

FUNERAL CONSUMERS ALLIANCE OF NORTH CENTRAL FLORIDA, INC.

“Dedicated to a consumer’s right to choose a meaningful, dignified, affordable funeral”
PO Box 358673, Gainesville, FL 32635-8673
April 2006

ANNUAL MEETING - APRIL 23, 2006: to be held at the Unitarian – Universalist Fellowship, 4225 NW 34th Street., Gainesville at 3pm. The Speaker will be Brenda C. Williams, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent, Alachua County Extension Office. Her presentation will focus on planning for end of life including how to downsize and enjoy it. As we get older, questions arise as to who should get which of our treasures and keepsakes. Brenda shares a program titled “Who Gets Aunt Tizzy’s Dish”. This is sure to be both entertaining and helpful.

Following the program we will have our official meeting. This is a critically important meeting in the life of the FCA of NCF. Following last fall’s newsletter, there were a number of helpful responses and some folks volunteered to serve on the Board. We will elect Board members and officers. Other concerns that could come up will be discussed below. Serious discussion needs to take place concerning the FCA’s future.

THANK YOU, GRACE:

Grace Wagner has done an outstanding service to our FCA, for a time as Secretary, and following that she revised and updated our brochure twice. That is a very significant contribution to our work. It is amazing how quickly these “tools” become dated. One of the basic purposes of our work is educating the public about end of life issues. The brochure is a helpful tool in opening up the subject. We urge you to pick up copies of the brochure at the annual meeting or contact us and we’ll send you the number you ask for. Then share them with groups or place them in your religious fellowship. Enabling a friend to take the next steps in this difficult area of life’s planning is a tremendous gift.

MORE THAN 100 HEAR THE MESSAGE:

In January we were invited to tell of the work of the FCA of NCF in a retirement community. They had expected 25 or 30 to attend. More than 100 came out – and we ran out of brochures! We had prepared a display rack to show our 26 educational pamphlets (the titles of which are listed in the brochure and are on the national FCA web site.) These elicited much interest and many were taken. And there were many questions. This is the largest group we’ve spoken to in the last 5 years. If you have a group that would like a program about the work of the FCA, just invite any one of the Board members or interested others. We’ll work out a way to be there.

AN UNSURPRISING FACT:

When we went to the above mentioned retirement community, we found that they had a “booklet” similar to our “Before I Go You Should Know” document. It is given to every member when they move into the community. Like our booklet, it provided an outline and space to fill in all the information that would be needed at the time of death. We asked the group that night, how many remembered getting the booklet – about one half raised their hands. Then we asked how many had filled out the information asked for and shared it with family. Only three hands went up!

When we have asked our Board members how many of them have completed the “Before I Go, You Should Know” document, we have about the same ratio. We all know much better than we do! Excuses abound and we get uncomfortable. One suspects that much of the anger expressed towards the funeral industry grows out of a sense of guilt for failing to have properly prepared for a loved one’s death. After all, how can you be angry with a parent now deceased because she/he left limited instruction and plans? So our frustration is directed at the undertaker.

NO ONE WANTS TO FACE HER/HIS DEATH!

When we delayed completing the “Before I Go..” book, we thought it was just us, that we we’re tardy folks, unregenerate procrastinators. A lingering sense of guilt and self-judgment hung over us. An upcoming journey and the dangers it involved provide the push we needed. However, we now realize that it isn’t a failing in us alone. It’s in all of us. To be human is to be anxious about death. That awareness of temporality, that consciousness of a time when we will not be, confounds and affects everyone. Sometimes we deal with that underlying anxiety by bravado, courting death, by heroics. More often we subvert the concern by being so involved in living, the day-to-day “stuff” that we don’t have to face end of life reality. Thereby we put the onus on the next of kin and the “blame” on the industry.

A TASK FOR FCA of NCF?

How many of our 450 members have really done their preparation work? Should we survey our group and find out how we are doing? Isn’t it more important to make solid plans than to increase our membership numbers? Is our basic aim to make inexpensive funerals available or should not the first step be planning? How can we assist each other to get this work done? All the information that is at our fingertips is useless if we don’t use it. And there are no speakers or programs that can “do it for you”!

