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In Their Own Words: Powerful, Personal Memorial Ceremonies Capture Passions and Favorites in Life

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Pam Vetter



This article is the first installment of a four-part series entitled "In Their Own Words," sharing stories about personal, meaningful funerals or memorials.

Families are taking a hands-on approach by creating memorial services or private ceremonies that fill the need to remember the life lived.

By capturing the loves of someone's life, family members are taking more time to think about creating a meaningful farewell, personal event or private moment that truly reflects a loved one. These creative

endeavors seem to serve more to the healing process while reaching far beyond a funeral home.

For Dan Nessel, a traditional funeral service didn't seem to fit his mother's life.

"My Mom passed away on January 20th, 2008. My Mom was a die-hard New Yorker and did incredible work for the community. We are not a very religious family and when it came time to figure out funeral arrangements, it was a challenge. I had sometimes discussed funerals with my Mom and she was completely against wasting a lot of money and having people standing around being so sad. I have four siblings, and on the days following her death, we tried to brainstorm of something meaningful to do and something my Mom would have loved. In the end, we came up with something which really worked out well. We held the service at the **Housing Works Bookstore**. It is a place that does incredible social good in the city and it felt so right to put money into Housing Works instead of a funeral home. The funeral really was more of a celebration, people gave tributes and we shared great stories about my Mom. Everyone really felt that it was exactly the type of funeral my Mom would have wanted," Dan reinforced. "The other thing we did was create a Memorial website: www.LindaNessel.com. It was a great way for people to share stories and for us (the kids) it was a great way to learn more incredible things about my Mom."

Linda Nessel loved New York City and Central Park, "so we decided, as a memorial, to get an inscription on a park bench in Central Park," Dan noted. "The money all goes to Central Park and it again felt like something my Mom would have loved."

On her answering machine, Linda Nessel always told everyone, "Please have a glorious day." The farewell her family organized was personal and certainly, glorious. The family recently experienced the one year anniversary of her passing. Dan said, "It's so hard to think of her gone, but it's nice that her story lives on in other ways."

When Alison Blackman's father died last March, she wanted to find a way to truly honor his passion in life. "My father passed away leaving me as the only relative left nearby who could travel to mourn him, as his sister and his only remaining friend are both elderly and unable to travel. Naturally, it didn't make sense to have a traditional funeral, and Dad detested them anyway. He once walked out of a funeral because he didn't like the eulogy. But as the months passed, I felt I needed to do something to note the passing of this great man. I thought about what kind of memorial HE would have liked. Dad was an accomplished musician and he loved concerts, especially at a place in Brooklyn Heights called **Bargemusic**. Bargemusic is a real barge tethered to the land known as New York City's floating concert hall. There is a spectacular view of the New York skyline as the musicians play. So I hired the entire Bargemusic and Olga Vinocur, a professional pianist, to play a 45-minute concert of piano music that Dad liked from Chopin and Bach. Prior to the concert, I gave a short speech about what made Dad special, and invited others to come up and talk about him. I had about an hour's worth of short remembrances from people who knew him, and I asked my aunt and his best friend who couldn't attend to send one, too. This is one event Dad wouldn't have minded!" Alison stressed. "It was lovely...and entertaining, and I think people who attended left with a better appreciation for my Dad."

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"We had a viewing with an open casket, because we had not seen him since he left for work that morning. Over four hundred people stood in the cold December evening, so close to Christmas, waiting to say goodbye. So many and so cold that a cloud of white vapor hung over their heads and flickered in the light from the street lamp - like Charles himself was flitting over the heads, listening to the conversations. But it was not over for me. I

Taking it one step further, Alison took the tribute she read at the memorial service and created an article from it: **Tribute To A Great Man-Norman S. Blackman, M.D.**

Shirley Landis VanScoyk of Honey Brook, Pennsylvania, faced dealing with funeral services when her husband suffered a sudden, massive heart attack and died in 2006.

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Pam Vetter



Celebrant Pam Vetter

meets with families, researches life stories, writes original tributes and conducts one-of-a-kind farewells. In finding her

mission, she believes the funeral belongs to the family.

As a **Journalist**, Vetter enjoys her work writing feature stories about interesting people who are trying to change the world. She also is committed to sharing progressive views through her article series focused on **Performers with Disabilities**.

As **The Funeral Lady**®, Vetter conducts personal funeral services in the Los Angeles area for celebrities, film crewmembers and professionals.

In early 2005, she earned certification as a Funeral Celebrant through training with the **In-Sight Institute** at the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science. After conducting high-profile funerals, she quickly gained national attention for funeral services that focused on storytelling.

Previously, she worked in the film industry at HBO Pictures, Fox Filmed Entertainment and Fox Broadcasting Company. She started her career in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in TV News at WGAL and Radio News at WLPA/WNCE. While working in radio as a news anchor and reporter, Vetter earned several awards from the Pennsylvania Association of Broadcasting for feature stories, live coverage and spot news.

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For more information on the Celebrant movement and helping families visit www.TheFuneralLady.com.

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needed something appropriate, meaningful and respectful. Like what to do with his ashes. But what did Charles love? What would he have liked?" Shirley weighed her options. "At 53, in excellent health, we were thinking about early retirement, not funeral plans. Present Charles loved his family and his home, and the Philadelphia Folk Festival. Past Charles loved a time when he was young and in the service, single and free, living in Florida and visiting Key West every weekend. After a beer or two he would often speak of his good times there, how pretty it was, the color of the water. So, I came up with a plan. Some of the ashes would be mixed with the mortar of the foundation for the addition to the house that my kids were building and would live in. We would mix them in as a family unit, just me and my son, my daughter-in-law, and my grandsons. Some would go with Ed, faithful friend and companion, to the Folk Festival. The rest would go down to Key West with me. I took out about a cup of Chuck's ashes and put it in a Tupperware container. I dropped in some dried yellow roses. I wrapped the Tupperware container in his favorite Hawaiian shirt and stuffed everything into a USPS priority box. My husband was a postal carrier for thirty-five years, and I ended up mailing them from the post office where he worked."

Shirley traveled with her friend, Carol, to Key West. After the ashes arrived through the mail, she boarded a boat, and scattered his ashes. Shirley added, "I choked up a little through the whole cruise, but nobody knew, it was totally private and I owned the moment."

Although she's been writing for years, a few months ago, Shirley started a new blog to share her stories. "I do write about Charles sometimes and yes, it does help me. The ones that are not about grief remind me that I am doing things, moving on. The ones about Charles help me to share my story. I find sometimes that I just need to tell the story of our life, like touching a stone to make sure it is real."

To visit Shirley's writings about life, loss, family and moving forward, visit <http://domesticisodes.blogspot.com>.

Pictured: Linda Nessel

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