

A Memorial Fit for Hog Heaven

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Old bikers never die . . . Actually they do, and a Milwaukee paint expert is hoping that a lot of them will want to end up in their gas tanks when the time comes. Jim Moritz, who spends his days developing new paints for a large Milwaukee company and his free time doing custom paint jobs on motorcycles, has launched a new business offering a product for that last ride: Motorcycle Memorials.

Moritz and his business partner, Ron Winkler, have already sold 50 cremation urns designed to replicate motorcycle gas tanks, and more than a dozen funeral homes carry their product.

"I wanted to call it 'Tanks for the Memories,' " Moritz said, "but that name was trademarked."

The buyers can choose a custom paint job that duplicates the look of the deceased person's bike, or they can pick a design that memorializes another aspect of the person's life: military service or a law enforcement career.

"I'm working on an Iwo Jima design," Moritz said.

The urns are formed from heavy plastic at General Plastics in Glendale and sold mounted on stands made by a woodworker in West Allis. Kevin Timm, a Harley owner who works in the service department at Hal's Harley-Davidson in New Berlin, thinks Moritz's urns have a lot of potential for sales to riders, even though most of them don't want to think or talk about death.

"If it was a hard-core rider, do I think they would do something like that? Absolutely," Timm said. "This is not just a hobby. It's a passion for people. I can see somebody wanting to be part of their bike, rather than in a container."

Mark Simonson, a funeral director at Altstadt-Tyborski Ermenc-Mcleod Funeral Service on S. Howell Ave. in Milwaukee remembers a funeral he organized last year for a biker in his 50s.

"His girlfriend brought in his leather jacket and it was cremated with him," Simonson said.

Another family of a deceased biker brought in the entire bike and parked it next to the casket during the viewing. Both Simonson and John Rozga, a partner at Rozga Funeral Home on W. Lincoln Ave., say the gas tank urns are getting a lot of attention in their product display rooms, which are open to the public during viewings at funerals.

"I've never had anything in the funeral home that has drawn that much interest," Rozga said. "I've had a gentleman take his wife by the hand and say, 'When I go, that's where I want my remains to go.' "

Rozga hasn't sold any, but he's had people who are pre-planning their own funerals request the tanks. They are definitely a baby boomer product, not something that appeals to the oldest generation, he said.

Moritz and Winkler aren't the first to market a motorcycle gas tank urn. There's at least one other company that makes one, and another that offers a final resting place inside a motorcycle engine block.

But Moritz and Winkler believe that their ability to do custom work and the growing interest in cremation across the country add up to a big opportunity for them to make a living offering a final alternative to those who live to ride.

"The whole funeral industry is going toward memorialization and personalization," Moritz said.

The Cremation Association of North America agrees, and the trade group has invited Moritz to talk about his gas tank urns later this month, when the trade group meets at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas.

"It's a very large market, increasing every year," said Jack Springer, executive director of the trade group. The association estimates that by 2025, 46% of deaths will lead to cremations, for a total of 1.4 million cremations.

In Wisconsin, 14,376 people were cremated in 2003, the most recent statistic available. That represents 31% of deaths

in the state, slightly above the national cremation average of 28.5%.

That growth has spawned a quiet but burgeoning industry, ranging from sweetly sentimental to downright weird. Two Janesville women, Joni Cullen and Lisa Saxer-Buros, started a cremation jewelry business 14 years ago, ahead of the trend.

Saxer-Buros' mother, Madelyn, was close to her family, and she loved to travel. When Madelyn died, Saxer-Buros designed a hollow circular pendant and had copies made for each of her siblings, who placed some of mom's ashes inside.

Ever since, part of the late Madelyn has accompanied her children on all their vacations. And Cullen and Saxer-Buros are running a million-dollar-plus business, Madelyn Co., making and selling keepsake jewelry. The products are sold to bereaved families through funeral homes, hospices and distributors.

Eternal Reefs Inc. in Atlanta puts remains into environmentally friendly concrete reefs and lowers them to the ocean floor. The Eternal Ascent Society in Crystal River, Fla., goes to the other extreme with hot air balloons, sending heavenward the remains of those deserving or otherwise.

For those who want to go out with a bang, there are people who will put the remains in a shotgun, a cannon or fireworks. Or for those seeking an artistic end, there's a sculptor in New Orleans who will mix remains with sculpting materials and make a bust, and an artist who mixes the ashes with paint and puts them in trees in her paintings.

Just about every cremation is the result of a choice made ahead of time by the deceased, according to a survey from the Cremation Association.

With this in mind, Moritz plans to expand his marketing beyond funeral homes by taking his gas tank urns directly to consumers at biker rallies and events.

There were 5.8 million registered motorcycles in the U.S. in 2004, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

"The beauty of the product is, because of its artistic value, it's a piece for the recreation room," Moritz said. The urns range in price from \$750 to \$1,500.

A bike owner might buy one now, hang it on the wall and tell his friends: "That's where I'm going to end up someday."

Rebuffed by Harley

Moritz is not a biker himself, but he's been painting bikes for customers since he was 12. He made his first gas tank urn from a real tank that he bought at a junkyard about eight years ago. He made a gift of it to the family of a deceased biker whose bike he had painted.

He and Winkler saw the chance to turn this into a business because they knew bikers tend to celebrate their passion for riding, even in death. They patented the urn design last fall, and they launched a Web site, www.motorcyclememorials.com.

Moritz's biggest disappointment so far with his business is that the hometown motorcycle maker, Harley-Davidson, isn't interested in a licensing deal for the gas tank urns.

"We do license products very selectively," Harley spokesman Bob Klein said. "In the past, we've declined to license such products. We would rather be out there riding the products down the road."

Moritz says his urns have added value for the man who doesn't ride alone. There's enough room inside for him to take

his biker chick along for eternity.

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