

Living Funeral Ideas: Planning a Non-traditional Goodbye

While planning a living funeral is not for everyone, some people may want to host this end-of-life celebration as a way to say their goodbyes to friends and family in person. The living funeral can take whatever form the honoree desires.

Living Funeral Definition

A living funeral is a celebration of life that is held prior to a person's death. Sometimes it is referred to as a "pre-funeral." The person is usually involved in making plans and it has a more festive feel than somber, although this can vary depending on the honoree's wishes and desires. It generally includes a mix of elements similar to a funeral, memorial, or celebration of life. These include:

- Eulogies of the honoree
- Music, whether religious, secular, live or recorded
- Religious readings, poems, or passages from books
- Funeral program for the service/event
- Reception with food and drink

In addition to the basic elements, the person being honored and remembered often offers a speech to family and friends as well, and there may be other special things planned, too. The living funeral is usually held when someone is approaching death, perhaps from a terminal illness or age. The events can be formal or informal, more reverent or with a more party-like atmosphere; just be sure to let guests know what to expect in the invitation. Some religions may prohibit or frown upon a living funeral so make sure to check in with religious leaders before making plans if it is important to the guest of honor.

Living Funeral Ideas

Like planning other funeral services, planning a living funeral means you'll need to have an order to follow with speakers and music. Add more elements to the service and post-service reception that create the atmosphere desired by the honoree.

When to Schedule the Service

Schedule the service while the honoree is still physically and mentally well enough to enjoy the event. You do not want to have it too soon, but waiting too long can be problematic as well. This can be difficult to determine, so speak with the honoree and his/her caregivers in order to get a good idea of when to host it.

Location Options

The location will help set the tone of the event. Consider any health issues and limitations before booking a location. Some locations come with options for activities built-in, while others are more free-flowing. Just a few options include:

- Sports stadium box or booth
- Restaurant halls
- Ballrooms in mansions or hotels
- Movie theaters or stages
- Sailboats or yachts
- Gardens or parks
- Conference room at an assisted living facility or nursing home

What to Include in the Service

The service itself can be as long or as short as the honoree desires. Some people may want to have a more organized event, while others may wish for a more casual service (or skip the service and simply host a reception instead). If a service is held, you might want to include all or some of the following:

- Introduction of the event and activities
- Pre-arranged speakers who offer short eulogies
- Upbeat funeral music selected by the honoree
- Time for attendees to offer their own words of remembrance
- Favorite passages from books, poems, or songs
- Speech by the honoree (this could also be done during a meal rather than the service)
- Closing remarks to end the service

Post-Service Reception Activities

The post-service reception should have a few special touches to make the honoree feel loved. This may include:

- Slideshow or video featuring memories (invite attendees to submit images/clips prior to the service)
- Table with plaques and awards
- Guest book with space for people to write a note to the honoree
- Red carpet treatment, including an actual red-carpet and limo service for the honoree, plus professional photographer to document arrivals and the reception
- Food and drink, from buffet with bar service to full-service sit-down meal and classy cocktails (whatever the honoree desires)
- Dance with live band or DJ
- Memorial craft, such as decorating a portion of a slat to be used in a bench
- Donation or fundraiser, like requesting people bring coats for kids or donate money to seeing-eye dog training
- Toasts or speeches (especially if the service only had one speaker)

Pre-Funeral Open House in Lieu of a Service and Reception

Some people may not want a formal service. In this instance, it may be best to plan a living funeral that is organized like an open house. At such an event, you can have a designated time for speakers, but otherwise, allow people to come-and-go as they please during a designated time period. This allows for a more casual atmosphere and natural conversation. Set up a finger food buffet and play background music. A display board with photos or slideshow are also appropriate at an open house. If lots of kids

will be attending, consider having some games and activities set up to keep them occupied as well.

Decoration Ideas

The location should be decorated appropriately. This means at the very least, flowers for the service and tablecloths and centerpieces for tables at the reception or open house. One thing to consider regarding the funeral service is whether you want to have a casket displayed; some people may desire this for a more funeral-like, somber atmosphere, while others might find it too macabre. Other decorations might include:

- Mason jar lanterns or paper lanterns
- White light strands
- Balloon bouquets in the honoree's favorite color, neutrals, or metallics
- Banners and flags
- Photographs and posters of the honoree's favorite things

If the reception or open house has an overall theme, you can also look for ways to incorporate the theme into decorations. A butterfly theme might featured them hanging from the ceiling, while a party for someone who enjoys camping might feature woody centerpieces with pine cones.

Who Typically Conducts a Living Funeral?

It's best to request someone conduct the event. This could be a religious officiant, close friend, or relative. They will open the pre-funeral and offer remarks, then keep things moving along. This person can introduce other speakers and let attendees know when different things occur, such as when music begins or the luncheon starts.

What to Say at a Living Funeral

Participating in a living funeral may be new to you. In this case, you should take your cues from the invitation and atmosphere. Prepare several remarks beforehand so you are ready.

What to Say During the Service

If you are formally asked to speak during the service, or if you decide you want to speak when the time comes, you should write a short eulogy-like speech. In it, you'll want to mention fond memories you shared with the honoree and what you admired about the person. Typically, these can be more light-hearted or even funny eulogies, depending on the formality of the service and the personality of the person being honored.

What to Say to the Honoree

The purpose of the living funeral is to celebrate the person before they pass, so it's an absolute must to talk to the celebrant. You want to share how much you loved him/her and say your final goodbye (if appropriate); add a special memory to the conversation to personalize it and look back together on the person's life. Consider starting with something like the following and let the conversation flow naturally:

- "The service was a fantastic idea, Person's Name! This is the perfect way to celebrate your long and colorful life. I'm sure you'll have many more memories made tonight, but I wanted to share

my fondest one the two of us had. . . "

- "You have always been dear to my heart, Person's Name. Being your [neighbor/friend/relative] brought joy to my life, and I will always remember when. . . "
- "Person's Name, thank you for inviting me to your lovely service. It was an honor to work with you all those years, and I always admired your cool head under stress."

Living Funeral Invitation Wording Sample

A living funeral might be a new concept for attendees, so you'll want to make the intent and atmosphere clear when writing up the invitation.

Informal, Casual Wording

Let's Celebrate a Life Well-Lived!
Please join friends and family as we honor
Name of Honoree during a living funeral!
Bring your stories and an empty stomach to
Location Address on Date at Time
and make more memories with Honoree's Name.
RSVP to Contact Name and Information by Date.

Formal Wording

A Personal Goodbye
The family of Honoree's Name
invites you to share memories and a meal
during a pre-funeral service in remembrance of
his/her life.
Honoree's Name will join us on
Date at Time at Location
to recognize all that he/she has achieved.
Kindly RSVP to Name and Contact Information by Date.

Personalize a Living Funeral

A living funeral can be personalized for the person being honored. Before starting plans, make sure it is what they truly want to do and involve him or her in every step of the process. This way, you create the memorial service that fulfills the honoree's wishes.