

Resting easy

It might not be for everyone, but a Cubs urn provided DONNA BLACKSTONE the comfort she needed in her time of loss

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Michael and Donna Blackstone loved the Cubs almost as much as they loved each other.

"We went to Opening Day every single year until Michael's health worsened," Donna said. "Michael was in a fantasy baseball league, and he always picked Cubs players. He loved Derrek Lee, and he loved Ryan Theriot."



Cubs fan Donna Blackstone clasps the urn that holds the remains of her husband, Michael, who died last Sunday. "When I die, I'm going in there with him," she said.

(Tom Cruze/Sun-Times)



Michael and Donna called Theriot "Ryan The Riot" because that's how his last name is spelled, Donna said. They named their dog, a Lab mix, Wrigley. They have a Cubs showcase in their Glenview home, which features a large Cubs lithograph and memorabilia they have collected through the years.

"We loved the Cubbies," Donna said. "And we loved going to Wrigley Field. The people there were always so nice to us. If Michael needed help getting to the car, they'd help us. I can't explain it, but the workers there were like family."

Michael died last Sunday at 50.

"His heart gave out," said Donna, his wife of 15 years. "He was a diabetic and an amputee, but it was sudden. A lot goes through your head. Fifty is too young to die; it was too young for him to die."

When she went to the funeral home to make arrangements for Michael's wake, Donna knew only that she wished to

cremate his remains. But a certain urn caught her eye. It was blue and red, had the Cubs' logo on it and was topped with a baseball.

"When I saw it, my body went tingly and numb," she said. "I knew that was it."

Donna barely has begun to make sense of her husband's death, but she has found comfort in the urn.

"You know what it does?" she said. "It makes me feel good. It can be part of our Cubbies showcase. I'm going to put it right next to our lithograph, and Mike can always be there. I have my Sammy Sosa and Mark Grace [memorabilia] and my Alfonso Soriano jersey, and it can all go together. And I'll have my Michael, my husband, and that's all I want."

Bill Simkins, the co-owner of Simkins Funeral Home in Morton Grove, where a service for Michael was held Wednesday, is a Cubs fan himself. When the Major League Baseball-licensed urns became available, he ordered one and put it on display.

"We thought, 'Let's just get it and see what happens,'" Simkins said. "It's not for everyone. But when Donna saw it, she was thrilled. It's comforting, and you take what you can at times like these."

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Clint Mytych, the 27-year-old chief executive officer of Farmington Hills, Mich.-based Eternal Image, came up with the idea for the MLB-licensed urns.

"It just popped into my head," he said. "Every industry has tried branding, but the funeral industry had never tried to offer something that would speak to the hobbies and passions someone had in their life."

Mytych originally hoped to make classic-car urns -- Corvettes and Mustangs, he said -- but that didn't pan out, so he pursued other brands. In addition to MLB, Eternal Image's licensing rights include the Vatican, Star Trek, the American Kennel Club, the Cat Fanciers' Association and the figurine company Precious Moments. MLB is the only professional league that has licensed funeral products, but Eternal Image recently partnered with Collegiate Licensing Co., and Purdue is one of its first licensed schools.

The MLB urn line debuted last summer with the eight teams -- the Cubs, Atlanta Braves, Boston Red Sox, Detroit Tigers, Los Angeles Dodgers, New York Yankees, Philadelphia Phillies and St. Louis Cardinals -- Eternal Image identified as having the largest and most loyal fan bases. Five more teams, including the White Sox, have been added to the line,

and all 30 major-league teams are expected to be available next season. A line of team caskets is set to debut next month, and the Cubs will be among them.

"The funeral business is going more toward celebrating life and the personalization of it," said Harold Gholson, a sales rep for Knauer's Wilbert Vault in Joliet, an Eternal Image distributor. "This [MLB line] is saying: That's how they're remembered on earth and who they rooted for."

The line has taken off "really well," said Gholson, who estimated he has sold 150 Cubs urns and 15 Sox urns to funeral homes in his territory, which includes Illinois, Missouri and part of Northwest Indiana. "It's interesting to see people's faces as they're walking through a display and see an urn. They're definitely conversation pieces. But it's still new, and I think that most of the older generation is still being buried rather than cremated."

According to Eternal Image, the Yankees and Red Sox are the top two sellers so far, with the Cubs third and the White Sox "seventh or eighth." The urns retail for around \$700, higher than the average cost of an urn. The caskets, too, will come at a premium: upwards of \$4,000. But what price can you put on peace of mind?

"I wasn't going to do anything," said Donna Blackstone, a service adviser for Autobarn Volkswagen. "I was just going to take his ashes home with me. Then I saw this urn, and it was the Cubbies, and I said, 'Oh, my God.' Yet I thought, 'I can't do that. It's too extravagant.' But my sister was with me, and she said if there is one thing you could go overboard on, it's this."

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Joe Herdegen's funeral home, Herdegen-Brieske, is located on West Wellington Avenue, about a mile from Wrigley Field. He has displayed a Cubs urn in the window since last season but hasn't sold one yet. Of course, he removed the urn from the window after the Cubs' first-round playoff ouster last fall. And he takes it out of the window at night "because of the crazy fans after the games."

All that said, Herdegen has received a lot of positive feedback about the urn. It's just that those who have shown interest weren't interested in cremation.

Kim Golob, the director of O'Neil Funeral Home in Lockport, has yet to sell an urn but has noticed they are conversation-starters.

"People see them and tell their families, 'When I'm cremated, this is what you need to buy for me,'" she said. "When the caskets come out, we'll probably set out lithographs of them in the display room."

The commercialization of funeral products likely doesn't sit well with everyone. But considering the Vatican has licensed a line of products, it's clear nothing is sacred

anymore. Given sports fans' unwavering loyalty to their favorite teams, funeral branding makes good business sense.

The loyalty of Cubs fans is legendary. But can there be any greater display of allegiance than choosing to store a loved one's ashes in a Cubs urn?

"It's certainly an overwhelming personal gesture of devotion to the Cubs," Cubs spokesman Peter Chase said. "The entire organization sends our collective best to the Blackstone family as it mourns Michael's passing."

For Donna Blackstone, the Cubs urn was the only choice that made sense.

"Michael would be so proud," she said. "And when I die, I'm going in there with him."

How would you feel about being buried in a Cubs casket or urn?

Katie Newberry, 27, Naperville

"They actually have those? As a Cubs fan, that would be pretty awesome. It's something different and out of the ordinary."

Jason Saunders, 33, Terre Haute, Ind.

"Um, it's an interesting idea, but I probably wouldn't get one myself."

Kevin Rutchik, 53, Harvard, Ill.

"Naw, I couldn't do that. ... It just doesn't seem right."

Al Burton, 34, Toronto

"It would be the experience of a lifetime."

Mickie Beckett, 50, Elmwood Park

"I would love it. Being buried in the ground in a Cubs emblem would be awesome, the best thing ever. But hopefully not anytime soon."

Liz Svita, 30, Palatine

"I would love to do it. Definitely. It would be awesome."