



Doing death *differently*

It's a certainty for everyone, but until fairly recently funerals have been a one-size-fits-all event. No longer, as FAY KNIGHT discovers

IT'S your last party, and recently some have decided they might as well really be there to enjoy it, given early notice. Byron identity Tony Narracott held his 'awakening' several months before he died and used the occasion not just to be with friends and loved ones but to invite the community to come along and raise (a lot of) money for a cause dear to his heart, the youth of Byron. It was a blast, as parties went, and combined tribute speeches full of emotion as well as humour with food, fun and a pole-dancing display.

That was Tony – and he got to arrange and enjoy it.

Others just want to sort out funeral arrangements in advance.

"People are much more upfront about their own mortality," says funeral director Andrew Laycock of Parkview Funeral Homes. "It's not unusual for someone to come to me straight after getting bad news

from a doctor. People are much more willing to talk than they were before. They say, 'I need a will and I need a funeral'. I've had 20 years of experience and I can help them get their affairs in order."

Byron Bay celebrant Zenith Virago has been demystifying death for North Coast residents for 17 years.

"A friend of mine died suddenly in the garden," recalls Zenith. "I said to her husband that we could probably do this ourselves; would he like me to help arrange things? He said 'yes'.

"I went to a funeral director and asked how to do it and he told me everything. We built our own coffin, took her from the hospital and washed and dressed the body. Two friends who were nurses helped with that. We took her body home so her children, who had just returned from England, could spend some time with her body.

"We held the ceremony in the afternoon – it was my 35th birthday.

Then, a couple of weeks later, another friend was killed in a road accident. Her husband asked me to help organise things and from then it just had a life of its own."

Next on Zenith's agenda is teaching a course called 'A Year to Live', which she says is based on the Stephen Levine book (published by Random House) of the same name.

"It's my passion to encourage preparation and dialogue (about death)," she says. "People can do it (funerals) on their own now, if they want."

Even in the 'traditional' funeral homes, change has arrived.

"As the generations are changing, so is the funeral industry," says Andrew Laycock. "A lot more people hold 'alternate' funerals in parks and on the beach, not in a church. We do a lot more funerals in the chapel on our own premises, too, and there is a trend towards cremations on the North Coast."

Parkview Funeral Homes are

currently in the process of changing their fleet to blue, instead of black or silver and their uniforms also change to keep with fashion trends.

"There is a lot more music in funerals, and a lot more Powerpoint presentations on a screen, rather than just a spoken eulogy," Andrew says. "I had a funeral a few years ago of a young man who died of cystic fibrosis. He was only expected to live a short time but ended up living until he was 21. His parents had filmed a lot of his life and it just made the best presentation."

Todd Usher, manager of Lismore Funeral Services, says that coffins have also changed from all traditional to a range including colours, team colours and even a 'fence-paling' coffin which gets a lot of comments.

"It's locally built and we've sold a couple," says Todd. "But people always say they know someone it would suit!"

Just as birth practises changed over the past few decades to remove automatic medical intervention and to bring in the participation of family and friends, so is death becoming a more open and natural event, according to Zenith.

"I think, for our generation, there will be more and more preparation and even celebration before death," she says. "Instead of having a big 60th or 70th birthday, you might have an 'awakening' party. People may want to make their own coffin, or decorate it themselves with the grandchildren helping. You might want to make a cloth that shows events in your life to be wrapped in."

"You will decide whether you want an open or closed coffin, whether you want the ceremony at home or in a garden or a public place; whether people come and have a party the night before the funeral and whether your body will

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