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Mar 16, 2008

Seeking a second life

Funeral consumer group needs new office space

By **Kristina Peterson / Daily News Staff Writer**

Every week, a broker sends the Funeral Consumers Alliance in Palo Alto a list of new cemetery plots to hit the market.

"Double depth lawn crypt. Price includes 2 concrete vaults! Save \$4,000!" read one for Skylawn Memorial Park last week.

For those with recently deceased relatives, navigating the end-of-life industry can be both surprising and expensive. That's where the Funeral Consumers Alliance comes in. Since 1952, it has been providing price lists, mortuary surveys and brochures such as "Eco-friendly Death and Funeral Choices" to its members in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

"If you listen to funeral directors, you spend \$15,000. If you listen to us, you spend a good deal less," board member Marjorie Bridges said.

But squeezed into a small office in the Wesley United Methodist Church, the nonprofit is struggling to pay its monthly rent of \$200, which recently doubled. And the stairs to its second-floor office are difficult for many of its elderly volunteers to climb.

So the group is casting out to find someone who can lease them space for about \$100 per month or share their current office.

The group only charges its members a \$50 lifetime fee. Membership awards them a discounted mortuary fee based on contracts that are renegotiated annually, planning forms, and an emergency card that lists selected end-of-life contact information.

Volunteers also provide guidance to distraught family members, particularly in how to navigate the complex price lists at funeral homes.

"It's kind of like a menu," said office manager Judy Yee. Deviating from the base fee and standard packages with add-ons can make the price jump, she said. Relatives can be pressured to spring for high-end items such as titanium caskets, and often have no idea what prices are standard for even basic services.

Recently, a man whose father-in-law lives in Santa Clara County called asking if the \$7,000 quote for cremation he had received sounded reasonable. Yee convinced him he could find something for well under \$2,000.

Other times, foreign-born residents anxious to do "what's expected in America" can fall prey to expensive suggestions, Bridges said.

In all, the A-group has about 4,200 members - a rough estimate, given that Yee updates the membership database based on reading newspaper obituaries and the Social Security Death Index.

Since the group started as the Peninsula Funeral Society in 1952, the alliance has helped a total of about 15,000 members, Bridges said.

The Palo Alto group was the first chapter of the national Funeral Consumers Alliance to open in California. The original headquarters in Seattle opened during the Depression "when people couldn't afford to bury their loved ones," Yee said.

In Palo Alto, Londa S. Fletcher and her Quaker community started the alliance when Fletcher was struck by the "tawdry commercialism she endured to bury her mother," according to a booklet written in 2002 to commemorate the group's 50th anniversary.

These days, somewhere between five and 15 people each day call or wander into the alliance's office. Its team of volunteers helps people locate affordable services for everything from scattered ashes to dove releases.

"Really popular right now are green burials," Yee said.

Bridges said nearly all members and their relatives are grateful for the group's expertise in their time of grief.

"We have done the work," she said.

E-mail Kristina Peterson at kpeterson@dailynewsgroup.com.

INFO BOX

For more information, go to <http://www.funeralconsumerinfo.org> or call 650-321-2109.

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