

Death & dying: spreading a positive message

By Carol Kaufman

Every summer, Loretta Downs raises Monarch butterflies from eggs found in her Chicago garden. She uses their mysterious stages of metamorphosis as a metaphor for the miraculous cycle of life. During that same time, and during the winter months she

spends in Ajijic, she brings that same metaphor into her other passion: creating conversations about death and dying.

At 68 years old, Downs is a strong believer in having a responsible and spiritual death. As a death and dying advocate and end-of-life care practitioner, she says, "My mission in life is to create opportunities

to talk about death and dying in positive terms. Anyone who has loved ones and/or assets and walks around in a human body has the responsibility to take care of their end-of-life business."

For the past seven years, Downs has been on the Ethics Committee at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center, the same hospital where she was born, where she sees the conflicts and hard deaths that are created by lack of preparation. "I've watched families being destroyed, people stop talking to one another. There's no reason for that to happen."

She continues: "Lingering deaths can be avoided by making decisions about the burdens and benefits of treatments. If we aren't talking about this, the default is that we end up on a conveyor belt of healthcare with this treatment, that surgery. Most doctors aren't trained about death; they're trained to fix things. They don't realize how much of a hardship it can be to prolong one's dying process. Wouldn't

most of us rather choose quality of life versus longevity?"

Downs received her introduction to death and dying while working in decorative accessories sales in the Chicago Merchandise Mart – the largest wholesale facility in the world. There, she met plenty of creative men who worked in the industry, many who were gay and contracted AIDS.

"In the 1980s," says Downs, "the industry was purged by AIDS. Many of my friends died. AIDS was a death sentence, so the patients knew they were dying. I wasn't afraid to be around these dying friends during the six years I spent volunteering on Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center's AIDS unit. The level of care and caring in that place was extraordinary. The unit became a model for other hospitals."

She would bring meals to the patients, talk with them and hold their hands. She would comfort the mothers, letting them cry on her shoulder. It was there that she learned how to die hard and how to die well.

"What I saw was that those who fought and denied their death suffered more, along with their families. Those who accepted their death made a choice to live their lives as fully as possible. Dying is a spiritual process with medical implications and legal constraints. When a person knows they're dying, it can open the door to personal growth and create opportunities for forgiveness, bounding exchanges of love, and learning about living."

By the year 2000, drugs were being developed and distributed to AIDS patients. That was the same year she retired and her mother entered into a nursing home.

Says Downs, "I had learned a lot about being with dying people on that AIDS unit, so I became an official trained hospice volunteer at my mother's nursing home. I've always enjoyed being around elders. Some of my best friends are in their 90s."

When Downs turned 60 she went back to school to get her

See Death on 10



Loretta Downs in her Ajijic garden, wearing her butterfly shawl in front of her butterfly-decorated *catrina* statue.

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Training to begin for electric calandria drivers

By Matt Fink

Calandrias, horse-drawn carriages in Guadalajara's centro historico, already a thing of the past in the sense of being a tradition harkening back to a distant time of corsets, pistol duels and wigs, will in a very real sense shortly be a thing of the past as they are phased out in favor of animal-less facsimiles propelled forward by the modern magic of electricity.

Those carriage drivers, or *calandrieros*, in compliance with Guadalajara Mayor Alfaro's controversial initiative will soon begin a 45-hour training

program with the new machines. Upon its completion, they will be receive documents certifying them to operate the shiny new beast-less beasts, which come complete with space for advertisements.

According to Marilyn Gomez Pozos, head of Guadalajara Animal Protection, taking part in the training proceedings will be various municipal and state officials, as well as the new model's manufacturers.

The training program will be broken up into four sections: The first, lasting five days, will consist of a crash course in the culture, history

and geography of the city; the second will involve the nuts and bolts of vehicular operation and maintenance; the third concerns traffic safety procedures, and the fourth and final module will see drivers actually piloting the contraptions, with Alfonso Hernandez, their chief designer, on hand to supervise and assist trainees.

There are currently nine calandrieros who have stuck by their refusal to go quietly into an equine-less future. According to Gomez, these men have stated their intention to delay a final decision concerning their involvement until the electric



Will the electric-powered calandrias become a new symbol for the city of Guadalajara, or will locals and visitors soon be lamenting the disappearance of horse-drawn carriages?

calandrias are up and running.

What remains a somewhat murky subject is the fate of the animals who will shortly find themselves without carriages to pull. Will they spend the remainder of their days galloping in sunlight fields of wheat and thoughtfully masticating apples to a pulp? Or will they, as many critics of the impend-

ing replacement claim, end up hanging upside down skinless and bloody in an abattoir, thus negating the nominal *raison d'être* of the whole business, that is, animal welfare?

A less weighty question being pondered over is whether or not operators will sport identical uniforms, and if so, what they might consist of.

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Death from 9

Master's degree in Gerontology so that she could qualify to speak at conferences.

"For many years I spoke about advanced care planning to senior service organizations and directors of nursing homes and funeral parlors."

In Downs's upcoming talk at Open Circle (see below), she will discuss *The Five Wishes*, a 12-page legal document that was developed by the organization, Aging With Dignity.

"This document is a helpful tool for exercising control over your end-of-life care," she says. "These wishes will clarify who and what matters most to you when you reach the end of the life line. You don't need an attorney to do advance health care planning. Start this process

when you're healthy, and then a second time when you're diagnosed with a serious illness, so that you can relook at what matters most."

Downs believes that there is bliss to be found at the end of life. "Some of us have a choice to leave behind a legacy of peacefulness by dying well. I've witnessed many people embody this peacefulness at the end of their lives. The Buddhists talk about right action and right speech. I talk about right death. It's an individual decision but we all need to be talking about it and making dying a significant part of life."

Downs will present *The Five Wishes*, Sunday, January 28, at Open Circle, 10:30 a.m., at Lake Chapala Society. Doors open at 10 a.m.

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