



Funeral Celebrants with Ruthann Brown Disotell

<http://www.funeraldirectorschat.com/2011/ruthann-brown-disotell>

Nancy Burban: Hi, I'm Nancy Burban, your host for Funeral Directors Chat, a podcast providing funeral professionals with insight to current industry topics, news and trends. Today, I'm really delighted to interview a dear friend, somebody I've been trying to get on this podcast for some time, Ruthann Brown Disotell. She's a funeral director, a celebrant and an ordained minister. The combination is what she will call "Celebration of a Lifetime." That's actually the name of her website. Ruthann was raised in a funeral home setting. She's a second generation funeral director. Although she was raised in a family of seven children, she's the only child who chose funeral service. She began her college studies as an art major, with a strong focus on portrait art.

But later decided to attend The American Academy of Funeral Service and graduated from Dallas Institute of Mortuary Science. Her accomplishments are many. I'll just list a few. She's designed and built a funeral home. She served as an on-site administrator for two funeral home start-ups. She's developed many programs and departments in various funeral homes in her area.

And she was certified as a celebrant through Insight Institute. She is currently self-employed, full time, as a celebrant and she serves a wide circle of funeral homes in her area, which is the New Jersey Area. Her website is CelebrationOfALifetime.com. That's www.CelebrationOfALifetime.com. Ruthann offers holiday remembrance programs to the community and assisted living residences.

She offers assistance as a funeral director to funeral homes in need of a vacation or supplemental help. She's also a speaker to funeral home groups for continuing education. She's a wonderful speaker, so you might want to look her up and see where she is speaking. She's the first celebrant to offer the Service of Remembrance at the NFDA Convention in 2009 in Boston.

Her community involvement is pretty vast. She's actually involved with the Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce. She's the past president of the Clinton Business Group, the past president of Toastmasters International, Chapter 433, and she currently serves on the board of trustees of BWNICE. Which is Business Women Networking Involving Charity and Education. Which benefits women's charities. Wow, that's a lot, Ruthann. Welcome to the show.

Ruthann Brown Disotell: Thanks so much, Nancy. It's a pleasure to be here. Finally, we got together.

Nancy: I know, thanks. Let me start off by asking you, since you work with so many funeral homes and you work with so many different people on an ongoing basis, what are some of the trends you see today, regarding funeral services?

Ruthann: For a long time we've seen a rise in cremation, so that's something that we're used to now. But now we're seeing a rise in green burial questions. I don't know a whole lot of funeral homes who are offering green burials, but there are a lot of people starting to think about eco-friendly solutions for funerals. And we need to address stuff like that. We also have a lot of delayed services in conjunction with direct disposition. So people are waiting until better weather or when people can travel in from different parts of the country. There is also a huge need for personalization. It's getting bigger and bigger each year. I give a lot of credit to the Burger King for that. Because years ago he said, "Have it your way." People are used to having things done their way and they're doing it at their funeral, as well.

Nancy: That's great. Let's talk about the need for personalization. What kind of things are you seeing in your services?

Ruthann: Personalization is really important. Because we need to acknowledge the life of the person. And up to now, we've done a lot with personalization regarding products. There's been a lot of changes in caskets to make them look like the person's life. There have been a lot of changes in paper work, like the register book and the acknowledgment cards, and prayer cards and things like that. We've worked really hard on bringing memory boards into the funeral home, to allow people to display items that are tokens of that person's life. We've been doing a lot of DVD presentations. So that people can sit and watch the person's life from beginning to end. It's all wonderful. The one thing that I'm striving to do is to bring that personalization to the service itself.

A lot of times we just completely forget it when it comes to there. My challenge was, as a funeral director, in dealing with the funeral arrangement process, you collect so many gems during the conversation when you're collecting obituary information, and talking to people and asking them about hobbies and interests and things like that, all these great stories come forth.

There's a lot of laughter and tears involved in the process. It's exciting to sit there and watch the family go through this remembrance time together. And then the funeral director part of me knows a lot of personal information. And walks into the funeral for that service and hears virtually nothing. It's not anybody's fault, actually. But the clergy is used to a certain doctrine and a certain layout for the service.

They have it down. They've done it many, many, many times. They pull a service out of their drawer and insert a name into it. And do what is doctrinally correct and give that person God's blessing or whatever is appropriate for them. And speaks comfort and peace to the family. But the deceased isn't really covered. They aren't really talked about. They're just kind of on the sidelines at their own funeral.

It seemed sad to me. I'm sitting in the back of the room saying, "Tell the story about the canoe." And it was frustrating. So when my life changed around, I had a few car accidents that changed my ability to do all the lifting involved in being a funeral director. And I had to reinvent who I was. Celebrant work was coming into the forefront.

