

# A Simple Pine Box: Ottertail firm looks to future

## *Patrick and Karen Kilby help families trim funeral costs*

**By John W. Dermody**

Giving birth to a business that focuses on the end of life can produce many thoughts, images and – ironically – hopes for the future.

Patrick and Karen Kilby of Ottertail have started A Simple Pine Box to create basic caskets and other amenities for families having to plan loved ones' funerals.

To say that the company with the straightforward designation is a “no frills” concept would not be quite right, despite the name.

The ability of the firm to create caskets in pine, oak, cherry or a multitude of woods has resulted in striking but inexpensive creations. But it actually offers more.

“We just wanted to offer something additional...as part of the celebration of life,” Patrick stated.

“Families will sometimes finish a casket themselves,” Karen continued. The final overall design can take the form of personal touches, inside or on the exterior.”

The production of wooden burial containers, along with urns for ashes, markers and other associated items is done at their location at 49615 Leaf River Road as part of their Sugar Creek Woodworking concern.

The owners view their approach as that of artisans, rather than just a process of building burial containers at low cost. The average price is approximately \$1,500. A family, on the average, would likely pay at least \$2,000-\$3,000 more for a fancier casket as a traditional funeral unfolds.

### **Personal, innovative approach**

While the company will apply a lacquer finish or some other preservative – or simply hand-rub the casket with oil to bring out the beauty of the wood -- the inside is available for a wide spectrum of possibilities.

“Families will sometimes finish a casket themselves,” Karen explained. With a highly-polished natural surface prepared by the company or with added embossing elements, each item is unique to a family. Of course, colors can be used, Patrick can carve a design, or any number of variations are conceivable.

There are no specific federal regulations. The encasement can be a plain box, lined or not. Many families will line a casket with either a blanket, a favorite quilt, an afghan or some other type of fabric item, she pointed out. Plus, one or two pillows can be part of the burial.

There are many misconceptions and myths regarding funerals and how persons can be buried, Patrick noted.

“We didn’t know the laws, so we researched them. There are lots of misunderstandings.”

He explained that the seed for the company was planted more than two years ago when his mother died. His sister started looking at caskets and basically asked him the question: “Why can’t you build one?”

From that point, not only did they learn that there could be a large savings in using “a simple pine box,” but creativity could make the whole process of saying goodbye more personal and meaningful for all family members.

## **Working together**

Patrick added, "We do not want to be in competition with funeral homes, we just want to offer something more."

The company's caskets can simply become part of a service conducted under the auspices of a mortuary. The box is just another type of burial receptacle placed in a concrete vault, or it can ultimately be part of a cremation.

In addition to the hand-crafted receptacle, featuring intricate dovetailing, contrasting woods and artistic touches, he said laser engraving can be incorporated into the design along with "medallions" – logos that can be attached to the casket.

"For example, a neighbor had some ash to be used for a casket, then a walnut cross was added." he commented. The combination was wonderful.

Federal law states that a plain box can be used and a funeral home cannot refuse it, nor charge extra for utilizing the casket.

As everyone knows, situations vary. On occasion, a family may be faced with making a quick decision. But at other times, there is space to plan. A person may be in hospice care or a lingering illness might be diagnosed as terminal.

"We stress family involvement... 'preplanning,'" Karen said.

"With Patrick's mother, we had some time."

Back then, he continued, they found after some investigation that "there was quite a need."

If a person ordering a casket desires, the company will do the lining, but there is a charge of \$200 beyond the basic \$1,500, it was noted.

In low key fashion, Patrick indicated that most families probably have favorite items belonging to the deceased -- perhaps an heirloom, photos, a specific jacket or dress...all kinds of items accompanying the body to its final resting place.

In other words, why spend extra money?

## **Special requests in three days**

If there is short notice prior to the ceremony, a casket can be completed in just three days. However, Patrick and Karen are in the process of building an inventory so customers can compare designs. Another reason is because they plan on taking A Simple Pine Box and its message to trade shows in the region.

