

HIGH-PROFILE FUNERALS

Joli A. Shaw

Your primary responsibility is to the family, but without careful media handling, chaos can develop

A five-year-old girl is taken from her home as her family sleeps. After an agonizing five days, police find the child's body along a nearby river. The family calls you to handle the funeral. The story has received media coverage statewide and was even picked up by CNN. You are ready to arrange the funeral, but are you ready to manage the media onslaught that will certainly surround the services?

Handling high-profile funerals requires tact, diplomacy and a "poker face" rivaling that of Barbara Walters when facing the media while offering your usual level of compassion, care and professionalism to the child's family. So how do you keep this scenario from turning into a three-ring circus, with you as the ringleader? In a word, *planning*.

Understand the Family's Wishes

You know your first responsibility is to the family, and that means finding out what they would like to include in the service. That also means talking directly to the family – not a representative. "We always need to make sure we are the contact person with the family, not the second party," said Kevin Mack, whose firm has arranged services for numerous celebrities and dignitaries, including former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, pop star Aaliyah, salsa queen Celia Cruz and John Cardinal O'Connor, archbishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of New York. "We should be as intimately involved with the family in these cases as in any other case."

In fact, when handling a high-profile funeral, finding out what family members *do not* want is often just as important as finding out what they do want. Making sure both you and your staff have an absolute understanding of those wishes is vital to meeting the family's needs. "We make sure we understand what the family wants," said Randall Weagley, president of Joseph Gawler's Sons, Inc., a Washington, D.C., firm that has handled the funerals of presidents, vice presidents, Supreme Court justices and other notable political and governmental figures. "Do they



want attention drawn to the service, or do they want privacy? That's the most important point."

Once you understand what the family wants, it is your job to make sure that everyone else understands, too. Remember, government agencies, state and local police departments, production companies and even the military do not decide how the service will proceed; the family does. Therefore, be prepared to protect the family's wishes. You will need a backbone of steel and skin like Teflon. "It's important that funeral directors keep in mind the family, because sometimes high-profile funerals get out of hand with VIPs deciding how things will happen," said Jack Hogan, Fogarty Funeral Home, Flushing, New York. "I have had to tell a bishop's office, 'That's not what the family wants.'"

Another consideration to consider is whether a family wants to speak directly to the media. Families often assign a spokesperson from the family, from a government office or from an actor's agency to handle all media requests. In some cases, they might even call upon funeral directors to serve as representatives. "The families want someone to act as a liaison, because it can be overwhelming," said Charles Childs of A.A. Rayner & Sons, Chicago, Illinois, which has handled funerals for celebrities, musicians and dignitaries, including Mayor Harold Washington. "They need someone who can coordinate; be in charge of information."

Assign Responsibility

Funeral directors who regularly handle high-profile funerals will tell you that the most important thing you can do is to assign specific responsibilities to your staff. That should begin with assigning a media representative; choose one person to answer all questions and provide any interviews requested. "You need a person who's dealt with media before," said Randy Earl of Brintlinger and Earl Funeral Homes, Decatur, Illinois, which has handled funerals for military casualties from the war in Iraq and tragic deaths, such as the one described in this article's introduction. "If you haven't, call NFDA or your state association to get pointers on what to do and what not to do." Then, ensure that all staff members know to refer any media queries to that spokesperson. This will avoid any confusion or conflicting reports while ensuring fulfillment of the family's wishes.

High-profile funerals are no different than regular funerals. They just have more attention.

Kevin Mack, Frank E. Campbell,
The Funeral Chapel, New York, New York

Next, delegate the remaining responsibilities among the staff—beyond the funeral directors who will directly serve the family. Determine who will work the front door, manage traffic in the parking lot, work with florists, drive the funeral coach, monitor the media, escort the casket, direct any arriving dignitaries, etc. "At Celia Cruz' funeral, we had one person handle umbrellas for the staff," said Mack. "Someone to push wheelchairs, and someone to take ladies to the ladies' room."

Joseph Gawler's Sons takes it a step further, beginning with a strict dress code for staff. "We want everyone looking distinguished but not standing out," said Weagley. "And each staff member has a very specific, assigned duty and practices that duty."

Finally, do not assume that your staff is immune to "celebrity fever." Said Mack: "Our staff is not allowed to approach any celebrities at our funeral home." Establish protocols for high-profile funerals, outline

your policy against seeking autographs during a service, and review proper phone etiquette.

You might even need to limit access to the facility, depending on the family's demands for privacy. "Our employees cannot come to the facility unless requested by the scheduling department," said J. Mark Busch, Busch Family Funeral Chapel. The Cleveland, Ohio-based firm, employs 35 full-time and 35 part-time staff members.

