

A nice little chat about dying

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AROUND ALASKA

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Doris began this week's museum brown-bag lunch program, "How To Plan a Funeral," by saying she had hoped more people would attend, but the topic may have put them off. She said that was too bad because "there comes a day when you aren't ready for it and it happens."

There were about 10 people at the lunch, all women except for one young man who looked slightly puzzled. He may have thought this was the next week's program on wood carving. Four of us were on the funeral panel: Annie, Paul, Fireman Al and I.

Annie and Paul are volunteer undertakers. I write the obituaries and often turn them into eulogies, replacing the newsy last-name style with more conversational language.

Al wears a uniform, dark blue pants and shirt. He became a fireman after he burned his parents' log cabin down when he was in college. It was an accident and no one was hurt, but Al's destiny was determined.

Al spoke first about living wills and honoring wishes not to save a dying person with heroics. Then he coasted right to the point: "Once the person has died, what do you do?"

You call 911, and the dispatcher will send Al and his ambulance crew. Al takes charge in his considerate, efficient way and brings

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the body to a cool room at the fire hall.

Then the family decides if the body is going to be embalmed, cremated or just plain buried here. The first two are expensive and require shipping to Juneau. The latter is the simplest and most-preferred way to go.

In Haines, we don't have a real undertaker, and we can't embalm. We have 72 hours to get the body buried. After that, Al said without hesitation, "things deteriorate."

A retired public health nurse in her 70s asked if she could be cremated in a fire on the beach. Al didn't think so, but I could see her thinking the same thought we all had: Who'd know? And even if they did, who'd stop it?

One of the ladies asked if you had to have a coffin. Al said he thought you had to be buried in a "container" but not necessarily a casket; you could be buried in a "bag." His audience chuckled and shuffled.

Paul explained how he began preparing bodies for funerals in the 1970s. The Presbyterian pastor, who was our town's traditional undertaker, was ill, and the interims weren't interested in this service. Paul had helped, so he took over.

"I think it allows people and families to put the emphasis on observing the death, not getting tied up with the unnecessary expense or interferences from well-meaning outsiders," he said.

The ladies nodded approval all around.

This is where Annie, Paul's wife and the retired high school secretary, said, laughing, "Twenty-five years ago, if anyone had told me that I'd be doing some of this stuff, I would have been surprised, very surprised."

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Then she got serious. She stressed that they are volunteers, that this is a service for the community. "It is an honor to help in this way at that time," although, she added, "it is difficult."

Rigor mortis sets in right away. "The muscle tissue locks," Annie said. It releases again after a day, but the facial features of death don't change. When someone dies, "compose their features," Annie advised. Close their eyes and mouth "and prop their head up on a pillow." Fireman Al, usually the first outsider in the home after a death, often does this.

I bet he says a silent prayer too. I wonder if he leaves the door open just a little longer than he should, to let the soul go.

When her husband died, Doris called 911 and went out in the yard. She had no idea what to do next. Then Annie arrived with Al (she is on the ambulance crew as well). "Annie said, 'I'll take care of it,' " Doris told us, clearing her throat. "And she did."

Al came back to the business of funerals. Caskets cost \$500 to \$1,500 at the hardware store. A plot at the cemetery is \$350. You need about a dozen certified copies of the death certificate for insurance, pensions and all kinds of big and small things you won't know about until someone dies.

One on the ladies said she was just back from burying her nephew Outside. "It cost \$10,000."

Then the retired public health nurse asked if you could "dispose" of a body by "putting it in the bay."

Everyone started talking. Wilma said, "We can't even dump garbage." Someone else said, "But your body is not garbage." Then another woman said, "You're food for crabs." Still another observed, "It is the ultimate recycling."

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Al silenced them. "You float," he said.

"Well," someone replied, "you could weight the body."

These ladies will not be afraid of the coachman of death when he stops at their door. They may even bargain for a better fare.

On the way out, I visited with white-haired Jane, the former president of the Haines Women's Club, who was volunteering at the desk. She said she was going to skip what she thinks is a morbid Haines tradition, the big community funeral and potluck. "I'm donating my body to research."

She said that when I write her obituary, I should make sure everyone knows all that. Then, as I pushed open the door, she asked me what time it was; she didn't want to miss another old-timer's memorial service that afternoon.

"He was such a nice man," Jane said. "I always liked him."

Heather Lende lives and writes in Haines.

