



## The Ties that Bind

A funeral is not a day in a lifetime, it is a lifetime in a day.<sup>TM</sup> This summarises the approach that The Life Celebrant (TLC) adopts when it comes to the final send-off. After all, no one says that a funeral must only be about endings, nor does a wake have to be enveloped by an air of despondency and regret –

though these have long been the norm. Instead, with her characteristic “What if I can ...” question, Angjolie Mei, 41, has gone where the local funeral services trade has not even contemplated, and introduced innovative concepts that distinguish the boutique funeral services company from the others.

Ms Ang founded TLC in 2010 despite the objections of her mother, who was wary of how the stigma of death might affect her. Mrs Ang would know – she married Ang Yew Seng when she was just 23, and spent years facing up to a myriad of prejudices. The late Mr Ang, Singapore’s “coffin king”, was the founder of Ang Yew Seng Funeral Parlour, the family business now helmed by Mrs Ang.

For Ms Ang, returning to the funeral services trade was a “calling”, and where she felt she could most impact people’s lives. When she was working as a financial advisor, Ms Ang saw first-hand the consequences of poor financial planning. When breadwinners passed away, some had incurred hefty medical bills that needed to be settled, while others had left their families without any means of financial support. In her role, Ms Ang found herself empathising with the clients, whom she preferred to represent than the insurance companies. Nonetheless, she did well enough to be inducted into the coveted Million Dollar Round Table.

Following her heart, Ms Ang soon departed the financial advisory profession and joined hands with a few partners to offer funeral consultancy services. A year and a half later, guided by her own notions of what a funeral services company should offer, she started her own funeral services business.

The company name, The Life Celebrant, encapsulates Ms Ang’s vision. More than just offering a conventional funeral service package, she wanted to transform the very nature of the occasion to one that celebrates the dearly departed through the sharing of memories, where people would look beyond the loss and grief to honour a life well lived. To date, 11 years after TLC’s founding on 1 October 2010, countless stories have been told and cherished by the people who had gathered to bid farewell to their loved ones.

With a foundation built on compassion and sincerity, TLC has established itself as a company that goes the extra mile, serving its clients from the heart. In addition to the various funeral service packages that one would expect from a funeral services company, the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) is constantly innovating and refining its products and

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services. When TLC rolled out its Showers of Love service in 2017, it was an unheard-of concept that was met with scepticism and doubt; the naysayers were soon silenced by the spike in demand. TLC's Angel Star is a specialised service catering to the little ones who leave before their time. Ms Ang also set up The Life Legacy to offer financial advisory services to help clients put their financial affairs in order. As the entrepreneur describes it, "a financial advisor and a funeral director are both pillars of family", so it is entirely fitting for them to take care of the clients' evolving needs at different stages of their lives.

### **A heartfelt goodbye**

Ms Ang draws inspiration for the business from the things and people around her. Her friends, too, often share ideas that would trigger her "What if I can ..." question, prompting her to explore uncharted waters. Showers of Love, for example, was sparked by the oft-heard comments that "she/he (the deceased) doesn't look like that"; "that's so not him/her", and from personal experience. When her mother-in-law passed away in France, she took it upon herself to re-style her as she felt that the embalmer had not captured her personality. Ms Ang curled her late mother-in-law's hair, using her own hairdryer as one was not available at the funeral parlour; painted her nails, and lightened the too-heavy makeup that had been applied. Her acts of love returned to her late mother-in-law the dignity she had in life. "The final view of the departed will live on forever, and I wanted people to remember her as herself," explains the certified Funeral Director and sole certified Life Celebrant in Singapore.

When Ms Ang watched the award-winning Japanese movie *Okuribito* (2008) – Departures, in English – about a cellist-turned-*nōkanshi* or encoffineer (one who prepares the body of the deceased for the funeral ceremony, in the presence of the family), she observed the dignity and meaning he brought to his role as a *nōkanshi*, and how much it meant to the bereaved family. These traits are now integral to TLC's service delivery, where every funeral service must be "dignified" and "meaningful". The movie also strengthened Ms Ang's belief in the viability of a decedent spa service.

The precious moments spent with the dearly departed in an intimate setting can serve as a last act of filial piety as well as a private goodbye, elaborates Ms Ang. Whether it is healing, grieving or acceptance, Showers of Love is conceptualised to smooth the way for the bereaved family. In 2017, when a suitable location became available, she launched TLC's decedent spa – the first such service in Singapore and the region.



*Showers of Love Sanctuary*

Scaling up TLC's repertoire of services to manage clients' needs "from womb to tomb", The Life Legacy provides bespoke estate planning services to ensure that the clients' assets are properly taken care of. This ranges from making a will and/or a lasting power of attorney to setting up a trust, and designing a preferred style of funeral and, after the funeral, overseeing matters relating to the estate.

