



Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Finger Lakes

Fall 2013 Newsletter

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From The New President

As your new president and a newly re-joined member of the FCAFL board, I am still learning about what a rather complex and busy place the Alliance is. I have been on several boards and have been president of some of them (First Unitarian Society of Ithaca, Finger Lakes Ecology Association, and Friends of Lansing Library), so I know how to do the administrative tasks involved, but I am still studying the legal and factual aspects of the information FCAFL provides to the public in the southern Finger Lakes region. Besides reading, one thing I do is go out with our more experienced members when they give funeral-planning presentations at venues like Lifelong, local libraries, and senior living centers. I not only help set up the display, but I can then see how each member does the presentation and answers questions in his or her own unique way.

Besides studying FCA materials, I now more readily take note of various print items related to funerals. A recent Wizard of Id cartoon in *The Ithaca Journal* showed the knights observing a giant, flat pan heating over a huge fire, with a big egg frying in it. Next to it, the little King is saying, "Humpty's final wish was to be cremated." This reminded me that in our efforts to spread the word about the many helpful resources offered by the Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Finger Lakes, we often notice how many people have never heard of FCAFL. In addition, we may soon discover that those to whom we speak have not thought about the final wishes of their loved ones, or their own final wishes, or much about funerals in general. That rather uncomfortable topic is something to be considered in the distant, misty future, "when the TIME comes", and doesn't need to be addressed now! It seems like FCAFL with its trove of information and good advice for planning ahead is a well kept secret.

Your hard-working board members grappled with this issue at the July quarterly meeting. The 2013 Funeral Price Survey had just been completed and posted on the website (www.imsfca.com) and we sought ways to alert the public to this valuable information. In addition, with our membership rolls falling, we want more people to know about and join FCAFL. The Alliance really needs more young members to carry its work into the future.

To this end, Dave Bandler has a good idea: Give gift memberships in FCAFL to your adult children. Dave did so for each of his sons.

The 2013 Funeral Price Survey was published at our website at the end of June. We did get a tiny notice about the survey in the Ithaca Times, and a blurb in the Danby newsletter, but were unsuccessful at getting the price survey announcement into the Ithaca Journal as a "brief". We are still working on that. Several members suggested radio interviews and volunteered to gather contact information for interviews or announcements on various area stations.

In July I was interviewed by Bob Fitzsimmons on the 4 PM "Mission Radio" program on a new station, WFRI 88.1 Ithaca/Watkins Glen. Dorothy Sholeen initiated that contact. Roy Colle arranged for Lee Raymond, WHCU's morning news and talk-show host, to interview Wayne Sinclair and me in late July, with Roy in the studio observing. Dorothy also contacted her friend Jon Hilton, of WVBR's Sunday jazz program to deliver brief public service announcements about the Funeral Price Survey.

While we did this radio work, some of us, as well as the Executive Director of the national FCA, Josh Slocum, noticed that the domain name of our website does not trip lightly off the tongue when read aloud, doesn't make sense to people, and is not easy to remember. Previously, we dismissed changing the domain name as too much work for little benefit, but when Josh contacted us, and Jon Hilton and Dorothy grappled with trying to say it over the air so it could be remembered, we revisited the idea of changing the domain name to "fingerlakesfunerals.org". We held an email vote about the proposal to change the name, and it was unanimous that we should adopt the new name. Don't look for it yet, as it is still in the works. During its debut, the current internet address, or URL, will still get you to the website, and a notice will appear about the new address when it becomes operable.

Lastly, although discussing funerals, death, and dead bodies isn't a favorite American pastime, there are some good books and articles written about funereal topics. *Time* magazine had an article on the increased use of cremation in the United States (The New American Way of Death, June 24, 2013). It said that by 2017 one of two Americans will choose cremation over burial.

I recently read two quite entertaining books on topics having to do with death and dead bodies: *The Dead Beat: Lost Souls, Lucky Stiffs and the Perverse Pleasures of Obituaries*, by Marilyn Johnson; and *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, by Mary Roach.

People magazine author Francine Prose wrote that “*The Dead Beat* is a witty, play-by-play guide to the telling and often unexpectedly amusing manner in which we mark in print the passing of the famous and infamous, the lifelong oddball, and the most ordinary of our neighbors.” I found it a really interesting book about the men and women who write newspaper obituaries, both in the US and Great Britain—and what they write about and how they craft it. Ideas from this book helped me write my mother’s obituary.

