

The Cremation Experience

by Pam Kleese, Director–Research and Insights, Homesteaders Life Company
and Barbara Kemmis, Executive Director, Cremation Association of North America



In May 2019, Homesteaders Life Company and CANA set out to explore the truth about cremation from women who personally made cremation arrangements for a loved one. Our goal was to dig behind multiple choice responses to the question “Why?” and uncover motivations in an attempt to understand the cremation experience from beginning to end. Put simply, we sought to better define the cremation experience.

In August 2019, Pam Kleese, Director–Research and Insights at Homesteaders, and Barbara Kemmis, Executive Director of CANA, presented the research findings at CANA’s 101st Annual Cremation Innovation Convention in Louisville, KY. We are pleased to share a summary of that presentation with *Cremationist* readers.

There are three things we, as a profession, know about cremation:

- It is the new tradition and majority disposition choice for the U.S., with no sign of reversing or slowing.
- In surveys, consumers have consistently reported their primary reason for choosing cremation is price and providers have responded to that by making cremation cheap.
- Industry sales data shows a trend toward direct cremation with minimal products or services furnished by the cremation provider.

But are we right? Cremation is such a new tradition—with most families choosing cremation for the first time only recently. Do we really interpret their motivations correctly?

Sample & Methodology

We carefully designed this research study to gather a range of opinions. Six two-hour group discussions were held in Phoenix and Nashville. We chose Phoenix because the cremation rate has been above the national average for some time. Nashville was chosen because its cremation rate is in the rapid growth stage.

In both cities, Leading Edge Boomer women, ages 64-73, were chosen to participate. Further criteria were that they had personally selected cremation for a loved one at time of need

within the past three years and had a household income over \$20,000.

Three groups were conducted with those who chose direct cremation and three with those who selected cremation with services. Cremation providers used by participants included funeral homes as well as cremation societies and crematories.

Participants took part in guided discussions (based on an outline prepared by CANA and Homesteaders) and exercises designed to engage them in thinking about their decisions and experiences in new ways. The four aspects of the cremation experience we particularly emphasized were:

- Purpose of commemorating the end of life/death.
- Cremation attitudes and perceptions.
- Understanding cremation experiences from the consumer point of view.
- The role of funeral homes, crematories, cremation societies, and other providers.

PLEASE NOTE: Findings from this study, as with all qualitative research, are directional in nature. They are useful for insight and hypothesis generation. They are not drawn from a nationally representative sample, but do reflect a range of opinions.

Summary of Findings

The conversations in the focus groups were rich and diverse. We succeeded in unearthing a range of opinions. The focus group participants didn't always agree with each other—but that was important, too, as we weren't asking them to come to consensus, but rather describe their unique experiences. Some of their remarks are difficult to hear because they challenge personal and professional assumptions and business practices—and even identity. We were seeking truth after all—and we heard it—and now we share it with you.

Insight 1

It's celebrating their past life, not their death. You're not celebrating that they died, you're celebrating what they did do. Their life up to that moment.

... one of the things I think was important about his service, is telling people about the whole life. A lot of times you know somebody, but you don't know everything about somebody. To touch on all the things he did in his life and people were amazed.

Focus on the person and not the body.

This was a constant theme in all of the focus groups in both locations and probably the most significant description of their motivation to choose cremation over past family traditions. Participants understood the purpose of commemorating someone's life after death to share memories, stories and fundamentally, mark a loved one's life.

They expressed over and over again a distaste for extending the public ordeal of grieving as was routinely done in the past, via multi-day visitations, church services, etc. with a focus on viewing the body. This shift is one of a public focus on the body to a **public focus on the person**.

Many also described experiences with hospice during which they were with their dying loved one and didn't feel the need to see an embalmed body. Therefore, embalming and public viewing of the body were not part of the cremation experience for most. Short visitation by the immediate family, though, was common among this sample. Some were familiar with and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to witness the cremation.

Cremation can meet important emotional and practical needs. On the emotional side, cremation allowed survivors to "keep him with me." The very nature of cremated remains, "ashes" to consumers, allows families to maintain a physical, tangible connection to their loved one no matter where they are. Some even talked about traveling with a small amount of remains so that their loved one could accompany them wherever they went.

