



CREATIVE CHOICES

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Winter 2006

The newsletter of the Austin Memorial and Burial Information Society (AMBIS), a nonprofit, nonsectarian, educational and consumer association organized to encourage informed planning about end-of-life issues. AMBIS is a member of the Funeral Consumers Alliance.

Volunteers needed for FCA Biennial June 1, 2, and 3

The 2006 Biennial meeting of the Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA), the national organization to which AMBIS belongs, will be held on the campus of St. Edward's University on June 1, 2, and 3.

Topics to be discussed at the 2006 Biennial will include some or all of the following:

- tissue and body donation issues that FCA has been instrumental in bringing to national attention this past year
- home funerals
- ways to affect legislation
- low-cost funeral options
- paying for grief relief
- hospice and FCA affiliates
- nuts and bolts of operating an affiliate
- litigation against industry abuses

Austin-area volunteers will be critical to the success of the Biennial. We need help from volunteers with the following tasks:

- gathering materials for Biennial packets, (such as pens, writing pads, key chains, wet wipes, tissue packs, hand lotion samples, maps of Austin, bus schedules and routes, and anything else volunteers think might be useful or make participants comfortable)
- assisting Biennial participants loading and unloading at the airport and upon arrival at St. Edward's
- registering Biennial participants when they check in
- running the Biennial FCA bookstore
- making and erecting conference signs to direct participants to meeting rooms and events
- researching cultural offerings in the Austin area for Biennial participants,
- running errands during the Biennial

If you are interested in providing such assistance to make the Biennial a success, please contact the AMBIS Biennial

Coordinator, Donna Belk, at 922-8043 in Austin or at <dbelk@austin.rr.com>; or contact Lamar Hankins in San Marcos, 512-396-0317 or at <lamarhankins@mac.com>.

Local participants will be able to register for the Biennial at reduced rates.

All AMBIS members are urged to bring two wire clothes hangers to the Annual Meeting for use by Biennial attendees. Ω

AMBIS Annual Meeting Feb. 26

Joshua Slocum, Executive Director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA), will be the guest speaker at this year's AMBIS Annual Meeting to be held at St. Edward's University on Sunday afternoon, February 26. The meeting will convene at 2 pm at the Auditorium in Ragsdale Center. See the map on page 2.

Slocum's topic for his presentation is "Know Your Last Rights." He has been Executive Director of FCA since July 2003 after serving as a Transition Director for about ten months after former Executive Director Lisa Carlson resigned.

During his tenure, FCA has significantly recovered from a serious budget deficit; become more prominent in its national media representation of the funeral consumer interests of families; undertaken direct assistance to affiliates in Ohio, Missouri, Utah, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Kentucky, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin where legislatures or funeral regulators were considering anti-family and anti-consumer legislation; worked with the Institute for Justice in fighting an anti-competitive casket-selling law in Oklahoma; assisted Dallas attorney Steve Wolens with opposing wrongful practices of the Federal Trade Commission, the federal agency charged with protecting consumer interests; and taken a leading



Joshua Slocum, Executive Director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA)

role in challenging anti-competitive practices in the sale of caskets involving Batesville Casket Company (the largest maker of caskets in the US), Service Corporation International, Alderwoods, and Stewart (the three largest operators of funeral homes in the US).

Slocum will be available for questions and discussion at the Annual Meeting. He worked as a reporter for a newspaper in Virginia before joining the FCA staff in 2002. He became interested in the funeral industry when he covered several funeral industry stories for the newspaper.

The Annual Meeting is expected to run from 2 pm to 4 pm. Refreshments will be provided by the University's food service. There is elevator access to the Auditorium in Ragsdale Center. Ω

Kudos to two funeral homes

Of the 32 General Price Lists (GPLs) reviewed for this year's survey of funeral costs, one stood out for clarity, brevity, readability, and ease of use. It was the GPL produced by Austin-Peel & Son Funeral Home. Its style should be emulated by all.

And it should be noted that there were two funeral homes that charge families nothing for providing refrigeration, one of the least expensive services offered by most funeral homes, at a cost under \$1.00 a day. The two are Austin-Peel & Son Funeral Home and Elgin Funeral Home.

AMBIS BRIEFS

Governing Council election

The election of four Governing Council members will be part of the business scheduled for the AMBIS Annual Meeting. Nominees are Gary Lichtenstein, Leo Osterhaus, and Daesene Willman for three-year terms, and Helen Burnette for one year to fill an unexpired term. Other nominations can be made at the meeting.

