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be taken home for the night.”

Zenith says that a lot can happen in that time ‘when the veil is thin’.

“I saw it with my own son when his father died,” she says. “He was 13 and he slept overnight in the same room with the body. Something had happened – in that dream state your spirit, your consciousness is free. I never used to believe all this until I saw it in action.”

Making some decisions ahead of time can be really helpful to your family, Zenith says.

“Even if it’s just one thing you say – ‘I’d like to have roses on my coffin’ – or a particular piece of music, or where you’d like your ashes spread; the whole thing can grow from that one seed.”

Paul Sheaffe, who grew up in Mullumbimby and Brunswick Heads, says that the process of documenting his parents’ lives before his father’s death inspired them when it came time for the eulogy and then spreading his father’s ashes.

“I built a DVD two years ago of both Mum and Dad telling their life stories,” says Paul, who has a Sydney-based DVD production business (Pauls Productions) filming weddings and other events. “We went out to the farm where he’d grown up and started with him standing under a 30-metre fig tree that he’d planted as a seedling



HOME AGAIN: Paul Sheaffe, second from right, with his mother, sister, brother-in-law and their children before spreading his father’s ashes at what was the family farm. Picture: LINDY WATERMAN.

when he was a child.”

Paul then filmed both parents in the many significant locations in their lives in the area.

“When Dad got sick and suddenly was dying I very quickly cut down a five-minute version for his funeral and thanksgiving services.”

Paul used the DVD footage to compose his eulogy at the committal service at the Lismore crematorium and showed the short DVD to ‘let

Dad speak for himself’ at the thanksgiving service the family held at Mullumbimby.

When the family received the ashes from the crematorium they debated where to spread them.

“Then we remembered him asking to be taken home from the hospital,” says Paul. “We had told him we were taking him home. Although the old farm was no longer in the family we got permission to spread his ashes there and my mother, my sister, her husband and a couple of grandkids and myself went. We divided his ashes into bowls and spread them in the area he’d played as a child.”

“We thought it would just take a few minutes but we were there for over an hour. We wished we’d taken a picnic. It would have been really appropriate.”

Zenith says that there is no ‘right or wrong’ in what people choose to do with their funeral.

“It’s my role to guide people through that experience and help them in whatever way makes it more beneficial to those left behind so they do not feel obstructed by the law, the industry or superstition or fear of the unknown.”

“One woman who was dying had two very young children,” Zenith recalls. “She spent time writing a letter and buying a present for each child for each birthday until they turned 18. It was such a



COMMEMORATION: Zenith Virago speaking at the Day of the Dead ceremony she helps organise each year.

beautiful consideration and so beneficial; something tangible because their memories are going to fade.”

The Natural Death Centre has a website full of information on what is necessary should you want to take charge of things yourself. There are guidelines on what is required to build a coffin, and information on cardboard coffins for those who would like to use less resources or have something which can be decorated by family or friends.

“Young children can be involved in preparations even if they can’t write,” says Zenith. “Handprints, drawings or favourite stickers on the coffin can help to make it familiar and allows them to do something.”

“When children die, that can be really, really hard. It

doesn’t fit into the same category as anything else but I believe that it shouldn’t be hidden from other children. Lying or trying to make it better doesn’t work – you’re selling them short. Children will accept it in their own capacity as time goes on.”

“When one woman I know lost her partner and had young children she kept the young father’s ashes in an urn that has a removable lid. He’s been dead for three years now. Every now and then she lets them touch the ashes and maybe sprinkle some somewhere. They can talk about it as they move through different stages of understanding.”

www.naturaldeathcentre.org.au

www.PaulsProductions.com

Zenith Virago, phone 0427 924 310



ORIGINAL: Todd Usher, manager of Lismore Funeral Services, with the fence-paling coffin locally made by Ross Binney Coffins.

As the generations are changing, so is the funeral industry

COVERSTORY

A unplanned charming and cheesy birthday saw 50 people turn-up!

I HAD a birthday on Wednesday and as I’m writing my book we hadn’t planned to celebrate. However Boris talked me into ‘getting together with a few friends down in the Manning’.

So we escaped to the country and before we knew it 50 people were coming.

My friend Joan, who runs the historic and charming Memories cafe on the river at Tinonee, offered the cafe as a venue. The gracious old building



DI’S DIARY DI MORRISSEY

was the original hospital when Tinonee was a thriving river town in the late nineteenth century.

In the 1950s it had slowed down and the sleepy road that was part of

the Pacific Highway had a punt to take your car over the river. With its wide verandah and magnificent view, the café is a gorgeous place to eat.

We set up tables in the camellia-lined courtyard with candles and flowers under a balmy starry sky. It was great fun and I met a lot of partners of friends for the first time, which was lovely.

The local doctor’s wife (both emigrated from South Africa) is a delight, with a great sense of fun.

Darling ABC radio presenter Fiona Wyllie and her husband Steve drove over from Port Macquarie. We so miss her on air every day in the Northern Rivers!

My wonderful son Nick and his girlfriend Mimi drove up from Sydney; my former PA, Irene, from Network Ten days in the 80s was also there as she has now settled in Tinonee.

My plumber pal was there – he’s currently designing Di’s Dunno, a replica old wooden outback loo

with its own mini septic to go in the garden near the old studio. We found old wood and a door and ancient brass hinges at the recycled hardware place and rusty corrugated iron for the roof. The interior is gleaming white and modern but we’re finding a few old-time embellishments as decor.

I put my foot down at Boris’s suggestion of a plastic green frog and a redback, though I did recall a few run-ins with wildlife ‘down the back’ at my

grandparent’s old home in Wingham.

And I’m not cutting up the newspaper in squares for loo paper either.

At the party friends chipped in with a dish or two and the curries and warm artichoke-heart casserole which I made were popular.

But the hit of the night was the cheese. I’m not a huge cake fan (though we had mud cake with sparklers) so Boris ordered a whole cheese from a dairy farmer up at Elands (where

Ellenborough Falls is) which he makes from his biodynamic milk and everyone declared it the best cheese they’ve ever eaten.

All in all it was a wonderful birthday. Now it’s back to work!

Cheers.

Di is Australia’s number one best-selling female author. Her new book, The Island, published by Macmillan, is on sale now.