

# LIFE AFTER DEATH



A Swiss company is changing the way people grieve by transforming the cremated remains of their loved ones into gems.

By Bianca Husodo

“WHEN MY MOTHER passed away, someone told me that it would be a nice way to commemorate her by making her ashes into a diamond,” says Foo Sue Ann, a 30-year-old entrepreneur in Singapore. “That was when I Googled and found Algordanza.”

Headquartered high in the Swiss Alps, Algordanza is in the hi-tech business of transforming the remains of people’s loved ones into gems. A large portion of the company’s clientele places orders through agents in metropolitan cities around the world, from Cape Town to Tokyo. Every year, the company receives about 1,000 urns filled with human ashes in its laboratory in Domat, a sleepy town some 120km outside Zurich. For between S\$6,500 and S\$28,000, the contents of each parcel are engineered into a diamond.

After Foo read up on Algordanza, she reached out to the company’s Singapore-based agent and agreed to have one diamond made out of her mother’s remains. At the crematorium, an Algordanza employee handled the process, safekeeping the ashes in an urn. The urn was then sent to Algordanza’s laboratory. Fast forward to six months later, a polished wooden box sat between Foo and the Algordanza agent she first spoke to. Foo watched as the agent slowly put on white cotton gloves and in a series of trained gestures, unfolded the box in silence.

A faintly blue diamond came into view. Foo could feel herself swelling with joy. “My mother was a beautiful woman, but cancer took such a toll on her body. She became so skinny, so frail,” she recalls. “To now have her in such a beautiful piece, it’s really special.” Foo decided to have the diamond made into a ring, which she now

wears every single day. “It’s nice to feel like you’ll always have a part of that person with you,” she says.

Like Foo’s, most of the diamonds Algordanza creates end up being crafted into fine jewellery — rings, pendants, bracelets — worn by grieving widows or loved ones of the deceased. It’s an awkward business, but lucrative nonetheless. Granted, compared to jewellery giants like Tiffany & Co. or Cartier, Algordanza’s numbers are considerably modest. But its customers are emotionally devoted to a degree that could easily make any big-brand executive green with envy.

Historically, people have conceived of elaborate ways to memorialise the dead, from the pyramids of Egypt and the Taj Mahal in India to the more recent eco-friendly “green burial” and the flower-shrouded rite of guided home funerals. What the bereaved considers poignant, others might perceive as disturbing. Beliefs about respecting the dead are informed by a variety of factors — culture, tradition, geography, religion — but the execution is an entirely different thing. In every era, it’s the available technology that determines the range of memorial alternatives.

The memorial diamonds grown by Algordanza — whose name means “remembrance” in the local Romansh language — may make you squirm, shed tears of joy or even revolt you, but the idea behind it is rigorously forward-thinking.

THE UNUSUAL COMPANY’S founder and CEO, Rinaldo Willy, 40, has always been intrigued by the concept of death. But to dismiss him as an oddball with an unhealthy fascination with the macabre would be a mistake. When Willy was

diagnosed with skin cancer at the age of 21, he inevitably thought of his own death. He began imagining the series of events that would follow his death. He was sure he wanted to be cremated.

In Switzerland, one can have one’s ashes scattered in the wind, in a forest or over a glacier. Willy had his mind set on a particular location high in the mountains — but then he remembered his mother’s frailty. “I knew she wouldn’t be able to visit this place physically,” Willy says. “So I thought, ‘How can I help her grieve when this time of loss happens?’”

It was in this state of mind that the then-economics student read an article written by a Russian scientist on the production of synthetic diamonds using different sources of carbon, including ashes. Willy misinterpreted it. He thought it referred to human ashes, when, in fact, his teacher corrected him, it was the organic ashes of trees and other materials. Yet the seemingly absurd idea remained lodged in his head.

Two months later, the same teacher connected Willy with the article’s author, who, in a serendipitous coincidence, happened to have diamond-growing machines in Switzerland. He regarded Willy’s mistake as a compelling business proposal. And their partnership soon led to the birth of Algordanza in 2003.

