

# The M essenger



**A Publication of the Funeral Consumers Information Society of Greater Detroit**

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**Founded in 1961**

**Fall 2005**

## **Burying Your Own Dead in Michigan**

**By Wendy Lyons**

**I**n many parts of the world the dead are still prepared for burial by family. In America, however, we have been conditioned to hand our dead over to strangers. Often, these professional morticians offer an assembly-line production in a factory of death, and when all is made ready, we simply file in to pay our last respects. This sterilized procedure assigns mourners to the position of mere spectators. But there is a better way to care for our dead, and for the last decade the re-emergence of the do-it-yourself funeral offers a significant financial benefit, but, more importantly, it can be the catalyst for a therapeutic expression of grief and provides a more meaningful transition to those left behind.

While a do-it-yourself funeral may sound appealing, it is often assumed to be illegal by the general public, caregivers, and bureaucrats. According to the Funeral Consumers Alliance, a non-profit advocacy group, caring for your own dead is legal in 45 states, including Michigan. A 1995 Michigan federal court ruling, *Whaley v. County of Tuscola*, affirmed the right of next-of-kin to take possession

of a body “for the purpose of preparation, mourning and burial.” Furthermore, MCL 52.205(5) says that the medical examiner must promptly deliver or return a body to the family or its representative. Michigan statutes and case law clearly defend the family’s right to care for their dead, yet the Michigan Department of Community Health refuses to accept death certificates from anyone but a funeral director, thereby denying family the required transportation and disposition permits. Based on unsubstantiated health-related claims, this obstruction of the law protects, primarily, the economic health of the powerful funeral industry, not the public’s health. Since Michigan law is worded similar to that of 28 other states that allow do-it-yourself funerals, why does the Michigan Department of Community Health choose to unnecessarily obstruct the family’s legal right to care for their dead?

Unfounded beliefs and fears stem from American society’s lack of experience handling our dead, but the physical process is safe, legal, and relatively simple and should be viewed as a labor of love. Home preparation of the dead

ensures ample opportunity to say good-bye. Many times this vital phase of grieving is cut short or denied to people who desperately need it. When in the privacy of the home, one is able to grieve, to say the things that need saying, to cry and kiss, whatever comes natural, without making others uncomfortable with the mourner’s expression of grief.

After the preparation of the body and private mourning has taken place, a memorial is often held at home, in a place of worship, or at the graveside. This service can be personalized in a way that is not possible at a funeral home. Family and friends are not confined to delivering the eulogy, reading scriptures, or acting as pallbearers. At a do-it-yourself funeral, people of all ages can work through their grief and emotions by becoming active participants. They can decorate the casket, sing, pray, read poetry — whatever is appropriate to honor the life and wishes of the deceased.

The tragedy of today’s modern assembly-line funeral is that it not only robs mourners emotionally,

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# President's Remarks

By Richard N. Miller

As I write this, summer is coming to a close. The trees are beginning to show their tinges of autumn, my chrysanthemums are opening their colorful faces and we have had to turn on our furnace once or twice to take a chill off the house. I am reminded of a line in one of the songs from *Fiddler on the Roof*, "One season following another, laden with happiness and tears."

Taken on a worldwide basis, there certainly has been a gigantic loss of life what with all the calamitous events that have occurred. Losses so great that time and again we have wondered if the world would be able to endure much more. Oh, I know we are nicely isolated from much of the chaos, but even in the midst of it all we find that our own sheltered side of the world is also subject to the same tragedy we see going on elsewhere around our planet. Forces are at work that make our ability to control them seem, to say the least, inadequate.

It gives us pause to think; what are some of the things we should be doing that have been put off? I don't know whether it is due to the events of these days or not, but I do know we have been receiving more requests for information about our services. So some are thinking more than usual about having their affairs in order. Are your funeral plan forms up to date?

I want to take this opportunity to thank the members of our Board for their support this past year. We are making preparations for an update of our survey of the funeral homes in the tri-county area. There are over 250 of them so it is going to be a big job, and we can use some help. We are planning to allow for as many of you as possible

to help us complete this task. (See Volunteer article on page 4.)

I want to thank a new young member, Ms. Wendy Lyons, a university student for her authoring our lead article for this issue. She has done research on her topic with both Ms. Lisa Carlson and Mr. Josh Slocum current Director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance. She has also volunteered her services to assist with any project we can set for her.

This will be our last issue of the Messenger until next year, so wishing all of you pleasant holidays.