And it just seemed like a perfect fit for me. So to be able to take the service itself and personalize it, so that those who are in attendance get a true picture of who that person is and why their life was important, just became a wonderful gift to me, to be able to give that to them. Now, when people come to a funeral, they get to walk away with more than they came in with.

And I think, particularly for the people who come to support a friend, when they didn't actually know the person who died, but they know somebody connected to them and just want to be there to support them, at the end of this service, they are totally clued in. They get it. They understand why the person was beloved, why all the people are in the room.

They even get a little inkling as to why their friend is the way they are. Because we all take a little bit of the person ahead of us into our own life. So it's an exciting thing to be able to deal with the storyline of the person who died. And present it to the congregation that arrives. I like to start my services on the day the person died. I paint a picture of what the world was like that day and do some research into that, so that everybody gets on the same page, right at the beginning.

That could be decades ago. Or it could be 10 years ago, depending on who died. We get to get into that scene, into that history and talk about that person being born. And what their life was like as a child, what they did in high school and what kind of career path they chose. How they found the love of their life and what kind of family they raised, with what values. And how they interacted with the community. And why everyone is sitting here today.

It is extremely honoring to talk about all the gifts that that person have given to everyone sitting in the room. All the blessings, all the character traits that are being passed along. All the value. It's exciting to watch the congregation while I'm speaking. I call it the popcorn effect, because people, their heads kind of pop when they realize, "Oh, I remember that story." And it's just so much fun to watch them all come to life out there, remembering all these joyous times and all these sweet moments, and be remembered to that.

The wonderful thing about that, Nancy, is that it takes people from the death bed and brings them back into the joy of the life. I'm not going to tell you that I ignore the death bed, because I don't. I think it's extremely important, right from the start, to acknowledge the fact that this person died. And that the people in the room are sad and there's a reason that they're sad.

But the person's life is not defined by the date and the time of death on a piece of paper. I bring them back in time to be able to experience all those things. It is just wonderful and healing for them to be able to be brought back to their joy.

Nancy: That's really beautiful, Ruthann. You put that so wonderfully. I love the way that you actually framed the whole service. Now, cremation is really rising in popularity. Do you think it's even more important to have a funeral celebrant service when someone's cremated?

Ruthann: My first opinion about cremation is not about the service. My first opinion about cremation is about seeing. The challenge that a lot of families have is when they walk into a funeral home and they want cremation because somebody told them that's what they wanted, don't always know that it's still possible to have a traditional funeral. And then follow it with cremation. Rather than a burial in a cemetery. So it's very important for funeral directors to be able to explain all of the options to families, so that they can make educated decisions. I think some people, when they say, "I want to be cremated," are talking about a variety of reasons. It's not always that they want everything short and sweet.

Certainly if a family is available to the idea of a viewing, it is a blessing to them to be able to see. I think seeing is believing. And it's the first step in the grieving process, to be able to come to terms, visually, with the fact that the person is no longer in pain. There are a lot of talented embalmers out there that know how to make the person look lovely.

Like they did last time we were at a barbecue. And they just look like they were full of sunshine. It's possible to make them look like they're OK. They won't all look like rock stars, but they'll look OK. And it'll be easier to say goodbye. For them and for the ones that don't get to say goodbye, the ceremony is key.

You need to have at least a turnkey somewhere that says, "We've acknowledged the fact that this person actually existed." When you have absolutely nothing, it just kind of invalidates the person's life. Like it didn't matter, it was disposable. And direct disposition kind of just throws that right there... I'm just really frustrated by direct disposition.

I'm certainly offering that to people if that's what they want, but it frustrates my heart to think that you're going to have a direct disposition. And it's going to be like a poof, like the person wasn't even here. If you can take a direct disposition and talk to the person in terms of, how do you want to remember this person? How do you want to honor their life? It makes the person think.

Nancy: And it gives them the value back.

Ruthann: Truly. Some people don't even stop to think about it until the question is posed to them. When you're taking obituary information, that's the ideal time to be able to say that. Because they've just told you all the things that this person was and did. And you can say, "How would you like to honor their memory? What would you like to do?" It leads you right into the opportunity to talk about having a gathering, whether the body's there or not. But the idea of having a gathering is so important, in order to have that sense of community, so that everyone can get together and remember together. The funeral home is the ideal place for that to happen. I know that we can have services anywhere. In somebody's living room, a recreation hall, a senior center and even in a park.

But as a funeral director, I'm very keyed in on the idea that there are so many people who spent a bundle of money to make a house that is designed especially for the griever. Why don't we take

advantage of that opportunity and go to this funeral home that's designed for the gathering of people during a grief moment? And give them a chance to get together in a setting that is comfortable and designed for them?

