

Death Care Removal Tips

BY GAIL RUBIN

Over the past two years, I have been the hospice contact for an old boyfriend, my husband, and my father. I was there when the funeral home removal team came for their bodies. From these three experiences, I offer my insights on how the removal experience can be improved.

My Friend's Story

Gary Mayhew was my boyfriend for a few years in the 1990s. While he didn't want to get married, we remained good friends, even after I married David Bleicher in 2000. The three of us went out to dinner every other Tuesday, and Gary always picked up the check.

Having been a smoker, Gary developed COPD. For the last five years of his life, he was tethered to an oxygen tank or concentrator. When Gary went on home hospice care in July 2021, I was his contact with the hospice. Ten years earlier, he preplanned and prepaid for a direct cremation.

Independence was important to Gary. He wanted to stay in his home and see a small circle of his friends. He declined hospice's offers of spiritual care. He didn't want any assistance with bathing, but he did want help from someone who could prepare meals and clean up the house. The hospice helped arrange for a part-time aide who came in a few hours twice a week.

During Gary's three months on hospice, Dave and I brought dinner to Gary's house every Tuesday night. We'd find him sitting in his usual chair in the living/dining room, where we would eat carry-out food and play the trivia game Stupid Deaths. Dave would wash the dishes that had built up in the sink.

This particular Tuesday, I called Gary at 11:00 a.m. to discuss dinner options. Green chile cheeseburgers, a New Mexico favorite, would be that evening's fare. I called back at 4:00 p.m. to ask what kind of cheese he wanted. No answer.

When Dave and I arrived at 6:30, the door was not unlocked for us as usual. I used my key to get in. All the lights were out. Gary wasn't sitting in his chair in the dining area. I followed the oxygen tubing into the bedroom. Gary wasn't there. The tube snaked into the bathroom.

There was Gary, curled up naked on the white tile floor, his white underwear around his knees. No pulse. Room temperature. The life sustaining oxygen cannula was several feet from his body.

I covered him with a towel and a blanket, then called the hospice to report Gary's death. The male nurse came about an hour later. He pulled on pink protective gloves, checked for a pulse, and made the pronouncement at 7:48 p.m. He called the funeral home where Gary had pre-planned. He did not offer to help move Gary's body from the bathroom or suggest laying him out prior to removal.

It was a long time before the removal team arrived at 10:00 p.m. A tall older man in a suit and a more casually dressed younger man wheeled the mortuary cot into the house. I showed them Gary's body in the bathroom. They pulled on their black protective gloves.

I shared my background as The Doyenne of Death® with them. That may not have been the best thing to do as a bereaved friend. It may have encouraged storytelling of other removals they had done.

The older man, who worked at OMI for eight years, said, "One time, we had to remove a guy who looked like Santa Claus, naked, wedged next to the toilet." You can't unsee something like that.

Rigor mortis had set in. They used the blanket to help move Gary's curled-up body. The older man deftly moved Gary's underwear up into place. I got a glimpse of the side of Gary's face that had been resting on the floor – it was purple with pooled blood. His eyes were wide open.



They wrapped him in a sheet and positioned him as best they could on a body board. They strapped him onto the gurney and finished with a burgundy plush covering. "Someone with the funeral home will be in touch to finalize the arrangements," said the younger man, as I signed the papers releasing Gary's body into their care.

They wheeled Gary out to their unmarked white van. It was nine weeks before he was cremated.

Takeaway Tips:

- *Be aware that everything you do and say will be vividly remembered by witnesses.*
- *Don't talk about other removals you've done. A better approach might be to ask questions about the deceased.*
- *Restoring modesty to the deceased prior to removal is a kindness that will make a positive impression.*

My Husband's Story

David Bleicher and I were married for 22 years, four months and one day before he died at age 71 on April 28, 2023. On April 4, he had TURP surgery to address an enlarged prostate.

This led to a host of medical complications: a heart attack, sepsis, kidney failure, coding, blood loss, sustained low blood pressure, and heart failure. On April 21, he was admitted to in-patient hospice care.

During the week he was in the hospice, I was with him around the clock to advocate for him. I took a few hours in the afternoon to run home, take a shower and feed the cats while a family member or friend stayed with him. He waited until I left the room to make a phone call to die.

Nurse Amber found me in the family room and said, "You'd better come back to the room, his breathing has changed." He had already exhaled his last breath when I came in the room. She said, "Take as much time as you need."

