



# **The Ageless Millionaire**

## **The E-Zine of the Longevity Club**

### **How to Throw a KickAss Funeral** **By Adriane Berg**

If you worry about the high cost of living, check out the high cost of dying. While free spending baby boomers may not balk at a \$20,000 funeral projection for 2015) our frugal parents might. With average legacies slated as \$92,000, most seniors loath the thought of our spending nearly 10%-20% of it to bury them.

Fortunately, whether we are a senior, boomer or younger, it's comforting to know that while the funeral industry may be about to explode, there's no need to also explode our pocket books We can "throw" a funeral that will honor our loved ones and ease our grieving process.

Let's take a close look at what funerals currently cost, and how planning can bring genuine financial and emotional benefit, no matter whether we plan on a high or a low-end affair. All we need do is, as least temporarily, set our feelings aside and remember that a funeral is yet another consumer choice, with competition, consumer protections, and personal taste all in the mix.

According to the Federated Funeral Directors of America, the average price of the traditional funeral is \$9,000-\$10,000, with burial costs at \$3,000 and flowers at \$1,000 making up almost

half the tariff. The Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA), [www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org), assures us that we can, and should, shop around. Yet, although there are some twenty-two thousand funeral homes, and two hundred thousand cemeteries in the United States, the average funeral planner opts to call only one of each, and pay the asking price.

This is not smart. According to a 2004 FCA survey, the very same funeral in the very same area could be had from a low of \$2,535 to a high of \$5,520, with absolutely no differences. Comparison-shopping is not only easy, but, the Federal Trade Commission, [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov), mandates that funeral homes list a menu of their prices.

In fact, a current trend is the availability of group discounts. No, you don't need a suicide pact. But, you can negotiate if family members or even a consortium of friends can agree on similar funerals, with the same home and at the same cemetery.

There are non-monetary benefits to pre-arranged funerals, as well. For example, the current Medicaid laws exempt the cost of the pre paid funerals as an available asset in determining eligibility. What's more, it's easy on your loved ones if you have made the arrangements for yourself. The FCA even sells a kit for \$10 dollars that document your instructions. The kit is designed to be left in your refrigerator

(more about cryonics later) so it's easy to find.

If you do plan your own funeral, you may pay in advance in several ways; they include: POD, or Payable On Death accounts, with the funeral home as the beneficiary, Totten Trusts, simply a type of bank account with a funeral home as beneficiary, a pre-paid contract, and an insurance policy geared to burial costs. Be aware that these policies, often hawked on late night TV to seniors, may not require a physical and are therefore quite expensive per thousand dollars of death benefit.

Still, because the death benefit ranges from \$5,000 to \$10,000 the price seems small, and often give the senior peace of mind. Few seniors want to burden their heirs with funeral costs and the premium on final expense life insurance seems acceptable. Many states have their own state regulated trusts for pre-payment. And with inflation rates of 5% per year, pre-payment often makes sense.

In planning the funeral for your loved ones, or your own, there are essential elements to consider:

- The ceremony
- The home
- The cemetery plot
- The burial style
- The casket or urn
- Transportation
- Music
- The headstone or marker
- Flowers and other frills,
- and pre or post after burial rituals

Perhaps the biggest decision, when arranging for loved ones, is: who in the family is in charge? If no one steps up to the plate, the law selects the next of kin according to its state law of intestacy. This usually means the spouse, then the children, then surviving parents, then siblings, cousins and down the line.

If you are the point person, here are some of the decisions you will have to make:

What style of service? While cultural traditions and religious ritual will dictate much of the agenda, there is lots of room for personal taste. As mentioned, flowers are a big-ticket item for Americans. Check-out [www.flowersonly.com](http://www.flowersonly.com) for lower priced arrangements. Music, too. A choir, chorus or a piped in recording of the deceased favorites are typical. Expect to pay what you would for a local DJ. Or create your own New Orleans style jazz funeral by taking lessons at [www.smithsonianjazz.org/class/grooveintojazz/lessonplan](http://www.smithsonianjazz.org/class/grooveintojazz/lessonplan)., or hire a jazz group like the Hot Tamales, [www.hottamalebrassband.com](http://www.hottamalebrassband.com), to perform. See the site of the National Funeral Directors Association for industry information, [www.nfda.org](http://www.nfda.org).

