

Bloomfield Hills gift company helps people commemorate loved ones

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The precision-tuned wind chimes catch the breeze, clink in the wind and offer a soothing tune.

It was a condolence gift from a coworker following the death of Bob Butley's mother, who died earlier this year.

The chime hangs from the window of Butley's screened porch, where he can listen and watch it swing in the wind as he sips his coffee.

"It's a really nice way to remember my mother," he said. His friend Shawnette Broussard, who lives in Louisiana, purchased the gift online and had it shipped to Butley in Texas. "While nothing replaces my mother, with the help of family and friends it gets easier. It was such a thoughtful gift."

Big Hug, an online gift company based in Bloomfield Hills, sells memorial gifts that can be customized for the buyer.

While pine grave blankets or pillows may be the norm to honor those who have died during the holiday season, long-lasting memorial gifts are gaining popularity. Remembrance chimes, Tree Huggers, pillows and engraved frames are favorites.

Katie Kiyu, owner of Big Hug, said the types of gifts she sells present a way to focus on celebrating the lives

of those who were lost during a season that can be melancholy without them.

“My desire to form a gift company to honor a memory that would live on in perpetuity was partly driven by the economics,” said Kiyo.

“But, mostly it was because of an emotional response. Sometimes gifts are truly appreciated in the days, weeks, or even months following a loss.”

Kiyo started Big Hug in 2009 when she was in need of a condolence gift but wanted to give something personal that would not easily diminish like flowers.

“The gifts I looked for I wanted to be timeless and enduring,” Kiyo said, “so that they could be given at any time during the year.”

The loss of a pet can be just as traumatic for a family, and because of this, owners have taken to purchasing memorial plaques to place in gardens or a special area of the home. Leather-bound frames with favorite portraits can also commemorate a deceased pet and act as a treasured keepsake.

Big Hug ships nationwide, including Canada with 80 percent of Kiyo’s business generated from loyalists outside of Michigan.

Kiyo said her primary focus remains sympathy and memorial gifts that honor the memory of people and beloved pets. Many are personalized with names and dates to mark the event, but they can include sayings, scripture, poetry and catch-phrases.

The gift prices range from \$38 for a 16-inch chime tuned to the first six notes of “Amazing Grace” to \$150 for a leather personalized pillow. Engraving is an additional cost.

Kiyo said people buy them for birthdays, death anniversaries, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and Memorial Day.

“Reaching out with a kind word or small keepsake on key dates throughout the year can mean a lot,” Kiyo said.

Best sellers

Katie Kiyo, owner of Big Hug, recommends several different gifts for people looking to memorialize a loved one:

- Personalized wind chimes: A local engraver offers many options. One coined favorite saying is, “Listen to the wind and know I am near.” There are also special icons just for the holidays.
- Tree Huggers: An Oprah “favorite thing,” a Tree Hugger is a stainless steel tree dedication tag maintained by an expandable spring that grows as the tree grows. Buyers use them to commemorate all sorts of family milestones, from birth of a baby to a wedding.
- Leather portrait pillows: A Birmingham manufacturer uses new technology to infuse images, graphics and texts into genuine leather. It is permanent and won’t wear off.
- Personalized frames and plaques: Items can be personalized in just 48 hours. The fast turnaround make these great holiday gifts, Kiyo said.

For more information, visit www.bighugllc.com.