



The Memorial Society  
of Rhode Island



## Newsletter — Spring 2008

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<http://www.funerals.org/rhodeisland>

YOU ARE INVITED TO  
THE ANNUAL MEETING OF  
THE MEMORIAL SOCIETY OF RHODE ISLAND  
An Affiliate of the Funeral Consumers Alliance

Sunday, May 4, 2008, 3:00 to 5:00 PM  
at Westminster Unitarian Church  
119 Kenyon Ave.  
East Greenwich, RI 02818

**“FUNERAL SHOPPING: HOW TO GET THE MOST FOR  
YOUR FUNERAL DOLLAR”**

**GUEST SPEAKER: Lisa Carlson**

President of the Funeral Ethics Organization

Author of Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love and  
I Died Laughing: Funeral Education with a Light Touch

“An entertaining and up-beat speaker on what might otherwise be a  
down-beat topic”

## The Board of Directors of the MS-RI

Susan Graefe, President  
Bruce Donovan, Vice-President  
Muriel Flood, Treasurer  
Judith Schrier, Secretary

Directors at Large  
Renee Bucklin  
Diane McGeough  
Jerry Tisser

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## National Funeral Consumers Alliance

The Memorial Society of Rhode Island is associated with the national organization, Funeral Consumers Alliance Inc. The Alliance was formerly known as The Funeral and Memorial Societies of America and before that, The Continental Association of Funeral and Memorial Societies. The organization was first based in Chicago and for a while included Canada. The exact date of its founding is not certain; however, in 1961 there were ten memorial societies in California and twenty nationwide. The number in California has nearly doubled, and the national number, now, is almost six times what it was in 1961. A move to Washington, DC proved nearly fatal to the organization due to expensive overhead. From DC the headquarters moved to Egg Harbor, WI., and then to its present location in South Burlington, VT. It is composed of a twelve-member board of directors which meets three or more times a year in different states.

FCA provides legal testimony, media interviews, talk-show participation, and speaking engagements on behalf of consumers of funeral services and products. It also responds to requests for specific information on death topics and develops brochures and other literature about

after-death choices. It refers callers to one of the local organizations for membership information and provides services if the call is from an area not served by a local organization. It cooperates with AARP and other nonprofit organizations interested in serious health problems, Hospice, end-of-life choices, and senior citizens. It monitors funeral regulations and legislation and alerts local organizations by E-mail of pertinent information.

Representatives have testified before the Federal Trade Commission and US Senate hearings. FCA has been instrumental in introducing regulations to require disclosure of all funeral services and their prices, elimination of restrictions for the scattering of ashes, and acceptance by mortuaries of caskets not purchased in the mortuary. Lisa Carlson, the previous Executive Director, has received national recognition for her activities dealing with funeral industry regulations. Joshua Slocum is the current Executive Director. Current plans include seeking regulations to benefit and protect consumers of cemeteries, mausoleums, and manufacturers of monuments, caskets, and urns. — *Adapted from the Website of the California and Hawaii Organization*

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## History Corner

The Memorial Society of Rhode Island was officially incorporated as a Non-profit Corporation under the General Laws of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations on September 15, 1980. The incorporation was preceded by a year of gathering members interested in establishing a forum for educating

themselves about the issues of pre-planning funerals. In the early years there were many newsletters and public forums. Future newsletter articles will reflect on the early years of the organization and recognize some of its founders and early strong supporters.

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## Message from the President

This has been an exciting, productive year for the Memorial Society of Rhode Island. At our last Annual meeting on May 14, 2007 a new board of directors was elected. With a set of recently revised by-laws in hand, we began the task of implementing our mission to "protect a consumer's right to choose a meaningful, dignified, affordable funeral, by providing education about the preplanning and recording of funeral arrangements by the members."

At our first official meeting as a new board on June 6, 2007, officers were selected by consensus. In September, Renée Bucklin replaced Fran Armstrong, who moved out of state. We agreed that our meetings would be once or twice per month depending on the immediate need in our planning and implementing process. Board member attendance has been stellar.

There was an acute awareness that in order to continue our work we would need to raise the fee for membership for all NEW, INCOMING members from \$12.50 to \$25.00 per person for a LIFETIME membership, as of June, 2007. This compares favorably to the fees charged by similar Funeral Consumer Alliance Affiliates throughout the country.

Our initial focus was on developing a brochure which would both state our mission and describe the benefits of membership. This effort resulted in a clear, crisp document which you will receive with this newsletter if you are a current member. It will be available in local churches, libraries, and estate planning law offices as we have an opportunity to distribute them."

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## Donating to the Memorial Society of Rhode Island

The cost of an individual *lifetime* membership in The Memorial Society of Rhode Island has got to be one of the best bargains around – \$25. Not surprisingly, this fee does not cover our day-to-day expenses – printing, mailings, and the like – even though our staff is comprised wholly of unpaid volunteers.

