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A unique treasure

By TAN GIM EAN

Here's a way of keeping memories of your beloved alive and close to you all the time.

HAVING a part of those you love with you keeps memories of them alive in your mind. It's natural to think more of a person when you see something that belongs to him, says Veit Brimer, co-founder of Algordanza International, who enthralled delegates at the Asia Funeral Expo with his talk on "A new way of memorial: transforming ashes into diamonds".

Does one really need something tangible to remember a loved one? To that, he replied:

"My grandfather died in 1976 and I don't have many memories of him. But when I see his photos in my mother's home, or his walking stick – he was wounded in the war – I remember him more."

Algordanza (the Rhaeto-Romanic word for "remembrance") offers families the chance to keep memories of a dearly departed close to the heart, or at hand. Brimer conceived the idea of turning ashes into diamonds after meeting a professor in a bar in Zurich in 2003.



Jamie Lim, owner of Algordanza Malaysia, with samples of what can be done with the ashes of a cremated body.

"He was creating diamonds and told me that we can produce diamonds of any carbon origin."

When Brimer first broached the idea with his parents, his mother was "mildly shocked". But three weeks later, she told him: "Your dad and I will be diamonds one day."

His first customer, in 2004, was from Germany. Today, he gets requests for the memorial diamonds from over 20 countries, with Japan, where the ashes of ancestors are considered sacred, heading the list in Asia. The "oldest" ashes he has received, that of someone who died in 1952, was delivered in a sealed metal urn.

"I thought we would have young, educated customers from the cities," he says. "But we found that many of them are ordinary folk who come from rural areas too. They tell us: 'My family has been part of my life since I was born. Now, they can still be a part of my life after they're gone.' One lady even takes her husband with her wherever she goes, in the box."

"Having the essence of someone you love with you is very intriguing. You can feel their presence all the time."

Recently, the company appointed a representative in Hong Kong (Elwood Beach Ltd) to serve China. Close to home, it has a partner in Kuala Lumpur.

Algordanza Malaysia is owned by Jamie Lim, who set up her office at Northpoint, Mid Valley City, KL, three months ago. Lim came across this radical concept while surfing the Net last year for something meaningful to do on her own.

What won her over was that memorial diamonds can be passed down from one generation to the next.

"It's normal for us to want to leave something to our families after we die. Our diamonds are timeless reminders of those we love. These keepsake can become family heirlooms," Lim says.

Initially, she had questions: Is the Algordanza diamond as real, hard, clear and natural as mined ones?

But after meeting Brimer at his laboratory in Chur, Switzerland, she was convinced that Algordanza is a unique and personalised way to commemorate a precious memory. And, considering how mobile people are today, it enables families to honour their loved ones without having to travel home to burial grounds or columbariums.

Clients can choose from nine sizes of diamonds, ranging from 0.25 carat (RM12,800) to one carat (RM65,000). It takes about 500g of ashes to produce four one-carat diamonds. The complete ashes of an adult weighs about 2kg to 5kg, and carbon makes up 20% of that.

"Once we receive the ashes, we will mark it with a serial number to ensure there won't be any mix-up," Lim says. After a chemical analysis to determine its properties, the carbon from the ashes is then transformed under high pressure and temperature into graphite.

The graphite is then placed in a growth environment and a diamond crystal is added to kick-start the synthesis. Crystals will form around the start-crystal, which will be cut off once the rough diamond reaches the desired size. The diamond is then cut and polished, and inscriptions, of up to 75 characters, can be engraved round the girdle.

Finally, a certificate is issued by the Gemmological Institute of America stating its chemical composition, weight, cut, colour and authenticity.

Size is determined by the duration of the growth process. A 0.25 carat diamond takes about three months to grow and a one-carat, six months. The colour is white, with a tint of blue, depending on the amount of the element boron in the carbon.

As memorial diamonds are not a bling thing, customers generally don't ask for the biggest size. The most frequent choice is the 0.4 carat, but people may request for three or four of them, to give to all their children. Most women want the diamonds to be set in their husband's wedding ring, which they then wear.

"One of our main concerns is the dignity of the deceased, so we treat the ashes with utmost respect," Brimer says. "We don't think of our diamonds as products – they don't belong to us."