

## Celebrants: Meeting the Needs of Families

by Glenda Stansbury

*The family is seated, The flowers are beautiful. The seats are full of friends and acquaintances. The prelude music fades out. And then something amazing happens. The officiant stands up and takes everyone in attendance on a journey of the deceased's life. Funny and poignant stories are shared, the family's loss and their grief in days to come is acknowledged, favorite songs are played, accomplishments are celebrated, a life lived is honored. At the end of the service, each person in attendance is handed a tile from a Scrabble game because this woman loved to play Scrabble. They are invited to put that tile in a special place in order to remember this life in the coming days. To close the service, everyone stands and toasts her life with a Mimosa.... her favorite drink. The family is thrilled that their loved one was given such a special and sacred time of remembrance. The attendees hug the family and tell them that they are so glad they came. The funeral home is praised for having such a meaningful and wonderful service. This is a celebrant service.*

Over the past several years, the big emphasis in funeral service has been on personalization. A picture is scanned onto prayer cards and a register book, a video tribute is looping during the visitation, the family is encouraged to bring in display items and pictures, the casket or urn is etched with personal information, the Harley is parked in front of the funeral home, and there is even a life-sized cardboard cutout of the deceased. Some funeral professionals are good at offering these personalized products, and truly believe that this is how you *wow* grieving families. But unless we actually personalize what is said and done during the service, all of that is really only set design. It may be very nice and pretty, but it still fades into the background when the family and friends sit through a service that never mentions their loved one or mispronounces his or her name. What gets remembered is that no one had the opportunity to really hear their story or honor their loved one.

Not at a Celebrant Service, which is at once fairly normal and amazingly different. The family is there, the funeral director is there, the attendees are there, the casket or urn may be there, the video tribute may be viewed, the music is played. What sets a celebrant service apart is that from the very first words uttered, the service is about the deceased – about the life, the memories, the grief of those left behind, the acknowledgement of the special place on this earth that the life occupied. The celebrant or family members may light candles, a friend could share a poem or story, the celebrant may incorporate a special ceremony of remembrance, and through it all, the family and audience will be engaged in a tribute to the life by hearing the stories and sharing the laughter and tears. If a celebrant has done his or her job well, each person who leaves the service will feel as if they know the deceased a little better, feel a connection to the family and ways they can be of assistance during their grief journey, and understand how important and meaningful a funeral service can be. Some funeral service professionals talk about the *wow* factor. Celebrants hope to move people way beyond *wow* to *wonderful, memorable, life changing*.

*Glenda Stansbury is vice president of marketing for In-Sight Books, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. She is a licensed funeral director and trains funeral directors, cemeterians and others as Certified Celebrants who meet with families to talk about their loved one, and plan personalized funeral services. Glenda is adjunct faculty with the funeral service department at the University of Central Oklahoma where she teaches courses in funeral service communication and the psychology of grief.*