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### ICCFA Magazine spotlight

► Dr. Wolfelt is a respected author, educator and consultant to funeral service. He advocates for the value of meaningful funeral experiences in his death education workshops across North America each year.

► He conducts an annual training for funeral directors on creating meaningful funeral ceremonies.

### More from this author

► Dr. Wolfelt's annual training program on creating meaningful funeral ceremonies will be February 4-7, 2019, in Scottsdale, Arizona. For more information or to receive a descriptive brochure, call the Center for Loss at 970.226.6050, email Dr. Wolfelt directly or go to the website for information about this program or others being held at different locations.

[www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com)

### More about this topic



► ICCFA University, July 20-26, 2018, will include a College of Hospitality and Event Management, headed by Dean John Bolton, CCE, CSE, CCrE. More information is available about ICCFAU 2018 at [www.iccfa.com](http://www.iccfa.com).

## SERVICE TO FAMILIES

As today's society emphasizes convenience in all aspects of life, funeral and cemetery service providers must reexamine how they are serving the unchanged need of families for healing experiences in the aftermath of death.

# How to transform the power and purpose of cemeteries: A lesson from down under

I'm a proponent of extensive, personalized funeral experiences because I know they help grievers begin to heal. Authentic death rituals are essential starters to healthy mourning. But as families increasingly bypass timely funerals, death rituals and burial or interment, they believe they are choosing to suffer less when in fact they will go on to suffer much more.

Purpose-based innovation in funeral and death care is the answer. We are at a crossroads. Families need our leadership and education, and they need it now—before the funeral goes the way of the dodo bird.

In 2015, I was honored to serve as the keynote speaker at the Australian Funeral Directors Association convention in Sydney. It was there that I had the pleasure of meeting Jane Grover. Jane is CEO of Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust, or SMCT—a community-based nonprofit responsible for eight cemeteries and memorial parks located in the state of Victoria, Australia, in and around Melbourne.

Following my presentation, Jane and her director of customer experiences, Angela Uilderks, decided to attend my annual training on the “why” of meaningful funerals in Scottsdale, Arizona. I knew in interacting with Jane that she had the vision and skill set to re-imagine and reinvigorate the funeral experience for the families SMCT serves.

Following my training, Jane was kind enough to invite me to return to Australia to provide some staff training on the experience economy and community education on grief.

While working with this group, I was able to witness firsthand how Jane and her team have been able to apply the experience economy lessons I teach and put them into action. SMCT has literally transformed itself into a newly vital and relevant part of their

community.

I asked Jane some questions so we can all learn how a cemetery organization took the lead in finding new ways to exceed contemporary families' expectations, meet families' essential mourning needs and thrive.

### *How did SMCT begin to work on changing their operating model?*

We realized that we live in a society in which there is immense pressure to surrender to convenience in all aspects of our lives. The ritual of funerals is eroding into a few hours where ashes are scattered with no ceremony, a brief wake may or may not be held and people move on without acknowledging the trauma of loss and the impact this major life event will cause.

It was through the power of observation and listening to our community that we realized that we needed to change our model to a customer-centric organization where rites and rituals are observed and serve the Victorian community.

We needed to do some deep self-reflection about what we do and why we do it. Employee focus groups across the organization were facilitated, and traditional views were challenged. There was also a significant amount of listening to our multicultural community and learning what was important to them.

We also asked tough questions about what would occur if we didn't change. Obviously, if you lose one or two percent of your customers every year, there is a negative impact on your revenue.

We also mapped our networks to understand our touch points so that we could create shared value and understand the pinch points. (Believe me, there were a few.)

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In fact, food and beverage has become our fastest-growing revenue stream, generating \$5 million per annum and fitting perfectly with the whys of funerals and the importance of sequencing in the funeral ritual. This was a revenue stream we did not have two years ago.

—Jane Grover, CEO of Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust, Victoria, Australia



Bunurong Memorial Park's café is part of the cemetery's dedication to offering families 21st century services.

### *After gathering stakeholder opinions and ideas, what changes did you start to make?*

Since 2011, we have undergone an exceptional period of evolution and transformation. We are dedicated to listening and responding to the changing needs of the community and continuing to refine offerings to enhance the customer experience.

First, we introduced high-quality food and beverage offerings, understanding that this supports and brings families together in an atmosphere of care and love. We built function rooms and cafés with diverse, multicultural menu offerings.

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Our chapels, which we now call “reflection spaces” to embrace all faiths and spiritual orientations, have dedicated viewing rooms for families to have space and time to spend with the bodies of their loved ones as they wish. Our grounds have also changed—no longer straight lines of graves and roses or wall niches for cremated remains.

In early 2016, we opened Bunurong Memorial Park. It is a model for all memorial parks in the 21st century that want to remain relevant and sustainable. From the moment a family experiences a death, they can take comfort walking through the doors of BMP that we will cater to their needs and

In February 2017 we launched The Centre for Care & Wellbeing at Springvale Botanical Cemetery. This is a purposed center that provides a peaceful, reflective and inclusive sanctuary for those who are on their journey through grief. CCW support services have a holistic approach for physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Programs offered include gentle physical activities such as yoga, walking groups, meditation, music, art and informative talks. —Jane Grover, CEO of Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries



**Bunurong Memorial Park's also has an onsite florist, as well as function rooms.**

offer them the care and compassion required at this difficult time.