Nancy: Absolutely. And I think, Ruthann, that a lot of families -- I know families that I've spoken to -- they don't know that they have the option of having a funeral celebrant. What I'd like to say is, ceremony speaks when words fail. A lot of times families will say, "I don't really have the words." Or, "I'm too grief-stricken to give a proper eulogy." I think it's at that time that the funeral director should recommend a funeral celebrant who can do it for them. In a much calmer way, in a very professional way. And can add things that they probably, since you've been doing it so long, wouldn't even envision.

Ruthann: A lot of funeral directors are still having difficulty introducing the celebrant work as a whole. I don't fault them for that. Because I totally get what it's like to make funeral arrangements year after year after year. You get your lingo down. You know what the next question is that you're going to ask them, because you've done it so many times that you just go on to the next question. For the average funeral director who's been around a while, when you ask the family, "Do you have anyone to do the service for you?" And they say no, the automatic response for the next question is, "What denomination are you?" It's just something we were taught ages ago. To say, "What denomination are you?" That's our lead to know which clergy to call. Now, we're in an age where well over 50% of the population do not attend a formal religious service on a weekly basis or even on a regular basis.

There are many people who show up for high holy days and religious holidays. And that's the extent of what they're doing. They have no real connection to the clergy. They have a connection to a title and that's it. They don't necessarily espouse to following that on a regular basis. So they're kind of floundering here and they don't necessarily want to see a clergy at that time, because they're already in grief.

Wouldn't it be horrible that funeral director who understands grief would also put that person in guilt by bringing in a clergy? It's one of those things we don't stop to think about. But truly, they're in grief right now. And you're offering to bring in a clergy, who's presence is only going to make them feel guilty, because they haven't been in that pew in a long time. They'll feel like they have to explain themselves. Maybe that's why they're opting out of a service. Because they don't want to go through the explaining process, of why they haven't been in a pew.

Nancy: Ruthann, that's a very valid point. And if you think about it, not just for the decedents, but also for the family it puts into question, "Am I going to enter the pearly gates of heaven? Here's a reminder of something that we neglected to do."

Ruthann: It's a challenge. Here's what can change the whole process. If funeral directors can change their language just slightly... And it's going to take practice. It's going to take repetitive practice for this to take hold. Because we're breaking a paradigm. When the family says, "No, we don't have anyone to do the service," the next question is, "What kind of service would you like to have? Would you like a liturgical service or would you like something that pays tribute to the person's life? Or maybe a combination of both?" Now, if they said a liturgical service, good. Call the clergy. That's exactly what they're looking for. If they want a storyline around the person's life, a celebrant is perfect for that. If they want a combination of both, it's possible that a

celebrant can do that too. It is not always possible that a clergy can do that too -- I don't know if everybody gets that picture -- because a clergy is hired by a congregation and has a wealth of people that they're responsible to.

That's not just for funerals. That's for hospital visits and writing their sermons, and a litany of other things that are on their calendar. To take that time, to be able to create the kind of service that a celebrant can do, is almost impossible for the majority of pastors. We're really doing a service to the clergy to be able to provide an out for them and have a celebrant take care of the service. Some clergy understand that and some don't.

That's where the balance comes in. It's an introductory process that we need to have with clergy, to help them to know that celebrants are not trying to steal their congregation by any stretch of the imagination. Because the people that the celebrants are working with aren't part of a congregation. But they could be. There are many people that I have dealt with who were once part of a congregation, but chose a celebrant service, quite possibly, because they didn't want to deal with that guilt factor.

And I was able to do a service for them and incorporate in things that were important to them, regarding their faith, because the fact that they haven't been in church in a long time doesn't mean they don't have faith. They still have their religious convictions. They just haven't been doing anything about being with the body. So to give them the faith convictions wrapped into the storyline is exactly what they need. I'm happy to give that to them.

Now, after the funeral is a whole different story. While I'm there visiting with them and forming this service for them, if they were formally of a church and just kind of washed away to the side and got out of the habit of going, I can encourage them back into the body of fellowship, so that they have that support that they need, in order to deal with the grieving process. For me, that's a terrific thing. And for some of them, it is too.

It certainly isn't a thing I force, but the suggestion is there. And the pastor is the one that comes out on the plus side, because now they're coming back into the fold. They're actively participating with the congregation and getting what they need, spiritually. So I'm not an enemy of the church at all.

Nancy: No, of course not. You offer a very valuable service, as you said, being brought back into the fold. Ruthann, I understand that you consider funeral service a ministry and you have even become ordained.

