeral experiences. What local artwork, events or museum exhibits could you tie to and offer your expertise? It could be a win-win for your business and the exhibit/event.**