

A Day in the Life of a Home Funeral Guide
by Peg Lorenz

The family had been sitting vigil by Sara's bedside for days, watching her breathing change, watching her slip away. The 54-year-old wife, daughter, sister, and mother of 2 had been stricken with a recurrence of cancer. They were stunned and grief-stricken. Sara had expressed that she wanted her body to stay at home, to stay peaceful and untouched. They had no idea how to comply with her wishes, until the Hospice nurse referred them to me. Unsure of when the actual moment of her death would occur, they called me to talk over the plans for her care after death. Ten minutes after I arrived for our planning meeting, her 92-year-old mother came into the kitchen and said, "She's gone".

With dusk descending, time slowed down. The only sound was the quiet sobbing of her teenage daughter. The room darkened. After a while I gently suggested various tasks which the family eagerly embraced: replacing the medical items with flowers and candles, covering her with silk and a beautiful lace shroud, cooling the room down with an air conditioner and placing frozen gel packs under her body. Throughout the evening, while concrete plans took shape in the kitchen about how to move forward with arrangements, each family member gravitated to her side, talking to her, praying, weeping. I often found myself being pulled to a quiet corner as sisters, husband, mother shared their stories of her. Her daughter selected music to play gently and friends stopped by to offer support. A sense of peace spread in the room.

With my guidance and support, one of the sisters called a funeral home to schedule the delivery of a cardboard cremation box and arrange for Sara to be transported to a crematory. The night settled in. When I returned the next morning, her husband told me he had come to her bedside over and over throughout the night, to be with her alone one last time, to speak those private words, to pray in the deep silence. It meant so much to him to be able to do this.

As relatives and friends gathered that morning, I encouraged everyone to participate in decorating the cremation box. It was a beautiful fall day. They went outside to paint pictures, place photos, and write messages on the sides and top of the box. Every word, every image, unique and heartfelt, they poured out their love for this amazing wife and mother, sister and friend.

We brought the container inside and six of us carefully picked her up and gently laid her in her final resting place. Her husband and daughter gathered flowers and leaves from her favorite tree and everyone there placed them over her. The group then gathered around her, read poetry and spoke their final goodbyes. We held hands in a circle around Sara for one last quiet moment and then the cover was placed over her. The funeral home came some time later and she was carried out to the vehicle by her husband and friends.

Twenty-two unforgettable hours. The family had no idea how this time after death would unfold, but the beauty of the space, the dignity with which their loved one was treated, the sacred feeling that enveloped the whole house, all was beyond their imagining. So was having the precious time to care so

lovingly for her body, to put her to rest in a container made unique and beautiful with their photos and art. Twenty-two hours that this family had to be in her presence, to connect with her spirit and to hold each other in the privacy of their home. It was a parting gift she gave them, and the beginning of their healing process. I felt honored and blessed to have been a part of it.