



Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Finger Lakes

Fall 2016 Newsletter

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Explore Our New Website

We're excited to announce we launched our redesigned website this summer:

www.fingerlakesfunerals.org

We hope you'll take a few minutes to explore the new features and updated look.

Responsive and easy to navigate

You can view the site from your smartphone or your desktop computer. Improved navigation makes it easier to explore the content and find answers to your questions.

Searchable content

We moved much of our content, previously in brochure format, to web pages, so that it is all searchable. We invite you to explore the Resources section to see information available on anatomical gifts, burial/ cemeteries, financing, your legal rights, funeral planning, our price survey, and more.

Join, donate, contact us online

We've provided forms for you to join or contact us with a question online. You can also donate online.



Angela Mennitto (of FCAFL, second from left) and others assist with class on how to wash and prepare a body for a home funeral

We Really Know How to Have a Good Time!

From Donna Scott, Board President FCAFL

FCAFL Board member Angela Mennitto and I attended the National Funeral Consumers Alliance biennial conference held in Atlanta, Georgia in June. Several workshops, held over the two days, offered an abundance of useful information that we soaked up.

Katrina Spade, the keynote speaker, gave a fascinating talk about the *Urban Death Project*. The project is developing recomposition (Spade's term for disposal of bodies by composting), as an alternative to earth burial in cities that have run out of space for cemeteries. They have perfected the technical aspects of composting the dead; initial work was done with donated bodies at the Western Carolina University Human Remains Forensic Study site. They adopted composting techniques used by veterinary colleges and farmers, who already compost dead large animals. Ms. Spade and colleagues are raising funds to build, in the next few years, a prototype at University of Washington with the goal of it being the first full-scale recomposition center in Seattle.

On a more traditional note, Angela helped with the demonstration on body care at home. Later, members of the National Home Funeral Alliance answered "frequently asked questions" about home funerals and provided practical talking points for local FCAs responding to callers seeking information.

In a riveting legal and historical talk, *Who Owns the Body*, Wake Forest University Professor Tanya Marsh spoke about the origins of state laws that intrude into our most private funeral choices. She and national FCA director Josh Slocum both noted that ten US states now require that all funerals involve hiring some services from funeral homes (up from just five states a few years ago). Ms. Marsh suggested that if one spends a lot of time in two different states, as many "snow birds" do,

one needs to make funeral plans that conform to the laws of both states.

Josh Slocum provided a comprehensive overview of current activities of the National FCA as well as many interesting facts about funerals and the funeral industry in today's world. He and another speaker both discussed the idea of merging small local FCAs into larger regional or statewide ones to increase efficiency and the longterm success of affiliate FCAs. He also introduced National FCA's new, improved website www.funerals.org/.



Just one of the impressive gravestones at Oakland – downtown Atlanta's premiere Victorian cemetery

In 100-degree heat we took Uber taxis to downtown Atlanta to tour Oakland, and a wonderful old cemetery that contains interesting and beautiful monuments. We visited *Gone With The Wind* author Margaret Mitchell's grave, and caught glimpses of downtown skyscrapers beyond the towering Magnolia trees. The shade of those Magnolias offered the only respite from the heat!

I learned about how other FCAs conduct their funeral home price surveys and discovered some new tips for ours, but I also concluded that, by comparison, our FCAFL price survey is well done. One large FCA in southern California surveys 600 funeral homes! Some disturbing discoveries: a few funeral homes give FCAs "fake" price lists; other funeral purveyors falsify the published prices from FCA surveys in the "funeral information" material they pass out at hospitals.

Oakland University sociologist, George Saunders, discussed how consumerism, product branding, and modern US culture have influenced how some people plan funerals, sometimes with an "entertainment" theme. The funeral industry now supplies merchandise to appeal to some clients' wishes to honor their dead with commercial brands and fictional characters. Imagine people buried in the ground sitting on their motorcycles or themes featuring Nascar, the rock band Kiss, or Dr Who's *Tardis*.

Saunders, Slocum, and Marsh all mentioned aspects of Service Corporation International (SCI), a growing national funeral behemoth (can you tell what they do from their name?). Wherever they operate, SCI buys up locally-owned funeral homes, keeping original names so locals don't know they are no longer family operated, and raise prices by 10-15%. Many of their staff are "sales closers" rather than traditional funeral directors.

Space doesn't permit more details, but this conference was definitely worth the trip to sun-baked Atlanta. We learned a lot and it really was fun!

Curious about the Cadaver Industry?

The New York Times 2003 best seller *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, by Mary Roach, won high praise for being scrupulously researched, respectful, quirky, irreverent and witty. Roach shows us that it is "never too late to contribute something to society."

