Enhancing the Value and Meaning of Funeral Flowers

The American Floral Endowment

If tears could build a stairway, and memories a lane, I'd walk right up to Heaven and bring you home again.
A recent survey indicates that funeral directors and florists can do more to enrich this important tradition.

Many factors currently impact American funeral traditions and the way funeral professionals operate their businesses, such as cultural shifts, the rise of the Internet and changes to family dynamics, finances and other priorities. These societal changes have also affected the ways in which people express their sympathy and condolences to families after a death occurs. This article – based on a nationwide survey of NFDA members conducted by the Floral Marketing Research Fund (FMRF) in August 2014 – explores the importance of funeral flowers and plants and offers suggestions on how to enhance their value and meaning for the benefit of the families you serve.

According to the FMRF survey, funeral directors agree that flowers are a long-standing method of expressing condolences that, like funerals themselves, must be preserved. Said one survey respondent: “A funeral without flowers is a big step toward no funeral at all.” Another noted: “[The gift of flowers] lets the family know the sender cared. Flowers have a role in the funeral ritual for beauty and warmth.”

According to the FMRF report, 74 percent of funeral directors surveyed encourage flowers at services, and nearly 18 percent view floral tributes as a significant tradition that should be preserved.

“When a family sees a floral arrangement and the name of the sender, they are deeply touched because the sender thought so much of them to take the time and expense to send flowers,” said one funeral director who responded to the survey. Without a doubt, flowers are an important component to navigating through grief and providing comfort. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

Joey Schwanke, owner of Greens Greenhouses Inc. in Fremont, Nebraska, explains: “Our challenge is to keep flowers and plants in the forefront for expressing emotions. Love, comfort, sympathy, cherished memories... things you cannot always know how to say, you can say with flowers. Funeral flowers are not for the deceased but to comfort family.
and friends. They give support and love.”

She adds: “We personalize flowers for the family and in honor of the life of the departed. We are creative and do a great job of pleasing the family despite the heart-wrenching experience of sending a loved one home. Families need the satisfaction that their loved one is watching from above and is pleased.”

The Challenges Impacting Funeral Flowers
Despite their importance and the genuine physical and emotional benefits that flowers, floral arrangements and green plants provide in funeral and interment settings, there are several challenges affecting their perceived value that must be addressed. Greg Jones, owner of Jones Funeral Service in Oconto Falls, Wisconsin, states that money can be a significant factor when families are considering funeral flowers. “The biggest roadblock to whether families welcome flowers to a funeral is an attitude that flowers are ‘a waste of money’.” If people saw the positive reactions when a family discovers someone they never expected sent flowers, it can touch them in ways you can’t place a price on.”

Schwanke notes that this perceived lack of value can affect more than just floral sales – it can influence a family’s attitude toward the entire funeral service itself. “If expense is an issue, the thought becomes, ‘Maybe no visitation; no one sends flowers, cards or memorial offerings; don’t have a funeral lunch… Let’s just cut expenses all around. Let’s consider graveside.’ How horrendous.” (See Figure 2.)

Another factor impacting the use of funeral flowers is the phrase “In lieu of flowers…” commonly found in obituaries and death notices. Unfortunately, even if a loved one wants to send a floral arrangement to convey his or her sympathy, he or she often interprets this phrase as: “The family refuses to accept sympathy flowers and/or plants at their loved one’s funeral service.”

Funeral professionals and florists alike need to educate consumers that the true intent of this phrase is merely to offer alternative condoleance options for mourners, such as a memorial donation to a worthy nonprofit or cause, and that this phrase does not mean, “Don’t you dare send flowers!”

Flowers, plants, monetary donations and other meaningful methods of expressing sympathy convey how much a person cares, and grief professionals generally agree that mourners should be offered numerous options by which to personally, meaningfully express their grief and condolences. This might take the form of sending a floral arrangement and/or green plant, making a memorial donation in memory of the deceased, both, or various other choices that allow family members and friends to determine what best suits their individual tastes, preferences and needs. (And frankly, it’s downright tacky to specify how a mourner should express his or her grief.)

Unfortunately, the phrase “In lieu of flowers…” has become commonplace in obituaries and death notices these days, but funeral directors and florists can help prevent this confusion by educating and encouraging families and mourners to accept/send all expressions of sympathy. While crafting an obituary or death notice with a family, for instance, funeral directors might suggest clearer, better worded phrases that honor a family’s request for charitable giving but do not “dictate” the manner in which mourners express themselves, such as:

- Memorial contributions may be made to...
- The family encourages contributions in his/her honor to...
- Remembrances are gratefully accepted at...
- His/her [Favorite Cause] will gratefully accept your donation...
- [Favorite Cause] is his/her choice for memorial contributions...

Using the phrase “In lieu of flowers…” in obituaries and death notices significantly reduces or “chills” the desire of families to encourage funeral flowers, arrangements and living plants and also discourages mourners from sending them as expressions of sympathy and caring following a death.

Funeral directors who responded to the FMRF survey indicated that this effect could cause families and/or mourners to miss out on the meaningful, beneficial effect that floral sympathy expressions can provide. For example, said Greg Jones, “I just conducted a private funeral, and the immediate family requested ‘no flowers,’ but one very large and nice flower piece arrived from two out-of-state nephews who couldn’t attend. Not only could the family not stop talking about it, but they took it home and were honored to do so.”