Because ashes can be divided into smaller portions, this ability to remain connected could be shared among multiple family members so that everyone can have a keepsake.

On the practical side, cremation also provides flexibility in multiple ways. The tribute can be scheduled at a time to allow as many family members as possible to attend and logistically it's much easier to transport cremated remains than to transport a full-size body. Memorialization options are impacted as well because multiple options are available. Some women talked about doing several things with the ashes—keeping a portion for themselves, sharing some with others, and scattering, sometimes in multiple locations. Cremation can meet important consumer needs in a way that other forms of disposition cannot.

Insight 2

Because you had them in life, you want them in death. You had that person in your life, and in their death, you don't just pretend they never existed. You still have a piece of them with you.

My daughter has a small portion of his ashes in a heart-shaped box that was given to her at the funeral home. She carries it with her—she took it to the university. It was—then, years after, I would find it under her pillow... it's just a piece of important things to her.

It allows end of life decision to be open, continual, closed, finished. It allows you the flexibility to make it any way you want. You can let ashes go that day and that can be over, you can have them for 6 years, 60 years, you can have a service, you can have a plot. Cremation allows you—you can have it in church service, you can do it backyard, you can make it where everybody's crying or where we just know the person exists because the pictures are there, so I do think one of things it does, is provides you flexibility in those decisions.

Cremation offers connection and flexibility.

continued on page 8

Cremation provides simplicity and satisfaction.

Picking out clothes and You're so stressed to begin with and then you have to look at his clothes or her clothes and, "What should I pick? What would look good on them?" I just didn't want to have to do that.

If everything was free? I wouldn't do anything different It's not so much about the money. It's about what that person would want.



Insight 3

We had to talk about price, as it is typically considered a major factor in the decision to cremate. What we learned was that price does play a factor, but not always in the way we might think. We heard three different ways that the price of cremation vs. full body burial impacted decisions.

First, for some families, it is about the absolute dollar amount. They have a limited budget that they cannot exceed. They simply don't have the money to do anything else. That, however, is not the case for everyone.

For others, it's more about spending money in a way that makes sense to them. While some have the money available to do something else, that's not how they want to spend it. They would rather put the money toward a nicer event or pay to fly in family members.

The women who chose cremation for reasons unrelated to finances were quite pleased to find out that not only were they served in the way they wanted, but they generally paid less as well. It makes them feel like smart consumers.

"Simple" is the word most commonly associated with cremation. There are multiple dimensions of meaning to the word, as we discovered. Cremation is a simple task at the time of passing. That simplicity is a key part of its value for consumers. For some people, grief is softened by a shorter public process—as compared to traditional funeral rituals—and by having fewer immediate decisions to make, including decisions around memorialization and final placement.

Ashes are not always treated with reverence by those who hold onto them. It's not a sign of lack of love, or confusion about what to do. For many, the process is finished; they hold onto the essence of their loved one's body in their hearts and imaginations. Where the body sits physically is irrelevant to them, and decisions are left to future generations.

All the participants in this study were very satisfied with their cremation experiences. There is nothing they would do differently about the cremation and the events related to it.

Is it about price?
Yes and no.

The only people we put in the ground are the ones that had insurance money and that we could pay for a funeral without everyone or me going into debt.

And cremation is just a way of getting something accomplished that doesn't cost a whole lot of money.

I didn't say to my kids, "You're not going to university because we had that really awesome funeral."

It's not cost for me it's a choice. I think that it's easier on the ones that are left behind. I think it's more meaningful to see the beautiful pictures and the way you lived your life and all of the love and the family and friends and wonderful time that you spent here and you would want them to take that and move forward with it.



Insight 4

Insight 5

It just wasn't necessary. I never had contemplated putting him in the ground, because we didn't need a place to go—I think for some people the placing of a dead person in the ground, having a gravestone, is "I need that place." Well, I don't feel you need a place to remember the person who's gone."

He was in a bag.
A plastic bag.

...it was a plastic bag. It wasn't zip lock, it was a plastic bag that had a twist tag... around the top... There's no ceremony with this, this is a bag of ashes.... And I took my hand and just scooped a little bit of him up.

Provider perceptions vary.

The women understand the central role of providers is to be body disposers. **Let that sink in for a minute:** They had one problem they couldn't solve themselves, and that was the dead body.