Book Reviews

From Carolyn Eberhard, FCAFL Board Advisor

Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End by Atul Gawande * ISBN: 978-1-62779-055-0 (Metropolitan Books 2014)

Atul Gawande is a terrific storyteller and he has fascinating, important and personal stories to relate. The most compelling one he describes is the long view in which the way his grandfather ended his days in India: at home, in control of his affairs, surrounded and catered to by loved ones. The contrast with what many elderly folks face in contemporary America is stark. Gawande goes on to relate how his own family experience played out when his father, also a physician, faced a medical and human dilemma: a slowly growing tumor of the spine that if not removed surgically would eventually paralyze and finally kill him. Gawande's father declined the recommended but highly risky surgery. He continued with his practice and civic activities for a fruitful two years, focusing on his and his family's wellbeing. As his condition deteriorated, his concept of wellbeing diverged from that of his family; he did not want to be living as a paralyzed patient, no matter how "comfortable" the medical establishment could make him. So one of the many important ideas Gawande considers in the book is that *wellbeing*, as the reason one wants to be alive, is a very personal concept and may often be at odds with what family, society and the medical establishment think.

Mortality will always be a human problem, not just a medical problem and needs to be faced with both heart and mind. These issues need to be discussed early in medical education.

*Biographical note: Atul Gawande is a practicing surgeon, and a professor at Harvard Medical School and Harvard School of Public Health, a MacArthur Fellow, he has written three best-selling books: *Complications, A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science; Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance; and The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*). He also contributes to the New Yorker as a staff writer.

**New York Times Review by Sheri Fink
www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/books/review/atul-gawande-being-mortal-review.html?_r=0

***TED talk 2012 "How Do We Heal Medicine?"
www.ted.com/speakers/atul_gawande_1



The Loved One

Are you a fan of Evelyn Waugh? A brief visit to Hollywood inspired "The Loved One" (Laurel Edition 1948), in which Sir Francis Hinsley's unexpected death in Southern California, and the experience of his being laid to rest in Whispering Glades Cemetery as arranged by his young friend Dennis Barlow, are described in violently satirical and hilarious fashion.



New York's Medical Aid in Dying Act

From Angela L Mennitto, FCAFL Board Member

Medical aid in dying is the process by which terminally ill, mentally competent adult patients under a doctor's care may obtain and self-administer medicine which would enable them to end their suffering and achieve a peaceful death.

The five states that have medical aid in dying available, got there by three different paths—Oregon and Washington by public referendum, Montana by a judge's ruling, and Vermont and California by passing a bill through their state legislature.

New York's Medical Aid in Dying Act, an attempt at a bill, was approved by the New York State Assembly Health Committee at the end of May 2016 by a 14-11 vote. The bill is modeled on Oregon's 1997 Death with Dignity Act. The next step is for the bill to be reviewed by the Assembly Codes Committee at some point after they reconvene in January. Since this is an election

year, the Assembly Health Committee will most likely have to vote again. Then it may need to go to a Ways and Means Committee. After that it has to go through a similar process with the State Senate.

If passed, under this Act, a patient requesting medication will have to be:

- at least 18 years old
- a New York resident
- mentally capable of making and communicating health care decisions, and
- diagnosed with a terminal disease that will result in death within six months.

Beyond these basic requirements the bill includes several safeguards and protections. You can review the entire bill by searching for A10059 here: assembly.state.ny.us/leg/

Getting the legislation passed faces an uphill battle. End of Life Choices New York has also initiated a lawsuit to make medical aid in dying available in New York. The case had previously been dismissed by two lower courts, however, the Court of Appeals has just recently ruled that the case can move forward.

Local Interest

Surveys show that 77% of New Yorkers support medical aid in dying. There have been several very well-attended events in Ithaca this past year that point to the high level of interest in our community. These included:

- Dr. Robert Wood's inaugural address for Hospicare's Sandra L. Bem Lecture Series on Compassionate Care & End-of-Life Issues in October 2015. The first lecture, "A Conversation with Dr. Robert Wood about Dying and the Compassionate Choices We Can Make," explored the distinctions between hospice care, palliative sedation, and physician-assisted suicide.
- Last April, the Cornell Law School hosted a 'Death with Dignity' panel discussion followed by a showing of the documentary "How to Die in Oregon."
- At our FCAFL Annual Meeting in April, Laurie Leonard, from End of Life Choices New York gave a talk titled "Aid in Dying in New York: Your Right to Choose."

- Ms. Leonard was back in Ithaca in late September for this year’s Sandra L. Bem Lecture Series giving a lecture titled “Taking Control of Your Death: What You Can Do To Die Well in New York.”
- The topic has also come up repeatedly at the quarterly Ithaca Death Cafe over the last three years.

Death With Dignity, Assisted Suicide, Right to Die: Are these the same?

“Death with dignity” is a commonly accepted phrase to refer to the process of a terminally ill person taking prescribed medication to hasten death. Many people still use the term “assisted suicide” or “physician-assisted suicide.” However, those supporting death with dignity argue that the term “suicide” does not apply to terminally ill people who would prefer to live but facing certain death would prefer a gentler way to die.

