

In Fresno, Car Washes Common Way to Pay for Funerals

By Kerry Klein

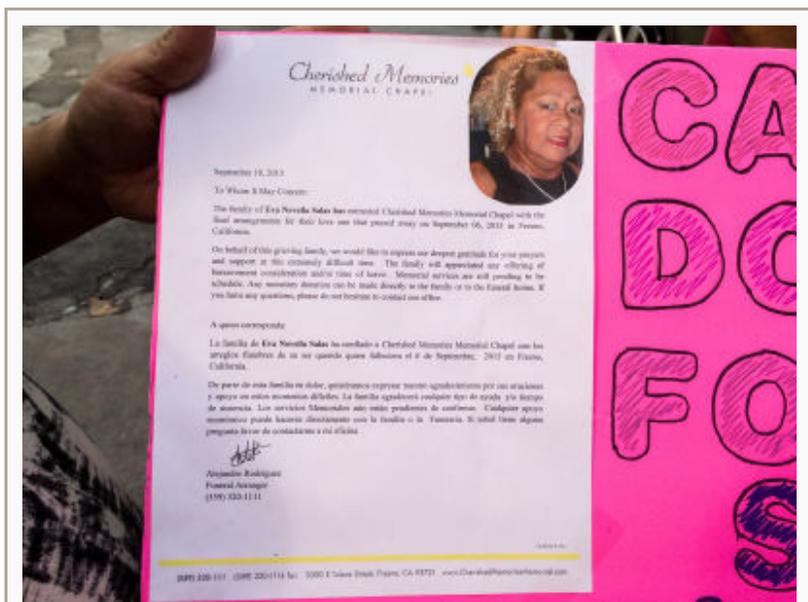
As expensive as medical care can be, it also costs a lot to die. Evangelina Quintanilla learned this a year ago when she lost her father, and again when her mother passed away in September.

Quintanilla, a single mother of eight in Fresno, couldn't afford a funeral for either of her parents. She maxed out all her credit cards to pay for her father's services. Because she was still paying off those bills when her mother died a year later, she had to get creative — so she held a car wash.

Washing cars for funeral donations is not uncommon in Fresno, where over a quarter of residents fall below the federal poverty level. Drive along the city's busiest boulevards on any weekend and you're bound to see groups of kids holding up brightly colored posters showing the names and faces of family members who died.

After her mother's death, Quintanilla's first idea was to beg. "We were just going to go from place to place by asking 50 cents, 25 cents, 10 cents," she said. "Anything was good."

But her sister had noticed people washing cars a few weeks earlier at a Central Fresno gas station. She urged Quintanilla to call and see if they could do the same. The owner said sure, but asked for a small fee and urged them to be frugal with water.



In English and Spanish, a funeral home representative explains that donations are accepted to pay for Quintanilla's mother's funeral. (Click to enlarge.) (Kerry Klein/KQED)

So Quintanilla and 20 or so family members set up folding chairs and lined up buckets of soapy water early on a Saturday morning in September. It was hot that day, over 90 degrees in the afternoon, and a light dusting of ash was blowing into the valley from the Rough Fire. It was a good day to find dirty cars — and a miserable day to be out in the elements.

Quintanilla sat in a minivan while her children, cousins, aunts and uncles washed the pickup trucks and station wagons that rolled in. The 41-year-old is disabled; she has survived two strokes and suffers from high blood pressure

and diabetes. Doctors have advised her not to work and warned her against exerting herself. “I’m like, ‘OK, tell me what I need to do. I need to be here for my kids. Tell me.’ ”

Many of these same health problems led to the death of Quintanilla’s mother. Just like her daughter, she suffered a string of chronic health issues, including diabetes. When she came down with a bad infection, her body ultimately couldn’t fend it off. She was in the hospital for a month before she died of sepsis. Quintanilla wonders if her mother’s fate could become her own. She says her brother jokes, “You’re probably next.”

When she can, she thinks back to a happy memory of her mother. “I never asked her age ’cause my mom used to tell people she was younger,” she says, in a fit of laughter. “My mom was in her 60s but she said she was 50.”

By about 4 p.m., Quintanilla says, they had washed around 75 cars and raised close to \$600. But they still had a long way to go: Cremation services would cost at least \$2,500. “We wanted to view her, but it costs more money,” she says. “Everything does.”

They still probably made more money than they would have from begging. “The biggest donation we got was \$150,” she says, choking up. “I think everybody’s been generous.”

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