Governing Council actions

The Governing Council approved continuing a \$25 requested membership donation for individuals to become AMBIS members, and approved a \$50 requested membership donation per household, effective April 1. The Council also approved a \$20,000 budget for 2006, and has agreed to offer members the option of receiving *Creative Choices* via e-mail. Members may make a request for the email version to <mail@ambis.info>.

New AMBIS members for 2005

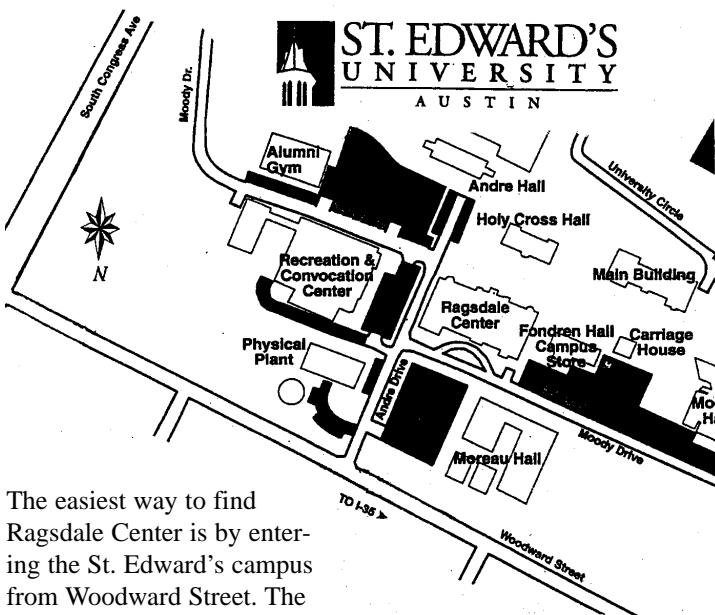
Daesene Willmann reports that 239 more families joined AMBIS in 2005. AMBIS now has 2525 member families. This represents a total estimated 8837 individual members. An additional 31 individuals and organizations have complimentary memberships.

Membership referrals in 2005

Over 50 organizations and individuals accounted for the referrals of new members to AMBIS in 2005. Thanks to Daesene and AMBIS volunteers, the word about AMBIS is getting around. Be sure to tell your friends and family about the benefits of an AMBIS membership.

AMBIS volunteers

Barbara Sell, the AMBIS Volunteer Coordinator, reports that there are now thirty official volunteers who regularly contribute time and talent to AMBIS. Barbara has organized training and orientation workshops for volunteers to help them work productively to carry out the goals and projects of AMBIS.



The easiest way to find Ragsdale Center is by entering the St. Edward's campus from Woodward Street. The auditorium is at the west end of Ragsdale Center.

AMBIS website: www.ambis.info

Contributions for FCA Biennial

As of January 9, 2006, the following individuals and organizations contributed \$3300 to AMBIS to support the FCA Biennial to be held June 1, 2, and 3 at St. Edward's University. Many thanks for their help. AMBIS volunteer Helen Burnette compiled this list.

| | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Albarado, Willis & Angelika | Hess, Richard |
| Aleman, Maria | Hillen, Bernard J. |
| Allen, Frances | Hines, J. Chris |
| Anonymous | Hoffacker, Lewis |
| Arnold, Kay | Houston, David & Harriet |
| Authur Beckman Foundation | Hurley, Marjorie |
| Austin, Sara E. | James, Martha W. |
| Barr, Bob & Jan | Jennings, Coleman & Lola H. |
| Bates, Al & Marian | Juried, Amy |
| Beer, David & Ruth | Kaplan, Harold & Mary M. |
| Belk, Donna (in kind) | King, Richard & Patti |
| Bertrand, Virginia W. | Klein, Bert & Eileen |
| Blankenship, Mr & Mrs. C. E. | LaFevers, O.J. |
| Bless, Margaret, B. | Lay, Dorothy J. |
| Boggess, Elizabeth | Leiden, Carl |
| Bowie, Jim & Betty | Loudat, Henrietta |
| Brandt, David D. Jr. | Lumbra,, Ruth |
| Brooks, Stan M. | MacDonald, John A. |
| Burke, Ed & Dolores | McAfee, Bill & Anne |
| Buzard, Esther P. | Melancon, Rebecca |
| Callirgos, Juanita C. | Meriwether, W.M. |
| Cheney, Elliot W. & Victoria | Middleton, Kent & Karol |
| Coffee, Bill & Ruth Ann | Mittag, Erika |
| Coker, Judy D. | Molberg, M.E. |
| Cooke, Richard F. & Anna | Moore, Alana Carpenter |
| Crosson, Priscilla N. | Pharis, Dave & Mary |
| Cunningham, Cris | Pivonka, Kerry |
| Davis, Nola | Poe, Martha Laughton |
| Derdeyn, Lt. (Ret.) Conrad | Price, E.B. & Billie |
| Donoghue, James L. | Puckett-Notley, Emily |
| Downes, John R., Jr. | Rankin, Gilbert F. |
| Drees, J. Meijer | Richardson, Martha |
| Edge, Tom | Riggs, Austen F. |
| Elliot, Norman J. & Patricia | Salvador, Amos & Lynn |
| Ellison, Shirley | Sampson, Chris |
| End of Life Choices | Sanders, Richard C. & Penny |
| Falck, Frank & Vilma | Schroeter, Valeria B. |
| Flink Living Trust, The F. Duane & Mildred P. | Sherley, Constance |
| Forsman, Louise E. | Shormann, Helen L. |
| Fowler, H.E. | Standifer, C.H. & Arveline |
| Fruchter, Benjamin & Dorothy | Strong, D. Orval & Betty |
| Geist, Chester & Christine | Turner, Ronald C. |
| Giddens, Homer A. | Urelus, Emerson & Lois |
| Giller, Donald W. | Vreeland, Judi |
| Grantham, Martin & JoAnn | Weaver, Robert & Elise |
| Graves, E.W. & Holly June | Webb, Wilfred |
| Grobe, Bill & Kathleen | Wiedmeyer, Jerry & Karen |
| Hale, Beverly | Wilson, John & Joyce |
| Hall, David & Elizabeth | Winans, Mary |
| Haisler, Eileen C | Winfield, Myra |
| Happel, Chris & Sharon. | Woodard, R.H. & Aleen |
| Hawkins, Charles E. | Wyllys, Ronald |
| | Young, Nelly |

Funeral Home Discounts for AMBIS Members changed by Council

By Donna Belk

In 2006, AMBIS has arranged for its members a wider range of choices in funeral homes that provide discounts to AMBIS members. To this end, the following funeral homes have agreed with the AMBIS Governing Council to provide to AMBIS members a 15% discount from the costs shown on their General Price Lists:

- All Faiths Funeral Services
8507 North IH 35
512-339-8878
- All Faiths Funeral Services
4360 South Congress Ave.
512-326-8878
- Austin-Peel & Son Funeral Home
607 E. Anderson Lane
512-419-7224
- Harrell Funeral Home
4435 Frontier Trail
512-443-1366
- Wilke-Clay-Fish Funeral Home
2620 S. Congress
512-442-1446
- Weed-Corley-Fish Funeral Home
3125 N. Lamar
512-452-8811

When contacting one of these funeral homes, please provide proof of your AMBIS membership by showing a copy of this newsletter addressed to you or your new membership letter. Membership also can be confirmed at the AMBIS office by calling 512-480-0555. The most current information about funeral home discounts can be found on the AMBIS website at <www.ambis.info>. Ω

Figuring your 15% discounts

Direct Cremation:

- All Faiths Funeral Service (both locations)
Regular price: \$780; Discounted price: \$663
- Austin-Peel & Son Funeral Home
Regular price: \$1289; Discounted price: \$1096
- Harrell Funeral Home
Regular price: \$2250; Discounted price: \$1913
- Wilke-Clay-Fish and Wilke-Corley-Fish Funeral Homes
Regular price: \$2295; Discounted price: \$1951

Full-service funeral based on hypothetical funeral with a 20 ga. casket as priced in the AMBIS 2006 survey:

- All Faiths Funeral Service (both locations)
Regular price: \$3715; Discounted price: \$3158
- Austin-Peel & Son Funeral Home
Regular price: \$5329; Discounted price: \$4530
- Harrell Funeral Home
Regular price: \$5440; Discounted price: \$4624
- Wilke-Clay-Fish and Wilke-Corley-Fish Funeral Homes
Regular price: \$6170; Discounted price: \$5245

Analysis of the AMBIS 2006 Funeral Cost Survey results

The simple summary of the 2006 funeral cost survey is that costs are up, driven partly by the rising cost of propane and natural gas for cremations, the rising cost of gasoline for vehicles, and new marketing strategies.

