



## An Interview with

# STEPHANIE WEST ALLEN

## Founder of Create a Great Funeral Day

**S**tephanie West Allen was stunned when her significant other suddenly died in 1988. She hardly remembers the funeral and still feels badly about being unprepared.

Ten years later, she watched her husband struggle to pull together a meaningful funeral for his mother, who had left no directions. Observing his grief and hearing him ask, "What would Mom have wanted?" Allen came to believe that knowing her mother-in-law's wishes would have made having a funeral so much easier. Her husband would not have been left wondering in the midst of his grieving.



ing funeral plans, he'd said, "I don't care what you decide to do" (her mother, who died first, had said she didn't want anything). After his death, Allen and her sister were left to negotiate ways to mesh their very different styles of decision-making about their dad's funeral plans. It's something they could have done sooner and perhaps even discussed with their father.

Based on those experiences, Allen wrote *Creating Your Own Funeral or Memorial Service: A Workbook*. Then in 1999, she registered October 30 as *Create a Great Funeral Day* as a "holiday" with Chase's Calendar of Events.

"Back then, *Create a Great Funeral Day* was a very bizarre idea," said Allen. "Some people got angry and a number of funeral directors were resistant to the idea and considered it competition. There's still a lot of resistance to the whole notion of planning ahead."

2014 marks the 15<sup>th</sup> annual *Create a Great Funeral Day* celebration. "One of the things that's happened over the 15 years since I wrote the book," Allen explained, "is that I understand how much more of a group effort [funeral

planning] is. When I first wrote it, I had a sense that it was a fairly autonomous, solo activity."

The idea behind *Create a Great Funeral Day* is to think about how you would like to be remembered and to let others you love know how you'd like your life celebrated. The family's experience of funerals is so much better when loved ones express their desires and values before dying.

"The people who are left behind are so grateful to have this already done," said Allen. "And planning your funeral in advance, regardless of your age or state of health, is a good way to think about 'What is my legacy thus far and how am I going to change, improve or affirm it as I move forward?'"

Allen's father died in 2014. Regard-

### The Terror Management Theory

Even an expert like Allen experienced family resistance to preneed planning. Why do people hesitate to discuss funeral planning, let alone do anything concrete about it in advance?

Social psychologists cite Dr. Ernest Becker's Terror Management Theory, outlined in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*. He wrote that all human behavior is ultimately motivated by the fear of death. Death creates anxiety because it strikes at unexpected and random moments, and its nature is essentially unknowable.

The awareness of our own eventual death, called "mortality salience," affects our decision-making in the face of this terror, and people decide to avoid the topic. *Create a Great Funeral Day* prompts us to be mindful and self-aware,



to plan reflectively in advance, rather than in reaction after someone dies.

"Some people approach funeral planning with fear and resistance, and may even become extremely uncomfortable when thinking about their funeral," said Allen. "Others are motivated by love; for them this planning is an act of love. If you're afraid, you may be afraid in lots of other areas of your life.

"Some experts say that we die the way we lived," Allen added. "Maybe that's true for funeral planning too."

### How to Start

Stating some sort of plan is better than no plan at all. Allen suggests spending time on October 30 considering the many ways a memorial service can celebrate each individual's unique life.

Ask yourself what are the purposes and goals for your service — each person will answer that question in his or her own way — and then make some plans or suggestions so your service matches that vision.

One tip to start the process: write down a number of "Never Again" stories. These are stories about things you have done that you would never repeat and what you learned from the experiences. Doing so helps you to see what is most important to you, and thus recall or recognize the values you might like to see reflected in your end-of-life event. "Never Again" stories highlight cherished values and reinforce the lesson learned after going astray from those values.

Individuals or families planning a memorial service might talk about

other funerals they've attended where they never want to repeat certain elements that they witnessed. These discussions are sometimes humorous as the most inappropriate elements of services are recalled. And of course, what is inappropriate for one family might be just right for another — thus the value of these discussions.

To avoid having a memorial event that goes through the motions of honoring the deceased but offers no emotional healing, focus on personalization. The more individual the service, the better it connects the bereaved to the deceased and makes the event a true celebration of their life.

Use *Create a Great Funeral Day* to change from fear of funerals to the courage to plan ahead and talk about what it means to have a "good goodbye."

### Resources:

To help sort out values, Allen recommends the Personal Values Card Sort exercise at [http://westallen.typepad.com/idealawg/2007/09/do-you-](http://westallen.typepad.com/idealawg/2007/09/do-you-know-what.html)

[know-what.html](http://westallen.typepad.com/idealawg/2007/09/do-you-know-what.html) or [http://casaa.unm.edu/inst/Personal Values Card Sort.pdf](http://casaa.unm.edu/inst/Personal%20Values%20Card%20Sort.pdf).

Allen's *Creating Your Own Funeral or Memorial Service: A Workbook* is available at <http://CreateYourOwn-Funeral.com>, and her blog address is <http://westallen.typepad.com/idealawg/>.

Download a news op-ed column you can personalize for your own market about *Create a Great Funeral Day* from <http://AGoodGoodbye.com/op-ed/>.

Gail Rubin, CT, *The Doyenne of Death*®, brings a light touch to serious subjects as a speaker who uses humor and funny films to attract people to discuss mortality, end-of-life, estate and funeral planning issues. She is Certified in Thanatology: Death, Dying and Bereavement by the Association for Death Education and Counseling. A pioneering Death Café hostess, she is author of the award-winning book and host of the TV and radio shows *A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for Those Who Don't Plan to Die*. Gail is an ongoing contributor to *Mortuary Management*. Her website is <http://agoodgoodbye.com/>.

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