You will probably also plan pre- and post-funeral events, like wakes for Catholics and Shiva for Jews. Cross-cultural arrangements can be made through those specializing in African American, Hispanic and Asian traditions. Check out [www.biomed.lib.umn.edu](http://www.biomed.lib.umn.edu), [www.healthweb.org](http://www.healthweb.org), for articles on the funeral rites of many cultures. In most cultures, tradition is that visitors bring flowers or food tributes, but in practice they also expect the family to provide a spread.

Special activities honoring the deceased are the latest trend. For example, mourners can create an "eternal reef," an arts and crafts project where they make handprints, embed mementos, and write thoughts, in a cement block, which become part of an eroding coral reef. Visit [www.eternalreef.com](http://www.eternalreef.com).

Viewing of the body and embalming starts at \$600. Expect to pay the clergy at least \$500, and the mortuary from \$500 to \$1,000. The web offers comparison-shopping at sites like [www.shopzilla.com](http://www.shopzilla.com), and [www.tributedirect.com](http://www.tributedirect.com), which boasts that you'll save 50-70%.

Often these prices are not broken down, as funeral homes offer a full package, much like weddings. The FTC requires a break down, but sometimes you must ask.

Which cemetery? Funeral homes and cemeteries are becoming vertically integrated in this age of consolidation. You need not succumb to a tie-in. Cemetery plots are a type of real estate with right of burial. You can buy them at any time and they must accept the body, whenever death occurs. That's why group plots, union, social club and benefit society cemeteries abound. The plot usually comes with perpetual care (clearing, gardening, upkeep of headstones), all from \$500-\$4,000. And yes, positioning counts. You pay more for more pleasant locations. Veterans with honorable discharges are entitled to free plots for themselves, their spouses and their children at a National cemetery. See, [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).

Bury or cremate? A surprising 26% of the population opts for cremation. See, [www.cremationassociation.org](http://www.cremationassociation.org). This is slated to rise to 50% by 2010, as price, property shortages and environmental concerns impact baby boomer preferences. Cremation is a comparatively inexpensive \$400 to \$3,000, but when the remains or ashes are presented at the service, the sky is the limit. Flying the remains to Borneo to be kept in earthen jars in Long Houses, scattered in the Mediterranean, or thrown over the Alps are costly and sometimes illegal. Ashes can also be buried, be set in a columbarium, or there may be no service, at all. In any case, the FTC assures us that ashes need no casket, and makes it a violation for a cemetery or funeral home to insist that you buy one. Of course, the urn can always be placed on the mantel, on a home altar. Or check out e-bay, where you can buy a bio degradable urn for around \$20.00, or a keepsake charm that holds a few of your loved ones ashes to be worn around your neck, \$12.99.

Which burial container? Of course, if you decide on a traditional burial the casket becomes a concern. Boy, do you have what to chose from! At [www.valdostamemorials](http://www.valdostamemorials), just one of numerous websites I found over 100,000 different styles and colors offered. Popular steel caskets come in 18 or 20 gauge steel. E-bay has an attractive 22 gauge at \$399. But, regardless of gauge, the body decom-

poses at the same rate.

The least expense casket is the cloth covered wood composite with flat crepe interior, around \$400-\$600 tops. The BMW crowd might prefer the top of the line oak, walnut or cherry, ranging up to \$12,000. Post modernists might like the stainless steel coffins at \$2500-\$3000. You will also need an outer container, usually concrete, a grave liner or a steel reinforced vault. Funeral homes and cemeteries compete on costs, \$600 for grave liners, up to \$1,000-\$2,500 for vaults.

Which headstone? In most Western tradition the most visibly lasting memorial to the deceased is the head stone. Stone and marble masons usually set up shop near cemeteries, and funeral homes provide catalogs. I had my living room coffee table made by a head stone cutter. It is pitted terracotta marble and so far it has lasted 30 years. My plan when the time come is to turn it vertically and inscribe, "Not Taking Any Calls." Why waste it, when marble headstones start at \$1,200.

In ground or above ground burial? For those into real estate, mausoleums and crypts start at \$8,000 to \$10,000, and, as usual, you pay for the view. Only you are not the viewer. The closer you are buried at eye level the more expensive. Harry Helmsly famed New York realtor, was buried by his notorious wife Leona, in a mausoleum with a stained glass window, looking out on New York City. The thrift market alternative is a flat marker, \$150-\$300. No matter what you choose, you'll pay about \$200 for placement of the stone or marker, more for the grave digging. Diggers are unionized, so there's little negotiation.

How do we get to the cemetery? The procession must be arranged through the local police department, as a permit is necessary. The hearse will likely cost \$500; the rest depends on the number and quality of the cars.