Moreover, they know there will be times when someone will likely ask for a "John Deere green" casket, or one that connects the deceased with a branch of the military, a church group or some civic organization.

Patrick explained that he can engrave military emblems, as requested, but he can't attach a commercial logo. Once the box is in the hands of the family, **then** it would be up to those individuals whether they want to affix such an item to the casket.

Another area was mentioned: caskets for pets, plus headstones and markers are created as requests are made. Display samples can be seen in both wood and granite.

Patrick mentioned that word is getting out. "Word of mouth advertising is the best," he added.

## **Value with a personal approach**

"We're not for everybody, but we can offer help in a less intimidating way," he said.

“We’re trying to dispel myths,” Karen emphasized. Not many persons have been aware that persons outside of the industry can procure their own caskets, she went on.

However, they acknowledged that funeral homes probably have little incentive to purchase products from A Simple Pine Box.

“I’m a woodworker...an artist in wood. We’re just trying to celebrate life in an artistic way,” Patrick continued.

“We don’t think it’s necessary to have to spend \$10,000 to celebrate a life,” said the veteran of more than 30 years’ working with his hands.

The couple has lived near Middle Leaf Lake for seven years. They refinish furniture for customers, build cabinets and unique pieces of furniture of all types, and always try to offer a personal touch, they pointed out.

Karen and Patrick were childhood sweethearts growing up in Proctor. Even then, he had started his career as a craftsman.

As he talked about their venture creating A Simple Pine Box, Patrick continued: “We’ve tried to get away from ‘sterile.’ We want people to touch the product...find it’s a little more personal.

“We want to offer a well-designed product at a price it should be.”

In regard to the typical casket purchased from a funeral home, he explained it is not unusual for a family “to pay \$3,000 more” than for a basic box.

When a person dies, “They catch you at an emotional time,” Karen stated.

The rural Ottertail company can be reached at 218-583-2463 or 1-866-840-3612. Web sites include: [www.asimplepinebox.com](http://www.asimplepinebox.com) and [www.sugarcreekwoodworking.com](http://www.sugarcreekwoodworking.com); each is linked to the other. The company has included a checklist for planning a funeral.

In addition, the web sites have links to Federal Trade Commission (FTC) pages explaining regulations pertaining to funerals, along with general information.

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### **Sidebar(s)...additional resources**

## **Many agencies offer funeral information**

When seeking information concerning funerals, costs and regulations, there are many resources. Many are easily found on the Internet.

One of the best and most comprehensive is the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) web site. The basic address is: [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov), but time is saved by going to [www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/services/funeral.shtm](http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/services/funeral.shtm).

Most states have a licensing board that regulates the funeral industry.

The web site for the Minnesota Funeral Directors Association is [www.mnfuneral.org](http://www.mnfuneral.org).

For additional information about making funeral arrangements and the options available, persons may want to contact interested business, professional and consumer groups. Some of the biggest include:

### **AARP Fulfillment**

601 E Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20049  
1-800-424-3410

[www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping older Americans achieve lives of independence, dignity and purpose. Its publications, Funeral Goods and Services and Pre-Paying for Your Funeral, are available free by writing to the above address. This and other funeral-related information is posted on the AARP website.

**Minnesota Funeral Directors Association**

9859 13<sup>th</sup> Ave. N.  
Plymouth, MN 55441  
763-398-0115  
[www.mnfuneral.org](http://www.mnfuneral.org)

**Council of Better Business Bureaus, Inc.**

4200 Wilson Blvd., Suite 800  
Arlington, VA 22203-1838  
[www.bbb.org](http://www.bbb.org)

Better Business Bureaus are private, nonprofit organizations that promote ethical business standards and voluntary self-regulation of business practices.

**Funeral Consumers Alliance**

33 Patchen Road  
South Burlington, VT 05403  
1-800-765-0107  
[www/funerals.org](http://www/funerals.org)

FCA, a nonprofit, educational organization that supports increased funeral consumer protection, is affiliated with the Funeral and Memorial Society of America (FAMSA).

