



Robin's Nest: It's My Party, and I'll Die if I Want To



Robin Woods and Richelle B. Williams, Manager at Martin's Home for Service. NEIL GRABOWSKY/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

By ROBIN WOODS
For Montclair Local



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Robin Woods is a Montclair girl-about-town, writing about activities, stores, restaurants and interesting people that catch her eye. She's written memoirs and personal essays as well as music and fashion columns for various NYC newspapers.

Got something you think should be in Robin's Nest? Write to us at culture@montclairlocal.news.

With my birthday arriving on the first day of spring, I've been contemplating how quickly the years pass and the fact that I won't be here forever. So, at the request of a loyal reader, I visited [Martin's Home for Service Inc.](#) on Elm Street to find out how to plan my own funeral. Say what?

Many of us are in denial about death, and don't have our specific wishes documented about the last party we'll ever attend. I'd rather be a guest rather than the honoree. Richelle Martin, manager, took me on a tour and shared valuable information with me.

Opened in 1950, Martin's was once the choice for African American funeral services, with Caggiano's serving the Caucasian population in town. Things have changed with the diversification of Montclair, and the businesses help and support each other when an extra hearse is needed. There are no set rules for who goes where.

A last will and testament deals with financial arrangements, custody issues, property rights and perhaps some funeral particulars for the dearly departed. However, I won't know whether you've followed my exact wishes because I will only be there in spirit, not with my To Do list in hand. It takes 10 days for a will to be filed and probated. Everything's over but the crying by then. Here's where a Funeral Agent comes into play. As a Funeral Agent, Richelle makes sure that the specific wishes of the client, set up in advance, are followed to the letter. This legal document supersedes everything that your next of kin or executor of your will might choose. This is a pre-need and pre-paid arrangement, which works perfectly for me. Richelle suggests that you

designate a Funeral Agent to work on your behalf, at the head of your will.



RICHELLE B. WILLIAMS

If you're getting creeped out by all of this talk of death, try not to be. From the moment I walked in the door of Martin's, it was a calm and serene place that actually smelled good. No cloying aroma from too many floral arrangements fighting with each other, or the smell of death. The front rooms are beautifully decorated with an Asian theme, with ornate carved screens, large fireplace, and a huge fish tank. That surprised me, as it's unexpected outside of dental and medical offices. Richelle is very spiritual and tries to keep things looking attractive and peaceful, with a Himalayan salt lamp on the hearth. There's color and beauty everywhere, which might be missed in times of grief and loss.

I won't be sending out any Save the Date cards to you any time soon, but you are all invited to attend my tea dance disco party celebration. I was raised in an Orthodox Jewish home and taught early on that it's "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" for us. No fancy dress for the deceased, just wrapping in a plain white shroud. Done and gone within 24 hours.

Not for me. I want to go out looking gorgeous in the brightest, most sparkly clothes I own, with full makeup and blown-out hair. Don't forget the jewelry. Richelle says, "You check in, you are dressed from head to toe, back to front, with a manicure, pedicure and the works. It's a spa hotel for people in transition, and you'll be ready for your function at the junction." She's a funny woman who takes her work seriously, but puts things into perspective. I've never been a fan of spa treatment gift certificates, so don't offer one to me.



Martin's Home for Service. NEIL GRABOWSKY/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

Did I ask to see a casket? Of course I did. Richelle's daughter Tiffany brought up a rental casket for me to explore. There isn't enough room to permanently store the many sizes and choices you might decide on, but a casket for "cremains" is kept on site. Cremains are what remains after cremation. During the service, there's a liner and insert inside it where the body is placed. That won't be me, as I have ancient ancestral reasons to forgo cremation. Have you ever wondered why you usually see the body only from head to just below the belly button? Where are the legs? This casket is known as a half couch, with two lids which open. The front part is what's seen by the public, and the rest of it is kept closed. Not as attractively designed, I guess it could be a place to stash what's needed for future use.

With my being so petite, the casket seemed huge and long. Although I turned down the offer to climb in to try it out, Tiffany has gone into one to see how it feels. That's what happens when it's a family business and death is dealt with as a day to day occurrence. She's also a media and tech expert who puts together videos with music choices given to her in advance. The videos play on a loop inside the viewing room where full funeral services are often held.

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Funerals don't come cheap, even if you don't want a horse and carriage to tote you to the funeral home instead of using a hearse. (A Cinderella coach for me, please! I never had a fancy wedding.) The cremains rental unit costs \$1,275 with the insert, and that doesn't include the cost of a cemetery plot or fees attached to a graveside ceremony. There are three cemeteries in town, Immaculate Conception, Mt. Hebron and Rosedale. The low-end figure for a traditional funeral service is \$9,000.

If you must go out in eco-friendly fashion, as caskets are made from inorganic materials and require a cement enclosure during internment, you'll have to opt for a green or natural cemetery. There are locations in N.Y. and N.J. if you want to stay local into eternity. Burial is in wicker or something easily biodegradable, so it breaks down quicker. No embalming or enclosures are involved, so you might not want to be within miles of the decomposing bodies ripening.

Send me no ornate floral arrangements, especially red roses. They are expensive and are more for the living to show off to each other. The flowers go to the cemetery from the funeral home, where they are discarded after two or three days. Hospitals and nursing homes don't accept donations of such anymore, as the volume far exceeds the space they need and require care from staff members.

Martin's can accommodate 350 or more people for a funeral, and I hope that mine spills outside into the floral garden area during the warmest day of summer. Did you know that more deaths occur in winter, from December to March, with January being the deadliest month of the year? There's really nothing that Richelle won't include as part of your funeral, other than allowing food to be served to nibble on between sobs. It's a health code issue, and you can wait until it's over for a repast. "You might walk in crying, forlorn and lost. I hope that you walk out calm and happier," she says.

I only wish that I could walk out with you.

In this article:

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