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, New Mexico. She was wearing a black coat and holding a notebook in her hand, as if ready to take notes. I didn’t know if she was there to write about something or just killing time. She was talking to a few people who were standing outside the funeral home as well.

“I’m not going to get into this topic,” she said, sounding a bit dried up. “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 as long as possible,” she said. “Even people who have died are not going to die aloud. It’s the party no one wants to plan.”

Rubin’s approach is like the “Doyenne of Death” and in fact she has registered the trademark on the name. She might, as she said on the other morning, wear a conch 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 short-circuit that avoidance.”

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.

“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 short-circuit that avoidance.”

Gail Rubin, on funerals

Rubin says funerals are the party no one wants to plan. She tells me 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 various rituals. 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 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 plan,” she said. “You don’t have to worry about making arrangements and be prepared with your information in advance, and let your family know where you 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 523-3914 or linthicum@abqjournal.com. Go to www.abqjournal.com/letters/new to submit a letter to the editor.