Ruthann: Yes. I had a very unusual start to get into funeral service to begin with. Even though I grew up over a funeral home, this sure wasn't what I was going to do when I grew up. I had a vision of becoming a wife and mother and making the world's best chocolate chip cookie. Attending PTA meetings and being a den mother. That was my vision of my future. My father decided that maybe I should go to school and have a vocation, in case my husband ever became ill or, god forbid, died. So I had to decide what I enjoyed doing. I was very much an art major in high school. I loved art. I carried that on into college and I studied portrait art in particular. My first semester of college kind of turned on me. All of my humanities courses changed in front of me. In humanities, we weren't studying humanitarians, we were studying how they died. In

English class, we were studying poetry, and every poem was about death. In Art History, we were studying Michelangelo's Death of a Virgin.

And in gym class -- I was taking a modern dance class -- I got stuck in the group that had to interpret death to music. I thought, "OK. Something's going on here." I went down to Dallas for a break, to visit my brother, who was in mortuary school at the time. I did have two brothers that were interested in Dad's business, but they didn't end up pursuing it all the way. My brother was in mortuary school and I played mom to him for a week. I got him off to school one day and saw a bible on his coffee table. While thumbing through that, I came to the book of Ecclesiastes.

I never start at the beginning of anything, I pick lucky number seven. That started out talking about the value of a good reputation. Then it went into say it is better to be in the house of mourning than the house of feasting. Sorrow is better than laughter, for sorrow has a refining influence on us. It's good to think about death while there is still time. A wise man will think much of death, while a fool thinks of only having a good time now. That kind of turned my head.

Nancy: I would think so.

Ruthann: "Oh, man!" I crossed the living room, called Dad, and said, "Guess what I'm going to do." So my arts studies came alive on a dead person. I ended up working on a human canvas, painting and sculpting people to look OK, so their family could say goodbye to them. And that was the beginning of my funeral service career, was working as an artisan, back in the operating room. I have since taken that personalization and put it into the room, to make the room look like the person. And now I take it and make the service look like person. But through the whole thing, my process was all about caring for that grieving family and being in the moment with them and helping them get from one place to another in one piece.

So my whole career has been about ministry and ministering to that grieving family. I have no problem calling myself a minister; I believe that's exactly what I am. But a couple of years ago, a few years ago, somebody who saw me do a celebrant service came to me and said, "You do weddings too, right?" [laughs] And it caught me off-guard. But then I started thinking about the same group of people that haven't been churched in a long time, and they need somebody to marry them, and why can't I apply the same principles that I use in a funeral for a wedding?

So I did go and get ordination papers. Mind you, it's not anything like being a seminarian, and it's not that hard to become an ordained minister and have papers. But that makes it possible for me to do marriage ceremonies, and the fact that I have a title of minister makes it easier for funeral homes to be able to introduce me to a grieving family, because then they feel like they have somebody that is tuned in.

Nancy: And, Ruthann, also maybe it might make the family feel more at ease too, because if they're seeing some guilt about calling you instead of a minister, or somebody from a church or a shul, by you being a minister that kind of says, you know, killing two birds with one stone, basically.

Ruthann: Right. And then I explain to the people at the beginning of every service that I don't have a congregation, my congregation has arrived here today. And then they get it.

Nancy: Nice.

Ruthann: So it's wonderful to be able to have strong purpose in my work. And I think that's something that everybody aspires to, to have a job that is full of purpose and makes a benefit to the world.

Nancy: Absolutely. Now, can you tell us a little bit about how a celebrant service is different from a standard service?

Ruthann: Well, like I had mentioned earlier, a standard service usually has a lot of doctrine involved in it. And it normally is stamped out ahead of time, and you just put a person's name in it. My service has a lot of story involved in it, a lot of research involved in it, and it hits a lot of nerves while I'm going through it. And mind you, when I say "nerves," don't get me wrong, because that sounds weird. It hits everybody different because the emotion is in there. The emotion is not always in a standard service because we aren't always talking about a story. When you're telling a story, you are walking through somebody's book of themselves and you're feeling things that you wouldn't normally feel in a standard service because you can relate to a lot of things that are going on in this person's life, because they've happened in your life too, possibly. And you develop a relatability with that one.

I had a gentleman come up to me after one of my services and I had given out paper to people to write a note to the person on, and we put those notes in the casket, at the end of the service. And this gentleman came up to me, he says, "You know what I wrote on my note?" And I was shocked that somebody wanted to share with me something that personal. He says, "I wrote I'm sorry." He says, "Because I didn't realize that we were in the service together and we had so many things in common, and I never took the time to get to know him well."

Nancy: Wow.

Ruthann: And I was floored. I was just floored. And can you imagine that happening in a standard service?

Nancy: No, not at all.

Ruthann: No. This is a very intimate experience to have with someone at service. And I get very vested -- I guess that's a good word -- in every service that I'm doing because I really, really want to get on the same page with the family. And every family member has a different viewpoint, which speaks to how I do my interview process, because there are people who gather the family into one room and then interview them. And while that's not a horrible thing to do, to have a family meeting and let everybody speak, I have learned through experience that the strong speak over the weak, and the weak never get heard. So I like to have one-on-one interviews with the family, and I do it on the telephone because they're less likely to be interrupted. And I spend as long on the phone as each family member requires. For some people it's 10 minutes, but for one gentleman it was an hour and a half that he needed to tell me how heartbroken he was that his kid brother died before him.

