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See in pope's peaceful death value of planning



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Death, typically a taboo subject, has been making headlines with the recent deaths of Terri Schiavo and Pope John Paul II. As a result, there are now few Americans who are not very familiar with the need for a living will. And, in a typical knee-jerk reaction, Americans now are flocking to fill out living wills.

Only about 20 percent of Americans have living wills or have even designated someone to make medical decisions for them.

Now, law firms, financial advisors and accountants are all reporting increased activity around the issue of healthcare proxies, living wills and powers of attorney. The New York State Department of Health reportedly had nearly 10,000 visitors downloading a copy of the proxy from its Web site during the Easter weekend alone.

However, as someone who has experienced, firsthand, the horror of an untimely, unplanned death of a loved one, I know that a living will is

only the beginning. And thinking that completing a generic form will solve all of the issues surrounding medical treatment, funeral arrangements and the endless decisions that will be faced by health care proxies, executors and other designated representatives is giving many of us a false sense of security. Believe me, the issues facing survivors are much more complex than any generic single-page form can convey.

Did Terri want to be buried or cremated? Did she want her remains placed in Florida near her parents or in Pennsylvania, where she grew up? It is too late to know for sure. But as difficult as these decisions may be, they are only the tip of a mountain of legal and financial decisions facing survivors.

Families and friends grieving the loss of Terri Schiavo and Pope John Paul II are having dramatically different experiences. Beyond the pain and grief the mourners are experiencing, one can't help but notice the clear advantage of prearranging one's final details. A clear declaration of one's wishes allows loved ones to focus on grieving and healing without having to fight a moral tug of war.

"As with life, death reveals that there are some things you can control and some things that you

can't," offered Russell Friedman, a nationally-recognized expert on grief and co-author of *The Grief Recovery Handbook*. "Controlling the emotions your loved ones will experience in the aftermath of your death is not within your control, and must be done by each griever individually. However, if your final wishes are documented and your financial affairs are in order, your survivors will be free to address the emotional energy caused by your death and to take the actions necessary for recovery."

I choose to embrace death as the inevitable last step of every life. I choose to be responsible for documenting my hopes, my dreams and all my wishes for actions to be taken upon my death — without chance for misunderstanding. And, I choose to plan for death to ensure that the legacy I leave behind is not one of bickering family members, but of the serenity we saw with a Pope prepared and even excited to follow his destiny.

Colgan, who became a widower at age 31, is president, Colgan Capital of Pittsford.