A Barnes and Noble review of *Stiff* describes the book well: “Impossible (and irreverent) as it may sound, Mary Roach has written a book about corpses that’s both lively and fresh. She traveled around the globe to conduct her forensic investigations, and her findings are wryly intelligent. While the myriad uses for cadavers recounted are often graphic, Roach imbues her subject with a sense of dignity, choosing to emphasize the oddly noble purposes corpses serve, from organ donation to lifesaving medical research. Readers will come away convinced of the enormous debt that we, the living, owe to the study of the remains of the dead. ... *Stiff* offers a strange sort of comfort in the knowledge that, in a sense, death isn’t necessarily the end.”

Finally, I discovered a British weekly PBS TV program called “William and Mary,” where Mary, a talented midwife, helps bring people into the world and William, an undertaker and an ethical, compassionate, and caring man, helps see people out of the world. The couple meet through a London dating service and have a sometimes turbulent, wacky, but always interesting relationship. Sunday nights, 10:30 PM on WSKG TV (PBS).

-- Donna Scott

Member Satisfaction Survey

Our recent survey of Alliance members, conducted by means of a questionnaire included in the Spring 2013 Newsletter, produced 69 responses, most of them (93%) from readers 65 years old or older, a majority of whom had been personally involved in planning a funeral. Only about 30% of respondents were acquainted with publications distributed by the FCAFL—either our price surveys or treatments of funeral planning issues such as cremation, organ and body donation, cost control, etc. Most of those who visited our website found what they were looking for. Seventy percent of respondents were aware of our policy decision to stop contracting with funeral homes for discounted prices in favor of conducting periodic price surveys, and most of these expressed approval of that change. Almost half had attended one of our public presentations. We were pleased with the generally favorable attitudes toward the Alliance’s activities. If you were among those who expressed an interest in volunteering a few hours a month to assist in those activities (either “YES” or “MAYBE”) and did not supply contact information, please get in touch by e-mail (info@imsfca.org) or phone (607-273-8316). As an all-volunteer organization, we continue to rely heavily on such interest and involvement.

Among the topics mentioned in the free-form comment section of the questionnaire were cemeteries (local rules and regulations), memorial services (local and other), a family’s legal requirements at the time of death, exploitation by the funeral industry, and consumer advocacy. We will be reviewing our publications and website with these topics in mind.

Here are a few sample questions that we received, with brief answers:

Q: “If you donate your body to Upstate Medical in Syracuse and have a memorial service, do you still have to involve a funeral home?”

A: Yes. New York State requires involvement of a licensed funeral director. A funeral home must be called

The Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Finger Lakes, Inc., founded in 1958 as the Ithaca Memorial Society, is a non-profit, tax-exempt, public-service organization that promotes advance planning of funeral arrangements and consumer education and protection with respect to funeral-related issues. Membership is free and open to all. Volunteers provide all services and programs. A Board of Directors is elected by the members. The FCAFL is supported entirely by donations and is a member of the national Funeral Consumers Alliance, Inc., which has more than 90 affiliates. This Newsletter is published twice a year and is freely available.

The Board of Directors, 2013–2014: Donna Scott, President; Dominick Paolillo Jr., Vice President; Suzanne Kilgore, Secretary; Carol Hardy, Treasurer; Barry B. Adams (to 2016), Monty Berman (to 2014), Royal Colle (to 2016), Cathy Darrow (to 2016), Carolyn Eberhard (to 2015), Ralph Jones (to 2016), Culver Mowers (to 2016), Louise Richards (to 2016), Dorothy Sholeen (to 2015), Wayne Sinclair (to 2015). Advisors: David Bandler, Philip S. Winn.

to provide transportation. The cost varies, so it is wise to check the cost with several funeral homes before the time of need.

Q: "Could we have another presentation at Juniper Manor 1—and possibly JM 2 as well?"

A: Yes. Mark your calendar for October 7 at 10:30 am (JM 1) or 1:00 pm (JM 2).

Q: "Will the 'Green Cemetery' be included in your new price list?"

A: No. Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve in Newfield does not provide the services of a funeral home, but its prices are available at its website, <http://naturalburial.org>. We would include it in a survey of expenses associated with earth burials in our service area, but a valid price survey along these lines would be an undertaking beyond our present means. However, our website (www.imsfca.org) has a list of cemeteries that are regulated by the State of New York, and other useful information about earth burial. See the "Resources" page for appropriate links.

