

Latest Funeral Trend: Bringing out the gem in you



Algordanza memorial diamonds made from human ashes have the same properties as mined diamonds.

Why opt for conventional burials when you could, at the end of your days, live on forever as a sparkling gem, no less, writes CHAI MEI LING

THE most precious jewels are not made of stone, but of flesh, so said Robert Ludlum once.

The celebrated author probably didn't know it then, but what he had said is today true even in the literal sense.

For a small fortune, one can engage the service of Algordanza, a small company in the mountainous southeast of Switzerland, to transform human ashes into diamonds.

Yes, real diamonds.

"We would not be allowed to use the expression 'diamond' if we could not prove that the diamond is genuine," says Algordanza co-founder Veit Brimer at the Asia Funeral Expo mid this month.



Algordanza co-founder Veit Brimer

"These are natural, not synthetic diamonds."

While mined diamonds age over hundreds of millions of years, Algordanza's lab-grown gems take just months to form.

Carbon, chemically drawn out from the ashes, is compressed into graphite under a high pressure-high temperature growth environment.

The graphite then undergoes the same process – of being heated up to 1,700o Celsius under the pressure of 50,000 atmosphere – before crystallising into rough diamonds, which are then cut and polished.

These lab-grown gems can pass any test given to mined diamonds because they have the same physical, chemical and optical properties. Their colours vary from translucent white to a bluish tint, depending on the amount of a natural metal called boron in the ash.

So how many of such precious stones can one get from a person's ashes?

"More than you would want," quips Brimer, 43.

A person's ashes weighs anywhere from two to three kilogrammes, out of which two per cent is carbon, enough to produce at least 300 carats of diamonds.

However, the procedure requires only half a kilogramme of ashes, and the biggest gem size offered is one carat, which takes a year to grow.

"One carat is pretty big. Most of our clients do not opt for that because it's not about having a bling-thing, but it's really a respectful memorial diamond."

Algordanza, which means "remembrance" in Romansh, one of the four Swiss languages, has over the last five years expanded to more than 20 countries, including Malaysia. Its biggest market is Japan, where land is scarce and cremation common, and the most popular request worldwide is for the 0.4-carat.

Brimer, previously an economist in the IT industry, started this venture some six years ago after he struck up a conversation with a professor in a bar and learnt that it's possible to make diamonds out of any carbon material.

"I told my parents this, and after a few weeks, my mother called and said 'If you do something like this, your father and I will be diamonds one day'.

"So the idea was born."

The following year, Algordanza was set up. The clientele was initially thought to be young, educated and wealthy.

But taxi drivers and clerks, professors and suburban housewives, they all come knocking at the doors of Algordanza, seeking a diamond to commemorate a loved one.

Brimer recalls the time when he passed to an 83-year-old lady the diamond made out of her husband's remains.

"A lot of people told her that she should bid her husband farewell, but she said there wasn't any need to, because she'd be meeting him in heaven in a few years.

"Till then, she wanted a part of him to be with her."

In Asia, it's common for clients to request for more than one diamond, says Brimer, because the older generation want to pass them on as family heirlooms.

Although Algordanza Malaysia, set up half a year ago in Mid Valley City, has yet to receive its first order, enquiries have been streaming in steadily, says manager Jaime Lim.

"So far, the biggest concern is whether this is for real, but there's no need to worry because the weight, cut and colour of our diamonds are certified with ISO9001.

"A chemical fingerprint is carried out each time we receive the ashes, and the origin of the diamond is confirmed," says Lim.

"That means the diamond is 100 per cent made from the ashes of your loved one."

Prices range from RM12,800 for a 0.25 carat diamond to RM65,000 for a one carat piece.

"If you think of it as a family treasure, which can be passed on from one generation to another, the cost isn't such a big issue.

"Diamonds after all, last forever."