To meet our mission of helping the public understand and deal with issues of death and the disposition of remains, we seek donations and are grateful for

Enhancing our visibility necessitated getting a telephone number and e-mail address, which you will find on the brochure and on page 1 of this newsletter. We have a Website at <http://www.funerals.org/rhodeisland>, which has a link to a membership form, which can be downloaded and mailed.

In order to update our information regarding current funeral home services and prices, Bruce Donovan, on behalf of the Society, agreed to do a statewide survey of all of the funeral homes in Rhode Island. His was a huge "undertaking," and it has involved lots of travel and persistence in making contact with the many facilities. Be sure to read Bruce's article on the General Price List Survey. Special thanks to Bruce.

I hope to see you at our Annual Meeting on May 4, 2008, from 3 to 5 P.M. at Westminster Unitarian Church. Our Keynote Speaker will be Lisa Carlson, who is the Founder and former Executive Director of the Funeral Ethics Organization. She has written many books, including *Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love* and *I Died Laughing: Funeral Education with a Light Touch*. Ms. Carlson has been interviewed extensively on radio and television. **PLEASE JOIN US.**

The upcoming year will be devoted to continuing the work begun this year but will also involve the implementation of a number of important committees which I hope you will consider serving on to help this organization to thrive. – Sincerely, Susan W. Graefe

contributions in any amount. Our application to become a 501c3 with the Internal Revenue Service is in process. We expect that 501c3 status will be granted, which will mean that all donations to the Memorial Society will be tax deductible. We will keep you posted on this development in future newsletters and also on our website <http://www.funerals.org/rhodeisland>. We will greatly appreciate your financial support.

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## Message to Current Members

If you have access to e-mail, we would appreciate it if you would send a message to [memsocri@cox.net](mailto:memsocri@cox.net) telling us that we may use the address you are writing from to

send you important announcements without paying postage. We promise not to share your electronic address with anyone outside the Society's Board of Directors.

# The Consumer Survey of Funeral Directors in Rhode Island

A major goal of The Memorial Society is to provide members access to current funeral costs. In Fall, 2007, the Society initiated a survey of all funeral directors in Rhode Island, collecting General Price Lists from over 80 establishments. (The General Price List (GPL), a federally mandated document required of all funeral directors, is intended to provide uniform categories of costs for a range of discrete services, sometimes bundled into “package” offerings.) All but a handful of funeral directors responded to our request for information: four known establishments have not submitted their GPLs.

Directors were forthcoming with observations on their work and only in a few instances seemed, understandably, suspicious about this survey by an outside group. Many welcomed the opportunity to see how their prices compared with those of their peers. Memorable was the knock on the door of one establishment, a knock answered by a young man in a sweatshirt advertising health and fitness training. This apparent incongruity seemed for a moment to give new meaning to a “full service” business, something for both the quick and the dead!

The survey gives a comparable sense of costs statewide. Although information was sometimes difficult to interpret, the Society made a good faith effort to present price information as accurately as possible and corrections are welcome. However, since, prices may change without notice, the consumer should in every

instance confirm individual prices before making final arrangements.

Development of the survey, time-consuming as it was, proved to be both instructive and pleasurable. The Funeral Rule issued by the Federal Trade Commission requires that funeral homes provide price information over the telephone and supply a copy of a GPL to anyone appearing in person and requesting it. Although a number of establishments were content to send GPLs by mail, site visits were the norm. These visits increased appreciation for the range of styles afforded by the local funeral industry. Noteworthy was the prominence nowadays of mention of cremation on funeral home signs and in their advertising. We must regret to report that we discovered numerous instances of non-compliance with the Funeral Rule. We will discuss these issues in our Executive Summary and aim to see that they are remedied.

It is our plan to issue updates of the survey from time to time, perhaps incorporating new kinds of information. Some members are curious about local and national / international ownership of funeral homes. (In Rhode Island, apparently, local ownership dominates.) Others are curious about newer options for burial – home and green, for example – and innovative services, such as bereavement counseling or space for post-burial receptions, now offered by some establishments. – **Bruce Donovan**

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## Help Wanted

After a year of defining our direction, the Board of Directors is now ready to establish committees to implement our mission to *inform and educate consumers about the importance of pre-planning funerals and protecting the consumer's right to choose a meaningful, dignified, and affordable funeral*. Among the volunteer opportunities available are

- filling future Board positions,
- participating in a legislative watch,
- providing legal consultation,

- assisting with this newsletter,
- participating in a speakers' bureau, and
- providing office help.

At present our Board of Directors is the seedbed for a very exciting organization. We need help from many members to make this organization truly grow and thrive. There will be a volunteer sign-up sheet available at the annual meeting, or you can e-mail or phone us about your interests. Call 401-884-1131 or send e-mail to [memsocri@cox.net](mailto:memsocri@cox.net).