And, at the end of that service, there was this elderly gentleman with a cane, quaking with Parkinson's on the front row. His wife came over to me and she says, "I want to thank you for speaking with my husband last night on the phone. You gave him permission to cry."

Nancy: Wow.

Ruthann: And that was the turning point for him and I was delighted to be able to know that the time was that valuable. Some people just need time, and not everyone has that in their schedule to offer a family. And that's another reason why I say that about priests and pastors and rabbis, that they have so much work on their plate dealing with the whole congregation, that to have that amount of time to be able to offer a family is not always available for them. But it is essential for the griever to have someone hear them.

Nancy: Yes it is, absolutely.

Ruthann: And then, when you have a service that shows that they were heard and that what their heart was saying is put out there in front of people, it's huge. It's a wonderful value and it's amazing what it can do for a family because, as funeral directors, we've seen a lot of dysfunctional families. Not that our families are any less dysfunctional, but we've seen a lot of dysfunctional families come through the funeral home and there's a reason why they're so perplexed, because they aren't talking to each other as well as they should be because they're hurt by past incidences and they make assumptions about each other and how each other feels about each other. And they're living that as if it's truth, and it's not necessarily truth, it's just what they believe is truth, because they feel that that person must feel this way about them.

And they live with that and it's ingrained in them and it causes their conflict to be this huge crevasse. When I interview them individually and hear what their individual stories are and how they feel, and I can relay that during the course of the celebrant service, it's like a light-bulb moment for some of these people, to hear the other person's heart. It becomes a tool for them to heal their wounds with each other and it helps them to understand and relate to each other differently. And I don't know any standard service that can do that for them.

Nancy: No. And as you say, different voices can sometimes help hearts hear each other.

Ruthann: Right.

Nancy: Mm-hm. Let's talk about some of the tokens.

Ruthann: Oh, tokens, I love tokens. I love to find a little something that expresses who that person is. We've had prayer cards and things like that to hand out at funeral homes for ages. But to have something that doesn't have the person's name on it, that is like a little secret between you and that little something, that whenever you see it, it will remind you of that person. It just gives you that moment in time to have a little private memory moment. I love that. I like to be able to go through the stories that people have given me and find the hook that was... Hook. OK, that makes me think of one right away. There was one gentleman, named Duke, love this guy -- big, burly guy, man's man, but he loved to tell his family that he believed in faeries. His heroes were Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones and Peter Pan. He had a time with his grandkids, treating them to stories about faeries.

At the cemetery, when we were doing the commitment service, I shared with people about how he took the grandkids to the sliding doors in the dining room at night and show them these flickering lights in the back yard. Of course, we all know they were lightning bugs or fireflies and he was telling the children, "You know what those are?" and they said, "No, poppy, what?" and he says, "They're faeries."

Nancy: Aw.

Ruthann: They said, "No, they aren't!" "Oh, yes they are" "Oh no, they aren't!" He said, "Yeah, they are." "Really?" And he had them sucked in, and when he was in the hospital in his last days, he got a get-well-card from his granddaughter. In it it said, "Poppy, I want you to know I had a dream last night that Peter Pan, you and me went to Neverland and told all the Neverland creatures how to behave. And I want you to know that I believe in faeries and everything you told me. Get well soon." So I called her forward and I gave her a beaded evening bag and I said, "While I play this song, I'd love for you to give everybody here one of what's in this evening bag." And she was excited to have a part. She went around and started dispensing these little Ziploc bags that I had in there. They were two by two inch, I got them from the jewelry store, and they had little stickers on them.

And it was fun to see people light it up as they're getting their bag and light up a second time as they see the sticker that says "pixie dust." And, during the time of the song playing -- I played a song, "Find Your Wings," which is a beautiful song about finding your way through life and I wish that you will find your wings -- the funeral director took these angel corners off of the caskets and then gave them to each of the children.

There were four children. And this grandchild is passing around his little Ziploc bags. At the last note of the song, she passed out the last bag. You can't buy timing like this. It was just perfect. And when we got done, I told everybody, "I stayed up late last night and I collected as much as I could. I would like for you to take this home and put it in your pillow for dreams of magical adventure.

Or keep it in your pocket for luck. But if by chance you would like... I know that we have a lot left over. If you would like to sprinkle Duke's casket with your pixie dust, you can have another one to take home." And every adult there took great pleasure in sprinkling pixie dust on this casket and asking for another one.

Nancy: That is so beautiful.

