

Opinion: Obituaries should be treated with reverence

By Kathryn Reed

Obituaries are big business. A year ago, my mom spent more than \$2,000 to place my dad's obit in three publications.

It was free on *Lake Tahoe News*. It's free to everyone, not just to my relatives.



The last picture taken of Kae Reed and her dad, Don Reed -- with Sue Wood and Cleo Reed in between. (November 2009)

I say this on the one-year anniversary of my dad's death to make the point that I find it shameful newspapers charge for obituaries – in print or online. It's almost inhumane.

Yes, I understand as well as anyone that a publication is a business. But I also understand that every life is a story.

No one charges a public agency for coverage of its meetings.

No one pays to get a feature story written. A community announcement doesn't cost money.

Why, then, charge for an obituary? Does it really take up space that is better used for some other editorial space?

My answer is an emphatic *no*.

And why treat it like an ad? That really is treating the deceased with disrespect.

Nancy Hayden Oliver, who I worked with at the *Tahoe Daily Tribune* twice, taught me a few things when I was her boss. I learned the importance of letting people tell the story of the deceased person through the obituary. She convinced me it's OK in that circumstance to use first names on second reference – instead of last name, as is customary in news stories.

She taught me that if there is a typo, you run it again. You fix it until it's correct. You only die once. It's imperative the accuracy of the obit live on factually.

I can't count the times I've spoken to the families left behind. It's amazing how the simplest of facts escape their memory. It's amazing how the person's life story flows like a novel.

I laugh. I cry. But mostly I listen.

I don't like writing obituaries. I feel guilty I have waited to know this person after I'm unable to speak to them. I feel a much different loss than the family – the loss of never knowing that person.

But those are actually the easier obits to write. It's when I know the person or the family that I have the hardest time holding it together. It's been even harder this last year. We're in this club together of having lost someone so incredibly important to us. Each death brings up my own sadness.

Death isn't easy. No one teaches us how to deal with it. We aren't supposed to talk about it. But it's real.

And it is so incredibly important how what could be the last (as well as first) thing published about that person be treated. The words about someone who has died deserve to be treated with respect and published in a manner that shows dignity.

When I worked for papers like the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Las Vegas Sun*, obits about well-known people were written ahead of time. This means all that has to be inserted are the date of death, services, and a quote from someone. It may sound morbid, but it speeds up the process of getting the news out to the public.

I've thought about doing that for some people in the Lake Tahoe Basin and beyond – because, really, you could get that person's input. Yes, morbid, but let me tell you, I would rather write my obit than leave it to my grieving family. I know how hard it was for my three sisters, my mom, my aunt and I to massage my dad's obit. As an engineer, he probably would have it whittled to five paragraphs that cost a fraction of what mom paid.

Still, though, one point of this is to have you think about what you would want said about you. And then, if you think you will be the provider of information for an obit for someone, get the information out of him or her now. One day it may be too late.