Participants were pleased to find that funeral directors can provide many additional services and products. Some tasks they can perform themselves, but not easily, such as acquiring death certificates. It's interesting that the products and services funeral homes offered were seen as more body-centered than person-centered, which led participants to look elsewhere for merchandise to celebrate the deceased's life.

Direct cremation consumers often purchased products and services... but not from the funeral provider. Amazon, Michaels, and other outlets are competition for products. Church halls, event centers, and restaurants are competition for gathering spaces.

Another common pain point expressed by participants concerned the delivery of ashes to the loved one after cremation. They experienced this as quite utilitarian, and somewhat shocking and surprising. Though some people may treat the ashes with less honor later on, receiving ashes in a plastic bag with a twist-tie can be bit jolting days or weeks after the death. A temporary urn is not perceived as an urn at all.

The focus group participants raised several questions, many of them related to handling of "ashes."

Participants suspected some rules existed, but weren't sure what the rules were or where to find them. In general the women tended to do what they wanted, but they carefully watched over their shoulder just in case it was improper. That is definitely not the best experience.

Often, these women learned from friends or their own experiences rather than having a go-to resource. Google was mentioned more than once as a starting place to research information on cremation options. Many women noted that they were pretty familiar with "traditional funerals" but that they weren't as knowledgeable about what cremation entailed. It's a newer tradition, and they felt that not as much information is available to help them understand the process.

Insight 6

One of the things I personally think is there's not a lot of information about cremation that sits up there readily for us, that we know. I actually learned more through the process... by having to go through the process then—I lived out millions of funerals in my life, so I know exactly how to go about it, but I can honestly say, I didn't know they were going to offer me—"You have a choice of embalming. Do you want to have a service? Do you want to have the ashes back? Do you want to do this? Guess what? You won't even have to pay for it if you let us do this with his body and do that"... It's things like that, that I would have liked to know in advance.

I think there's more information on burial. And so I didn't know all the things about cremation. I feel like cremation isn't—the information isn't out there enough for people to make that decision... I didn't know about all this. All these options.

Consumers want more information.



Why These Insights are Meaningful

This research is rich in content and challenging to embrace. We invite you to share this article with your staff and discuss the following questions at your next staff meeting:

- Do these findings validate your experiences?
- Does this research challenge your professional identity?
- Which opportunities do you see?

Stay tuned . . . throughout 2020, CANA will be publishing new articles that dive deeper into these insights and related CANA member experiences.

Lastly, a note on language: Cremation providers and consumers are speaking different languages. This was painfully obvious from the first minutes of the first focus group. The confusion and lack of consensus is notable. For example, participants consistently used the term “ashes.” CANA has promoted use of the term “cremated remains” to convey dignity and respect, but this has not spread beyond our profession.

Additionally, cremation versus burial is an opposition that isn't. Participants buried cremated remains when they had cemetery property, but often divided them or kept them close with future plans to bury or inurn. The opposition is toward a focus on the body expressed as casketed burial, versus life lived.

Many terms were confusing or foreign to participants. How can we connect with consumers if we are speaking different languages?


Cremation IS and is NOT

While we set out to better understand what cremation is, along the way we also learned what it is not.

Cremation is NOT:

- The opposite of burial
- “less than”
- A way to avoid grieving
- Regretted
- Only about the lowest cost

Cremation IS

- A simpler way to deal with (dispose of) the body
- More flexible
- Less expensive/a better use of resources
- A way to stay connected to the deceased
- Less stressful
- Somewhat unknown/still evolving 

You can download a copy of this article to share by visiting goCANA.org/CremationistArchives.



Above: Barbara Kemmis (l) and Pam Kleese (r) at CANA's 2019 Cremation Innovation Convention

CANA Executive Director Barbara Kemmis has over 20 years of experience developing and marketing member benefits, providing leadership in professional associations, fundraising and creating professional development opportunities. Barbara has a master's degree in Library Science from Dominican University, a graduate certificate in nonprofit management from North Park University and a B.A. from Earlham College.

Pam Kleese joined Homesteaders in 2005, bringing research and analytics experience gained through positions with the Maytag Corporation and Gateway. In her current role as Director—Research & Insights, she leads the company's business intelligence functions and provides custom research services for Homesteaders' customers.