Ms Ang keeps a keen eye on developing trends and the impact they might have on the trade. In recent years, aligning with the global move towards environmental consciousness, TLC has expanded its offerings to include biodegradable urns and sustainable burial options.

### **The business of death**

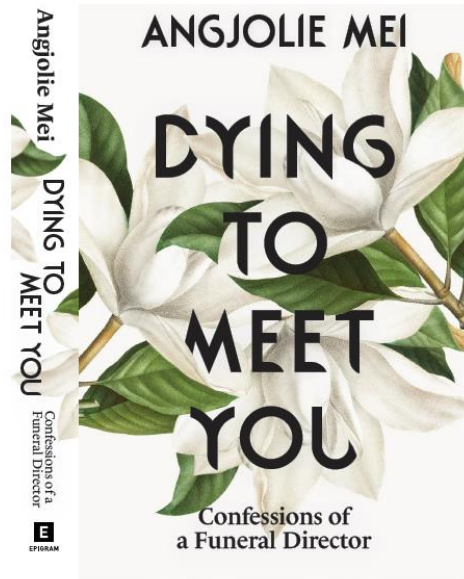
Ms Ang's youth and gender make her an anomaly in a very traditional trade. Her fresh ideas and passion to encourage conversation about the "taboo" subject of death have raised her profile, and she is often called upon to address the topic at seminars and other events.



*Dying To Meet You*  
First Edition



爱的告别  
First Edition



*Dying To Meet You*  
Second Edition  
Launch July-Aug 2020

Ms Ang's biography, *Dying to Meet You: Confessions of a Funeral Director*, was written in part to demystify death and to reduce the associated stigma, and to share her own experiences. The book, which is in its second edition with new chapters on COVID-19, offers an insider's view on what goes on behind the scenes in the business of death. The second edition is already into its third print run.

TLC's day-to-day business is handled by 11 full-time staff members, whose service delivery and compassion are frequently called out by clients for compliments. "In our company, the 'heart' is the most important, not your experience nor your educational qualifications," highlights Ms Ang. This is why the Chinese character for "heart" (心) features in the company



*TLC's female pall bearers*

name and its portfolio of services – for example, Angel Star (天使心) uses the homophone 心 instead of 星, and Showers of Love is 留心语 – reinforcing TLC's commitment to serve with compassion.

Whereas talent attraction and retention are a usual headache for SMEs, TLC's core team has been with the company since 2017. Among all the team members, 80 percent are women, which has brought unexpected benefits to the company – "they are always looking for ways to make things more beautiful and will handmake pretty accessories and

decorations". But Ms Ang is quick to point out that there is no gender discrimination in the company. "One of our seamstresses is a man and we have male and female embalmers; our pall bearers and truck drivers are women."

Recent years have seen a change in the public perception of the trade as the media has "glamourised" it somewhat. Consequently, the SME has been receiving more job applications. "It's important for us to get people who can fit into our company culture," says Ms Ang, and this means they have to be self-motivated and hardworking, and possess very high levels of empathy and compassion.



*Ms Ang with some team members, a few days before she delivered in October 2019*

TLC has a structured programme for new hires, which is unusual among small companies, which tend towards a more flexible setup. In the funeral services trade which is populated by long-time family businesses, a formalised organisational format is almost unheard of. Unfazed by what others think, Ms Ang has put in place a corporate structure designed to guide the company into the future.

### **An abiding love**

Being the first to unveil new ideas has boosted the SME's sustainability as it grows from strength to strength, though competition is not on the entrepreneur's mind. "We are running our own race," she asserts, which to her means exploring ideas with her "What if I can ..." question, in a constant search to do things better. Among the many "what ifs" is the use of technology to enhance efficiency.

TLC ranks among the first few in the trade, if not *the* first, to create dedicated chat groups for every client so that the stakeholders are involved in the discussions. Where feasible, e-documents are transmitted for the bereaved family's endorsement. Going forward, Ms Ang would like all work to reside in the cloud so that file sharing and synchronisation, both internal and external, will be seamless.

TLC has a strong presence in the online space, where it seeks to engage, educate and connect through stories. It is a forerunner with its own TikTok and YouTube channels and podcasts, and the company actively uploads content to its Facebook and Instagram accounts. It also has its own website.

The latest TLC project is the launch of a school in December 2021 to provide training for people in the trade. Ms Ang, who had completed a two-year Funeral Director certification



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course overseas as there was/is no such course in Singapore, believes the time is right to plug the gap. Through the school, she aims to professionalise the trade by establishing protocols and best practices, raise the overall standard and further alter public perceptions towards the trade.

Death is a serious business and every dearly departed deserves a dignified, meaningful send-off. It is the collective responsibility of the funeral services trade to do its part to deliver on its brand promise. Her hope is that for the bereaved families, what lives on in the end is ... an enduring love.