



PREPARING OUR LAST WISH

CHANGING OUR PERCEPTION OF FUNERAL SERVICES

Like so many others who have lost a loved one, Clare Davison was faced with having to organise a funeral at a time when she was grieving her husband.

Fortunately, Clare had given some thought to arrangements, having attended a Last Wishes Workshop, held at her home at Sedgwick Park House. The workshop, hosted by Jean Francis, an Interfaith Minister and Spiritual Counsellor from Horsham, had outlined the many ways in which a funeral can be less sombre and more of a celebration of life.

Jean explained to a small group how grieving families were not restricted to expensive coffins, church services and gleaming hearses. We can be buried in a painted cardboard box and transported in a modified *Only Fools and Horses* Robin

Reliant; Our ashes can be cast adrift aboard a miniature Viking boat lit by blazing arrows. The options offered by more alternative funeral specialists meant that when it came to organising her husband's funeral, Clare would create a unique service with the help of *Dandelion Farewells*, a local funeral company that Jean recommended.

"When Jean came to my home for a workshop three years ago, she brought with her a beautifully painted cardboard coffin. I have always found old wooden coffins with creaking leads absolutely terrifying, so I loved this idea. We had a really open discussion and were asked to write down our thoughts for our own funeral."

"When John died 18 months ago, I was in a terrible state and didn't know what to do. He wasn't a religious person and hadn't

expressed feelings about his own funeral. He just trusted me to arrange it. Remembering the workshop, I ordered a simple white cardboard coffin for only £200 and asked friends and family to send photos of John. Our nephew's children spent hours helping me decorate the box with pictures. I stuck on a label of his favourite Chablis, whilst the children and my dogs put their hands and paw prints on it too! It was a joyous moment during a sad time, as everybody was talking about John."

"I bought a jewellery box and lined it with purple satin, and this is where I keep John's ashes. It ended up being a beautiful experience. When it's my time, I want to be buried in a pink coffin with pink roses around me, and transported in a pink Cadillac! I've always found old-fashioned funerals quite fearful, but it doesn't need to be like that."



Jean Francis was ordained as a One Spirit Interfaith Minister in 2012

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NATURAL OPTIONS

As shown above, Jean Francis has returned to Sedgwick Park to host further Last Wishes Workshop, always speaking to small, intimate groups of people. She provides information that many of us are not aware of. That ceremonies can take place at home or in a garden, that it's possible to be buried on private land and that costly wooden caskets are not an obligations.

One of Jean's primary aims is to raise awareness of environmentally-friendly options, such as no embalming or natural burial sites. People can even request that a tree is planted to counteract harmful emissions during cremation. Attendants to the workshops are also given worksheets to complete, covering everything from insurance plans to favourite music, which can later be used by relatives to ensure your own wishes are adhered to.



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Clare Davison created a special ceremony in memory of her late husband, John

Another attendee at the workshop is Margaret Tyzack-More, who has been inspired to arrange for an environmentally-friendly burial. "I'm going to be laid to rest in a willow coffin at Clayton Wood Natural Burial Ground in the South Downs," she said. "Everyone used to use willow for laundry baskets when I was little, but now they have lovely designs with beautifully woven tops. At Clayton Wood, everything that goes in the ground is biodegradable, as am I. There's no headstone, so ultimately, you're just pushing up daisies."

"By filling in these Last Wishes forms, you can tell those you're leaving behind how you want to be buried. These are people you love, so you don't want them to have to worry about money or what kind of handles to put on the coffin!"

INTERFAITH MINISTER

Jean was initially inspired by two life-changing funerals, both pre-arranged by the elderly gentlemen involved, which she attended 25 years ago. These uplifting experiences led her to write a book, *Time to Go*, about the importance of saying 'goodbye'. This was followed by two more pocket sized books, *Finishing Touches* and *Ashes and Memorials*.

Having moved to Horsham in 2002, Jean joined ARKA Funerals in Brighton, one of the first local companies to focus on ecological funeral choices. In her ten years there, she learned how to personalise occasions with compassion and even drama. However, Jean understands that different ideas can lead to disagreements, having experienced this at the funeral of her own brother.

"For the benefit of other relatives, Jim's funeral service included hymns and prayer," said Jean. "But I felt that my cheeky little brother deserved a bit of sparkle. Working with a celebrant, I adapted a poem called 'On Angels' Wings.' My brother was a double amputee and was building a three-wheeled Harley Davidson. The poem was about him wearing his red bandana and riding among the stars. Just before the committal, as the curtain was rotating, I played a soundtrack of a Harley revving up, which was a brave thing to do. I wasn't sure what the reaction would be, but everyone smiled. My brother didn't go to church and I think he'd have enjoyed that. That's why filling in the forms at a Last Wishes Workshop and expressing your own ideas is important."

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The Last Wishes Workshop, hosted by Jean Francis (back row, third from left) have inspired people to talk about and prepare for their own funeral

After leaving ARKA, Jean became a One Spirit Interfaith Minister, training with the One Spirit Foundation and being ordained on her 73rd birthday in 2012.

As a Minister, Jean presents services for people of any faith - or none at all - creating a ceremony that reflects an individual's lifestyle, philosophies, hobbies and humour.

"Many people are spiritual but not religious, so Interfaith Ministers can fill the gap between religion and Humanism," she said. "Traditionally, people haven't discussed death. But by thinking ahead, a funeral ceremony can possess real healing power. It presents a wonderful opportunity to take responsibility for one's departure. You can say, 'thank you' or 'I'm sorry' to someone. Occasionally, in my role as a celebrant or minister, I meet them with other family members, which helps me understand the essence of a person. We look at photos and discuss memories to create a personal ceremony."

At Clayton Wood, everything that goes in the ground is biodegradable."

CHANGING VIEWS

Jean hopes that future generations will be more open when it comes to discussing death and that the funeral experience will become more celebratory and less costly.

"Some funeral companies have certain protocols and traditions. I respect that as they have a business to run," says Jean. "That suits a lot of people, but people shouldn't feel that they're restricted to a church or crematorium service. There are natural burial sites, or you can be cremated in a hand-painted box, with your ashes spread in a special place by your family. And there are basic packages which cost very



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"Death seems to be the last taboo, yet it will affect every one of us sooner or later."

little, which is a key message of the workshops.

"It's taken my whole lifetime, but thankfully people are now asking questions and seeking a funeral service that reflects their life. The younger generations are more open-minded and social media is making them more aware of options, particularly those that are less harmful to the environment."

"Death seems to be the last taboo, yet it will affect every one of us sooner or later. If we think about sex, it doesn't mean that we'll have a baby any more than if we think about death we will drop down dead! So, my mission is to make the experience surrounding funerals a better and more gentle experience."

WORDS: BEN MORRIS
PHOTOS: TOBY PHILLIPS

● Jean will host a Last Wishes Workshop in Horsham on Saturday 16 November, at 10.30 – 4pm. Full details given on application. Booking essential on (01403) 273754. www.circleoflifecelebrations.co.uk/last-wishes-workshop/

Jean Francis shows how a coffin can represent an individual's character and include personal items

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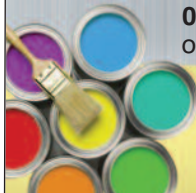


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