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ASSOCIATION OF  
**WOMEN**  
FUNERAL DIRECTORS

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*Strengthening the Presence of Women in Funeral Service*

## **Sympathy Flowers or Memorial Donations? It's Best to Avoid Confusion!**

By  
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How many times have you heard a story like this?

My dearest friend in the entire world found herself in a quandary this week. Her father-in-law passed away, and she needed to decide how to handle the “in lieu of flowers” statement within the death notice/obituary in the local paper.

“What does it mean,” she asked me, “when they say that? Do I *have* to make a contribution to the Cancer Society?”

I suspect everyone knows that the word *lieu* is French, and the phrase *au lieu de* from which we get “in lieu of”, means *instead*, or *in place of*. This is, by its very nature, exclusionary, limiting people’s sympathy choices to only one thing: the donation *instead* of the flowers.

Let me ask you: in writing obituaries that include this phrase, do you always mean to exclude floral tributes?

After a long conversation, my friend decided to go ahead and send a floral arrangement to the church. Why, you might ask, did I choose to push for flowers, in lieu of a donation to a most-worthy organization?

I have my reasons. And, at the end of this article, I’ve got an invitation for you to answer that earlier question, and give me *your* opinions.

## **The New Trend Affects Local Ties**

According to the funeral directors I've spoken with, more and more families are requesting that donations to charitable organizations be made in honor of their departed loved ones.

They don't always mean to *exclude* floral tributes, however; they only want to give people a choice in the matter. And, more often than not, they are completely unaware of the true value of flowers in a memorial service.

While a donation is certainly can be a fine tribute to the deceased in both name and philanthropy, such a gift to a national organization takes money out of the local economy, and we all know how devastating that can be to small towns and cities.

More than that, it can damage ties that bind local businesses together. The trend toward memorial donations can undermine a funeral home's relationship with local florists.

## **There's Also Proof that Flowers are Healing**

The traditional funeral ritual plays a key role in the grieving process. As tradition has given way to new forms and behaviors, still the most common funeral-related ritual, is the sending, receiving and viewing of flowers.

In a study entitled, *The Role of Flowers and Plants in the Bereavement Process*, funded jointly by the American Floral Endowment and the Society of American Florists Information Committee, more than half of the bereaved surveyed strongly agreed that flowers were a critical component of the funeral ritual that helped them deal with their grief.

At the funeral service, flowers also help brighten a somber environment and provide a topic of conversation and a tranquil focal point.

More important than the role of flowers in keeping conversation going, the study further demonstrated that because of their soothing qualities, sympathy flowers displayed at funerals actually had a positive impact on the emotional well-being of the bereaved.

After the funeral service, arrangements and plants act as keepsakes to brighten the home and in the case of flowering plants, can serve as a living memorial to the

deceased. Not only that, caring for the plants can provide hours of pleasure *and* an emotional connection to the missing loved one.

### **There They Are: My Two Reasons**

Certainly as local businessmen and women, you realize the need to keep money circulating locally. That's a "no-brainer" as is often said. So reason number one for removing the phrase "in lieu of flowers" from the obituaries you write is economic in nature.

The second reason has to do with the results of the study, "*The Role of Flowers and Plants in the Bereavement Process*," and your unique role as a funeral director.

You have chosen to help the bereaved to endure their loss, and to start the healing process by creating powerful funeral and memorial services on behalf of the families who come to you.

If floral tributes and sympathy arrangements can serve their emotional needs, then it is in their best interest (and yours) to ensure there are flowers for them.

### **And, What of my Friend?**

It is my strong opinion that flowers are a tangible means of showing concern, affection and sympathy for the bereaved. That is the position I shared with her in our conversation last week. She felt the flowers were too expensive, and just didn't matter as much as other actions may.

In fact, she and her children had come up with their own way to honor their grandfather, a WWII Veteran who had proudly served in the Navy. They were going to write cards to soldiers serving in Iraq - but were faced with more decisions. How many cards? Ninety-two, for the number of years he lived; or 40, for the number of years he served in the Navy?

And, do they mention their grandfather in the cards - or just wish the servicemen and women a happy holiday?

Certainly, once the details were ironed out, such activity can be healing for the children. And, I supported their plans. But, I was quite clear that this was not in the same league as sending flowers to the service.

## **In Closing**

Occasionally, the obituary announcement includes the phrase "*In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to....*" Often times, this terminology is used to encourage charitable gifts but not necessarily to discourage other expressions.

Removing the phrase, *in lieu of*, and rewording the obituary to not exclude flowers, but *include* the option of making a memorial contribution may be all it takes to reduce the confusion. You could write, "*As an expression of sympathy, memorial contributions may be sent to....*"

This honors the family request and does not confuse the other bereaved family/friends/businesses. It gives them permission to send a physical form of their expression of love to the deceased. Funeral etiquette is not well-known, and people often spend too much time 'trying to do the right thing,' without really knowing what that is!

Most families sincerely appreciate all personal expressions and may later regret having too few flowers at the funeral. It is important that each giver make their own choice and many people are choosing to send a floral remembrance to the service or family home as well as a donation to the charity indicated.

While a monetary donation is a worthy tribute, there is really no substitute for beautiful flowers as an expression of sympathy. They comfort the living as they commemorate the lives of the deceased.

## **I'd Love to Hear from You!**

Earlier I mentioned that I'd like to hear your comments. Here's a link to a very short survey:

[http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=jo7qrEexpCwSG91x47L8tw\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=jo7qrEexpCwSG91x47L8tw_3d_3d)

I believe there are just five questions, designed to explore your perspective on floral tributes and sympathy flowers. The survey is anonymous - but, should you choose to share your contact details, there's an opportunity to do so.

Please be aware that the results of the survey may be the focus of an upcoming article.

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## **An Excellent Resource**

I wanted to mention a Web site I've discovered, with a wealth of valuable content around this subject. The site is: <http://www.inlieuofflowers.info>.

I've had the honor of speaking with Clay Atchison III, founder of the site, which is aimed at raising awareness of the role flowers play in the grieving process.

We've spoken on the phone a number of times, and his passion for the inclusion of flowers in funeral rituals was apparent. "We know what flowers symbolize and the comfort they can provide. From our own experience we've learned that flowers provide a voice for the many people who have difficulty finding the right words during a time of tragedy." I so agree with him.

The information on the site ranges from the tribute guide by relationship, mentioned earlier, to a selection of bereavement poems and sympathy card messages. There's also a section covering sympathy etiquette, as well as a compendium of funeral hymns, and a glossary of sympathy terminology.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.inlieuofflowers.info/index.php?s=2>