What would help you to get started in this very necessary work? Should we train a cadre of assistants, who like income tax consultants, would offer their guidance and encouragement? Would you volunteer for such service (After completing your own booklet!)? Could such help be offered to small groups within religious fellowships and/or service clubs?

A CHANGE OF FOCUS IS NEEDED!

One of our Board members in the fall of 2005 undertook a survey of other FCA groups in the southeastern US. The sense of his findings was that most all of the groups are

struggling, their major purpose being survival. The word we get from other groups across the country is that there are a few very large FCA's, with fulltime paid staffs, that continue to be strong, but the volunteer groups are stumbling.

Our Board has wrestled with several options. One option is to become primarily a web-based operation. To see what one of those looks like, go on line to <http://www.fcalc.org/>. This is the Leon County FCA and they get an average of 5,000 hits a month. Also check out the national web-page at <http://www.funerals.org/>. If our purpose is information, it is hard to outdo these resources. That would raise the question of how many of our members have access to the Internet? The more basic issue is – “Would that get the planning task accomplished?”

Another proposal has been to significantly increase our membership dues and employ a professional to give continuous, focused leadership and undertake a professional public relations effort. In so doing the organization might pursue arrangements with several of the funeral homes in the area as well as seek accommodations with cemeteries for internment. Our present contribution arrangement is for a one time “membership donation” and contributions as requested and needed. Would we support such a costly undertaking including significant annual dues, if deemed appropriate?

FUTURE DIRECTIONS STUDY TEAM:

Are we at the point where we could seek volunteers to review where we've been and the options for the future and bring to the membership at a fall meeting recommendations of next step? Clearly an option to consider is a recess in our operations. One or another of us has suggested the possibility of ending the FCA at times. This seems too large a task for the whole membership. Could we form such a study group? Would you suggest someone who would serve on this? Would you be willing to work on it?

ELECTIONS AT ANNUAL MEETING:

We have good news and bad news: The good news is that Laura Winefordner has ably filled the position of secretary. Also Malcolm T. Sanford has agreed to serve on the Board. We will confirm these persons in these positions at the annual meeting. Now the bad news: The by-laws provide that all officers and board members are proposed either by a nominating committee named by the membership or nominated from the floor. The Board has not been able to enlist a nominating committee and we will depend on nominations from the floor. The two-year terms of the president and the treasurer are being completed. The president has served 5 years and does not wish to stand for election again. At this time the position of vice president is vacant also. It is most important that you come to the meeting with some one in mind to nominate for these leadership positions! The future of our FCA of NCF depends on individuals taking responsibility in this matter!

You can see that our annual meeting is very important. See you there!

News from the National Scene:

Personal Preference Laws for Body Disposition

In more than half the states, there is a statutory obligation for survivors to honor the written wishes of the deceased, to follow your personal preference. In a few states, your wishes may be over-turned in the case of cremation, however. Even if there is no personal preference law in your state (blank entry below), it is better to have your wishes in writing than not at all. Courts routinely support all but the most outrageous wishes.

Perhaps the most useful laws are those permitting you to name a designated agent for body disposition. If you are estranged from next-of-kin or were never married to your significant other, the designated agent law allows you to name someone other than a legal spouse or relative to carry out your wishes. Or perhaps one of your children is a little more inclined to follow your wishes than the others.

Sometimes circumstances change, and it seems appropriate to change funeral plans, too. One woman's father lived so long that none of his friends were left to come to a viewing. A public viewing for one person--just for her--didn't make sense. Or perhaps you planned on body donation to a medical school in Idaho but died while on a trip to New York. Should your estate pay for shipping your body back to Idaho, or would you trust your agent to make appropriate alternative arrangements?

Almost all states honor the legal rights and documents of your home state, if death occurs while traveling. **Florida** –does have a personal preference law.

NATIONAL LEGISLATION: Senator Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.) and Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fl.) indicated in December, 2003 that they intend to reintroduce bills that would strengthen the FTC Funeral Rule. The most crucial aspects of these bills are:

- *Making the Funeral Rule into a law (right now, it's just a regulation).
- *Expanding the Rule to cover cemeteries, crematories, casket retailers, and other death services providers.
- *Providing money for the FTC to enforce the Rule.

Foley reintroduced a pared-down version on April 1, 2004. As of August, 2004, Sen. Dodd has not reintroduced his bill from the 107th Congress.