

Kraft- Sussman Funeral Services: Know your rights in the funeral process

When I was in my teens, I felt that I would find some sort of catharsis as a mortician. I thought that perhaps seeing the remarkably placid faces of the dead would help me to find my own calm, that there might be a way to achieve such a temperament in life by observing it in those who have, whether peacefully or not, passed on into what some think of as death and other would rather perceive as being post-life. Unfortunately, Las Vegas lacks a mortuary school, and my scholarships tied me to studying at a Nevada institution, and so my dream of studying poise and character from the dead is just that, a dream, nothing more and nothing less; however, I did choose to study English and, pursuant to the skills I have gained from that study, am able to write about those who do what I could not.

I was recently introduced to Wendy Kraft and Laura Sussman, who together own Kraft-Sussman Funeral Services, Las Vegas' only gay-, woman-, and Jewish-owned funeral home. When I was approached to write an article on these two women and to investigate what the misconceptions people have about funeral rights and expenses so as to dispel the misunderstandings that those of us not in the business of death are likely to have, I was more than delighted to pursue the task, not just to live vicariously through Wendy and Laura but also to educate myself on how

I can ensure that I, or my partner, am respectfully treated when the unfortunate and unforeseen does happen.

Kraft- Sussman opened their doors in March of 2009, Laura Sussman having previously worked in the field of Jewish non-profit organizations and deciding to

and the needs of their mourning families – in forming their own funeral home. “We were both part of the Jewish burial society called the Chevra Kadisha,” said Laura Sussman, “and when a death occurred in the Jewish community, we would go in as volunteers and prepare

the body for burial in a traditional Jewish manner. Through this and my other jobs we would sometimes hear about staff of funeral homes behaving in an unethical and inconsiderate manner. We thought we could do something that would be true to the mission Wendy and I both have to help people and provide a positive alternative for families that would ensure a much more personal and intimate experience. Fortunately, we've been very well received since we started.”

Wendy Kraft's experience with the corporate funeral home validated the things Laura had been hearing about: “I realized that the corporate way wasn't necessarily the most sensitive way to treat people during those times. I also noticed that I was the only female funeral arranger where I worked, even though

families seemed to be comforted by my being a woman and a mother. When you get down to it, Laura and I are two devoted mothers. Who else would you

Continued on next page



join her partner, Wendy Kraft – who had been working as a funeral arranger for larger, more corporate-minded funeral homes and became very disillusioned by their emphasis on sales rather than catering to the wishes of the deceased

Some burial services are not mandated by law

Continued from previous page

want to take care of you and your family in those times?"

One of the biggest differences between Kraft-Sussman Funeral Services and their larger competitors is that they do not participate in a practice dubbed as "coroner's rotation," which is an arrangement between funeral homes and the coroner's office where the homes agree to help with the transportation of those deceased who are assigned to the coroner. This secures more business for funeral homes that do partake in



Wendy Kraft

coroner's rotation, but Wendy and Laura prefer to work with families that choose to work with them, as opposed to families that feel stuck with them and are not aware that they have the right to have the body of their loved one(s) moved to any facility of their choosing. When Wendy and Laura speak with a family, they do it directly and through an automated phone service (Not sure what this means)???. They pick the bodies up themselves, procure their death certificates, and stay in constant contact with that family so that they need not reintroduce themselves to different funeral arrangers and clerical staff, which would involve having to retell the tumultuous story of their loved one's death over and over. Laura Sussman said in reference to the quality and tenderness of their service, "Many of the families we work with come back to see us, and we have developed strong, lasting relationships with the families that we have served despite their circumstances. Even though we've only been open for less than two years,

we have more Google reviews than any of our competitors, and the families we serve are passionate about the work we've done."

In addition to not participating in coroner's rotation, Wendy and Laura are also adamant about making sure that the families they serve know which services are and are not necessary. "There are many misconceptions that people have about the funeral process, and one of those is the myth that embalming is a required part of a funeral service and burial," said Wendy Kraft, "So unless somebody is having a full visitation (open casket with somebody who has been dressed and had make up applied to them), it isn't necessary." It turns out that embalming, which most people believe is required, is not only unnecessary in most cases, but it also happens to be a fairly pricey item to add to a funeral home's revenue from a family. Therefore, some less considerate funeral homes that have funeral arrangers working on a commission basis are reluctant to tell families that embalming is optional. Also, formaldehyde is highly toxic and volatile, and traditional embalming is a process that necessitates the use of formaldehyde.

Yet another misconception that some larger funeral homes capitalize on is one concerning cemetery plots. Those who have not already reserved cemetery plots are often unaware that even if a mortuary owns a cemetery as well, the two are still separate entities. One can purchase funeral services in one place but have the actual burial elsewhere. Families are also able to make or purchase their own caskets and use them for the funeral, and since the Federal Trade Commission regulates the operations of funeral homes, the homes cannot charge a family more money in a different sector of the bill because they brought their own casket, dressed the deceased themselves, or provided any other services of their own volition.

Wendy Kraft also explained to me how not knowing one's rights in the funeral process can directly affect the LGBT community: "Most of the LGBT partnerships in Las Vegas are not registered domestic partnerships. They're people who have loved each other and lived together for years, but they don't have a legal connection. People have to know that if they want somebody specific, whether a partner or anybody else, making their funeral arrangements,

the person must sign a Statement of Authority to Order the Burial or Cremation of Human Remains and have it notarized, otherwise a funeral director, by law, has to work with the next of kin. It is important to have your wishes known, whether through pre-planning, writing, or telling your family and trusting them to abide by those wishes. You can alleviate a lot of discomfort for your family and make the process simpler and more comfortable." Wendy Kraft and Laura Sussman showed me the Statement of Authority form and told me that they welcome anybody in the LGBT community to come to Kraft-Sussman to sign this paperwork and have it notarized free of charge. "We just want everybody to be protected and to have their wishes



Laura Sussman

fulfilled compassionately," said Laura Sussman.

I sat with Wendy and Laura for at least an hour after the interview. We jumped from topic to topic and often discussed my own interest in mortuaries and how even though my vision of dealing with the dead was a ship that sailed long ago, I was pleased to be using my training as a writer to explore the truth and fiction associated with funeral direction. They gave me coffee, chocolate chip cookies, and explained to me how being devoted mothers to three children has helped them to maintain the tenderness and compassion that they take with them into their work. I must say that if these two can be so accommodating and warm to me when I'm alive, I should be so lucky to be in their care when I'm dead.