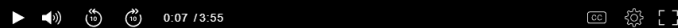


# Kiwi Coffin Club Throws Glitter on the Idea of Dying

A growing number of New Zealand senior citizens are taking matters of death into their own hands through paint, song, and dance.

Hidden away in a small New Zealand town a group of rebellious seniors have found a unique way to prepare for death.



BY AUSTA SOMVICHIAN-CLAUSEN



PUBLISHED OCTOBER 19, 2017 • 7 MIN READ

The show must go on! Or must it? The members of [New Zealand's](#) quirky Coffin Clubs don't think so. The clubs—which consist of Kiwi senior citizens who seek comfort, community, and coffin-making—is gaining popularity among New Zealanders, as well as internationally.

While Coffin Club groups are popping up all over New Zealand, the original club was founded in [Rotorua](#) in 2010 by former palliative care nurse Katie Williams, 77. During their weekly meetings, they're challenging the grim ideas often associated with death, and the morbid, monotonous nature of many funerals. ([See what happens when death doesn't mean goodbye.](#))

It all started with an organization called [University of the Third Age \(U3A\)](#)—an international movement dedicated to fostering lifelong learning, which gives retired and semi-retired participants the opportunity to pursue interests and meet new friends. During a U3A meeting that Williams attended, a brainstorm was happening to identify possible new club ideas within the organization.

"For a reason that I have absolutely no idea about in retrospect, I got up and said, 'I'd like to build my own coffin,'" says Williams. She says that she was met with initial dead silence, and then a queue of "like-minded individuals" who urged her to get the club started.



Every week, aging New Zealanders are gathering together for a rather unusual hobby: building their own coffins. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY LOADING DOCS

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"I gathered some old blokes who were ex-carpenters and builders, and a group of women that would get creative, and we started it up in my garage and carport," she says.

What followed is the ever-growing Coffin Clubs community of about 160 members from all over [New Zealand](#), as well as a growing list of countries, starting with Ireland. Says Williams, "it's excellent and incredible what's happened. It's hard to believe really. There's about 50 to 60 that come to our 'club day' each Wednesday. These people come to order their coffins, to decorate their coffins, to come help out the new comers."

She says that many of the members have lost their life partners and come to the club to seek the comforts of a loving community. "These people come and get a cuddle, they get a kiss, and they get cared about," says Williams, who emphasizes the importance of personal touch during club gatherings. She believes that touch is an important aspect to anybody's well-being. In addition to coffin creation, members also eat meals together and enjoy breakfast and afternoon tea.

When asked if being a part of the club has made her feel more comfortable about death, Williams says, wholeheartedly, yes. Celebrating death is just as important as celebrating life, she adds.



Filmmaker Briar March tells the story of the Coffin Club through song and dance in a unique docu-musical.  
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY LOADING DOCS

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Williams also says that the ability for some of her members to take part in the musical documentary above has changed their lives for the better. She lets out a sigh of happiness as she exclaims, "For the people involved in the documentary, if they die tomorrow, they'll all go out as the brightest of stars! They glow with beauty and importance."

She says that one of the stars, Tina, 90, recently had intense bouts of grief due to the death of her daughter and her granddaughter. Following her participation in the documentary, "she has just blossomed. Suddenly she's able to talk through things and is a completely different person. The documentary has enhanced the lives of so many oldies and it's just priceless."

The stars were born anew from the glitz and glam of getting their hair and make-up done, and donning outfits of glitter and sequins. Williams says that they were taught by a choreographer how to move gracefully, "despite the aches in their hips and knees and things."

The unique musical documentary was produced by [Loading Docs](#) and features members of the club strutting their stuff and challenging the idea of what a funeral should look like. They shirk black outfits and formality in exchange for panache and individuality. And don't forget the glitter.




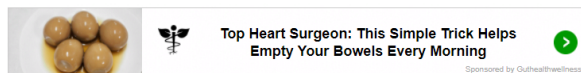
The docu-musical's star, Jean McGaffin is one of New Zealand's senior citizens bringing fun and personality to her own final journey.  
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY LOADING DOCS

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In the center of it all is the brightly shining star that is Jean McGaffin, one of the club's founding members. With a background in stage work, McGaffin was chosen by director [Briar March](#) and flew to [Auckland](#) to perform in the documentary. She says that since the film was made, interest in the club has been springing up all around the world. McGaffin was first drawn to the idea of the Coffin Club because of the high cost of funerals, and the ability to get creative with your own casket.

Thanks to Coffin Clubs, she says, funeral costs are brought down to a bare minimum, and a funeral director is almost unnecessary. "Strange to say that the funeral directors are being quite supportive," she says. The cheapest coffin in New Zealand previously available starts at about \$5,000 (NZ), but seniors are now able to request one through Coffin Clubs for a mere \$200 (NZ).

The caskets created by members range widely in intricacy, and Māori motifs are common. Some of Coffin Clubs' Irish members have taken to painting leprechauns and clover leaves on theirs. "Whatever has interested you throughout your lifetime, you can incorporate into your coffin," says McGaffin.

How about her own? "Mine is purple! I like lots and lots of glitter—I'm a very glittery person, and I want my coffin to show that," she says excitedly. Coffin Club has also helped rid her of any fear she had, and she says that the documentary even helps to glorify old age in some ways.

"Makes you realize there's no mistake about it, we've all got to die, haven't we? I used to be a bit scared, but now I know when the time comes I will be surrounded by a lot of caring people," she says. "I'm not scared of dying now."

*The National Geographic Short Film Showcase spotlights exceptional documentary shorts created by filmmakers from around the world. To submit a film for consideration, email [sfs@natgeo.com](mailto:sfs@natgeo.com).* [📄](#)

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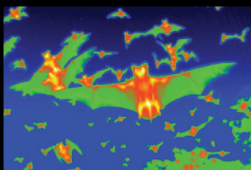


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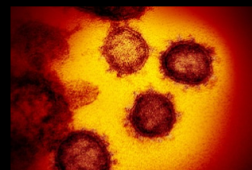
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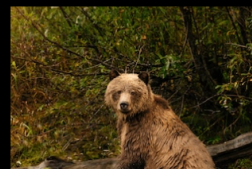
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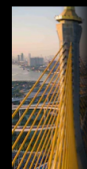
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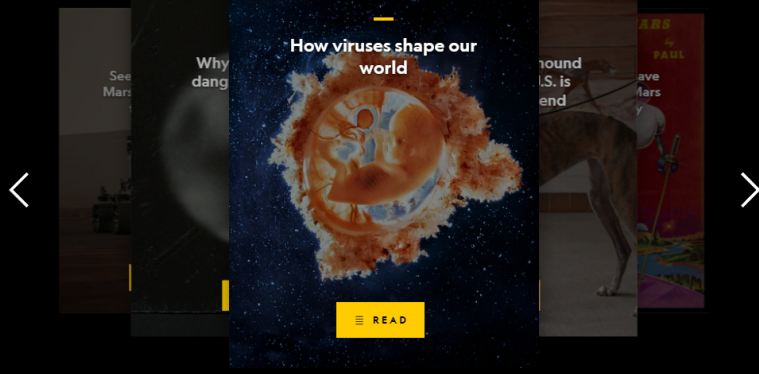


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