

## **CELEBRATION OF LIFE SERVICES**

*Debbie Bailey, MA, MT-BC, ACC*

“Help!” “Whatever you think is fine.” Those are two common pleas that I have heard too often when asked to assist with preparing Celebration of Life Services. We are more accustomed to preparing memorial or funeral services, and traditionally, those services tend to be quite liturgical and routine in nature. In other words, there is often a formality which is fine, but only if it meets the needs of the families and honors the deceased. Regrettably, that is often not the case. The purpose of this article is to offer consideration about alternatives and emphasize, particularly, the powerful role that music can play. My intent is to provide the spark for expanded thinking that will be helpful for planning.

First, we must define what it means to celebrate. There are many synonyms offered when we examine the word “celebrate” including honor, laud, praise, mark, commemorate, and observe. Honoring someone means that we do all we can to make known the many aspects of that individual. We must ask what the singular qualities were about the person and then how best to exalt him during the time of observance.

My friend, June, passed away not long ago. She was a feisty, little lady who took voice lessons until she was 80. Her beautiful, clear, lyrical soprano voice was dazzling. She loved fine, classical music, as well as lots of other less lofty music selections, one of which was *Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer*. For those that are familiar with that humorous Christmas song, there would probably not be too much controversy about the fact that it is not on the top 20 most used at memorial services. However, if I had been able to attend and also pull my weight during the planning of her service, “*Grandma*” would have been there. I know that June wanted it, and that selection was part of the essence of her.

Unquestionably, the medium of music is powerful. Since the Psalmist David on, music’s virtues have been extolled. So, why don’t we tap into this power source more often? Why, when a distressed person appears at the Activity Director’s door for help, do we hurriedly fill in with standards like *Amazing Grace* and *How Great Thou Art*? and give no thought beyond that? For some, those songs may be perfect. For others, “*Grandma*” is a better, and yes, a more honoring choice.

Martha, a resident at our retirement community, said it so well. “Music has always formed the fabric of our lives. It provides a tapestry of pictures associated with our memories, especially the memory of occasions which are special to us. These become souvenirs without substance which inhabit our souls and hearts.” Activity Directors should lead by providing workshops for families and residents in preparation for these services. Questionnaires should be tailor-made to address format and content issues. Death is as much a part of life as anything else, but we have not effectively found a way to discuss it openly.

We may be fearful, or it may be too painful. Often, humor is quite effective and appropriate. It is amazing how many cartoons can be found in newspapers, and this gallows humor can break the ice. Another great way to get things started is to listen to a song and discuss all aspects of it. A suggestion would be *To Where You Are*, introduced by the currently popular singer, Josh Groban.

All parts of the service should be carefully analyzed with two primary questions: Is it honoring? Is it comforting? Often, musicians are told to “play anything you want” during the prelude and postlude. Paying more careful attention to both will enhance the effectiveness and cohesiveness of the celebration. If there is a solo in the service, it is critical that the music selection really speak to who the person was. For my mother, I sang *Climb Every Mountain*. For another friend, I led a sing-along of *Red River Valley*. Both were ideal. *Ave Maria* was perfect for Ronald Reagan.

Selections from every period of music have their own set of fairly distinct music characteristics. For instance, baroque music (1600 - 1750) written during the time of Bach and Handel is quite grand, overlapping, and complex. Classical music (1750 - 1820), which was music written during the time of Mozart, Haydn, and early Beethoven, is very structured, ordered, and melodic. Selections written during the romantic period (1820 - 1920) are often used because they are evocative, emotional, and individualistic.

There are many resources to get ideas for music selections. Consulting the Internet can provide titles for listening. The point is that once there is increased awareness about the almost infinite possibilities, Celebration of Life Services can be elevated to new heights by selecting appropriate music. Activity Directors should assume a leadership role now and start listening and guiding on the wings of tone.

*Debbie is a music therapist, board certified. She earned her MA in Health Care Management and has been employed full time in the health care industry for about 12 years. She has also worked as an adjunct instructor, elementary music teacher, choir director, and professional vocalist. Currently, she is the Director of Community Life at the NBA Village at Skyline Retirement Community in Colorado Springs. CF*