



Bringing a Writer's Eye to *Obituaries*

Writers often don't get a lot of feedback on their work. Obituary writers almost never hear good words about what they wrote.

So Petra Lina Orloff knew she was onto something when she heard a stranger at the department store praising an obituary that she'd written. And when the woman pulled the clipping from her purse to share with a friend, it set Orloff on a path that has led her to start her own business.

Orloff is CEO and founder of Beloved, which crafts custom obituaries and eulogies for grieving families. The company was founded in June 2017, has a stable of about 25 writers and is already working with about 100 funeral homes, mostly in the Detroit area, where Orloff is based.

Orloff is working to expand her network of funeral homes and

writers, and to bring her service to grieving families around the country.

"I feel good about being able to tell people's stories, and I feel really great about employing writers," said Orloff, 42. "I've attended funerals and had the whole family come up and embrace me with this big hug. It's really nice to do something so wonderful for people in their time of great need."

Beloved is an outgrowth of Orloff's interest in writing and her desire to earn money while employing her skill.

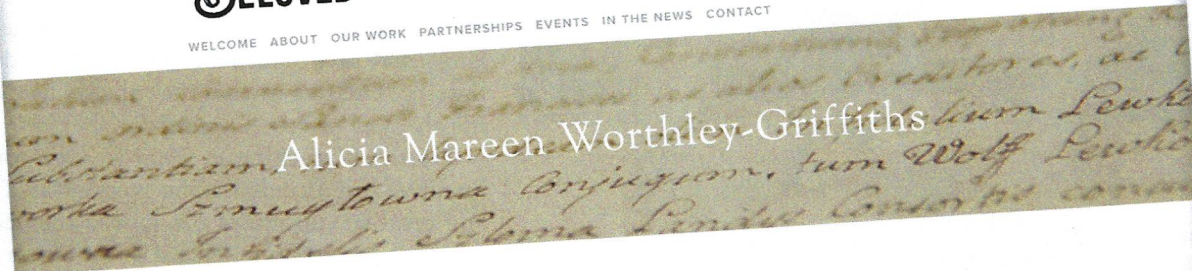
Orloff has been a professional writer for nearly a quarter century. She completed the Ph.D. program in English at Wayne State University in

Detroit, where she taught literature and cultural studies.

However, like many academics, Orloff found her teaching salary wasn't enough and supplemented her income by writing.

Her efforts took on a more personal note when her father, Frederick, died in 2004, and Orloff met with a funeral director in Cheboygan, Michigan, to discuss her dad's obituary.

"The funeral director gave me a template and said, 'Fill this out, and we'll submit it to the local paper.' I said, 'Absolutely not!' I was writing professionally at the time, and I'd always been a good writer, so I wrote the obituary I wanted," Orloff recalled.



Alicia Maren Worthley-Griffiths

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1946 - 2017



Alicia Maren Worthley-Griffiths, 71, a resident of Clawson, Michigan for more than 30 years, passed away on September 12 at Royal Oak Beaumont Hospital.

Her quiet passing is in stark contrast to the life she lived. Bold, intelligent, energetic, and determined, Alicia was Michigan's first female building inspector. Working in a male-dominated industry before women's liberation had even found a foothold in the United States, was a job only a strong, force of nature like Alicia could handle. She was, as her son Rodger Griffiths indicates, "a proud, Leo woman with a Leo personality to match." Truly, she is remembered as adventurous, genuine, and generous, traits that exemplify her life.

She was a dauntless foodie, who made a hobby out of visiting new restaurants and tasting unique dishes with her loving husband of 32 years, Rodney W. Griffiths. Rodney, who met Alicia on a blind date, says that when he first saw her, he was taken by her "beautiful dark hair, her pretty eyes, and great smile." He adds that Alicia's "fascinating personality" and her willingness to dine on BBQ at a dive in downtown Utica sealed the deal for him: he was hooked. Several years later, they married at Church of Christ in Troy, Mich. When not eating out, the couple enjoyed annual visits to Florida, where the sounds of the Atlantic Ocean lapping the sandy shores of Daytona Beach were among Alicia's greatest joys. The two also reveled in flea markets and the local arts and crafts scene, as well as weekly Pinochle games with her brother-in-law and his wife.