The law being proposed in New York State uses the term “aid in dying” in its title. The bill clearly states that terminating one’s life under the law is *not* suicide.

Sometimes the phrase “right to die” is used interchangeable with “death with dignity.” However, “right to die” is more accurately used when talking about directing one’s own medical care. That is, refusing life-sustaining treatment such as a respirator or feeding tubes when close to death. This is something that you can control by providing health care directions by completing a New York health care proxy and a living will.



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See website drinkmywords.com/category/death-2/

~ Websites of Interest ~

End of Life Choices New York:

endoflifechoicesny.org

Through leadership, advocacy, education, and counseling, this organization seeks to expand choice at the end of life and improve the quality of care for New Yorkers, ensuring that their values and wishes are respected.

National Home Funeral Alliance:

homefuneralalliance.org

The NHFA empowers families to care for their own dead by providing educational opportunities and connections to resources that promote environmentally sound and culturally nurturing death practices.

Home Funerals in New York:

www.nyfunerals.org/homefunerals.htm

Home funeral vigils are legal in every state, but not all states allow families to complete every aspect of a home funeral. The Funeral Consumers Alliance of Long Island and New York City site has more information.

Notes from FCAs Around the Country

Buyers’ Clubs

Some states still have Funeral Consumer Alliances that are “buyers’ clubs,” similar to our former Ithaca Memorial Service (IMS). IMS changed its name to FCAFL in 2007 and ceased contracting with funeral homes in 2010. There was no known instance of a funeral home failing to honor the terms of an IMS or FCAFL contract. However, some of these other FCAs’ “cooperating funeral homes” no longer honor previously agreed prices and contracts.

Funeral Professional on YouTube

Caitlin Doughty, a young funeral professional from California, has created funny “Ask a Mortician” videos on YouTube. Her website www.orderofthegooddeath.com/category/videos has 23 humorous skits with titles such as, “Ask a Mortician – Exploding Caskets” and “Ask a Mortician – Are Viking Funerals Legal?” Even her more serious topics, such as “Ask a Mortician – Traditional vs. Natural Burial” tweak the funny bone.

Quote from Newsletter of FCA Coastal Carolina, Wilmington, NC

Tides and Currents, the newsletter of FCA Coastal Carolina, Wilmington, NC, noted that a speaker at the 2014 National FCA Conference in Minneapolis described another “new” method for body disposal: Alkaline Hydrolysis – again one already used by veterinary colleges for animal bodies. With humans it could be called “Water Cremation.” Instead of fire, it uses common strong chemicals including lye to break down the body and one is left with water and the same kind of ashes (ground bones and teeth) as with the fire method. It has a much smaller carbon footprint than furnace cremation and probably doesn’t release mercury from tooth fillings into the air. The chemicals used in alkaline hydrolysis are not released into the environment.

This method was proposed (ineffectively it seems) to the New York State Legislature and was dismissed without a vote a few years ago. Funeral directors lobbied against the bill. It was said that some legislators were horrified that “Grandma would be washed down the drain”. They should look into what gets washed down the drain during the commonly used embalming process.

Arlene Patton Mellor Bradshaw, deceased April 4, 2016

Arlene volunteered with numerous Tompkins County organizations. She was executive secretary of the Ithaca Memorial Society (now the Funeral Consumers’ Alliance) from 1992-2002 and served on its Board of Directors from 2004-2007. The executive secretary performed all the office functions of the Society, which in those days included enrolling 50-60 members per year, communicating their personal funeral plans to their chosen funeral homes, handling inquiries from members and the public, and doing the financial work normally performed by a treasurer.



The Alliance depends entirely on donations to carry on its all-volunteer program of public education and service. Every gift is important. We couldn’t do it without you! Thank you.

Donations received In Memoriam

Catherine K Paddock
in memory of Jean Warholic

Terry R Koch *in memory of Peg Shaad Koch*

Helen M Cotton
in memory of husband Clare Cotton

Elizabeth Einstein *in memory of Linda Folley*

Thomas Larue *in memory of Sara Suplee*

Anatol & Carolyn Eberhard *in memory of Donna Bergmark*

Ellen Biesdorf *in memory of Heinz B Biesdorf*

Christine A Ogden
in memory of John Ogden

Edward M Bosworth
in memory of Charles Waddington

**Donations gratefully received
January to October 20, 2016**

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~ Planning for Funeral Needs ~ Free presentation in early 2017 at “Lifelong”

This FCAFL seminar and discussion will cover the advantages of planning well in advance, knowing more about options (cremation, burial, anatomical donation, etc.), how to read a funeral home’s general price list, cost control, ways to reserve money for funeral costs, the price variations in this region, and where to find additional trustworthy information.

The Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Finger Lakes, Inc., founded in 1958 as the Ithaca Memorial Society, is a on-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 80 affiliates. This Newsletter is published twice a year and is freely available.

The Board of Directors, 2016-2017

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Check out our new website

www.fingerlakesfunerals.org

And

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