-- Louise Richards and Barry Adams

Outreach to Agencies and Living Facilities That Serve Seniors

During the spring and summer the Alliance Board compiled a list of 62 organizations, medical and residence facilities, and apartment complexes that serve seniors in Tompkins and parts of seven surrounding counties. A packet describing the programs, information, and services provided by the Alliance was sent to each place, except for a few where we have already presented funeral planning seminars. Addressees were directors, managers, or social workers at county offices for the aging, hospitals, nursing homes, senior living communities, and apartment complexes that serve primarily senior citizens.

Each packet contained the FCAFL brochure and an enrollment form and the following Alliance publications: *Why Everyone Should have Advance Plans for Funeral Needs*, *Publications Available from the Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Finger Lakes*, and a 3-page summary of the 2013 FCAFL Funeral Price Survey. The cover letter described the aims of the organization and the ways that we make relevant information available to the public. It emphasized our public presentations about planning for funeral needs and invited each recipient to contact us if his or her organization would like to arrange a presentation for staff, clients, or residents.

When this Newsletter went to press, we had received

only one response. We hope that the information packets will at least stimulate recipients to visit the Alliance's website and see the many funeral-planning resources available there. Unfortunately, we have no way to know who visits the website.

Funeral Planning Presentations

The Alliance offers several free public presentations on funeral planning each year, emphasizing consumer options and cost control, with ample opportunity for questions and answers. Recent venues include Lifelong, McGraw House, and Titus Towers in Ithaca, Juniper Manor in Trumansburg, and the Tioga County Office for the Aging in Montour Falls. For information about upcoming presentations, send an inquiry by email to info@imsfca.org or call (607) 273-8316.

Funeral-related Legislation

Funeral-consumer groups in New York State keep track of funeral-related legislation and, when appropriate, contact legislators about it. In several recent years we have supported a bill that would provide a "Cemetery Customer's Bill of Rights," to be posted in the office of every cemetery regulated by the State of New York and given to every customer and to any person upon request. But the bill has never been reported out of committee in the assembly or senate. The bill was re-introduced in the assembly in the 2013 session, but sadly for cemetery customers, it did not attract a sponsor in the senate. If the bill is introduced again and is sponsored in both legislative chambers, the *Newsletter* will print a description of its content.

For the past nine years the Alliance or its predecessor has opposed legislation that would permit funeral businesses to sell packages of goods and services, because these packages would inevitably contain pricey elements not wanted by particular customers. Funeral sales people would promote packaged products and services because they enhance revenue. A customer would still be able to choose goods and services à la carte, but would be less likely to do so and therefore less likely to control the cost of the funeral. In the 2013 legislative session a bill that would permit the offering and sale of packages of funeral goods and services was again introduced and referred to the appropriate committees in the senate and assembly, and again it died there. Large corporate funeral businesses, notably Service Corporation International (SCI), make sure it is reintroduced every year. Each time a committee vote on the package-pricing bill has been scheduled, this Alliance and similar groups across the state have contacted legislative committee members and urged them to vote No on it.

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Burial Costs in USA Rising Slowly

In August, 2013, the National Funeral Directors Association released the results of its 2012 national price survey. The median cost of a full-service funeral, excluding casket, vault, cemetery charges, and incidentals was found to be \$4650. Items included in this subtotal were: non-declinable basic services fee, transfer of body to funeral home, embalming, other preparation of the body, use of facilities and staff for viewing and for funeral ceremony, hearse, service car or van, and a "basic memorial printed package." The average charges for the most frequently purchased casket and vault—\$2395 and \$1298, respectively—brought the total to \$8343. This figure was up 7.6% from 2009. Real and potential costs not included in the survey were: custodial care of a body if arrangements are delayed, mileage charges, flowers, clergy honorarium, cemetery plot, opening a grave, graveside ceremony, and a grave marker or monument; also obituary notice(s) and death certificates. These costs in central New York are often in the \$2500–\$4000 range, although some people spend much more.

Finances

The Board of Directors at its July meeting voted to ask you for donations this fall because the Alliance has been running a deficit for the last two years (–\$1,957 for 2012 and –\$602 this year to date). Our major expenses are the printing of newsletters and brochures, preparation of mailings, and postage, totaling about \$2,000 annually. We have sufficient funds to continue for a while, with slightly over \$7,000 in the bank. A neutral or positive annual cash flow would prevent future problems, so if you have not given in the last couple of years, would you consider making a donation? It's tax-deductible.

-- Carol Hardy, Treasurer

Friends and Loved Ones Remembered

The Alliance reports memorial donations in each Newsletter. The memory of the brother and parents of Diane L Geohring were honored by a donation received since the Spring 2013 issue was published.