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**ICCFA Magazine  
author spotlight**

►Rubin, Certified Thanatologist and Certified Funeral Celebrant, helps organizations connect with baby boomers and seniors on end-

of-life issues. She's a pioneering death educator who uses humor, film clips and outside-the-box activities to teach about serious subjects. As the coordinator of the inaugural Before I Die Albuquerque Festival, she consults with those who want to create similar events in other markets.



►She's the author of the award-winning books "Kicking the Bucket List: 100 Downsizing and Organizing Things to Do Before You Die," "A Good Goodbye:



Funeral Planning for Those Who Don't Plan to Die" and "Hail and Farewell: Cremation Ceremonies, Templates and Tips."



**More about this topic**

►You can listen to Rubin's interview with Justin Magnuson, co-founder of the Before I Die Louisville Festival, on her podcast, "A Good Goodbye," on FuneralRadio.com. She also created Mortality Minute spots for radio and online videos, and writes about the funeral industry at The Family Plot Blog.

►Online videos of the Before I Die ABQ panel discussions and presentations are available at <http://beforeidieabq.com/miss-festival-events-watch-videos/>.

**More from this author**



►Rubin will be presenting "Lessons on grief and mourning in cartoons" at the ICCFA Convention in Las Vegas, April 18-21, 2018. This presentation

incorporates clips from popular animated films to illustrate and instruct about mourning losses. (See page 104.)

►Download a free 50-point executor's checklist from [www.AGoodGoodbye.com](http://www.AGoodGoodbye.com).

**COMMUNITY OUTREACH/PREPLANNING**

How can you get people to talk about end-of-life issues, much less about preplanning? You might get a handful of people to come to a seminar about it, but if you're willing to put in a lot more effort, you can draw hundreds of people to a multi-day festival focused on end-of-life topics.

# Before I Die festivals start important conversations

**B**efore I Die festivals are part of a growing social movement to foster reflection about how we as individuals and as a society manage death and dying. By providing space and opportunities to openly discuss end-of-life issues, we can improve the percentage of those who plan ahead and take actions to address our mortality.

Through a host of entertaining and engaging free or low-cost activities, Before I Die festivals boldly take death out of the closet so participants can think about, talk about and plan for their eventual death.

Over the past seven years, mortality discussion opportunities such as Death Cafes and Death Over Dinner events have proliferated worldwide. The idea of Before I Die walls—giant chalkboards which offer a place to publicly state hopes and goals—rocketed around the globe after a 2012 TED talk by Candy Chang.

Now Before I Die festivals offer a fresh way for funeral homes, cemeteries and death-related organizations to connect with the general public. The key is to engage people with experiences that



**The Before I die wall on the campus of Central New Mexico Community College, created by French Funerals & Cremations.**

prompt questions and conversations: field trips and tours, theater, films, poetry, music, panel discussions, Death Cafes and other outside-the-box activities.

**How Before I Die festivals started**

Like the Death Cafe movement, Before I Die festivals originated in the United Kingdom. The first one was held in 2013 in the U.K. at Cardiff University in Wales. A second festival was held in 2014 at the University

of York, curated by professor Cynthia Kitzinger. The festival was part of a network of events across the U.K. for "Dying Awareness Week" in May 2014.

"My interest in curating this festival grew out of my research exploring people's experiences of having a loved one in a long-term coma and their thoughts on what makes for a 'good death,'" Kitzinger said. "It provokes conversations with family and friends about end-of-life wishes, supports us in thinking about our own mortality, allows us to reflect on grief and loss and helps to develop the social and policy context to support as good a death as possible for each of us."

After 2014, no Before I Die festival was

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You know, it's funny—people will say, “Oh, no one wants to talk about death and dying,” and then they'll sit there and talk to you about it for 20 minutes. —Justin Magnuson



**Above**, the Prelude to Eternity party in the pavilion at Sunset Memorial Park. **Above right**, the themed beer and wine served at the festival. A taste of Rest in Peace Pinot Grigio, anyone? **Right**, a tour of historic Fairview Cemetery. **Below**, a tour of the casket and urn workshop of the nonprofit Fathers Building Futures, which provides jobs and training to released convicts. French Funerals & Cremations provided mentoring on building kosher caskets for Jewish burial and making urns for cremated remains.



held until 2016, when the idea resurfaced in the United States. The University of Indiana School of Nursing received a grant to hold a Before I Die festival April 15-17, 2016. The three-day event, held in Indianapolis, featured 28 activities and drew 800 people.

### Before I Die Louisville

The second U.S. Before I Die festival was held October 2016 in Louisville, Kentucky. It was coordinated by Kel McBride, the “Lively Death Lady” of Clearly Depart; Justin Magnuson, a death educator with Living Fully; and Deb Tuggle, a clinical nurse specialist with Critical Care Consultants. Their first festival drew more than 700 people to 17 events over the course of a month.

Kel McBride aimed to get younger

people into the end-of-life conversation. “They don’t think they’re going to die. It’s tricky to engage people and get them in the right context that’s fun. You need to meet people where they are.”

“You know, it’s funny,” said Justin Magnuson, a hospice volunteer who has hosted Death Cafes in Louisville. “People will say, ‘Oh, no one wants to talk about death and dying,’ and then they’ll sit there and talk to you about it for 20 minutes.”

In April 2016, Magnuson collaborated with a hospice to host an event focused on advance directives. Only five people attended. That’s when he came to a realization: “You have to have something else that’s engaging, related and parallel.

