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Death Breathes New Life into Branding

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Nothing about its suburban-normal office building hints that behind the door of Eternal Image Inc., a revised American way of death is emerging.

From its Detroit Tigers urn to a pristine ivory and gold Vatican Library casket sanctioned by the Pope, the melding of brand marketing and death is inevitable: Wouldn't you expect the "24th century styling" of a Trekkie cremation urn to boldly go where no urn has before?

Detroit has a long history of thinking creatively about death. It's a jagged line from Robert C.W. Ettinger's call to cryogenics -- "The Prospect of Immortality" was the 1964 book's title -- to this fledgling Farmington Hills company.

"We were all complete outsiders to the funeral industry," says Nick Popravski, who heads up marketing. "It was new to all of us."

Clint Mytych, now 28, is the CEO, having brought in his mom, Donna Shatter, and Popravski in as his executive team. Mytych's original idea, conceived for a college paper, was a casket that looked like a 1967 Ford Mustang.

The professor encouraged him, and after the professor died while still in his 30s, Mytych pursued the idea that Americans are passionate about their favorite brands -- retrenching after the auto companies sent the group packing. On a card table, they retooled the idea: Millions wear their beloved sports team jerseys in life. Wouldn't they want to wear them beyond it?

Licensing companies thought not -- at least as first. "We were kicked out of some of the finest licensing firms," Popravski says. Precious Moments, the sweet-faced dolls, were the first to license the firm. The Vatican Library and Major League Baseball followed.

At the first funeral director trade show the group attended, they couldn't afford a booth -- but attracted media, and a slew of orders, after setting up a display in a hotel room.

What seemed obvious to the founders made sense to the public, even if funeral directors seemed initially skeptical.

"It's a paradigm shift," says Lynn Isenberg, a Bloomfield Hills native turned Californian. After the deaths of her brother and father, Isenberg reinvented her career: She created Lights Out Enterprises, planning "end-of-life celebrations" to embrace a similar idea -- that baby boomers want to celebrate the lives of their loved ones in a more personal and distinctive way.

Since then, she's written three books based on a fictional funeral planner. To promote her latest, "The Funeral Planner Goes to the White House," in which heroine Maddy Banks becomes the

president's "grief buddy," she's planning a book-signing tour at funeral homes. Now Eternal Image is co-sponsoring the book tour, along with a national funeral home conglomerate.

The funeral business has always been for-profit, cloaking salesmanship in an aura of dignified whispering. Grandpa wearing his Detroit Tigers jersey in a \$4,499 casket is more like a shout from the bleachers.

Are funerals supposed to be fun? Sometimes being able to remember a loved one with laughter also frees people to grieve, Isenberg says.

Eternal Image gets e-mails and calls from people who are grateful that a dad, who loved the Boston Red Sox, could be buried as the fan he was. "When a husband or father passes away, the family desperately wants to do the right thing to honor him," Popravski says.

Eternal Image's first caskets became available in December, but funeral directors who once shunned their products are now signing up.

"It's not for everyone," says Bob Biggins, a Boston area funeral director and spokesman for the National Funeral Directors Association. "They're making funerals more personal."

Laura Berman