Keep the Media Informed

Be proactive; do not wait for radio and television stations or newspapers to call you. Prepare a press release or other communication necessary to release pertinent information to the media ahead of time. This prevents the feeding frenzy that can ensue as media representatives attempt to track down the story while also lending organization to the day of the funeral and visitation. Information you might consider providing includes



Tips for Talking to Reporters

Go for Sound Bytes: Reporters like and use short statements, or "sound bytes." To give them what they want, pause between sentences, and do not feel it is necessary to elaborate beyond what the question covers.

Breathe: It is okay to pause and think about your response before giving it. A quick answer does not necessarily constitute the best answer.

Try the D.A.M. Principle: Diffuse, Address and Move on. If a reporter asks a negative question or a question unrelated to the event at hand, first diffuse it, then address the question briefly, and then move on to make a positive point. For example: "Why are funerals so expensive?" Answer: (Diffuse first) "That is a common misconception." (Address) "However, we are not here today to discuss the funeral profession." (Move On) "We are here to discuss this funeral service, and I'll be happy to answer any questions you have about that."

Be Prepared: Have a statement ready and approved by the family, and know what the family does and does not want revealed to the media. Feel free to repeat the statement more than once during an interview.

Be Wary: Be aware that a reporter might ask you the same question more than once when trying to solicit a specific answer. Do not vary from your original answer.

Use Notes: For phone interviews, it is okay to have notes in front of you. Be prepared to answer any question the reporter asks, whether in person or on the phone.

the locations of burial and services, the procession route from the funeral home or church to the cemetery, the time of the visitation and funeral service, approved locations for filming and taping, restricted areas, maps and diagrams detailing where to be and when, and the designated funeral home and family contacts.

Take this proactive approach, of course, with the family's approval. In some high-profile cases, families might

demand anonymity, as was the case when the Busch Family Funeral Chapel recently handled the funeral of a current television sitcom-star's mother. The celebrity did not want the media to know about his mother's death until after the services were complete. "[He] did not want a picture of himself walking alongside his mother's casket," said Busch. "We were instructed by the actor's agent that we were not to reveal anything unless we were given an

approved code name. The star was back in California shooting another segment before the first announcement was made."

At that point, Busch issued a press release (approved by the actor) on the completion of the services. Media inquiries arrived from around the country and, per instructions, Busch forwarded them to the actor's press manager.

Manage the Details

You can argue that attention to detail is important for any funeral service, but even the smallest detail takes center stage when handling high-profile funerals. "Before Cardinal O'Connor's funeral, we measured the crypt," said Mack. "It was an inch off! We had to have a casket specially made."

Extra details can also stem from the number of outside organizations and agencies that are often involved with these events. Instructions might come from government agencies, press offices, agents, production companies and a variety of city, state and even federal officials.

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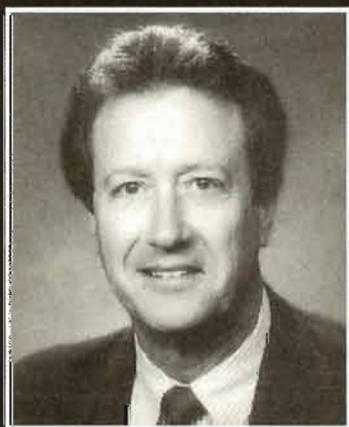
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*Realize that you are in charge –
you have to deal with the media,
but your first responsibility is to the family.*

**Randy Earl, Brintlinger and
Earl Funeral Homes, Decatur, Illinois**



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How do you sort through all of the confusion? "Make sure you have a contact person you can talk to – one person you can call," said Earl. Just as you should have one contact for the media in high-profile funerals, these agencies should have one point-person handling your event.

Maintaining regular communication with these organizations is the key to working with them. "We have many meetings with government officials and government agencies – plural, because there is often more than one at the table," said Weagley. "There's a structured organization to how it happens. It's lots of communication."

Security

Security, both for the family and for

attendees, is certainly a primary concern during high-profile funerals. That can include shielding families from crowds of onlookers and gawkers to protecting them, in criminal cases. "We've had gang funerals that become high profile, and families are concerned about police presence," said Childs. "And celebrities want to make sure close friends and family are able to receive each other and not have a security issue."

Thus, be prepared to take a major role in organizing protection, which could include hiring a security firm or working with city or state police and the FBI. Your toughest job might involve balancing their needs with the needs of the family. "We've had FBI, local police and the local sheriff in plain clothes watching the crowd," said Earl. "You have to make sure

they're in the position they want to be and are not infringing on the family's privacy."

A final consideration for security involves cost. It sounds cold, but security should be a part of the estimate you provide the family. Providing protection for a high-profile funeral can be very expensive, depending on the demands of the family. For the service of the television star's mother, "We hired security guards for the funeral home and had to provide security 24 hours a day," Busch said. "The security expense alone was \$5,000." *

Joli A. Shaw is a copywriter with Jones and Thomas, Inc. Located in Central Illinois, Jones and Thomas is a full-service marketing communications firm with 18 years of experience working with funeral homes, associations and suppliers in the funeral profession. For more information, call 217-423-1889 or visit www.jonesthomas.com.

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