

Confirming love and life in death

Colma Cremation & Funeral Services

By JEAN BARTLETT | THE WEEK OF 6-11-18-6-17-18



(Amy Stinson photo)

Joe Stinson at his office in Colma.

It happened long ago, more than 50 years ago, a personal story of grief that changed the life path of longtime Colma businessman Joe Stinson forever.

"This took place in Jeannette, Pennsylvania where I'm from," Stinson recalled. "I was 14 at the time and I was with my two buddies from junior high. We left school at 1 p.m. to go up to the Catholic Church for weekly instruction. I was running a little ahead of my friends and they decided they were going to play hooky that day and not go to catechism. But I decided to go and waved goodbye to them as I crossed the four big tracks that went through town and headed over to the church.

"We are up there in that class for about 45 minutes and when we all came out, we headed to the bridge a little further down that crossed the tracks. Then we all see it. This big train is stopped and everybody is talking about how two kids got killed by the train. And then it hit. I knew."

Joe's friends had followed the steel rails a good way down, long past the spot where a bridge serves as a safety guide over land which curves down. Eventually they turned around and came back into an area called "Dead Man's Cut," where two hillsides grow at such a degree that one cannot hear a loud train coming. They were hit from behind.

"Back then, what to do about grief didn't exist," Stinson said. "And at that age, you go through what you go through. I went to the funerals and it was horrible. When you are 14, these are your brothers. We were extremely close."

"After their deaths, one family was a little distant to me," Stinson said, "because I was the one that lived. But the other family brought me in."

It wasn't until after high school, that the young man from Jeannette was really able to move on from what happened and start to see a need. Now he serves the living as a grief counselor, funeral director and the CEO of Colma Cremation & Funeral Services.

"It was because of this life-changing event that I took up the baton of funeral work."

Over the years, Stinson's baton has covered every aspect of funeral work. Those job skills include: multi-state certified funeral director, funeral home owner, embalmer, eye enucleation surgeon for corneal transplant, associate in hospital pathology, deputy coroner, associate in forensic pathology and organ donation counselor. He is the recipient of the Distinguished Service Award for donated medical services. He is a certified bereavement facilitator and a keynote speaker on healthy grief support. He is the creator and talk show host behind "Good Grief Radio." He is a curriculum developer and educator on understanding bereavement. He is also a husband, father, son, brother, grandfather, uncle, in-law, cousin and friend.

In the late 1960s, Stinson and his wife Christine came out West.

"When I originally entered the funeral business, the type of work I did was traditional. But one day a family came in that I knew like my own family. I greeted them the way I greeted others, but I got a very, very different reaction and that's because I wasn't educated on grief. When individuals go to school to get their license in medicine, psychology, health care, ministry, sociology, funeral service – if they want to specialize in end of life care or grief work, they have to add the study of grief as part of their discipline, because it is not naturally taught as part of their discipline.

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"When one goes through grief and trauma, it changes the way the hormones are produced in the body and you are going to have these symptoms. One is loss of memory, way more than is comfortable, regardless of age. Children have it too. You are going to have a hard time following a thought process and completing it, whether

you are talking or thinking. Your five senses are actually diminished, so things are not getting to you. That's where you hear people say they are numb. Your immune system drops, so you are more susceptible to disease and you have feelings of being overwhelmed. When someone comes in, I am going to talk to them about this. Because the more that person grieving knows this, the more they know there is nothing wrong with them. What they are going through is a normal process. A big part of what we do here, is give individuals all kinds of coping skills."

Colma Cremation and Funeral Services is a grief-based practice, though that service, grief support, is free. All of the following are offered – green burials, pre-planning, memorial service planning, transportation from place of death, funeral coach (hearse), caskets, urns, form explanation and processing, cremation and burial options. Since day one, the company's goal has been to offer affordable solutions for funerals and cremation. There is no embalming. Embalming is not required by California law. No state or province in North America requires the routine embalming of bodies.

"Today we are seeing more processes of a natural death," Stinson said. "Less people are in an ICU. Many people are dying natural deaths at home or in nursing homes. So it doesn't make a lot of sense to take a person who has just experienced a very natural process, that we are designed to do, to die, like we are designed to be born, and then proceed with embalming, a horribly invasive procedure which when done, leaves the deceased not looking anything like they did in life. "

Stinson said that in his business, life and love are constantly affirmed, and he is a wealth of stories.

"I met this woman after her husband died," began one of a number of stories he shared. "She told me that she and her husband were not really social people. They kept pretty much to themselves and they walked a lot. They were very content. Her husband died at home. After his death, she told me she went back on that walk because that is where he was, and that's how she and he stayed united. Not another thing did she need. She did not need anyone else to come in there and tell her she should be doing this or that to feel better. She knew. I also knew from conversations with her, that she and her husband had talked about this walking and how this would be. They had this pre-death agreement, the most powerful thing on earth, and they knew whichever one went first the other would do this. She was so peaceful."

Stinson said that when your loved one enters the process of death, there is an understood promise that you make to them – that you will take care of yourself.

"You have had that person in your life, and you want to keep them in your life, and that means taking care of you. Because when you take care of your health, by taking care of your grief, you will continue to get the messages that they are sending you. When you are not healthy, the messages will be there, but you will never hear them."

Colma Cremation & Funeral Services. 7747 El Camino Real, Colma. Phone: 650-757-1300. Toll free: 888-757-7888. All the services of CCFs, including pricing, funeral packages and a great deal of free information on grief, can be found on their website: www.colmacremation.com.



A Bartlett's Biographies Headliner

Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.