He adds: “To learn that someone is thinking of you and cares for you goes beyond words. Ask any funeral director about the family that expected flowers for their loved one’s funeral – from their co-workers or peers – and nothing shows up. You want to see disappointment…”

Enhancing the Value and Meaning of Funeral Flowers
Often, the only meaningful funeral “keepsake” available to mourners is a memorial card, which generally includes a few vitals (name, birth date, death date, age, photograph, etc.) and, perhaps, a poem or verse. This fact offers an opportunity to funeral directors and florists alike to make flowers and mementos a more meaningful part of the overall fu-
The truth is that flowers have many meaningful uses before, during, and after the funeral. Flowers can and should touch and bring joy to every attendee and help enhance warm, loving memories of the deceased. Adding greater meaning and value to funeral flowers, however, needs to start earlier in the process, i.e., when making funeral arrangements. You can do this by directly asking the immediate family to consider where they would like the flowers to go after the funeral and by suggesting ideas that create poignant experiences before, during, and after the funeral that, ultimately, provide meaningful memories and keepsakes for years to come.

For example, consider creating a special "mini-ceremony" before or after the full service that allows immediate or close family members to select something to take home as a personal memento. At a recent funeral, for instance, a funeral director asked each of the deceased's grandchildren to select a rose from a flower arrangement so each of them could take it home as a special remembrance.

Moreover, funeral flowers and plants can incorporate inexpensive but meaningful keepsakes or trinkets that mourners might cherish in the future, such as:

- An angel, cherub, ornament, cross or other religious symbol
- Cards bearing jewelry, pins or other small mementos
- Symbols denoting the deceased's hobbies, such as faux antlers, fish, boots, etc.
- A holiday remembrance ornament
- A special keepsake container

As far as meaningful ways to use funeral flowers after the service, there are many post-service tribute options you might discuss with/suggest to the families you serve:

- Place flowers in the casket and bury them with the deceased.
- Divide flowers and/or plants among family members and friends.
- Leave them at the gravesite in remembrance of the deceased.
- Use them to honor and remember other deceased family members.

There are also many ways for families to use floral arrangements and/or green plants after the funeral by donating them to:

- A park, cemetery or other community space for planting
- A community college, YWCA or university for floral design classes
- A local high school biology department for dissection
- A veterans' memorial, senior center,
hospice or hospital (check first for allergy restrictions)

- The funeral home or cemetery for use at another funeral or burial.

(If in doubt, floral retailers can generally provide a list of local organizations that accept floral donations.)

Finally, flowers and green plants provide a great opportunity for family members and mourners to craft their own meaningful, lasting memorial tributes. Once dried and pressed, funeral flowers can be used to create or incorporated into:

- Mementos, shadowboxes, art or holiday ornaments
- Candles, domes, displays, rosaries or paperweights
- Pressed or confetti-style jewelry or beads (check online for these services).

The bottom line is that funeral flowers and green plants can provide numerous meaningful uses before, during and after the funeral, but it’s incumbent on funeral directors and florists to educate people about the many ways to make sympathy flowers a lasting remembrance.

**Partners: Funeral Directors and Florists**

So, as a funeral service professional, how can you help families better understand and appreciate the value and meaning of funeral flowers and green plants? The first step requires understanding how significantly floral arrangements can help provide a positive, healing experience for the families you serve — before, during and after the actual service:

- Flowers and green plants help your funeral home look aesthetically pleasing as a provider/location that families would consider choosing again.

- Flowers help create a warm, memorable setting for a family's final interactions with other loved ones and a positive environment that can encourage them to use your firm again if/when the time comes.

- Flowers help foster a positive experience by enhancing feelings of support and comfort, which help move a family toward healing after loss.

- By working with your local florist to craft a memorable funeral service, you can collectively create an unforgettable ambiance that reinforces the overall value of the funeral versus the cost.

The next step is to view your local florist(s) as a business partner who can help you enhance the value of the services you provide to families. For example, Wayne Jones, owner of Flowers - Wayne Jones in Virginia Beach, Virginia, describes how his floral business works to better serve both funeral families and directors in his area: "We check the newspapers each morning for obituaries. When a family calls, [this practice] helps us best assist them in making choices. Often, a person might not understand that a standing spray is not necessarily appropriate for a memorial service, so we are able to help with that. Some religions do not prefer flowers at the service or cemetery, which is in our best interest to know.”

In addition, Schwanke explains how florists can help enhance the services provided by funeral homes by viewing funeral directors as partners: “We get flowers to funerals. If they have any problem with our product, staff or time constraints, we attend to issues. We know all our directors by name, their families, their likes and dislikes. We pride ourselves on our pieces.”

Florists such as Wayne Jones, Schwanke and others fully understand how much funeral directors rely on their local florists to serve as their best business partners and readily relate to the opportunities and challenges funeral professionals face. Says Schwanke: “We always strive for the best relationships with funeral directors. We realize the pressure you face. We are both in the business of helping people during the most difficult times of life. It is up to us to do the very best job we can, together, to achieve that goal.”

Wayne Jones concurs: “I have become more aware of what a funeral director goes through – from paperwork to removal to cemetery to restrictions. They have their headaches. We are aware of what they face, which, therefore, we also face. [Funeral directors depend on us to] get the flowers to the funeral home in plenty of time to be recorded and acknowledged and set up for the funeral. That family is going to have that funeral only one time. The impressions of a florist and funeral director will last forever. We bring back happy memories. We’re here to serve”.

To download the free “Funeral Directors and Flowers – Insights Into Floral Tributes in the Funeral Industry” report in its entirety, visit www.floralmarketingresearchfund.org and create an account. With the full report, you can learn:

- How other funeral directors perceive sympathy flowers and their role in funerals.
- Their experiences with families and which forms of support are the most helpful.
- Suggestions on how funeral directors and florists can better collaborate in service to families.