

**Amy Limbert** | Sentinel Staff Writer  
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When Paula Powell-Volk gets stressed or overwhelmed, she touches the charm around her neck, and she feels calm.

Pressing her finger against the tiny jewelry reminds her of holding her late husband's hand. She can even feel the swirls of his thumbprint. The white-gold charm that Powell-Volk wears is called a Thumbie, and it bears the imprint of her husband's thumb, taken after he died.

"I just reach up and feel that texture and everything is OK," she said.

Thumbies are gaining popularity in a niche called "memorial jewelry," which is often sold by funeral homes and can be as simple as a cross or heart pendant or more personal, such as a tiny vial containing cremated remains.

Though postmortem thumbprints strike some as morbid, Central Florida funeral homes report selling hundreds and even thousands of Thumbies in the past several years, at \$120 to \$530 each.

Powell-Volk, 39, of Orlando, loved the idea of Thumbies immediately.

"It was the greatest thing I'd ever seen," she said of the dime-sized tribute to her husband, Warren, who died in March of leukemia. "I'd never seen anyone else with them. I actually feel like I have a piece of him with me."

But it's not for everyone. Some find the idea a bit . . .

"Ghoulish? Yes, my own dad used to think that all the time," said David Gordon, president of Meadow Hill Co., the Fox River Grove, Ill., company that trademarked and manufactures Thumbies.

Some funeral homes agree and refuse to offer the product.

"I think they're in poor taste," said Louis Wilson, funeral director at Beth Shalom Memorial Chapel in Orlando. "I think it's taking advantage of an emotional time, and it's not what my community ever asked about as far as wanting or needing."

But Gordon says that everyone grieves differently, and for some, Thumbies provide comfort.

"It's something for a child to have when they're older, for example," Gordon said. "It can aid in the grieving process by being something tactile, something to touch."

Besides, the mementos themselves "don't scream out 'Death,'" Gordon said. Maybe that's because Thumbies weren't designed to be memorial jewelry. Gordon's mother made the first two for him when his daughters were born as a way to celebrate their births, he said.

"We started off in the gift industry, especially for parents," Gordon said. "But funeral homes

became a great niche."

Gordon said his mother made those first Thumbies 30 years ago, and 10 years ago he realized he could turn them into a business. The concept "really took off" about three years ago, and Thumbies have expanded to include pet paw, nose and hoof prints as well as an array of finished products such as earrings, key chains and cuff links.

Some local funeral homes are doing a booming business selling the keepsakes. Gordon said that 95 percent of his business comes from funeral homes. More than 175 funeral homes and crematories in Florida offer Thumbies, and many funeral-home employees not only sell Thumbies but also wear them.

Cheryl Lankford, co-owner of Lankford Funeral Home in DeLand, said she first saw the Thumbies in 2000 when she was touring a funeral home in Seattle. She said her funeral home has sold hundreds since she started offering them soon after her trip, and she herself has one from her late father's print.

Marnie Carmody, a funeral director at Deltona Memorial Funeral Home in Orange City, offers Thumbies for grieving clients but has purchased several herself of living loved ones. She said she and her husband wear each other's thumbprints, and she also has one of her dog's paw print. Carmody also had a footprint charm made for her sister to celebrate the birth of her baby.

"I think it's an awesome way to celebrate people, living or deceased," she said. "I don't feel it just has to be for people who pass away."

Powell-Volk says her Thumbies -- and the four others she bought for her husband's three daughters and his mother -- were worth the cost.

"It feels like he's right here with me," she said.