

Memento
MORI
Remember Death

When loved ones die during a pandemic, families honor the lives of the departed while preserving their own

BY SHANNON SMITH





More than 100 mourners, a violation of state COVID-19 restrictions for funerals, gathered for Misagaro Appolinaire's burial.

Even the ritual of death was tainted by COVID-19.

For some people, COVID-19 changed the way they lived but also how they died. For those left behind, the global pandemic changed how they were able to honor their loved ones, and it transformed the shape of their loss.

Walt Stein, development director and educator at grief services center HOPE for Bereaved, knows the stages of grief. He'd previously lost both his father and his significant other, and he counsels people daily on loss. But he didn't expect his anger to be so acute when he was kept from seeing his 98-year old mother when she died of natural causes on June 6. The nursing home staff told him that a total of three guests were each allowed to visit her only once during her final days. He'd visited her daily for 19 years, coaxing her through the confusion and hallucinations of dementia, but he was turned away because he'd already used his time — there was no one else to come.

"After taking care of my mom for all those years. I never thought she'd die alone," Stein said. "There's something special when you're with that person and they're dying; there's

a closure comes with that. And when you don't have that opportunity ... You feel like you've been cheated."

Stein was one of many people affected by New York state's safety guidelines, which restricted access to nursing homes, hospitals, funeral homes and churches. Those precautions also censured some behavior associated with consolation and comfort.

Tricia Karn asked her mother not to hug anyone at her father's funeral, but, of course, she did.

David Karn was a U.S. Navy Korean War veteran living at a senior care facility with Parkinson's disease. Before COVID-19, his daughter Tricia visited him every night. She would clean his fingernails and make sure he'd gotten to finish his dinner. When New York suspended family visitation for facilities like his, she spiraled with the same thoughts every day.

"I woke up every morning with that feeling like, What can I do today to see him?" Karn said.

For six months, she watched him diminish over monthly FaceTime calls. When he'd





Above: Dol Oth's favorite dog was very protective of his body, barking at anyone who came near during his funeral on Oct. 2, 2020.



Left: Flowers sit on a table at fifth-generation family business Farone and Son Funeral Home. The Farones had to turn people away from some services to comply with state COVID-19 restrictions.

Opposite: Walt Stein, development director and educator at HOPE for Bereaved, holds a portrait of his late mother while surrounded by photos of others' lost loved ones at the grief services center.

Right: Chak Srown (left) records video while his family releases doves for his father's Buddhist burial. The simultaneous release of the birds symbolizes the separation of any sins or burdens from Oth.

Below: Arrows mark the flow of traffic for the funeral service and mass of Appolinaire at Our Lady of Pompei/ St. Peter's. Churches had to limit attendance and record visitor names for potential contact tracing.





see his daughter on the screen, he'd ask her what he'd done wrong, and why she wasn't there. She would try to tell him about COVID-19.

"Everyone was just super sad we couldn't do things as a family," Karn said, who still wonders if she could have had more time, if things could have been different, if his isolation contributed to his decline.

Sarah Uon's nail salon in Virginia had closed because of COVID-19, so she packed up her family and moved back to her childhood home of Syracuse to provide 24-hour care for her father, Dol Oth, who had been diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. She still wakes up every day at 6 a.m. and goes to his room, hoping to see him there.

"There's no good time to die, but passing away during COVID is just not good at all," Uon said.

After Oth was admitted to the hospital, she took turns with her siblings because only one person was allowed to visit per day. This meant that her 8-year-old daughter couldn't see him before he died; the open casket was her goodbye.

Bonnie Tucci, a counselor and educator at Hope for Bereaved, said one unexpected advantage for those who have lost someone during COVID is that they recognize they've lost someone and something. She said many people are grieving right now and don't realize it; they are grieving lost jobs, lost security, lost human connection, the loss of a lifestyle and control.

"[Grief] changes us," said Tucci. "This whole pandemic has changed every single one of us."

Karn said that grieving during COVID-19 changed her and increased her empathy for other people and their hidden hardships.

"We don't know how [others] are processing or what happened to them during this," she said. "I just internally have to be as grateful as I can so that I don't fall into self-pity or think that this is just happening to me. It's happening to everyone."