In addition to reflection spaces, BMP includes a dedicated cremation viewing room as well as a children's playground, a café, function rooms and an onsite florist. Our florist stocks excellent seasonal blooms but will also fulfill special requests. What's more, we offer a service where we place floral arrangements on graves for families who are not able to visit regularly.

In addition to the reflection spaces, BMP also offers solace rooms (for meditation), funeral director meeting rooms, fridges, walking paths and, of course, the traditional burial and cremation products.

Operating in the experience economy, people value time, convenience, the ability to customize their ceremony and create a bespoke experience. We make it easy for families to keep tradition while being a 21st century, responsive organization.

In this vein, in February 2017 we

launched The Centre for Care & Wellbeing at Springvale Botanical Cemetery. This is a purposed center that provides a peaceful, reflective and inclusive sanctuary for those who are on their journey through grief.

CCW support services have a holistic approach for physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Programs offered include gentle physical activities such as yoga, walking groups, meditation, music, art and informative talks.

All CCW programs are also available to our staff—many of whom have participated in meditation sessions and yoga classes, which has led to significant health benefits.

We also open up our facilities to select community events, including weddings and other gatherings.

In 2017, our Melbourne General Cemetery hosted the annual Melbourne Food & Wine Festival. It was a sensational event, and the food and wine offering were spectacular—all designed and created by our

head chef and our food and beverage team. A jazz band provided fabulous entertainment, and a night tour of the cemetery was led by our historian and manager of cultural heritage.

***How does SMCT work with area funeral homes and funeral directors?***

Often, families will phone our contact center to ask for guidance to navigate through the processes of planning a funeral. Our staff explains that the first step is for the family to choose a funeral director. We work

together with the family's appointed funeral director to ensure that we meet the needs and expectations so that the experience can be a positive one.

At BMC, funeral directors meet with families in comfortable, private consulting suites to discuss funeral arrangements. When a funeral director books a consulting room, an SMCT concierge team member is appointed to serve the family alongside the funeral director.

The benefit for the family to meet onsite at BMP is that they become comfortable with the logistics of the site, parking, the location of reflection spaces for services, the viewing rooms (for those who wish to spend time with the bodies of their loved ones), the style and size of the function rooms, the menu and floral arrangements, the music or any other special requests, such as an on-screen presentation during the service. It provides the family the opportunity to explore all we have avail-



**Bunorong Memorial Park, opened in 2016 in Victoria, Australia, features a children's playground.**

able. Our SMCT representative assists with all aspects of the funeral.

Once the funeral director has taken the loved one into their care, the family may take comfort in having that loved one transported to BMP prior to the service. The family may then hold a viewing, public or private, in the days or evenings prior to the funeral service.

Their loved one may then stay in the care of our staff in our storage facilities located within the customer care facility up to and including the day of the service, all carefully cared for by our staff in conjunction with their funeral director.

When the time comes for the funeral service, SMCT staff will transport the loved one from our storage facilities to the reflection space and have them in place for the family and friends to honor at the service.

***What results and outcomes have you seen since transforming your organization?***

Repositioning SMCT into the 21st century has been disruptive and disorientating. However, the community has overwhelmingly responded to our innovation and constant display of moral courage.

What has been the impact? Increased visitation, strong revenue growth via a “house of brands” approach and increased service offerings. SMCT’s annual revenue has grown

from \$42 million in 2014 to \$63 million in 2017.

In addition, our workspaces, facilities and parklands have attracted several local and global awards. I am equally proud of the talent and capability within SMCT during my tenure and the significant cultural change we have led and the depth of care and compassion within the organization.

***What advice would you offer to funeral homes, funeral directors and cemetery professionals in North America?***

The value of rites and rituals for death and dying are being challenged today. You need to genuinely engage with your community to ensure you understand their needs and then find new and innovative ways to meet these needs that bring about perceived value and mutual benefit. You need to have moral courage.

This quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes encapsulates the “why”:

“Greatness is not in where we stand, but in what direction we are moving.

We must sail sometimes with the wind, and sometimes against it—but sail we must and not drift, nor lie at anchor.”

**What you must do**

Consider why some iconic brands are no

longer with us. Kodak, Blockbuster and Borders, for example, remained internally focused, feared change and ceased to remain relevant.

On the other hand, what have Disney, Uber, Google and Apple done differently to be relevant in today’s experience economy? They have all applied an external reflection philosophy.

They are forward-thinking, they track trends and technologies, they competently and confidently make decisions, they hire innovative leaders and they have a clear focus on the consumer and empowering them.

In closing, what I would share for all in the funeral/cemetery sector are the following principles:

**Purpose:** Be clear about you why you are needed as an organization and make decisions based on those whys.

**Resilience:** Be prepared to sail against the wind if need be.

**Integrity:** Align your values to ensure you take the right people on the journey with you.

**Moral courage:** Be courageous and make the hard decisions when required.

**Empathy:** Be mindful to consider situations from other perspectives.

This “PRIME” advice will take you far. SMCT is a testament to that. □