

# Charity Spotlight

Isabel Russo, head of ceremonies, explains how a new video voiced by Stephen Fry highlights services provided by the British Humanist Association

**T**he British Humanist Association's (BHA) trained and accredited celebrants conduct funerals and other non-religious ceremonies that are attended by around a million people each year. The BHA recently teamed up with Stephen Fry to release a video explaining how humanist weddings, namings and funerals can be ideal options for non-religious people looking to mark major turning points in their lives.

Isabel Russo, head of ceremonies at the BHA, said: "We really wanted to get our message out to the general public. We're a charity but in many ways we're quite quiet about the work we do. We really wanted to make an accessible explanation of our ceremonies. Historically, a lot of our marketing has been advertisements with trade magazines and leaflets. What I found was missing was that real visceral sense of what a humanist ceremony is. What really works about this is the tremendous warmth of Stephen Fry's voice mixed with lovely images that tell the story of what a humanist ceremony is and how it appeals to a broad section of people. It was really nice to come off the page and create something lively and dynamic, that clarified what we do and the services that we provide. We were obviously delighted that Stephen was more than happy to do the voiceover for us. In a way he really speaks for the quality of our services. We're quite traditional, we've been around for 120 years, but are also contemporary and I feel that Stephen Fry epitomises this.

## Choosing humanist ceremonies

Two YouGov polls, each surveying 4,000 adults, highlighted a growing interest in humanist ceremonies. Nearly a third of respondents, 29.6 percent, had attended a humanist ceremony of some sort. As a percentage of the UK population, this translates to 14.7 million people. 14 percent also said they would choose a humanist funeral.

"The figures confirmed the demand for our ceremonies," said Isabel. "Seven million people want a humanist funeral for themselves when they die and over a million people a year have attended a humanist ceremony. This confirms the trend. The poll found that more people aged 18-24 want a non-religious humanist funeral than want a religious one. The demand for non-religious funerals is growing. We're entering into an era of talking much more openly about death, about funerals and about choices around death so I think people are feeling empowered to make choices that really reflect their belief systems and the person that they're celebrating or commemorating and saying goodbye to. That's absolutely not to say that all people should have a humanist funeral. I'm coming from the position where every person should have exactly the right ceremony for them and the right funeral according to their belief system.

"I'm encouraged by the fact that more people are having the courage to break away from a tradition or an outlook that may be that of their parents or grandparents, if it doesn't





necessarily match their own choices and views. They are stopping and examining what they really want and what really speaks to them, they now feel more confident to really make their voice heard. There are open discussions about choice and people are feeling much more comfortable talking about bereavement and supported in being able to make those decisions.

### Inclusive ceremonies

"There's a fine balance when including religious music or traditions in a humanist ceremony," said Isabel. "We would be lacking integrity if we filled a ceremony with religious content, so our line is very much that we'll include it where it's a cultural reflection of a person's life. They may love All Things Bright and Beautiful because it reminds them of their school days or singing with their grandmother or playing rugby. We don't include religious content where it's an act of worship led by us because obviously it's a non-religious ceremony and it wouldn't feel correct and right for us. Having said that, we always have time for reflection and we welcome people from all faiths within the congregation. We recognise that contemporary society is made up of many outlooks and we very much focus on the person and on the relationships around that person. There isn't anything contentious because it's about universal truths and universal feelings and acknowledging that universality of all of us in a grieving context.

### Organising non-religious funerals

"There's been a huge increase in the number of people who are becoming celebrants. It's such an important role so funeral directors can be taking a reputational risk when they recommend a celebrant. I would always encourage funeral directors to sit in on ceremonies so they can see the celebrant in action. I worked as celebrant for five years before I became head of ceremonies. Funeral directors couldn't know whether I was doing a great job without seeing me at work.

"I also recommend that if a family asks for a non-religious service that the funeral director helps them to find a suitable celebrant. In one sad case, I received an email from a family who had requested a non-religious, humanist ceremony. They had been unhappy during the ceremony, which was religious in style and content, and didn't meet their expectations. Three weeks later they found out that the celebrant was a vicar, not a humanist. They felt incredibly let down.

"For many people it's very important to have someone leading the ceremony who shares your outlook, your perspective, your belief system and your values. For us, it just doesn't work having someone who's prepared to do anything and who's willing to bend what they truly believe to pretend that they share your views. When someone specifically asks for a non-religious celebrant, they've asked for somebody who shares their belief system and that reflects their journey through life. When I was young it wasn't that easy not to believe in God. It's a choice, an active choice, that shapes you as a person. If an individual asked for a non-religious celebrant they want to speak the same language as that person and it's quite alienating to have someone who believes something very different from you taking your ceremony and pretending to have the same beliefs. It's inauthentic.

"There are many independent celebrants available today and people call themselves humanist celebrants who aren't necessarily accredited - the British Humanist Association doesn't have any control over who can use the word 'humanist'. So I'd urge funeral directors to check their work and check their background. A lot of Independent celebrants are of course very good, but the important thing is that a funeral director knows what they are getting. We can offer assurances that celebrants accredited by us are well trained, that they are insured, quality assured and receive continued professional development, which means there's an ongoing overview of their work. We also have a robust complaints procedure in place that supports everyone involved for those times when something doesn't go as the client would have hoped. Fortunately at Humanist Ceremonies™ those times are rare!" ■

The new video is available to view on YouTube or via the BHA website. For more information contact Isabel and the ceremonies team at:

Telephone: 020 7324 3060

Email: [ceremonies@humanism.org.uk](mailto:ceremonies@humanism.org.uk)

Website: [humanism.org.uk/ceremonies](http://humanism.org.uk/ceremonies)