

A celebration of life

For thousands of years a funeral/memorial service has been a means of expressing our beliefs, sharing sorrow and acknowledging what a loved one has meant to us. A funeral or memorial service:

- helps us acknowledge that someone we love has died
- gives an opportunity to say goodbye
- honors the person's legacy as stories and memories are shared
- provides a social support system for the family and friends of the deceased
- offers hope for the living

In recent years, many people choose to hold a memorial service instead of a funeral. A *funeral service* is with the body present and is usually planned within a few days of death. A *memorial service* (without the body) can be delayed as long as you want to meet the convenience or needs of the family.

Many funeral directors will be glad to assist with memorial service planning, but there will be a charge for such services. However, many families have found it therapeutic and loving to take charge without the help of a funeral director. Having something to do takes away the sense of helplessness survivors often feel at a time of death

Memorial services are conducted in a variety of ways. Those who adhere to a particular faith tradition may choose to participate in the rites and rituals that are practiced by their faith community. But memorial services are not only for the religiously observant. A service of remembrance can be completely designed around the life of a loved one.

Creating a unique memorial experience, whether for a few immediate family

members or friends far and wide, is an opportunity to begin the process of healing for those who are grieving. Remember that funerals are for the living—for those who endure the trauma of losing a loved one.

Planning a memorial service

The major purpose of a memorial service is to recognize, honor and celebrate a particular life. There are a variety of possibilities for creating a unique service. Here are a few tips to consider when planning a gathering to celebrate a loved one's life.

The setting

First consider what type of service will best reflect the personality and wishes of the deceased. Marcia was a leader in her church and had strong ties to that community, so it was logical that her memorial service was held at her beloved church. Harold lived a quiet life on the farm, tending to the fields that his family had farmed for generations, so his immediate family gathered on the hillside as the sun was setting, shared stories, said a simple prayer and buried his ashes. Larry was an active member of the American Legion, so his family planned a service that honored his many years of military service and included a party in the same building where he had participated in many legion events throughout his lifetime. Dean was an artist and musician, so his memorial service was in an art gallery with many of his paintings hanging on the walls for people to enjoy.

Who will come?

Decide if there will be a public announcement in the newspaper or a social networking site, if the information will be shared through the "grapevine" or word of mouth, or if it will be by invitation only.

Who will lead the service?

A small gathering of family members may be more organic than a planned ceremony and revolve around story telling filled with both laughter and tears. If a more formal ceremony is planned, a clergy member, trusted friend or sibling may be necessary to preside over the service. Will there be one or more speakers to provide reflections on the deceased, or readers of poetry/scripture, or musicians? Roles for children may include handing out flowers or programs.

The service itself

If there are no religious dictates, you may want to pick a theme of remembrance that exemplifies the deceased's life. Will she be remembered for her civic activities, volunteering or excellent culinary skills? Will he be remembered for his love of gardening, charity work or practical jokes? Are there favorite readings of the deceased—Bible verses, Zen philosophy, quotes from political leaders or comedians? Did he or she leave any letters or instructional writings? Perhaps relatives and friends could be invited to write their own letters or memories to be read aloud during the service. There are a variety of ways to include everyone in the sharing of memories and honoring the person who has died: lighting candles, signing a guest book, bringing photos or mementos of the loved one and sharing with others, planting a tree. Be creative and have fun planning something that is unique to the one who has died.

Photographs and Memory Books

Photographs and videos often help to break the ice for teary family members and friends. As people look at the photos together, memories are stirred and life is celebrated. Consider making a photo collage to display in the gathering space or create a video montage of beloved photos to play at the service. If possible, include awards or special recognitions the person has received.

Refreshments

Sharing food during times of bereavement is a time-honored tradition. Whether it is casseroles shared at the person's home, a lunch at a restaurant, or simply cookies and tea after the service, eating together is an important part of sharing our grief.

We hope that the guidelines provided here are helpful to you if you decide to plan a memorial service on your own. If you desire further assistance, please contact the NorthShore hospice chaplains who are available to help plan or lead a memorial service for your loved one.