

MY LIFE IN A DAY

PETER HEADINGTON FUNERAL CELEBRANT

Funeral celebrant Peter Headington has a difficult couple of days ahead. He is working on the funeral service of a friend who died in a microlight accident. "It is an honour and a privilege to be undertaking the service," says Peter. "But there is an added level of emotion when it comes to the deceased being someone you know. I just hope I can hold it together to deliver the service and do the right thing for my friend."



Peter has been a celebrant for nine years. "I don't consider what I do to be a job, really, nor is it a vocation or a 'calling'. To be honest, I see it is an honour to be asked to do one last thing, on behalf of a bereaved family, for their loved one.

"I have always felt I could help people at the most difficult times of their lives. The letters of cards and thanks that I get from families makes what I do worthwhile to me and, as I undertake funerals, weddings and naming ceremonies too, I feel I have balance as I see people at the happiest as well as the saddest times of their lives.

"A typical week will see me doing a couple of funerals, a naming ceremony and a wedding at the weekend. I am very busy and I don't have a lot of time to myself! However, I can still like to escape to the sun in Spain when I can and I also sing in a choir.

"When I started, celebrancy was in its infancy and I suppose I became frustrated that the funeral procession didn't really know what a celebrant could offer. However, that is changing rapidly as the funeral directors that I deal with know the difference between

- for example - a religious service, a humanist service and a celebration.

"I offer a variety of styles of services because, when some people say they want a non-religious service, they don't actually completely want an absence of God. They do want God to be there, just in the background. I think I tell the story of the deceased rather than preaching

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the doctrines of the Bible. There is room for everybody and each family must have choice.

"Typically I receive a request from a funeral director and I then make an appointment to see the family. I like to spend a couple of hours with them to understand what they want from the funeral service and get to know as much about the person they've lost as possible. I always emphasise that it is what they want that is important.

"The family can choose any structure or format they want. Naturally I have a tried and tested structure, but I tailor every service to the individual family. I often find that people want to use the tried and tested service but some do want highly original and unusual formats, reflective of the lifestyle and interests of the person who has died. I work with the family to choose the music, we discuss whether they would like it to

be non religious or semi religious, but mostly we talk about the person that has passed away and I hear some truly wonderful stories. I am often told "Oh they were just an ordinary person," and then suddenly you hear extraordinary stories, such as how they were a pilot in World War II or captained submarines for a living. I also always ask to see a photo because I feel I can get closer to them if I know what they look like.

"For me it is hugely rewarding at the end of service when somebody comes to say goodbye to me and thanks me for the service saying "Oh, I didn't know that about them!" I love the fact that families share their stories with me and that I can pass them on as part of both a celebration and farewell to that person.

"After spending a few hours with the family I go away to prepare the service and order the music. Even little things like this have changed hugely in recent years. Most crematoria have a modern system in place now for downloading music requests. When I first started nine years ago I was often to be found buying CDs of particular pieces of music which I then added to my collection. My CD collection is enormous and now, largely, unused!

"Before becoming a funeral celebrant I was a sales director for a furniture company for 22 years. I was made redundant but my firm was extremely good to me and so I decided that I would go to live in Spain and enjoy some sun and sandy beaches. However, I got bored very quickly and, on a visit back to the UK, I happened to be listening to Radio 4 when there was an interview with a celebrant. At the time I'd never heard of them! The idea intrigued me so I looked into it. The rest, as they say, is history.

"Funeral celebrancy actually originated in Australia, not in the United States as many people believe. Having decided



to re-train, I read a lot about somebody called Dally Messenger who was based in Australia. He is well known in the celebrancy world and, because I didn't know of any organisations in the UK at that time, I contacted him and I did a correspondence course. Now, of course, training for celebrants in the UK is extremely well organised and, I would say, now a prerequisite of becoming a good funeral celebrant.

"I am now a member of the Association of Independent Celebrants (AOIC). As an association we want all celebrants to be trained properly because we want to make sure every family gets a good experience. We also insist our celebrants are properly insured; the only organisation to do so. We don't offer our own training but we do recommend the training run by Civil Ceremonies Limited. If I could advise funeral directors anything it would be to make sure that the funeral celebrants they choose have been trained appropriately by a recognised organisation. We get one chance to deliver a funeral service, and we have to do it well.

"I am very heavily involved in mentoring celebrants now because I believe it is important in the achievement of high standards - and also because I enjoy it.

"Recently, a prospective celebrant made contact with me and so I invited her to see one of my services with the permission of the family. I thought it would help her decide if the job is right for her. We offer mentoring to all newly-qualified celebrants to ensure we're supporting people in delivering the very best for bereaved families."