

Obituaries celebrate lives of loved ones

Lien Foundation campaign aims to alter views on death with tributes carrying fun facts, photos of dead

Theresa Tan

The Lien Foundation wants to change the way people view newspaper advertisements about death.

It thinks obituaries and death anniversary advertisements can be more cheerful and celebrate the lives of those who have passed on, instead of just listing the names of those left behind.

The philanthropic group has launched an Obitcheery campaign with a series of ads placed over five Sundays in the obituary pages of The Sunday Times and Chinese-language daily Lianhe Zaobao.

It began last Sunday, and continues through this month with ads that combine pictures with interesting details about the people featured.

It is also inviting people to nominate their loved ones for such tributes to be published.

This is the latest effort by the foundation, which has been working to remove the taboo over talking about death and dying.

Lien Foundation chief executive Lee Poh Wah said the aim of the campaign is to "capture the essence" of those who have died.

So, the ads feature interesting and fun pictures of those who have died, not the usual head-and-shoulder shots seen in obituaries. The ads also describe what the person was like, and what he or she cared about or enjoyed in life.

Last week's ad in The Sunday Times remembered Mr Chinnasamy Vaithinathan, a photographer who ran the Nathan Video and Photo Studio and died last December of pancreatic cancer, aged 83.

His ad reflected his life story through a film strip, indicating his passion for photography.

His widow, Madam Arumugam Baskaravalli, 53, said: "He was a very caring person and always put people at ease. When he did a job, he always did it to perfection as he really had a passion for photography. His in-memoriam ad is so nicely done and I'm grateful for this tribute."

She married Mr Nathan after his first wife died and they had no children, but he left behind three children from his first marriage.

Secretary Joanna Lim, 46, thought the ad for Mr Nathan was "touching and refreshing". "I felt it told his life story and how he touched the people around him. It also made me think about the legacy the person left behind and, in turn, made me reflect on the legacy I would leave behind," she said.

Ms Tan Su-Lin, vice-president of Singapore Press Holdings' (SPH's) Cats Classified, said the company provides assistance free of charge to those who want more creative obituaries and death anniversary ads.

The ads have tended to have a standard format because grieving family members are often too distraught to think about creative obituaries, she said.

If customers want something different, SPH's artists can come up with creative designs or do a visual according to the family's wishes, if they provide the photographs and text.

Mr Lee acknowledged that bereaved families may find it hard to do death notices differently, but thought they could be more creative for in-memoriam ads for death anniversaries.

Some might also want to plan their own obituary to make it more meaningful, perhaps by including their last message to their loved ones.

In the process, they may find themselves reflecting on the meaning of life and learning to treasure their family members.

Creative agency Mandate Advertising designed the ads for the campaign, with input from the families of those featured. The foundation found these 10 families through various hospices.

Today's ad in The Sunday Times features Mr Tan See Soon, a seaman who travelled around the world at least twice.

The bachelor, who died last December at age 68, would bring home exotic gifts for his nieces and nephews, such as a preserved piranha from Venezuela and an ostrich egg from Australia.

But more importantly, his family remembers him as a fatherly figure who was always generous to them.

To nominate a loved one for an obituary sponsored by the Lien Foundation, visit www.obitcheery.com before May 12.

Visitors to the website can also create an online tribute for someone they would like to honour.

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Madam Ann Lee, holding a portrait of her late husband Roy Koh, with her daughter Shannon, six, and son Joel, four. In Mr Koh's final days, he wrote letters and prepared gifts to be passed to his children on their future birthdays.

ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOJ

Precious last years devoted to family

Mr Roy Koh lived only 38 years, but he showered his family with enough love to last them a lifetime.

Even when battling terminal cancer, the former logistics manager never failed to greet his children with a hug and smile.

In his final days, he was writing letters and preparing gifts for his daughter Shannon, six, and son Joel, four, to be passed to them on their future birthdays.

It was in 2008 that he noticed a growth on his thigh. The tumour was removed, but he was then told he had final stage liposarcoma, a rare cancer that develops from fat cells.

It was devastating news, especially since his wife, Madam Ann Lee, was expecting their second child at the time.

Despite being ill, he cooked for his family, woke up at night to feed the baby and constantly assured his wife that all would be well.

Madam Lee said: "Roy was a loving husband and father. Everything he did, he did for us."

He died in August 2011.

In his ad, which will appear on April 21, the big heart encircling his picture indicates his love for his family and theirs for him.

Madam Lee, a customer service supervisor who earns about \$3,000 a month, said she was grateful for the Lien Foundation tribute as she would not have been able to afford such an ad.

"It really honours him. His life may have been short but it was well-lived," she said.

Theresa Tan



PHOTO: COURTESY OF ARUMUGAM BASKARAVALLI

Last week's ad paid tribute to Mr Chinnasamy Vaithinathan, 83.