

Learning the Customs of Life and Death

By Karen Brodsky

Yom Kippur is a solemn day. While the entire liturgy for the day is intense, the Yizkor service in memory of loved ones who have died is reverent. We also recite Yizkor during the three festival holidays of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot.

We light Yizkor candles—one for each of our dear departed—on the eve of the holiday. We also observe the Hebrew date of the anniversary of the death—yahrzeit—by lighting a special candle and reciting the Kaddish in synagogue.

These rituals are as familiar to

us as hearing the sound of the shofar on the High Holidays as they have been passed down through the generations.

Other Charlotteans have their own ways of marking the anniversaries of the deaths of loved ones. At Carolina Refugee Resettlement Agency, we learn about different rituals from our refugee clients whom we have resettled in our city.

Most of CRRA's Bhutanese clients are Hindu. One of our case-workers, Ngana, at the anniversary of his father's death (according to the lunar calendar), shaves his head to show that he is in mourn-

ing. According to one source, "during the departed soul's last days the sorrowful difficulties would have engaged the mind of the people. The hair that was present at that time on the head [is] polluted by negative thoughts. By physically removing it, one prepares for a hopeful future. As the new hair grows, one leaves behind his sorrow and negative thoughts to look forward for positive growth."

Also on the anniversary of the death, a priest conducts a ritual in the home called the shradha, offering pinda (rice balls) to the ancestors. Hindu funeral rites can be simple or exceedingly complex. According to a writer on the Internet site called mailerindia.com, "religions such as Hinduism offer [its adherents their] own immortal souls satisfying answers to questions of life and death. ... They also demonstrate that death is something that can be prepared for instead of being feared. ... A true Hindu shall love death as he loves this life."

Ellen Dubin, executive director of CRRA, who has led the agency from its beginning in 1996, recalls experiences dealing with burial rit-

uals of refugee clients of different religions—some difficult to fulfill in Charlotte both from a monetary perspective and a ceremonial one.

A Serbian family arrived in 1998. According to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Health Department, the husband's chest X-ray tested positive for tuberculosis, but upon further investigation, the doctors determined he had end stage lung cancer. He died within a few months. Dubin turned to Catholic Social Services' burial assistance program and the Greek Orthodox Church, which arranged for burial in Charlotte. The graveside service was performed by a Greek Orthodox priest because at the time there was no Serbian religious leader in Charlotte. It seems the rituals of the Greek Orthodox Church are closest to Serbian Orthodoxy.

Not all Muslims have the same burial customs, Dubin learned. At the time of the death of the elderly grandfather from a recently-arrived family of Meskhetian Turks, the only Muslim cemetery in the area was in Gaston County. Dubin contacted a colleague from Somalia, who helped with the burial. She spoke with the colleague afterward and discovered that the family objected to several things

because of differences in the cemetery's rules and customs and those of the family.

Traditions among the Montagnards (the tribal peoples of the Central Highlands of Vietnam), include burial as quickly as possible. Afterward, friends bring food (and sometimes activities for small children) to the home of the mourners, most of whom do not go to work or other activities for a week. The custom is not unlike our shiva.

As we recite Yizkor during Yom Kippur, we note that the prayers for each individual ask God to remember the soul of the deceased because the one reciting it pledges to give charity on the deceased's behalf. As a reward for this charity, the person asks that the deceased's soul be bound in the "Bond of Life" together with the souls of the forefathers and mothers and the other righteous people in the Garden of Eden.

Volunteering qualifies as charity, and CRRA always needs help to provide its services. Call 704-535-8803 or e-mail ellen.dubin@carolinarefugee.org. Visit CRRA's website at www.carolinarefugee.org.

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Grants Support Jewish Senior Community

Three Charlotte Organizations Benefit from BJH Foundation for Senior Services

Greensboro - This year, BJH Foundation for Senior Services has awarded over \$152,000 in grants to 17 different programs aimed at improving the lives of Jewish seniors in North and South Carolina.

"This is our 5th grant cycle, and we are pleased to be able to continue funding numerous programs that serve Jewish seniors with varying needs," said Arthur Samet, President BJH Foundation for Senior Services.

2011 funding include these Charlotte programs:

Jewish Family Services of Greater Charlotte and Levine-Sklut Judaic Library and Resource Center - "The Melton Adult Mini-School for Senior Enrichment" offers seniors text-based Jewish study opportunities relevant to their individual needs. Curriculum is brought to their location making it convenient and broadens their knowledge to the various sectors of the Jewish population. The program's goal is to empower seniors with the knowledge that they need to enrich and enhance their lives and their community.

This grant was partially funded by the Jerome Madans Fund. Each year the BJH Foundation for Senior Services designates one grant from the Charlotte, NC area to be awarded from a special endowment fund created by the Madans family after the passing of long standing board member Jerome Madans.

Sandra and Leon Levine Jewish Community Center

"Community Center Nurse and Mental Health Wellness" program will use their funding to expand services for the Levine JCC Senior Oasis Nurse Wellness Program which was started in 2010. Programs are offered on stress reduction, spirituality and mental health. Home visits will be made to seniors by an RN and social worker.

Temple Beth El will continue to grow their "SPICE" program which provides eight different programs to Jewish seniors in North and South Carolina. The educational, religious, and social programs reinforce and enhance the senior's quality of life as well as keep them involved in the community.

Information on donating to BJH Foundation for Senior Services call 336-854-8400 or please visit www.bjhfoundation.org. The next grant application deadline will be April 2012.

Financial information about this organization and a copy of its license are available from the State Solicitation Licensing Branch at 919-807-2214. The license is not an endorsement by the state. ☆

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