Ruthann: So just to find that hook, just to find something that speaks to that person. For one fellow, he was standing at the bus stop every morning by the general store, and he would back up to the peanut bin and steal peanuts. Now, everybody stole peanuts, but this is the one that got caught. His nickname was Peanut. So I had tiny little brown paper bags with three peanuts in there to represent, "I Love You." They were folded up and in a basket by the door. Everybody went home with some peanuts. I have another gentleman who served in the Marine Corps and he wanted to be a lifer, but his wife talked him out of it. But he was a very proud marine and wished he had stayed in. So we took a poker chip, because he loved to play poker, and I turned it into an American flag, because it was red and white striped on the outside. I put a blue center in it and a star on it. Everybody took a poker chip to remember him.

It's something that you can have in your pocket, in your drawer of your desk. Anywhere. But whenever you see it, it's just a little light bulb moment for you to remember that person. For another man it was a turkey feather. He loved turkeys and he relocated them for the Division of Fish and Game and Wildlife. When his sons told me about how he loved turkeys, they cried. They were that emotional about how much their father loved turkeys.

And how he would take corn out in the field of his farm at four o'clock every day. And as he spread it they just came running from the woods. They loved this man and he loved them. So everybody got a turkey feather at the end of that service. And at the cemetery, I never saw so many people adorned with turkey feathers in my life. In their pockets, stuck in their hair, behind their ear, whatever. But they were delighted to have a feather. And it wasn't an expensive thing. But it was a valuable thing.

Nancy: And it was thoughtful.

Ruthann: It really brings the story home.

Nancy: You're obviously an extraordinary celebrant. I know that because I know you. But does it make a difference which celebrant a firm chooses? What are the things that they should consider?

Ruthann: There are a lot of different celebrant trainings that are popping up all over the country. I can't speak to the value of each of them, because I haven't been to all of them. But I think it's important to understand that when you hire a celebrant, it should be somebody who has background in grief. There are a lot of people that go and do celebrant work because they want to do a good thing. That's nice and people should do a good thing. But to go from being an event planner to being a celebrant is a jump. I think there's a lot to be said for having education in psychology on some level and grief in particular. Because you're dealing with people that are going through a very traumatic time. And a funeral home does not want to take their family and turn them over to just anyone. I would caution people, when selecting a celebrant, to keep that in mind. That you really want somebody who has a background in understanding how to deal with a grieving family.

There are a lot of funeral homes who are having people trained to be an in-house celebrant. That's a wonderful thing. To have somebody that is from your staff is perfect. Because they've been in the funeral home, they've seen the situations, they've come to understand what a grieving person is. To give them a little extra training is not a bad thing. And then send them to celebrant training.

I just know that, as funeral directors, we've gone through so many times when we said things to a family with all good intention and wish we could suck the words back into our mouth, because we've realized that we weren't a help just then.

If you're taking someone who has no training in grief and giving them to a family, the likelihood of that happening is even greater. We all know how terrified we are of the limousine driver who's not discrete in how he deals with the family. The same thing could happen with somebody else who's decided to take on this job... And they're going to do a good thing. I just have this horrid picture of the person who thinks, "Oh, somebody had died, let's celebrate."

It's like, "No. We need to enjoy that person's life. But we need to understand, first and foremost, that the people that we're dealing with are torn." And we need to find a way to deal with their broken heart. And be in the moment with them and care for that heart, first and foremost. One of the ways we do that is acknowledge that their heart is broken. And then to remind them that there was joy and it can remain. Because the fact that you love a person doesn't die with that person.

The love continues. Unfortunately, the grief part of somebody dying isn't something you get over. I think there's a thought out there in the world that, after a certain amount of time, you should be over it by now. And you should have closure. There's an interesting word, closure. But you don't get over grief. There is no closure. Grief just kind of hangs out with you the rest of your life. The change is your relationship with that grief.

Grief is very brutal and unkind in the beginning. As you travel along with grief, it becomes more of a familiar companion. It doesn't hurt you as much and as often as it does in the beginning. But it's always there and we need to be aware of that. I would recommend that when people pick out a celebrant, that they would have a conversation with them, first off. Know who they are and have their name on file, for when that moment comes that they need to recommend somebody.

This isn't something that you should figure out at that moment. It's something that you should know in advance. Meet a celebrant. Let them know that you're interested in their services. And ask them to talk to you about what they consider their field of choice. And get a sense of who they are. So that, when the time comes that you need to recommend a celebrant, you have full confidence in who you're bringing on board to deal with your family.

Nancy: Right. It's a very delicate balance, as you said. It's a journey. Grief is a journey. For somebody that is not familiar with funeral services, it may not be something that they could just jump into. As we all know, in mortuary school, you do learn how to deal with family. So you already have that education in place. This is just another layer, another skill set that you're taking on. I know John McQueen, in Florida, has four or five of his funeral directors who are also trained celebrants.