**Cremation Society of Minnesota**

[www.cremationsocietyofmn.com](http://www.cremationsocietyofmn.com)  
The Cremation Society of Minnesota offers human cremation services and complete funeral services throughout the state.

**Cremation Association of North America**

401 North Michigan Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60611  
(312) 644-6610  
[www.cremationassociation.org](http://www.cremationassociation.org)

CANA is an association of crematories, cemeteries and funeral homes that offer cremation.

**International Cemetery and Funeral Association**

1895 Preston White Drive, Suite 220  
Reston, VA 20191 1-800-645-7700  
[www.icfa.org](http://www.icfa.org)

ICFA is a nonprofit association of cemeteries, funeral homes, crematories and monument retailers that offers informal mediation of consumer complaints through its Cemetery Consumer Service Council. Its website provides information and advice under "Consumer Resources."

**International Order of the Golden Rule**

13523 Lakefront Drive  
St. Louis, MO 63045  
1-800-637-8030

[www.ogr.org](http://www.ogr.org)

OGR is an international association of about 1,300 independent funeral homes.

**Jewish Funeral Directors of America Seaport Landing**

150 Lynnway, Suite 506  
Lynn, MA 01902  
(781) 477-9300

[www.jfda.org](http://www.jfda.org)

JFDA is an international association of funeral homes serving the Jewish community.

**National Funeral Directors Association**

13625 Bishop's Drive  
Brookfield, WI 53005  
1-800-228-6332

[www.nfda.org/resources](http://www.nfda.org/resources)

NFDA is the largest educational and professional association of funeral directors.

**National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association**

3951 Snapfinger Parkway, Suite 570  
Decatur, GA 30035  
1-800-434-0958

[www.nfdma.com](http://www.nfdma.com)

NFDMA is a national association primarily of African-American funeral providers.

**Selected Independent Funeral Homes**

500 Lake Cook Road, Suite 205  
Deerfield, Illinois 60015  
1-800-323-4219

[www.selectedfuneralhomes.org](http://www.selectedfuneralhomes.org)

Selected Independent Funeral Homes is an international association of funeral firms that have agreed to comply with its Code of Good Funeral Practice. Consumers may request a variety of publications through the association's affiliate, Selected Resources, Inc.

**Funeral Service Consumer Assistance Program**

PO Box 486  
Elm Grove, WI 53122-0486  
1-800-662-7666

(Apparently no web site)

FSCAP is a nonprofit consumer service designed to help people understand funeral service and related topics and to help them resolve funeral service concerns. FSCAP service representatives and an intervener assist

consumers in identifying needs, addressing complaints and resolving problems. Free brochures on funeral related topics are available.

### **Funeral Service Educational Foundation**

13625 Bishop's Drive

Brookfield, WI 53005

1-877-402-5900

(No apparent web site)

FSEF is a nonprofit foundation dedicated to advancing professionalism in funeral service and to enhancing public knowledge and understanding through education and research.

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## **Planning for a funeral**

The FTC also has among its many suggestions, the following consumer tips listed on its web site:

- *Shop around in advance.* Compare prices from at least two funeral homes. Remember that you can supply your own casket or urn.
- *Ask for a price list.* The law requires funeral homes to give you written price lists for products and services.
- *Resist pressure to buy goods and services you don't really want or need.*
- *Avoid emotional overspending.* It's not necessary to have the fanciest casket or the most elaborate funeral to properly honor a loved one.
- *Recognize your rights.* Laws regarding funerals and burials vary from state to state. It's a smart move to know which goods or services the law requires you to purchase and which are optional.
- *Apply the same smart shopping techniques you use for other major purchases.* You can cut costs by limiting the viewing to one day or one hour before the funeral, and by dressing your loved one in a favorite outfit instead of costly burial clothing.
- *Plan ahead.* It allows you to comparison shop without time constraints, creates an opportunity for family discussion, and lifts some of the burden from your family.

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