

Grave Undertaking: Alfred prepares to host international conference of obit writers

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It's a grave undertaking but Alfred, NY, is up to the task, says David Snyder, editor of its hometown weekly newspaper. For three days next week, this small village with 1,200 full-time residents and a single traffic light will play host to an international conference for obituary writers from places as far away as Nigeria, Great Britain and Spain as well as all over the United States. They will gather in the Kenyon-Allen Rooms in the Powell Campus Center on the Alfred University campus for the latest word in how to write the final word. Among the panelists are Betty Abah from Nigeria; Robert Chaundy from the BBC in London; Marilyn Johnson of Atlanta, author of the newly published *The Dead Beat*; Andrew Losowsky of Spain; Adam Bernstein of the Washington Post; Joan Harvey of The Oregonian; Jim Sheeler of the Rocky Mountain News and author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Obit*; and Gayle Sims of The Philadelphia News. Don't presume the gathering will be deadly dull, though. "They are a fabulous group of people, very laid back," with a penchant for puns, says Snyder. "They call themselves 'grimsters'." How and why Alfred became the host for the "9th Great Obituary Writers' International Conference is a not a cryptic (Sorry. That pun's a stretch) tale, but one that began four years ago when Snyder was given the task of introducing Carolyn Milford Gilbert, founder of the International Association of Obituarists, at a New York Press Association conference. "We hit it off," said Snyder, who is an assistant in Herrick Library on the AU campus as well as "publisher, editor and janitor" at The Alfred Sun. Snyder gave Gilbert some editions of his paper, one of which contained an obituary for the late Dr. Clarence Klingensmith, a biology professor emeritus at Alfred University. (Coincidentally, says Snyder, a panelist in another session had read the obit, and proclaimed to his colleagues, "This is journalism.") After reading the Klingensmith obituary, Gilbert e-mailed Snyder to invite him to attend the 6th Great Obituary Writers International Conference in Las Vegas, NM. Snyder was in a quandary, though. As the editor/publisher/janitor at The Alfred Sun, how could he miss the Alfred Traffic Light Festival, celebrating 30 years of having a stop light (the only one) in the village? (For more, see: <http://www.alfred.edu/pre...>) Yet, the dates conflicted with the obit writers' conference. Finally, he decided to attend the conference, but told Gilbert of the dilemma he'd faced. She was charmed by the idea of small town celebrating its traffic light, bought the celebratory T-shirt and even a jar of "traffic jam," the fruit preserves sold as fund-raiser. And, she proposed that a future gathering of the obituarists should be held at Alfred. Snyder said he wasn't anticipating that this would be the year. After all, there were other contenders for the honor, including Cleveland. Then in March, Snyder got the call: Could he host the meeting in Alfred? A phone call to Kristin Karl, manager of the Saxon Inn on the AU campus, confirmed she had the space available, and plans were under way for Alfred to host the conference June 14-16. Having the obituarists conference in Alfred is just one more way to lay to rest the rumor that the village - home to 5,000 students during the academic year - is dead in the summer. "It's really quite lively," affirms Snyder. "There's lots going on."