Ruthann: Yes. And it's good to have a back-up. That's another thing. It's really nice to have someone that you can go to if your in-house celebrant becomes ill or is on vacation. Or if they're already working on a service, another one comes in. It's hard to get a focus to work on two celebrant services at the same time. So to have a back-up person is a wonderful thing. That could be somebody on staff or somebody from the outside. But it's very important to have that available for when everything hits at once. That's the way funeral homes are. Everything's quiet and then everything hits at once. If we could just get people to space out the death rate evenly, it would be a wonderful thing. But in all my years I have never see it. So we need to be prepared for things like that.

Nancy: Ruthann, how can a celebrant service aid in the reputation of a funeral home and its importance in the neighborhood? We know there are a lot of independents all competing for the same cases. How can this service help a funeral home stand out?

Ruthann: If you have a good funeral at your funeral establishment, people walk away and they say, "Hey, Joe, you should have been to Mary's funeral over at ABC Funeral Home. It was amazing." People talk about services that are good. They do. It just happens. It can happen at the

repast or it can happen the next time they see somebody at the coffee shop. But people talk about incredible services. You'll notice that when I said that comment, no one said my name. They said the funeral home's name, because that's where the service was. So now Joe knows that an incredible service happened at ABC Funeral Home. That must mean that incredible funerals happen at ABC Funeral Homes. Now, if you want an incredible funeral, then you need to go to ABC Funeral Home to get it. So it comes right on around back on the funeral home. And promotes the funeral home, whenever a good funeral goes out of there. Funeral directors know this, but they don't necessarily think of it in terms of the service itself.

They know of it in regards to their staff, their livery equipment. They know about how pretty their place looks and the value of the services that they offer. But the actual ceremony itself can bring people into the funeral home. So you've got to make sure that you have everything that a family needs to want to come to your funeral home.

And I don't know many families who are going to a funeral home because they offer casket corners. But if that funeral home has the ability to bring in a good funeral, so that the service itself speaks to that person's life and really shines, then that shows on the funeral home. And it's free advertising for them.

The one thing that funeral homes have a challenge with in a celebrant service is that sometimes they cost a little bit more for the service than a church service or bringing a pastor in. Because we're so used to giving pastors very little money for what they do, but a celebrant service has, usually, about 15 hours worth of work in it.

And I don't know if funeral homes really understand that. Because the interview process, the research, the discovery of the correct soundtrack for the service -- because music is a part of that -- to be able to put all that together, the average celebrant is spending about 15 hours to make that happen.

So the fee is usually larger than what you're used to paying for clergy to come in. If we could just take to Catholic church, for example, once you add up the cost of the mass, the organist and soloist, the gratuity to the sexton and to the altar boys, when you put that all together, that's very comparable to a celebrant service. There is a sliding scale in celebrant work. Some do not charge very much. I put a lot of time and energy into mine, so I know that I'm a little bit more than funeral homes are expecting to hear.

But the family has never asked for their money back or ever been disappointed by the type of service that was offered, because they know they got a value. That's really the whole thing. It's perceived value. When you're talking about that person's life and why that family loves them, the family's willing to pay that amount of money to be able to have that love expressed. It's really important to understand the family's part in this and what they consider to be worth the money.

Nancy: And it's an experience. It's not a cookie cutter, Psalm 23 with a name injected. I've been to funerals already where they've mispronounced the decedent's name. You don't want that to happen. This goes so much far beyond that and celebrates the person's life. And, as you said, there are two times in your life where you really want to celebrate. That's a wedding and a funeral.

Ruthann: Exactly.

Nancy: Now, Ruthann, are there other services that a celebrant can offer a funeral home?

Ruthann: Yes. Funeral homes are doing stuff outside the box right now anyway. A lot of them are offering holiday help programs. A celebrant is a wonderful vehicle to use for a holiday help program. You call the community in and recognize that they're going through a difficult time, for maybe the first or the third time. And they don't know how to deal with holidays without that person. A celebrant can certainly help out with that. But I'm learning that there are other times that a funeral home can actually get advertising value out of offering their celebrant. To go to a Memorial Day event at an American Legion or a VFW. I have a service already scheduled for myself for memorial day, where I'm going to take care of a town's parade. When it goes back to the American Legion, I'm doing a brief ceremony there, in conjunction with the legion and what they normally do. The mayor will speak as well. But they called me back for a second year, because it was important to them to have the value of the veteran acknowledged in more than just a couple words.

That's one place a funeral home could get added advertising, by having their celebrant there.

