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Author's 'Funeral' turns into a real business

By Gail Slaughter

Human beings, it's been noted, are the only creatures who can contemplate their own deaths. But it's not usually a topic we wish to dwell on.

Death is scary, and funerals are sad.

But what if funerals were less about grieving a death and more about celebrating a life?

What if we had a say in how we are remembered?

A new novel, "The Funeral Planner," explores those ideas. It's about a young woman who starts a business creating end-of-life celebrations -- pre-planned by people who are still enjoying life.

What's ironic is that writing the book led author Lynn Isenberg to start a business just like that.

Much of the book takes place at Clark Lake -- which is not surprising, because much of it was written there.

Isenberg lives in Los Angeles and has worked in the motion picture industry, but she's a cousin of Bob and Laurie LaZebnik of Clark Lake. They invited her to stay at their home while she wrote "The Funeral Planner."

Isenberg had also written her previous novel, "My Life Uncovered," there. "They are incredible cousins," Isenberg said of the LaZebniks. "They understand the needs of a writer."

"The Funeral Planner" is an entertaining read, especially for women. Romance, rivalries and relationships keep the reader rushing through the pages.

But it's also thought-provoking, inspiring readers to consider new ideas about how we mark the end of someone's life.

The idea for the novel came from a remark made to Isenberg at her brother's funeral. He had died a year to the day after her father, and of course she was grief-stricken.

Singer Sandra Bernhard performed an a capella solo at the service. That's when Isenberg's college roommate turned and said, "Gee, I wish I'd brought my boys. Then they'd know funerals don't have to be so sad."

She's right, Isenberg realized. Sorrow is inevitable, but isn't there a lot to smile about? The things we loved about the person, the good times we shared, the spirit that made him or her

unique?

Isenberg began writing as a distraction from her grief, and eventually as a way of working through it. She researched the book by auditing business classes at the University of Michigan and talking to funeral directors, some in Jackson.

The book's protagonist, Maddy Banks, starts with an in-depth interview with her clients to learn all she can about them. Then, with the help of a professional filmmaker, she creates life-bios on film. A client might want to be filmed at a favorite fishing spot, for example, or in a restaurant with friends. The client could reflect on lessons learned in life, or let a co-worker tell a funny story.

The celebration might include dancing, or a walk on the beach. It could take place at the racetrack. The client's favorite music could be played, maybe by the original musician. Everyone would receive a "funeral favor" -- a small keepsake to remember the person by.

As the fictional "Lights Out Enterprises" took shape on the page, it struck Isenberg that her protagonist was creating a viable plan that could succeed in reality. Lights Out could become an actual business. Isenberg could become "The Funeral Planner" herself.

The book was finished and sold to Red Dress Ink. As it was readied for its Sept. 1 release, Isenberg began setting up her own Lights Out Enterprises.

Already she has several clients -- ages 62, 56, and a couple in their mid-40s, "all healthy." The enthusiastic Isenberg says she's "having a ball" interviewing them and "pulling out the essence of who they are.

"Writing is a very solitary occupation, but as you may have noticed, I'm a very social person."

Midway through the book, Maddy takes a soul-searching respite at Clark Lake where she tends bar at the Eagle's Nest. She meets a former funeral director, and the two write a grief manual and set up workshops at the restaurant.

Likewise, Isenberg co-wrote two manuals about "Grief Etiquette" with David M. Techner, author and funeral director of the Ira Kaufman Chapel in Southfield. And the two are planning a workshop on all aspects of funeral planning at -- where else? -- the real Eagle's Nest.

Best of all, there will be a "blow out" book party at the Eagle's Nest at 6 p.m. Nov. 7. It will be open to everyone, and Wetherby Funeral Home will provide a casket for the occasion.