

Funeral firm plans \$1m industry revamp

Ang Chin Moh sets up foundation in bid to expel stigma, boost standards

By JANICE TAI

ONE of Singapore's largest funeral companies has pumped \$1 million into a foundation aimed at raising the industry's profile.

Ang Chin Moh Casket, which has been operating for 100 years, yesterday announced that it has set up the ACM Foundation in an effort to remove the stigma of death among the public, promote innovations and philanthropy and provide training for the sector.

Over the next five years, it aims to partner educational institutes to set up a bereavement academy offering degree courses in death care.

Places such as Taiwan and the United States offer degrees such as a Bachelor of Mortuary Science, but these are not available in Singapore.

Ang Chin Moh Casket director Ang Ziqian, 32, who has set up the foundation, said the lack of training options means some essential funeral services here, such as em-

balming, have to be carried out by foreigners trained overseas.

The foundation also hopes to run training courses to accredit industry practitioners with the aim of raising standards by weeding out fly-by-night operators or providers of low-quality services.

Mr Ang said there is currently no licensing scheme for operators. Mr Freddie Choo, managing director of Trinity Casket, agreed that accreditation will help.

"Currently, there is hardly any control over who can provide funeral services. One can operate a 'funeral service' with just a mobile phone, without office, vehicles or employees by outsourcing it and retaining a commission."

Mr Ang said there are about 60 undertakers in Singapore, employing about 400 full-time staff, while about 400 more are one-man operators and part-timers.

Training and professional accreditation are important because the sector is heading for a manpower shortage, said Mr Ang.

"Demand for death care will rise due to our ageing population but there are hardly any young workers in this industry," he added.

"With the high turnover and retirement rate, there will be a severe manpower shortage in five years which will result in a longer wait for funeral services for all of us."

The industry is being hit hard by staff shortages and land scarcity issues in other parts of the region.

Some bereaved families in Hong Kong have to put their deceased in cold storage for three weeks before cremation while the wait for a niche in a columbarium can stretch up to three years.

The foundation hopes to rally industry players and religious organisations to step up philanthropic efforts to help the needy.

The number of elderly people living alone is likely to increase from some 35,000 now to 83,000 by 2030.

Ang Chin Moh has been providing about 70 to 100 free burials a year for the destitute who have no family support and hopes to work with others to continue its philanthropic work.



Ang Chin Moh Casket director Ang Ziqian (left) with Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah. Ang Chin Moh's ACM Foundation is teaming up with the Lien Foundation to change attitudes about death. ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

For now, the foundation is teaming up with Lien Foundation to change attitudes about death by organising international compe-

titions in which people are invited to submit designs for caskets, urns or funeral parlours.

"We want to give death a mod-

ern twist and makeover, reducing the fear factor," said Lien's chief executive Lee Poh Wah.

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Mr Raymond Hon (top, left) designed the 3-D printed wind chime to be made from cremated remains (left), and Mr Kenne Cheong (top, right) created a tower urn (right) that can contain up to three generations of ashes. PHOTOS: CAROLINE CHIA, DESIGN FOR DEATH COMPETITION

Remember loved ones each time the wind blows

A STUDENT has given 3-D printing an unusual new spin - by coming up with the idea of a three-dimensional wind chime made from the cremated remains of the departed.

Mr Raymond Hon, an undergraduate from the National University of Singapore, said the ashes could be loaded into a 3-D printer which would create components of the wind chime layer by layer. The finished product would have contours of the dead person's face worked into its square pattern.

"We often shut away the dead in coffins and people who grieve struggle with loneliness, so I wanted to create the absence into a presence," said the 25-year-old.

His is one of two entries from Singapore to be shortlisted in the first global competition held to re-imagine death care for the future.

The other entry saw Mr Kenne Cheong, 31, a lecturer at Institute of Technical Education (ITE) College Central, coming up with a tower urn that can contain up to three generations of ashes.

The competition was organised by the Lien Foundation and ACM Foundation - both Singaporean - in partnership with the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), a global body for the industry. "Death is central to us but we live in a culture estranged from it," said Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive of Lien Foundation.

"The competition challenges designers to develop new products and experiences that create new interactions and conversations about death."

Participants from all over the world came up with ideas. They included a "mushroom" suit which contains fungi to break the body down in an environmentally friendly manner and innovative ways of remembering the dead, such as one involving capturing a grandparent's "scent" for eternity.

Singapore's entries were among 160 shortlisted for judging from more than 700 entries, but both missed out on prizes.

A French team took the award in the green category, after inventing biodegradable coffins which visitors can also be seated next to.

A combined Lithuanian and Greek team won in the "wrappings of mortality" category for their design of honeycomb-shaped urn vaults that each contain individual remains. These are added together to form a family tree containing ashes from different family members.

Winners of the competition, held on online portal designboom.com, won cash prizes amounting to €85,000 (\$\$140,000) and will be flown to Austin, Texas in October to present their works at the NFDA International Convention and Expo.

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