



# SKY HIGH MEMORIALS

Firework displays and sending ashes into orbit offer unique options

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**The sky's the limit for a growing number of families, who are choosing fireworks and spaceflight for their final goodbye in the search for ever-more imaginative and personalised ways to mark the life of a loved one.**

It was a caller to a radio station, back in 2004, that provided the inspiration for Heavens Above Fireworks - now a thriving business offering memorial parties that include spectacular firework displays containing a portion of ashes.

Fergus Jamieson, Managing Director of NAFD supplier member Heavens

Above Fireworks, explains: "Ashes dispersal by fireworks was brought to our attention by Radio 4's *Home Truths*. A listener said she wished she could 'go out in a fireworks display'. It was her wish that started us wanting to know more. Our research showed most people had never thought about ashes dispersal within fireworks displays as an alternative to current, more traditional practices and fireworks companies were not interested in offering the service. So we formed the company in 2004.

"We arrange events for all sorts of people. Budgets vary widely but,

importantly, everyone has been very pleased with the service we provided. Amongst notable events we arranged a 'Grand Finale' for Dame Anita Roddick's mother in Littlehampton on the beach. We met the wishes of a number of soldiers killed on duty in Afghanistan during that conflict and arranged for them to 'Go out with a Bang' and arranged a 'Spectacular Goodbye' at Glyndebourne Opera for a member of their production team."

The company's work has attracted national media attention. "One client was a lover of horse racing. Her wish was to have her ashes scattered within

a fireworks display at Goodwood race course and we arranged for this. The celebration was filmed by the ITV show *Richard & Judy* – and we’ve had national press coverage for other memorial events we’ve undertaken.”

Families also now have the choice of purchasing self-fired rockets so that they can arrange the memorial event themselves and, increasingly, people are setting out plans for a memorial firework display in their plans for their funeral. The firm can provide an advice sheet on request, without obligation, and are happy to work with funeral directors to incorporate these wishes into any plans. Heavens Above also offers funeral directors an introductory commission on the fireworks display base price of 5%. The funeral firm can invoice Heavens Above for its commission or opt for it to be donated to the Heavens Above Fireworks Charitable Fund (HAFCF), which supports a range of national and local charities. Adds Fergus: “We donate a portion of every invoice to the Fund. This year, funds raised will be donated mainly to Kidney Research UK, Cystic Fibrosis Trust and Saint Clare Hospice, and over £10,000 has been donated to charities so far by HAFCF.”

Some families choose to send the ashes of their loved one even higher, through the services of firms like both Heavens Above and also specialist firms like Sheffield-based Sent Into Space.

In 2010, while completing their PhDs in Engineering at the University of Sheffield, Alex Baker and Chris Rose challenged themselves to take a picture of the earth from the edge of space. The story of their balloon flight and the subsequent imagery captured the public imagination and they were inundated with requests for them to conduct launches for schools, businesses and research establishments. The following year

Sent Into Space was established as a trading name and launches began in earnest.

Sent Into Space now offers a range of services, including supporting scientific projects and launching a wide variety of unusual items into orbit to be filmed as they reach the edge of the earth’s atmosphere and beyond. However, as Sent Into Space’s Alex Keen notes, they’ve had more emails asking about scattering ashes in space than almost any other topic.

When the founders of the business - Dr Alex Baker and Dr Sam Rose - discussed their aspirations for the business, back when they were working out of the attic in Alex’s old house, it was one of the first things to go on the agenda.

Alex Keen explains: “Last year, we finally made that dream into a reality, with the launch of Ascension Flights. At the time, we talked to a lot of journalists about the service. Readers may have seen our appearance on BBC *Dragons’ Den* back in August 2017, where we faced a grilling about our mental arithmetic from Peter Jones before receiving an offer from Deborah Meaden. Since then we’ve spoken to a huge number of people who heard about the service and were thrilled to find out more about what we can offer. We’ve also talked to people across the funeral industry and representatives of many different faiths, discovering the huge variety of rituals and customs around grief, loss, and memorials.

“Space is awesome. Awe is a rare and complex emotion, a simultaneous sense of wondrous reverence and fearful dread. The word “awesome” has been diluted in meaning somewhat over the past few decades but, if it’s possible to sum up humankind’s feelings for space in a single word, “awesome” is a pretty good attempt. It’s no coincidence that much religious



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imagery depicts heaven as being above us. The night sky and the planets and stars above were worshipped as deities and believed to dictate the fates of those born under their influence by early civilisations across every part of the globe.

“In the modern age, each foray beyond the reaches of our atmosphere and every defiance of our gravitational field is a moment of triumph for scientific endeavour and the human spirit. Equally, however, each step we take is a humbling reminder of how small a space we occupy in the grand scheme and how much room we still have to grow as a species. It’s no wonder that, for many people, having their ashes sent on a final journey into the black void of space to scatter gently back down across the whole world seems like a fitting final journey.

“It’s taken us a long time to launch an ashes scattering service, which we’ve called Ascension Flights. Partly, that’s because we knew this would be a huge technical endeavour. We wanted the ashes to be released at a certain altitude, which required us to build a secondary GPS system and a computing module to track altitude and trigger the release mechanism once it had confirmed it was above a certain height.

“The proprietary mechanism we designed involved the ashes being poured over a cone, through a thin slit, creating a slow and steady pouring effect like sand running through an hourglass. That meant every moving part had to be sealed or protected from particulate wear and we had to research into the exact properties of human ashes, from their tendency to agglomerate and form clumps that would prevent a clean flow to the likelihood of moisture retention leading to freezing that could damage our payload.

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“All of these developments took time, and each component and system underwent an exhaustive testing process. We knew that, if we’re asking people to entrust us with the final remains of a departed loved one, any failure on any flight would be unacceptable.”

Alex acknowledges the importance of a close partnership with funeral directors. “Every industry has its own way of working and requires a wealth of hard and soft skills to succeed. For that reason, we’ve spent as much time as we did building our mechanism talking to funeral directors and industry professionals. Their insight has been invaluable in helping us see how our service should work and how to provide the best service to people going through some of the most emotionally challenging times that one can experience.

“Today, we’ve conducted a number of flights for customers who’ve contacted us directly, but we’ve also entered into a partnership with some of the most experienced and well-respected funeral care providers in the country. Very soon, hundreds of funeral directors across the UK will be able to offer Ascension Flights through their practices, meaning our customers can rest easy knowing that the best qualified people are carrying out their wishes every step of the way.”



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