



CREATIVE CHOICES

In this issue . . .	
• Annual Meeting	1
• Price survey analysis	1
• AMBIS Briefs	2
• President's column	2
• Workshop announced	2
• AMBIS Donors	3
• AMBIS Council/FHs	4
Winter	2010

The newsletter of the Austin Memorial and Burial Information Society (AMBIS), a nonprofit, nonsectarian, educational and consumer association working since 1964 to encourage informed planning about end-of-life issues. AMBIS is a member of the Funeral Consumers Alliance.

AMBIS Annual Meeting February 21 at Gethsemane Lutheran Church, 2 pm - 4 pm

Mike O'Krent, founder of LifeStories Alive, LLC, will be our keynote speaker for the 2010 AMBIS Annual Meeting, beginning at 2 pm at Gethsemane Lutheran Church, February 21. The church is located at 200 W. Anderson Lane, across from Red Lobster, on the N. Hwy. 183 service road. Light refreshments will be served, and door prizes will be offered. Your Governing Council urges you to come to the meeting and thank Gethsemane Church for donating their facility for our annual meeting.

Besides our speaker, a proposed funeral consumer "Bill of Rights" will be available for your consideration. Several of our area funeral directors who participate in the 15% discount for members will lead a discussion titled "Positive Responses of Area Funeral Homes to Emerging Consumer Trends," and members will be able to ask questions. A challenge grant will be presented, to even further increase our best-to-date AMBIS fall fund drive. The President will present the challenge for "Each One to Reach One." Your input will be solicited regarding the value and yet high cost of our quarterly newsletter. Other important business items are to adopt the budget and elect members to the

Governing Council for 2010. What we do together locally and with the other Funeral Consumer Alliance chapters is worthy of your presence.

Being prepared for death can include more than financial and advance directive readiness. As our inspirational speaker, Mike O'Krent will be presenting an idea that may be a new thought for most of our members. Mike's LifeStories specializes in making personal history videos for families to record their heritage. They create family heirlooms in video—digitally mastered records of life stories with personal accounts, photos and mementos of family history. Having your life story written or recorded can be a cherished legacy to your family and friends.

Mike may inspire you to write or videograph your story, by yourself or with his help. Mike got his inspiration between 1996 and 2000 when he interviewed Holocaust survivors for Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. During that moving experience, he discovered the process and the importance of recording the life stories of our loved ones. **Ω**

Annual price survey reveals funeral industry changes

Already, the five counties that AMBIS regularly surveys have twice as many funeral services as are needed to handle 200 deaths each year, an easy task for any of the facilities. Nevertheless, five new funeral services entered the marketplace in 2009 in the five counties, with two more scheduled to open in early 2010. Only one of those services, Heart of Texas Funeral & Cremation Services, provides low-cost services to Central Texas families. The other four new facilities are Wrench Funeral Home & Cremations in Leander, Ramsey Funeral Home in Georgetown, All Faiths Funeral Service in Smithville, and Weed-Corley-Fish in Lakeway. Providence Funeral Home plans to have two new facilities in Bastrop County in early 2010.

Some of the new services hope to appeal to the public's interest in green burial, but so-called green services and goods can be provided by any of the 44 facilities surveyed.

Two factors are driving increases in funeral costs in the Austin area—the cost of embalming and the non-declinable fee (NDF), referred to on most General price Lists as “Basic services of the funeral director and staff and overhead.” The NDF is a cost, permitted by Federal Trade Commission rules, that is added to whatever goods and services are selected by a family. Those goods and services are provided at profitable markups, so there should be no need for an additional markup, especially one amounting to several thousand dollars at most funeral facilities.

SCI funeral homes led the pack in the cost of the NDF, with its Cook-Walden/Capital Parks location charging a whopping \$4295 for the privilege of doing business with that facility. Together, the 7 SCI-owned facilities charged an average \$3261 for the NDF. The other 37 facilities surveyed charged an average of \$1818.89. The overall survey average was \$2048 for the NDF.

Four funeral facilities charge under \$1000 for their NDF: Heart of Texas Cremation & Burial Service (owned by Goodnight & Snell) charges \$525; Neptune (which does not provide burial

See Survey on page 2

AMBIS BRIEFS

Notaries needed

Notaries are needed this coming year to be present at Advance Directives/Advance Planning workshops at a variety of locations. If interested, please send an e-mail to <mail@ambis.info> or call the office at 512-480-0555 to leave a message any time. Volunteers are at the office Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays between 10 am and 2 pm.

