

Coffin Club the funeral revolution

Death Cafes and Coffin Clubs: challenging the taboos around death

Talking about funerals

How Coffin Club in North Devon is making a space for honest conversation on death

Nixie James-Scott thought she knew about design. She had even trained as a knitwear designer in the seventies, when the word used to refer to paper and diagrams. It is only through the [Transform Ageing](#) programme, delivered by UnLtd, the Design Council and the South West Academic Health Network, that she has realised the potential of design to meet other needs – like breaking down the taboos around death by making your own coffin.

“It has been fascinating to see the aims and goals for Transform Ageing come about through this extraordinary design process,” she says.

Nixie received a £500 Inspire Award from Transform Ageing, which, along with on-going support, is intended to help people explore and work up a new idea to benefit their community, with a focus is on learning and collaboration.

For Nixie, this allowed her to attend a master class in Hastings to learn how to start a Coffin Club. The clubs, based on an idea from New Zealand, are a way for people to address their concerns about death by literally building and decorating their own coffin. “It was at a moment my life when I thought I wouldn’t be able to do it, but UnLtd was so supportive that I decided to just go for it,” she says.

The first Coffin Club in the UK was started in Hastings in Sussex by funeral celebrants Kate Tym and Kate Dyer. On the six week course, participants paint and decorate their own coffin, which can be dismantled and stored until it is needed. There are also informal talks from someone who can inform the participants about the choices they can have around their own end of life and funeral. They are sociable events where participants can form strong, supportive and ongoing friendships.

Discussions about death have never been easy. But as costs rise, they are getting harder. In the UK, [funeral poverty](#) has increased 50% in three years, according to the Fair Funerals Campaign. The campaign describes funeral poverty as both the unmanageable debt associated with funeral costs and also the distress, shame and stigma of not being able to provide a “decent send-off” for a loved one.

Around one in six people will struggle to pay for a funeral in the UK as costs have risen over 112% over the last 13 years. Nixie has long been engaged in helping families to navigate their way through the process of death and funerals. “As I worked around death and dying I was drawn to work as a home and family-led funeral guide, helping people to keep their loved ones at home after someone dies if they wish and to enable them to know of and make choices,” she says.

In 2010, Nixie was ordained as a One Spirit Interfaith Minister and has officiated at weddings, funerals and many other ceremonies, often being present in a family at moments of great joy or grief. “Death and dying was anathema when I was younger but as I got older, I kept going to funerals and getting a dig under the ribs saying you should be doing this,” she says.

Nixie took the first step to hosting her own Coffin Club when she accepted an invitation to attend a Death Cafe in Bristol. These “meetings of people with no agenda” provide space to

gather in groups of four or five and to talk about death and dying matters over coffee and cake.

After attending the Bristol Death Cafe, Nixie worked with a friend to bring the idea back to Devon. They started holding Pop-Up Death Cafe around North Devon, in reach of the county's sparse population.

"People just start talking," Nixie says. "Sometimes the most amazing conversations can happen." She noticed that often people who were unwell or older used the cafes as an opportunity to talk about death and their own funeral and end of life choices, because they may have struggled to have those conversations with their own close family.

"Sometimes people who have lost a loved one can be quite bereft because they didn't let their family-member talk about their funeral wishes," Nixie says. "So for some people it's a liberation to be able to talk about their fears or their experiences. Nothing is off limits."

It was through this interest in Death Cafes and the death community that Nixie learned about Coffin Clubs. The first Coffin Club was started by Katie Williams, a former midwife and hospice nurse, as a way to celebrate people's lives and their personalities. Williams came up with the idea in her seventies, when she noticed that her friends' funerals did not reflect their true personalities. So she recruited some local men in her hometown of Rotorua in New Zealand to help her start constructing her own coffins and brought interested people together to decorate them. So far, Coffin Clubs have resulted in coffins covered with pictures of Elvis and decorated with Irish Clovers and pink glitter. Many New Zealanders choose traditional Maori motifs.

At a cost of just NZ\$250, the coffins were also cheaper and more accessible for people affected by funeral poverty. In this country Coffin Clubs use flat pack coffins made from sustainable and ecologically sound larch ply wood that cost participants £250. At the moment, the clubs themselves are free.

Nixie is now planning the guests she would like to invite to speak to attendees of her Coffin Club North Devon, including an independent funeral director, a death doula, the owner of a natural burial ground and the manager of a crematorium.

The idea is to demystify the process of end of life and funerals, so that people know exactly what goes on. Nixie says the process has enriched her work as a home funeral guide, funeral celebrant and a support to families as they face difficult choices around dying and death. "I see my role as an enabler and an educator," she says. "I am passionate about empowering people to know their choices."