



grey matters by Ruth Gerzon

A fortnightly series for seniors by Ruth Gerzon from Eastern Bay Villages.

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On her website Gail writes: "I know it is still sad when an aged parent dies, but something felt wrong with these dour, traditional mourning funerals in funeral home chapels with organ music playing and strangers in suits in attendance. Everyone sits in pews facing the front speaking in hushed tones like in a library and it feels wrong to smile. I couldn't help but think there had to be a better way."

In 2016 I met Gail at a hui in Ohope on alternative funerals organised by my friend, Honey Thrupp of Taneatua. Concerned by the debt taken on by families to pay for funerals,

Honey began researching options and became troubled by the chemicals used in embalming.

The way she sees it, whanau provide loving care to a dying family member but then turn the body over to an undertaker. There the body is drained of fluids and chemicals put in their place. It took courage for Honey to bring this up in a community where it can be tapu to speak of death, as this can be seen to invite it. Yet, over a year Honey talked to people in her whanau and hapu about her concerns, and researched family-led funerals.



UNDERGROUND FURNITURE: Menzshed coffin maker Peter Mullooly.

the rising cost of funerals

Dying can be expensive. According to the Consumer NZ website, on average, the cost of a funeral is about \$10,000.

For a tangi, when the burial is in an urupa rather than the public cemetery, costs are still likely to be \$4000 to \$5000.

At times, there is more than one death a year within a whanau. Families can spend years paying off debts, and bad debts are a major problem funeral directors' face.

People close to death now some-

times request a simple burial or cremation with no ceremony due to concern about costs. Yet funerals are for the living, to provide a time and place for grief and remembrance, so this may not be the right option for those they leave behind.

Consumer has a list of ways to reduce costs and notes that there is no legal requirement to have a funeral director.

I discovered this five years ago when supporting a friend who was dying. I researched requirements and found that only two or three

forms need filling out and I could easily arrange these.

In the days before the Menzshed and the Kawerau Coffin Club, I bought one for \$500 from TradeMe. Willetts helpfully agreed to do just the embalming that the family requested. Our costs stayed within the Work and Income grant (now an exact \$2093.31) available to beneficiaries, and the family was left without a debt.

Visit www.consumer.org.nz for more on cutting funeral costs.

Claire Turnham (www.onlywithlove.co.uk), a leader of the British movement to reclaim death and dying for families, also spoke at the hui, and women from Taranaki demonstrated their weaving of whariki to use instead of coffins.

Honey had expected 20 people to attend but over 80 came. The hui went longer than expected, as speakers shared their knowledge and both Maori and Pakeha participants contributed, remembering practices from our past, appreciative of the space to open up and discuss these issues.

Since that hui, just three years ago, local women have begun weaving whariki and coffin clubs have joined our landscape, with a website noting that they are "Makers of Fine, Affordable Underground Furniture". In the Kawerau club, secretary Graham Goodall says both men and women support each other to make and decorate coffins for themselves, friends and family, minimising costs and planning their last farewell.

In Whakatane, the Menzshed makes coffins to

sell. We can now all buy an affordable casket to decorate ourselves.

A couple of years ago my husband and I watched a TV interview with a woman from the Rotorua coffin club who had painted a picture of Elvis Presley on the inside of her coffin lid. I assured my husband that I would rather put his portrait there. However, now that I am contemplating a natural burial, I might not need a traditional coffin at all.

It seems timely, given the growing interest and raft of new alternatives for family led funerals, to again share ideas on how we can give our loved ones both the farewell they deserve, and one that satisfies our need to grieve.

We have arranged another public meeting with speakers: funeral directors, Steve Butler and Bradley Shaw, funeral celebrant Rosemary Sloman, Honey Thrupp and Graham Goodall of the Kawerau Coffin Club. Everyone is welcome to join us at the Knox Presbyterian Church in Domain Road on Tuesday, July 16 at 10 am.

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