I caressed his face and said to say hello to other loved ones who had died before. I slipped the wedding band off his finger, thinking the words, "until death do us part." I called a few close relatives. Then I let Nurse Amber know I was ready for what comes next.

She and an aide removed the catheter and IV drip medication ports. They wiped down his body one last time and arranged the sheet neatly over his chest. Nurse Amber took the last viable flowers left from a get-well bouquet and laid them on his chest. I placed a toy bat under his left arm. It was Dave's personal symbol, a spiritual companion to accompany his body on his journey to the next world.

Nurse Amber took care of contacting the funeral home. Dave and I had pre-arranged and pre-paid for our funerals the year before.

The pick-up team consisted of a young man and young woman. They wore suits and performed their work calmly and respectfully. They came in quietly with the gurney. It was obvious to me that they had been trained in respectful removals.

The young man asked, "Was he a veteran?" If he had been, they would have used a U.S. flag cot cover. "Is there any jewelry that needs to be removed?" I had already slipped the wedding band off and had it in my pocket. "Is it all right if we cover his face?" That struck me as odd, but I could see how it might upset some family members. I said it was fine.

They wrapped the sheet around his body and used it to move him onto the gurney. They secured the body with straps and finished with a gray fleece cot cover. Nurse Amber accompanied me as we followed the gurney and removal team out of the hospice wing at the hospital. We parted ways as the team took Dave's body down a hallway to the left, toward the removal vehicle at the back of the hospital. Nurse Amber walked with me to the right, through the Emergency Room, and out to the parking lot. At my car, she gave me a hug and said, "Drive carefully."

Takeaway Tips:

- The removal is a family's very important first impression of your funeral home's services. Training can make a big difference from the start.
- Ask questions about the deceased and the family's wishes.
- If you honor veterans with a flag cover, remember a veteran can be female.

My Father's Story

While Dave was going through his medical complications in April, my 92-year-old father in Florida had heart trouble that put him in the hospital. He was discharged home with heart failure and a concentrator to provide supplemental oxygen. Two days after his 93rd birthday in August, he deteriorated quickly. On the phone with him while waiting for the EMTs to come take him to the hospital, Dad told me, "I want what Dave had." He meant hospice.

After a night in the hospital, Dad was discharged on Thursday to a lovely in-patient hospice facility in Boca Raton, Florida. By the time my older brother Mitch and I got there on Saturday, his consciousness was slipping away. But he recognized we were there and said, "It all went so fast. Love you to pieces."

I spent Sunday and Monday nights in the hospice with Dad, helping to address his restlessness in the night. He loved musicals and I sang show tunes to him, including Old Man River from Showboat and Dulcinea from Man of La Mancha.

Dad slipped away early Tuesday morning while Mitch and I slept in the room with him. Two nurses burst in at about 4:20 a.m. and said, "Your daddy is gone." How they knew that without monitoring equipment is still a mystery to me. They briskly removed the catheter, wiped him down, and arranged a sheet over his chest.

My parents' burial plots are in the Washington, D.C. area, where their parents (my grandparents) are buried. I worked with my parents to pre-pay for their funeral arrangements ten years earlier. I had already given the funeral home in the D.C. area a heads-up to be prepared.

One man came to pick up my dad's body by himself. He wore a lavender button-down shirt and black slacks. He neatly tied up the sheeting around the body and moved a body board underneath to make the transfer to the gurney. He used a burgundy fleece cot cover.

He was a chatty pickup person. He talked about another transport he did of a military officer. My brother and I didn't know why he was telling us about this, and it seemed inappropriate.

We gathered up our personal items in the room and followed as he wheeled Dad's body through the hallways to the rear entrance of the hospice. We watched him move the gurney into a black Chrysler Pacifica. The vehicle sported a window



decal identifying it as a medical transporter. After he drove off, we went to my brother's home to take the next steps for the funeral.

Takeaway Tips:

- Contract removal services are common in the funeral business. Make sure their services meet with your funeral home's standards for respectful removals.
- Consider the difference of a hospice death with a pre-arranged funeral home pick-up to an unexpected death. Police, fire, EMTs, and the medical investigator flood the home, and the loved one is removed in a body bag. Almost all deaths are unexpected, even with hospice. Try to make all removals a calm and comforting experience for those left behind.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gail Rubin, Certified Thanatologist and The Doyenne of Death®, is a pioneering death educator. She is the author of four books on end-of-life issues, was one of the first people to hold a Death Café in the United States and she has coordinated six Before I Die New Mexico Festivals.

Learn more at the website, www.AGoodGoodbye.com.