2009 In-Kind Donors

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Survey from page 1

services) charges \$525; A Simple Tradition charges \$595; and Goodnight & Snell in San Marcos charges \$995.

The average embalming cost among all 44 funeral facilities is more than \$765, but the 7 facilities owned by Service Corporation International (SCI) average more than \$1366 for embalming. "Mortuary services," independent businesses that contract only with funeral homes for such tasks as embalming, picking up of the body after a death, and handling direct cremations, as well as some other functions, charge as little as \$225 for embalming. Five of the SCI-owned facilities in the survey charge \$1395 for embalming.

Direct cremation prices have edged up slightly. The survey average was just under \$2000 at \$1998. The least expensive direct cremations can be found at Heart of Texas Cremation & Burial Services at \$775, and at A Simple Tradition for between \$775 and \$925 (depending on charges for refrigeration and distance from central Austin). The most expensive direct cremation prices are at Thomason (in San Marcos and Wimberley)—\$3200, McCurdy in Lockhart—\$3020, Eeds in Lockhart—\$2750, the three Austin-area locations of Weed-Corley-Fish—\$2645, the four SCI locations in Austin—\$2640, the SCI location in Bastrop—\$2595, the three locations for Harrell—\$2495, the SCI location in Taylor—\$2595, Mission on S. 1st—\$2390, and the SCI location in Georgetown—\$2340. Thomason charges more than four times the lowest cost in our area, and the others charge more than three times the lowest cost for the same service.

The other significant price factor in the cost of both funeral and cremation services is the charge made for refrigeration. While two funeral facilities—Jones and Elgin—make no charge for refrigeration, 60% of the facilities in the survey charge \$100 or more for this inexpensive service (estimated by the industry to cost less than \$1 per day). The 5 SCI facilities in Austin and Georgetown charge \$595 per day for refrigeration; Eeds in Lockhart charges \$500; the SCI facilities in Bastrop and Taylor, and Weed-Corley-Fish charge \$295; Superior charges \$200. Some funeral services add refrigeration charges as extra, rather than as a part of the normal care of a body included in the NDF.

As always, the best advice for families purchasing funeral services is to study the marketplace, either by using the survey or obtaining General Price Lists and Casket Price Lists, and notice the details. That is the only way we know to avoid paying more than is necessary for funeral and cremation services. Ω

From the President—

First, thanks to so many of you who sent in contributions this fall. They are essential for our work. If you didn't send in an additional gift, please still consider it.

Second, thanks to our FCA (Funeral Consumers Alliance) affiliate in Denver, I was able to use what I knew and save my son-in-law's family \$1150 on the cost of a direct cremation. Additionally they saved about \$1000 more because they did things themselves rather than asking a funeral director to do what they themselves could meaningfully do. They were totally ignorant of their options and totally unprepared for the death of "Mom." I am so glad to know what we can do for others - as an INFORMATIONAL society. This is a good reason for you to belong to AMBIS too, and support the FCA with your contributions.

Third, did you read about the Connecticut funeral home which cremated the wrong body? When the grieving family first looked into the casket to see their 95-year old great-grandmother, they found a stranger's body in her casket. Great grandma had been accidentally cremated! The funeral home owner called the mix-up "a most unfortunate incident." The Department of Public Health is investigating it, but this is just another example of why our FCA organizations are important - working for good oversight, being an alliance to receive complaints concerning funeral homes or cemeteries, and acting on them with more force than an individual can usually accomplish.

**Rodger Ericson,
President, AMBIS Governing Council**

May 1 Advance Directives Workshop at 1st UU Austin

AMBIS volunteers Daesene Willmann and Ed Nichols will conduct an Advance Directives Workshop at 10 a.m. on Saturday, May 1, to inaugurate a three-program "Final Affairs" series at First Unitarian Universalist Church, 4700 Grover, Austin.

The workshop, complete with notary public services, will supplant the stand-alone May workshop normally held in the Austin AGE Building. Cost for attending any or all of the three-program series is \$15, payable to First UU Church. Other programs in the series, on May 8 and 15, will deal with last will and testament planning and end-of-life arrangements. Call AMBIS at 512-480-0555 to reserve a space or send email to <ambis@grandecom.net>.

2009 yields record number of donors to AMBIS—Thanks to all!

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 - 110 American Legion Rd., Smithville (512-237-3836)
- Beck Funeral Home
 - 15709 Ranch Road 620, Austin (512-244-3772)
 - 4765 Priem Lane, Pflugerville (512-251-3500)
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 - 411 RR 620 South, Lakeway (512-263-1511)
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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.

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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.

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