

Over my dead body

Talk about morgue-anized! Type A New Yorkers demand the final say as they prepare their own funerals

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Amy Krakow is planning a big bash at Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, and like any well-organized public relations woman, the Upper West Sider has it all figured out, right down to the tunes.

When her guests arrive, they'll be serenaded by Joey Ramone's version of "What a Wonderful Life." After settling in, they can bounce along to Wang Chung's "Everybody Have Fun Tonight."

The only detail Krakow doesn't have yet is a firm date — nor will she be able to greet her guests. That's because the big fete she's planning is her own funeral.

Though she's just 55 and fit, Krakow — who, among her other achievements, once dated TV's Larry David — is part of a growing number of New Yorkers who are arranging their farewells down to a T.



EILON PAZ

Upper West Side resident Amy Krakow intends to put the "fun" in her own funeral. Although she's a healthy 55, the publicist has already picked out a catchy playlist and tasty menu — barbecue — for her final farewell.

In this age of micromanagement, the idea of leaving something as monumental as a final statement to someone else's whim or vision not only seems outmoded, but unnecessary.

And for a growing number of New York City's control freaks, calling the shots on their own departure puts them back in the driver's seat — even from the great beyond.

According to Randy McCullough, deputy director of the New York State Funeral Directors Association, more people are taking the reins on their own send-offs.

"It's a very discernible trend — the business is becoming more consumer-driven," he says. "Some people are terming it 'a celebration of life.' If they loved motorcycles, they might want their bike present at the service."

Krakov says her choices — both in the setting of Dinosaur Bar-B-Que (one of her clients) and music, which also includes Marianne Faithfull's rendition of "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" — reflect her sense of humor.

"It isn't that these are my favorite songs as much as that each one says something about my life," she says. "And the key to a good funeral is humor. You want to remember someone in a positive light."

She has left a fund so that her friends can facilitate her wishes, and though she probably won't meet her maker anytime soon, she's not taking any chances. In fact, she started thinking about her own funeral nearly 10 years ago.

"My apartment was in TriBeCa during 9/11, and it was then I realized that you have to live each day as if it is your last, so I started planning accordingly," she says.

Nor is she the only one. Natalie Paruz, a 36-year-old musician from Astoria, is rallying a group of her friends to perform a requiem.

"I want to make it a big concert," says Paruz, who works on film soundtracks and commercials. "I'm also in the process of designing a gravestone that will reflect my interests and passions. It's a work in progress — and I'll keep adding details as time goes by."

She's also purchased a cemetery plot and instructed her cousins to hang bells by a nearby tree, so that visitors can ring them as they come by.

Paruz says she's planning now to make things easier for her loved ones.

"Even though I'm young and healthy, I wanted to spare my family from having to deal with any details," she says. "I've been through planning my mother's funeral, and it was so difficult because none of us knew what to do. We kept thinking about what she would have liked."

Ed Ollivierro, 60, from Jackson, NJ, has big plans for himself. He wants his ashes to be mixed with cement and become part of an eternal reef — for plant

and marine life — off the coast of Sarasota, Fla., part of the same reef program his late wife's signed up for.

He took the planning cue from his wife, who died last fall. "She was 48, but she had arranged everything," says Ollivierro. "It was so much easier. I decided to do the same thing because the atmosphere was actually upbeat." Some New Yorkers may be tempted to orchestrate a tearful moment or two for their mourners. One recently deceased designer requested the singing of a poignant aria from "La Wally."

"When I pointed out that the aria was really sad, my brother said, 'I'd like people to be slightly devastated,' " recalls the designer's sibling, who prefers to remain anonymous.

Lisa Marshall, a spokeswoman for Service Corporation International, which owns both the Frank E. Campbell and Riverside funeral homes in NYC, maintains that making arrangements for one's own death is becoming part of a responsible, organized life.

"We plan for big-ticket items like college and weddings," she says. "This is the same.

"Our industry is accused of playing on people's emotions — this is a way to avoid that. You can compare prices and make rational decisions without feeling guilty that you are not doing what someone would have wanted." And if you set up a pre-plan fund, you lock in the price. "It's a great hedge against inflation," she notes.

Denise Beeson, 61, a resident of Santa Rosa, Calif., ordered a \$250 price cap on her service to prevent her family (she's married and has stepchildren) from overspending.

"My mother wanted a \$25,000 high Mass," she recalls. "I also had a friend whose husband asked that his ashes be spread over Cape Cod. She had to rent a plane . . . As we say in California, it was a major movie. I just want my ashes sprinkled under my grapevine."

Then again, those who do plan ahead should be flexible.

Gael Greene, the 73-year-old food critic, had always hoped to have a memorial over cookies and Champagne at Lutèce.

"It's what I imagined for years, but alas, Lutèce's death preceded mine," she says. She has yet to decide upon a worthy replacement. (Krakow has already selected her backup: Should Dinosaur Bar-B-Que predecease her, she'll go with Nathan's in Coney Island.)

Bob Johnson of Sunnyside, Queens, a 47-year-old photographer and videographer, shot his own memorial video, but realizes the technology of his memento may change with time.

For now, it's set to be projected on a large screen, and individual DVDs are to be left under each seat for guests to bring home.

“I’m not planning on dying anytime soon, but I did this now because the thought of my friends or relatives taking charge of my funeral makes me cringe,” says Johnson, who makes and sells “Y’Obits” obituary videos for others.

His goodbye video begins with a greeting from Johnson — “I bet you weren’t expecting to see me here today” — and contains lighthearted testimonials from friends. Along with the video, he’s left a short list of people who are banned from the event. “It’s my funeral, and I don’t want them there.”

Johnson says he enjoyed making the tape. “I had fun with it in a morbid sort of way,” he says.

“Doing this kind of thing gives you the last laugh.”

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