

Best of The Best Award: Rest in Peace Plastic Bag

Change is an ever-existing part of the human experience. Whether big or small, everyone will experience a change during one's lifetime. As funeral professionals, we understand that while change is inescapable, it can also be a painful experience. People use the term "growing pains" regarding experiences for a reason. However, change is also a positive thing. The growing pains can create something beautiful and new or perhaps a better situation. This idea brought Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. to the Plastic Bag Funeral Project. It all began with an announcement from the State Department of Environmental Conservation that there would be a state-wide plastic bag ban on March 1st, 2020. The logic behind the ban was to reduce pollution and plastic waste to work towards a healthier Earth. Plastic bags, especially those within grocery stores, would be banned. The choice of paper or a reusable bag would be the two options at checkouts. Many individuals pushed back against this announcement and fought the change. The plastic bag ban would be an inconvenient change for many individuals and, therefore, caused pain and upset, as change does. The situation became tenser when the Western New York grocery store chain, Wegmans, announced it would be removing plastic bags chain-wide early on January 27th. Our local communities of both Hamburg and West Seneca, NY, were upset over the ban and having to buy reusable bags. As always, we wanted to help ease the pain of change. Our staff decided that we wanted to help our community with the transition from plastic by giving them their first bag free. These bags would be the blue tote bags with our logo that we traditionally use to give families back their belongings and customized printing materials during our Compassionate Care Appointments. However, we wanted to have some fun with the project and created the Plastic Bag Funeral concept.

The Plastic Bag Funeral Project was a program that we designed to serve two significant purposes. The first and primary reason was to help with the transition from plastic bag dependency. However, the second was to have an opportunity to interact with the community in a positive environment. The goal of helping ease the community's growing pains through practical and comical means was achieved as follows. We began the announcement of our event through a mock death notice on our social media for the plastic bag. This death notice was soon reworked into a Life Story. For each family we serve, we create a Life Story, which illustrates who the person was and less of the biographical information in a death notice. The life story for the plastic bag can be found on page 5 below. Next, we set up one of our chapels in each location to resemble that of our real visitations. In the chapel was a set-up of small LED candles around a tiny casket designed to hold wine bottles, which held a plastic bag. We also made a memorial candle and "memorial video." The memorial video contained information about plastic bags, their damage to the environment, the ban's importance despite the inconveniences, and how to reuse already owed plastic bags in a beneficial way, such as weaving mats for the homeless. We encouraged visitors to come to pay their final respects to the plastic bag and watch the video. Traditionally, custom mementos are given away during calling hours to remember a loved one. For this case, the keepsake was the blue Lakeside Memorial totes. The slides for the memorial video can be seen on pages 7-11, and the candle print can be seen on page 6 below. This event was held at both locations on Monday, February 3rd, and Tuesday, February 4th, from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm. During the event, we had the pleasure of meeting members from all local communities.

The benefits of this project were rewarding for both the community and our staff. Primarily, we hit our goal of helping many families transition from single-use plastics to using

reusable bags in grocery stores free of charge. Having the event in our funeral home and setting it up like our calling hours allowed community members to see our funeral home facilities and ask questions about our services and programs without a loss in the family or the stress of mourning. In fact, the event was more playful and got a laugh out of community members who were struggling with the new change. During this time, our staff answered questions about preplanning funerals, our American flag retirement program for veterans, our awards and achievements, and environmental issues from the video. It opened these types of dialogue for individuals who may never have interacted with the funeral home before. Our staff was glad to support the bag ban due to its environmental advantages as it allowed supporting our community's health and future. We also were able to show off our more humorous side and show our communities that funeral homes are not scary or incredibly serious and dark places. Our staff could be creative and show that we are fun-loving people going through this change with the rest of the community. While our team is serious and professional when necessary, it was an excellent time to let loose and to serve as a reminder to the community that we are just like them. Some media attention and photographs from the event can be seen on pages 12-14 below.

Overall, the event was a massive success for us. We were able to help with the pain of change in a different way than usual with a bit of humor. Putting smiles on the faces of our community and doing our part to save the environment brought our community together, but our staff closer together as well. While change is inevitable and sometimes painful, Lakeside Memorial will always be there to ease the pain.