“When a man of 80kg is cremated, he becomes 2.5kg of ashes,” Willy explains. “Using

Creating memorial diamonds out of the carbon concentration in cremation ashes, the Swiss-based tech company Algordanza offers a range of different diamond cuts, from symmetrical to rough-edged. The diamonds’s hue — typically white with a faint tinge of blue — is an unaltered result of the trace elements present in an individual’s body.



these ashes, we can make a diamond of 0.2 grams.” If there aren’t enough ashes, hair can also be added in. The following procedure is similar to how a normal lab-grown diamond is made — at the laboratory, using the carbon contained in the ashes, a memorial diamond is produced through diamond presses that reverberate with the vehemence of the deep-earth forces they mimic. It is inside these 18-ton machines, at temperatures that reach 1,371 degrees C and pressures of nearly 360,000kg per square inch, that the carbon extracted from human ashes is transfigured into diamonds. The size of the diamond is dependent on the duration. The longer it remains in the growing phase, the bigger it becomes.

Rather than being predetermined — as some competitors would offer — the colour of each Algordanza diamond is an unaltered result of a specific combination of trace elements present in the deceased’s body. While the base colour is white, most tend to have a bluish hue, thanks to the natural quantity of boron in the ashes. Fake teeth, titanium hips or the remnants of chemotherapy can also impact its resulting colour. Nitrogen lends a yellow tinge. Traces of phosphorescent chemicals can create diamonds that glow in the dark.

Explaining all of this to a would-be client is tough, admits Willy. “Our business deals with the very sensitive topic of death. There are a lot of moral and ethical questions on how we should communicate [with our clients],” he says. For me, it was very clear from the get-go that we needed to respect the situation and not hurt anybody’s feelings.”

Willy would tell his team never to sell. “We do not sell, we only consult,” he says, underscoring the difference between the two. “We don’t want people to have the wrong impression of us, or categorise us [like] salespeople selling insurance policy or a car.

If a potential client were to come in and he was still obviously deep in depression, I would tell my people: ‘Don’t let him sign the contract.’”

Often, sceptical clients refuse to confirm their orders until they meet Willy face to face or visit the laboratory themselves. A pilgrimage to the facility is an optional part of the six-month gem-making process that Willy has thoroughly fine-tuned. The route to Domat involves travelling beyond the glacier through mediaeval cobblestone streets, past a dairy farm or two, a golf course and wildflower fields. Many of Willy’s mourning customers make this long journey to see the facility with their own eyes in order to believe it.

“Everybody is welcomed to visit us, to witness the process, to meet the real people behind the diamond-making process. This is not another one of the internet’s scam companies,” quips Willy. He notes that now the pandemic has halted flights and travel plans, he and his team conduct virtual tours through Skype, making it a point to bring their clients around the facility and introduce them to the 13 employees at the plant. “For us, there’s no reason to be synthetic, artificial or snobby about the whole thing.”

Initially, the founding entrepreneur would make it a point to personally consult his clients. He would remember stories of people he had never met in his life before, getting to know them through stories told by their visiting loved ones. He would take joy in delivering the final product himself, mentally archiving his clients’s reactions. “After about a decade of doing this, I realised that I got too personal,” admits Willy, “and that death had [taken] a strong emotional toll on me. So I stopped and left most of the consulting to my employees instead.”

In 2013, during Algordanza’s 10-year anniversary event, Willy says, 20 Japanese

clients were invited to the facility. “For the first time in my life, I had in one room 20 family members and 20 memorial diamonds. Each of them told me their personal stories,” he remembers. “One thing that bound all of these together was love. And when I realised this, I got teary-eyed. Because you’re sitting here in your office in Switzerland up high in the mountains, and you’re not entirely sure whether your service reaches the heart of the people.”

At its core, Algordanza couples the tangible with the intangible. When Willy founded Algordanza 16 years ago, he married the solid certainty of the death industry with the vagaries of the jewellery market by leaning on science and technology to reimagine the conventional keepsake. But he also banked on the inevitability of pure love.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re Japanese, Chilean or Italian, love is everywhere,” he posits. “I think that’s why we are growing so fast all over the world.”

When asked if Willy, who has overcome his battle with cancer, would one day become a diamond himself, the entrepreneur laughs. “My six-year-old daughter recently said, ‘Papi, you must become a diamond,’” he quips. “And I told her, ‘Sure, but please give me a little bit more time.’”



Clockwise from top left: Most of Algordanza’s diamonds are eventually crafted into jewellery, worn by clients who want to be able to carry the presence of their loved ones with them at all times; Rinaldo Willy (right), founder and CEO of Algordanza; a finished memorial diamond is delivered in a polished wooden box; inside Algordanza’s laboratory in the quiet town of Domat are three diamond presses in which the memorial keepsakes are grown.