U.S.News & WORLD REPORT

public in 1993, Stewart's stock price had, by last October, risen 426 percent. Stock analysts predict a still rosier future, as America enters the golden era of the death-care industry. After a century of declining mortality, an aging America will reverse that trend, pushing the present death rate of 8.7 per 1,000 to 13.6 per 1,000 in 2050. The Big Three already are snaring those futures: In 1997, SCI had $3.2 billion in prearranged funerals on the books. Young job hunters are taking note: Top funeral directors can make $100,000 or more a year. Mortuary-school enrollments are up 45 percent since 1990. The National Academy of Mortuary Sciences advertises on the Web (*www.drkloss.com*); the curious can click on an opening casket lid.

Friend to consumers. Wasielewski's ongoing battle with these death-care Goliaths might be utterly quixotic were it not for a relentlessness that can weary even his supporters. Using only an old computer, a few volunteers, and a copy machine at Kinko's, he surveys cities to find both price gougers and fair-priced funeral homes, then makes that information available to consumers by phone or on the Web: Someone in Houston, for instance, can call and learn which funeral home charges $1,495 for essentially the same service and casket that cost $9,910 at a chain-owned home. With his circle of "spies" in the business, the priest has documented such common mortuary practices as selling pricey caskets sealed to protect the loved one's body from the elements, containers that many mausoleum managers say in fact can liquefy the flesh and even explode—sometimes blowing the front right off the crypt.

cent plastic frame. When a widow mentioned that she'd prefer gifts to charity over flowers, the funeral home took the initiative to print the notice, "then charged the lady $75 for paper and frame. She's not supposed to be paying attention, you see. She's supposed to be too grieved."

The priest's efforts reflect the belated maturing of a consumer movement first given life 35 years ago by the late Jessica Mitford's hilarious exposé of the funeral industry, *The American Way of Death*. The doyen old priest, whom Mitford in

tions for care of the dead. A national network of memorial societies now serve as buyers' cooperatives for a half-million members, finding low-priced mortuaries and sometimes negotiating rates for their members; their association, FAMSA (Funeral and Memorial Societies of America), lobbies Washington on consumers' behalf. A network of alternative suppliers has emerged, offering caskets and urns via catalog shopping and the Web. There is even a growing home-funeral movement that helps people bypass funeral directors

funeral buyers began 20 years ago, when someone called to say that an old woman in his parish was on the street begging money to bury her husband. When he called on the widow, ill and alone in her small abode, she said the funeral would cost $995, for her an unimaginable sum. Wasielewski then called the mortician, who explained that the woman had chosen a fancy casket. At the rosary that night, the priest decided to see for himself. "I thumped the casket, and called others on to do the same, and we realized

In the past five years, funeral prices have risen three times faster than the cost of living.

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