I've also taken to working with assisted living. I recently introduced my mother to an assisted living facility. I wanted to do some volunteer work for them. This was a wonderful discovery for me, to understand that the people who are in assisted living are fully aware of what's going on around them. These are not nursing home people. These are not people moaning in a bed. These are really sharp cookies who just need to be in an environment where somebody can help them if they need it.

A lot of them have given up their driving privileges. But they're in an environment where they're having activities and dining in the dining hall with people, and making friends, and developing relationships. Those people die and they have funeral services out of house that these people don't go to. Last Thanksgiving, I had a service at the assisted living. I did it a week prior to Thanksgiving. We acknowledged all the people who died in that facility the year prior.

I told some character traits about each person and lit a candle in their memory. I had so many people come up to me afterwards and tell me how important that service was to them. We sang some songs and remembered these people, who were a part of a fabric of their life while they're living there. It had a lot of value. If a funeral home went to an assisted living facility and did something like this with their celebrant... What a wonderful PR move that is.

Nancy: It would be beautiful.

Ruthann: It really shines back on the facility. So I would encourage people to think about that. I also had a luncheon that I held at Valentine's Day. I didn't do it on Valentine's Day itself. I did it just prior to Valentine's Day. And did a public invitation to a nice restaurant. And had a luncheon that people were glad to pay for to get in. We had a little service in there, in conjunction with this luncheon. It gave everybody an opportunity to talk about the person who was their valentine. Because they knew Valentine's Day is going to be different this year. I encouraged each of them to bring a photograph of their favorite valentine. They all brought their spouse or their sweetheart with them, in picture form. All these pictures are being flashed around

the room. They were so pleased to be able to stand and say a few words about why their valentine was special. It was a wonderful event. Everybody has asked to come back for next year. I'm very pleased that I found something that we've been missing for so long.

Because we know the holidays are important, but here's the one holiday in the calendar year which is designed for couples only. Here we have people who are newly no longer a couple. It's a totally different day for them this year. So to give them an opportunity to get with other people and celebrate the fact that they still have love in their heart and this is who they have it for... It was a really great event. It made me feel good. It made me feel so good, to know that they really valued it.

Nancy: It's so special. And it's so special that you thought of that. It does give them a level of closure. At the same time, it celebrates their life with their loved one, who has passed on.

Ruthann: Yeah. It's a wonderful, wonderful opportunity for them. This is something that we could definitely go out and do at senior centers as well. There are so many opportunities out there. It's just a matter of being creative and using celebrants to work it out. Because a celebrant can cross all the denominational barriers. This is the joy of a celebrant. They don't have a label hanging on them. You can use them anywhere and they can take care of business. So I'm excited that doors are opening that weren't necessarily open before. It's all because of celebrant work.

Nancy: It's taking the grieving and, even if for a short time, turning it into a love story, of who the person was, and celebrating that. The grief is going to be there. You cannot make that go away, as you know. But, for a short time, taking them out of that place of grief and letting them share their love of this person who has passed on.

Ruthann: Yes. And the nice thing about celebrant work also is that there are some people who are curmudgeons in life. And you just can't seem to think of why you should have a funeral for them, because they're just that challenging. But a celebrant can find something good in everyone and bring that to the forefront and make a service out of it. That's a plus factor. For the family to be able to have something that they can hold onto, that was a value of that person's life. Yes, they were good at that. Maybe they saw things from a different viewpoint, but they certainly had this about them. You just find the light side of the person and bring that to the forefront. It gives you a better feeling when you're letting go of someone.

Nancy: And it makes the family know that every life is worth remembering.

Ruthann: Exactly.

Nancy: Well, thank you, Ruthann. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Ruthann: I can't think of anything off the top of my head. We've had a really good talk.
[laughs]

Nancy: Oh, yeah, it was wonderful. Thank you so much. I almost cried at a couple of the stories. Ruthann, I know that there are a lot of young people who have asked me to speak with you and for you to share your wisdom and knowledge. And I'm sure a lot of them would like to get in touch with you after this podcast. How can they do that?

Ruthann: They can find me through my website, which is CelebrationOfALifetime.com. The one challenge that people have is they want to put an "S" in the middle of that. While I do a lot of celebrations, I only do one at a time. And each one of them is a celebration of a lifetime. So if they go there, there's an inbox on there, on the contact page. I'm happy to be able to respond to them. I'm always excited to be able to share celebrant work with people and have them understand the value of that.

Nancy: You're also on Facebook.

Ruthann: I am. I'm on Facebook. I have a fan page, Celebration of a Lifetime. And I love to friend funeral directors, Ruthann Brown Disotell. So feel free to ask to friend me and you can follow along with what I'm doing.

Nancy: Thank you so much, Ruthann. And thank you for sharing with use today.

Ruthann: My pleasure, Nancy. It was great talking to you.

Nancy: You too.

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and <http://www.funeraldirectorschat.com/2010/green-funerals/>