“Art, theater, and poetry engage people in a way that they can see themselves as part of this experience,” Magnuson said.

“It works for environmentalism; it works for other causes. Why not have a death and dying festival?”

Lessons learned in 2016 informed the timing and scope of Louisville’s 2017 festival. The three-day Indianapolis festival was too intense. Overlapping events forced participants to choose one event over another. Louisville’s first festival, spread out over a month, turned out to be too long, both for organizers and attendees.

A combination of activities spread out over two weeks and a one-day symposium became the model for Louisville’s second Before I Die festival, held October 7-22, 2017, with the symposium on November 4.

See the sidebar on page 64 for a sampling of festival activities. Check out the full list of Before I Die Louisville Festival activities at [www.BeforeIDieLou.com](http://www.BeforeIDieLou.com).

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# Ideas for a Before I Die festival

- Create a community conversation around a theater production of “Tuesdays With Morrie” or another play that deals with end-of-life issues.
- Hold an interfaith panel discussion with faith leaders talking about each religion’s take on life, death and the afterlife.
- Host a poetry event, as Louisville did with “Dying in the Streets,” which focused attention on the deaths of local indigent individuals.
- Have a historian conduct a tour of an old cemetery, highlighting famous and not-so-famous residents resting there.
- Hold a party or reception in a cemetery or mausoleum.
- Coordinate an art show with local artists, such as Albuquerque’s “Earth, Air, Fire, and Water: A Celebration of Cremation Art.”
- Arrange tours of a casket- or urn-making workshop, a funeral home or crematory, a local coroner’s office or office of the medical investigator or examiner.
- Place Before I Die walls at high traffic locations, photograph the responses and post on social media. The walls can then be washed to make room for new thoughts.
- Host Death Cafe discussions at different locations. (Learn how at [www.DeathCafe.com](http://www.DeathCafe.com).)

**Right**, the website for the 2017 Before I Die ABQ Festival. Rubin suggests getting a website devoted to your festival up and running and planning at least nine months to a year in advance.



## Before I Die ABQ 2017

The first Before I Die Festival in the U.S. west of the Mississippi was held October 20-25, 2017, with 22 events held at multiple locations around Albuquerque, New Mexico. Six hundred attendees participated in the six-day festival, coordinated by yours truly, Gail Rubin.

The most popular events drew crowds of more than 50 people to hear panel discussions with funeral directors and financial/legal advisors on “What you need to know before you go,” the movies “Harold and Maude” and “The Seventh Seal” at the Guild Cinema and a panel discussion, “Jewish burial equals green burial,” with a demonstration of the Jewish *tahara* ritual.

The panel discussions on funeral, financial and medical issues were video recorded and are available on YouTube, extending the conversation.

A Google Map guided attendees to events around town. Find out more at [www.BeforeIDieABQ.com](http://www.BeforeIDieABQ.com).

## Sponsors and partners

Sponsors and partners or collaborators make Before I Die festivals possible. Sponsorships can be structured as cash contributions and/or in-kind donations. Partners or collaborators may offer the festival nonprofit status for charitable donations, places to hold events, advertising and communications to specific demographics and other festival participation elements.

What’s in it for a sponsor? At Before I Die ABQ, sponsors received leads through a drawing for a free cremation provided by a sponsor. More than 150 contacts were collected over the course of the festival. Other benefits included promotion at events, links to sponsor websites, promotion in emails, blog posts and news releases, a goodie bag with sponsor-provided items and printed materials, on-site events and speaking opportunities.

In Albuquerque, sponsors included French Funerals & Cremations, The Neptune Society in Albuquerque, The Old Pine Box, 1-800-AUTOPSY and estate and financial planning firms.

Festival partners included the nonprofit organizations Albuquerque Oasis, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of New Mexico, the Jewish Federation of New Mexico, Fathers

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Building Futures and the YMCA of Central New Mexico.

### **Want to hold a festival in your community?**

“My biggest piece of advice,” said Magnuson, “would be to find local collaborators who are already doing related work. Find sponsors who really appreciate the need and want to support that. And start small and find ways to build relationships within your community, through the local media, through local supporters—and find support before you start.”

My advice:

- Get a website devoted specifically to the festival up and running and plan at least nine months to a year in advance.
- Leverage your relationships with local media you’re already advertising with to raise visibility for the festival.
- Use press coverage, email blasts and social media ads in addition to advertising to raise community-wide awareness.
- Keep events free or low-cost (\$20 or under). In follow-up surveys, many people said they could not have attended events if there had been a fee involved.
- Build a team to plan, promote and implement up to a week of activities.

Before I Die festivals can help get conversations started about advance medical directives and estate and preneed funeral planning. They also can provide one-on-one connections with potential customers and clients in a non-threatening setting.

Baby boomers are a strong demographic for Before I Die festivals. However, they also provide opportunities to connect with younger generations, as the Louisville festival endeavored to do.

“This is not end-of-life, this is a conversation over a lifetime,” Magnuson said. “You may be hit by a car at 18, or you may live to be 77. People in your life need to be talking about this. How do we support each other? We’re a long time away from a universal conversation.”

Holding a Before I Die Festival in your community may be just the ticket to getting the conversation started, and positioning your funeral home or cemetery as the go-to expert.

I’m already planning the next Before I Die ABQ festival, starting October 30 (that’s Create a Great Funeral Day) to November 4, 2018. 