The most dramatic price increases in the Austin area have been made by the Cook-Walden funeral homes. These four funeral homes raised their basic service fee, often called the Nondeclinable Fee (NDF), by \$1,000. This is a fee that the funeral home may require under federal and state regulations after you have selected all of the goods and services that you want—a surcharge to their already marked-up prices. While the Federal Trade Commission does not mandate this charge, few funeral homes fail to charge it. These four Cook-Walden funeral homes, owned by Service Corporation International (SCI), now charge \$2895 for their NDF. The survey average for the NDF, leaving these four funeral homes out of the calculation, is \$1547. Three other SCI-owned funeral homes included in the survey charge an average of \$1872 for the NDF.

The other increase by the Cook-Walden chain is their new charge for embalming in all five of their area funeral homes: \$1395. The average charge for embalming in all the other funeral homes in the survey is a mere \$513. The other two SCI-owned funeral homes included in the survey charge an average of \$610 for embalming.

It appears from an analysis of survey results that these Cook-Walden funeral homes lowered most of their prices for caskets to compete better for casket sales with A Simple Tradition, All Faiths, Superior, and Collier Caskets, all of which have low casket prices. Cook-Walden has more than made up for the reduced costs of the 20 ga. and 18 ga. caskets priced in the survey by their greatly increased charges for the NDF and embalming. Last year, Cook-Walden charged \$995 for the 20 ga. casket and \$2495 for the 18 ga. casket. In 2006, their charges for these caskets are \$595 and \$1195, respectively, a difference of \$400 for the 20 ga. and \$1300 for the 18 ga. Their increases for the NDF and embalming together are \$1700.

The charges for Direct Cremation in the 2006 survey ranged from a high of \$2690 at Pennington's Funeral Home in San Marcos to a low of \$675 at A Simple Tradition in Austin. The survey average for Direct Cremation is \$1603. Above-average cremation costs were reported for Beck, Condra, all Cook-Walden funeral homes, Eeds, Harrell, Marrs-Jones-Newby, Mission (S. 1st St. location), Pennington, Thomason, Weed-Clay-Fish, and Weed-Corley-Fish.

In reviewing the new costs for the Cook-Walden funeral homes, one AMBIS volunteer remarked that their slogan "Service Beyond Expectations" should be changed to "Prices Beyond Expectations." Ω

Please Help Us Keep Our Mailing List Current

Be sure to let AMBIS know if your address changes. It will help us keep our mailing costs down. If you move out of the area, we can help you transfer your membership. Send changes by email, call the AMBIS office at 512-480-0555 or send this form with the old address to AMBIS

My new or corrected address is:

Name

New or correct address

City, State, Zip

Phone

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AMBIS CONTRACTED FUNERAL HOMES

The following funeral homes offer to AMBIS members a 15% discount off of the costs shown on their General Price List:

- All Faiths Funeral Services
8507 North IH 35 (512-339-8878) and
4360 South Congress Ave. (512-326-8878)
- Austin-Peel & Son Funeral Home
607 E. Anderson Lane (512-419-7224)
- Harrell Funeral Home
4435 Frontier Trl. (512-443-1366)
- Wilke-Clay-Fish Funeral Home
2620 S. Congress (512-442-1446)
- Weed-Corley-Fish Funeral Home
3125 N. Lamar (512-452-8811)

When contacting one of these funeral homes, please provide proof of your AMBIS membership by showing a copy of this newsletter addressed to you or your new membership letter. Membership can be confirmed also by calling the AMBIS office at 512-480-0555.

Visit the AMBIS website: www.ambis.info

CREATIVE CHOICES

CREATIVE CHOICES is published quarterly by the Austin Memorial and Burial Information Society, a nonprofit, nonsectarian consumer and educational organization formed in 1964 to protect a consumer's right to choose a meaningful, dignified, and affordable funeral.

The ideas expressed in *CREATIVE CHOICES* are those of the authors and editor and not necessarily those of AMBIS. Address changes, editorial items, letters, and inquiries about the benefits of membership should be sent to:

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Office: AGE Bldg., 3710 Cedar Street, Rm. 112, Austin

Telephone inquiries may be made to 512/480-0555

E-mail may be sent to mail@ambis.info

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