## Arrangements Committee Report

The following people have been assisted with arrangements for their funerals this past year:

- Mrs. Colleen Bernhart
- Mrs. Emma Cobb
- Mrs. Virginia Geddish
- Ms. Marilyn Hogan
- Mr. Todd Kenyon
- Mr. Harmon Nine
- Mrs. James Rhinesmith
- Mrs. Madelyn Roberts

**O**ur deepest condolences are extended to Carter Stevenson, Board Vice President, on the recent death of his brother.

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## Volunteer

By C.J. Harrison

There are several ways to help:

1. Call or stop by one or more funeral homes in your area. Ask for a price list. By law, they are supposed to both have and give you one. Then simply mail it to our office address shown on page 2.

Note: They may want to engage you in a discussion about “what you want.” Simply tell them you are asking for future reference and are not sure yet. Or, tell them you have an ailing relative. We all have at least one ailing relative.

2. Send a donation. Consider that we are the only consumer group in the area trying to service all funeral consumers in the area by watchdogging our local funeral establishments, providing consumers with information and helping people document their final funeral arrangements.

We are a grassroots organization of volunteers trying to make a difference in the face of a very moneyed, powerful, and profit-driven industry. So, every little bit helps.

3. Tell us your story. If you have had a good, bad, or questionable experience with a funeral establishment, let us know. Your experience can help others.

## Our Continuing Public Presence

By Al Ugelow

Be sure to visit our updated website at [www.detroitfunerals.org](http://www.detroitfunerals.org). This is of course a major way we can continue to bring our society to the attention of the public.

With a busy summer behind us—and the holidays fast approaching, we are also moving on a number of other fronts. In August board member C.J. Harrison graciously filled in for President Miller at the last minute at a speaking engagement at the Grosse Pointe older person center. By the way thanks are due member Carolyn Troha for bringing this speaking opportunity to our attention. We have been alerted to two other possible engagements in Detroit in the coming months by Vice President Carter Stevenson, and we’ll keep you informed later about these. The program for health fairs and senior expos should be available in coming weeks as well and we will attempt to host our table again. If you can help here please let us know.

We are attempting to build our speakers bureau for opportunities

such as those mentioned above and are working on a set of talking points which should make that job easier, e.g. the history and mission of our society, the pros and cons of traditional burial, non-traditional burial and cremation, pre-planning vs. pre-paying, etc. We have a stock of fliers which cover such points for interested members. However we do have a need for speakers available to visit and discuss these matters with an audience. If you are able and available and would like to be involved please let us know and we can pursue that further.

On a slightly different front we are attempting to update our cost survey of area funeral homes. The last such survey was done before 2000 and we are seeking to determine current prices for direct burial and cremation so we can pass that along to the membership as needed. We have updated a questionnaire which we will be sending to funeral homes and hope to be able to assemble the data into a listing by next Spring.

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## Burying Your Own Dead in Michigan

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it robs them financially, too. The average cost of a funeral in the United States is around \$6,000. In contrast, a do-it-yourself funeral can be practically free. The least expensive method is to wrap the body in a shroud and bury it on private land. Though a casket is not required by law, a biodegradable cardboard one can be purchased for as little as \$20. The only significant remaining expense

is determined by the method of disposition.

Little by little, individuals are heeding the call of the do-it-yourself funeral movement. In taking back control for the preparation and burial of their dead, emotional distress is not exacerbated by additional financial hardship. More importantly, they are discovering that it is neither morbid nor an emotional burden. On the contrary, the do-it-yourself funeral

can be the means for a healthy and healing expression of grief and can give a more profound transition to those left behind.

Home funerals are not for everyone. Many people welcome the services of a funeral director. But for others, the do-it-yourself funeral provides a matchless opportunity to honor our dead and tangibly express our undying love. It is the natural thing to do.

## Class Action Lawsuit

Funeral Consumers Alliance, Inc. has filed a lawsuit in federal court in California seeking to stop the country's three largest funeral homes chains and the nation's largest casketmaker from shutting out competition and fixing casket prices at artificially high levels.

To read more about this see the following website  
<http://www.funerals.org/ClassActionPR.htm>

## Welcome To New Members

Ms. Laura Cole  
Ms. D.M. Davis  
Mr. Jesse Greer  
Mr William Harrison  
Ms. Kristine Herzog  
Ms. Wendy Lyons

## Start Spreading The News! *Free Newsletter Offer*

**F**uneral Consumers Alliance, Inc., publishes a national newsletter that rounds up consumer news and national trends in funeral options and consumer advocacy. Find out what's going on in 49 other states with this free one-year subscription.

To get your free subscription send your name, address and member affiliation to:

Funeral Consumers Alliance  
33 Patchen Road  
South Burlington, VT 05403

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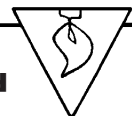
## Help Save Money and Resources

Have your copy of The Messenger sent to you via e-mail (PDF format). Just e-mail your request to [aarvcraig@mac.com](mailto:aarvcraig@mac.com). You can have this newsletter e-mailed to multiple addresses at no extra cost. Please indicate that you no longer wish to receive the snail mail version (list name and address).

[www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)  
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