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Standard funeral not sole option

By Levi Pulkkinen, SeattlePI Published 10:00 pm PDT, Sunday, March 18, 2007



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Doris Jean Powers, 85, lies in her bed at her Renton home while at the foot of the bed sits her handmade coffin. Powers, who has a heart condition and is likely to die soon, has taken an active role in planning ... more

Propped up on the hospital bed where she spends most of her time, **Doris Jean Powers** eyes a wooden box about the size of a refrigerator a few feet away.

Messages written in bright markers are slowly covering the pale yellow wood. She reads the notes, or has them read to her. She likes to hear what people have to say.

"It's looking more and more like a steamer trunk every day," Phyllis Powers said from her mother-in-law's bedside.

"Well, it's going to be quite a trip," Doris Jean joked.

When the box arrived at the modest blue duplex she shares with her family, Powers wasn't so sure she'd like having her casket so close. Doris Jean, 85, is dying. A heart condition she's had since birth is expected to take her life.

When she goes -- and she's in no rush -- she said she doesn't want to be hauled to a funeral home. With help from a funeral director, she wants her family to take care of her remains at their Renton home.

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Doris Jean is one of the small but growing number of people who are opting for funerals at home.

While home funerals are legal in the state, most residents believe their loved ones have to be taken to a funeral home after death, said **Char Barrett**, the Seattle-based home funeral director hired by the Powerses.

Barrett, who specializes in home funerals, said many of the people who hire her to plan a home funeral aren't comfortable handing their loved ones over to a stranger at death. So she teaches her clients to do it themselves: Close the eyes of the deceased; wash and dress the body; preserve it by packing dry ice under the torso.

"The beauty of doing something like that is that it gives people a place to direct their energy after someone has died," Barrett said. "They don't really know what to do with themselves, and they need a creative outlet."

Cost is also a factor, as many people who are dying hate the idea of leaving their families with a financial burden, Barrett said.

In 2004, researchers with the Seattle-based **People's Memorial Association** found that a typical funeral with burial in King County cost \$3,898. Cremation is cheaper -- the average cost here was \$1,533.

Phyllis Powers guessed she would be paying about \$2,500 to lay her mother-in-law to rest in the Renton cemetery where her father-in-law is buried. Doris Jean Powers is not a fan of cremation.

"You cremate me and I'll haunt you," she told her daughter-in-law. It was a joke, but the Kansas native wasn't kidding.

Funeral home prices often include services like embalming that aren't always necessary, said **John Eric Rolfstad**, executive director of the funeral consumers group. And the markup on caskets can be quite steep.

Rolfstad said many of the bereaved who arrive at a funeral home feel guilty about cutting costs, or are confused about how much they'll actually end up paying.

"A funeral home price list can be amazingly confusing if you don't know how to read it," Rolfstad said. "A lot of times, people don't know what all their options are."

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"It's something the boomers are kind of bringing back," he said. "They did the home birthing thing ... and now there's home funerals."

After working in hospice care and training as a funeral director, Barrett founded her company, A Sacred Moment, last year to help guide bereaved families through a home funeral.

Most of her clients, she said, have a loved one who is chronically ill and preparing to die. She said a home funeral isn't appropriate for those who die suddenly or violently, or who require an autopsy.

"There is such grief that that's not a time when they should be thinking about caring for this loved one themselves," Barrett said.

A home funeral is also usually the wrong choice when the body needs to be preserved for more than three days, she said. Dry ice only does so much.

Among Barrett's clients have been several parents whose children have died after a long illness. Parents such as **Pam Howley**, whose daughter, Daron, died at 17 of a brain tumor.

Howley said she didn't see why she should have to give up Daron to a stranger.

"I didn't want to do the normal stuff that everybody does," Howley said. "Parents with kids, they want to keep the body as long as possible."

After her daughter's death on Dec. 14, 2005, Howley said Barrett came to her home to help her prepare Daron's body. They held a viewing at Howley's Bellevue home, then a funeral service at a church the next day.

Howley said it was exactly how she wanted to say goodbye to Daron.

"I think it would have been really hard ... to let someone just come and take her," Howley said. "I think it made it easier."

As her life winds to a close, Powers still meditates every day. It helps her sleep.

And she's even gotten comfortable with the casket.

"It's going to be home pretty soon," she said, "so I better be."

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