Her passion was also ignited by a love for beautiful things, which culminated in frequent trips to her favorite spot, Neiman Marcus.

The obituary was nearly a page long. Though she was grieving, Orloff filled the piece with the gentle humor of a daughter talking about a parent she loved.

"Frederick Conrad Orloff, 60, spent the last days of his life smoking Basics, eating White Castle hamburgers, drinking Squirt, and entertaining family and friends from his kitchen stool in the Orloff family home in Mullett Lake, Mich. After being admitted to a Detroit area hospital in March, Fred was diagnosed with brain cancer. Instead of receiving treatment, Fred opted to leave the hospital and live out his life "watching the ice melt on Mullett Lake."

The obituary continued in a similar

vein for seven more paragraphs. At his funeral services, people made a point of telling Orloff how much they liked the obituary. But it was two weeks later, while she was standing in line at the local Walmart, that she realized the impact the piece had had. Two women were standing in front of her. One was talking about something she'd read in the newspaper.

"She said, 'It's so funny, you have to read it.' Then she actually pulled it out of her pocketbook. It was my obituary. I thought 'Oh my God, it really resonated with people,'" Orloff recalled. "It was a wonderful gift for me."

Orloff, who had been helping people write dating profiles and wedding vows as well as businesses

with reports, marketing copy, newsletters and other materials, added obituaries and eulogies to her professional offerings. She used the approach that had made her dad's obituary so memorable and learned lessons about what else worked when helping people celebrate the life of a late loved one.

"I learned to not be afraid to include things that may not be incredibly positive. When people think about the negative aspect of someone's personality after they are dead, it often is not with anger, it is with humor. So, to include something like that is just as important to telling the story of someone's life as the positive aspects," she said.



Petra Lina Orloff is a former college instructor who is bringing her writing skills to funeral service.



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Orloff also vowed to stay away from a template approach to gathering information for her obituaries. Instead, she'd ask, "Tell me what you remember about this person," or "Tell me your best memory of them? What is your least-favorite memory?"

"It all comes out in the storytelling process. It is much more personal," she said. "They generally laugh and say, 'Oh, remember the time they did this,' or 'Oh, this is what they always used to do.' It's always a positive experience."

Orloff left teaching in 2008 to look for more lucrative opportunities. She worked as a writer and creative consultant but missed the academic atmosphere and intellectual stimulation of the classroom.

"I missed being a scholar. I started thinking, 'If only I had been paid enough to remain in the humanities, but I need more recurring revenue.'" She knew other academics, like her, who were working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Beloved was born when Orloff realized she could use those writers to help grow her obituary-writing efforts.

"I thought writing is already in their line of thinking, and this can help them continue to teach and not feel like they are constantly on the edge of foreclosure or bankruptcy," she said.

Orloff began researching how funeral homes gather information for obituaries and their business model for publishing them.

"I started talking to a local funeral director in the Detroit area who has been in the business his whole life. He educated me on the funeral business. The more I spoke with him, it became apparent that I could ... do this ... worldwide," she said.

Beloved's business model is flexible, based on how the funeral home would like to use it. Some funeral homes build the service cost into their basic price structure, while others offer it as a premium to families who want a more custom obituary.

Funeral directors send the family's contact information to Beloved, and then a writer has conversations with a few members of the family to gather the facts for the obituary. Once a draft obituary is completed, it is sent to the family for review. Writers make as many revisions as needed. Once given final approval, an electronic version is sent to the funeral director and the family.

"The process is out of the funeral director's hands. He or she doesn't have to do anything," Orloff said.

The entire process takes about 36 hours or less. Orloff is hoping to get the turnaround time down to 24 hours, but much is dependent on the availability of family members.