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For further consultations,
call Russell Cormican at

954.763.1900

Russell Cormican
Attorney at Law

12 SE 7th St, Suite 700
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301

Norman Elliott Kent
Attorney at Law

2520 N. Dixie Hwy
Wilton Manors, FL 33305

www.NormKent.com

LIFESTYLE BOOKS

GAY MAN WRITES BOOK ON DEALING WITH DISASTERS

► John Hayden

Hurricanes crash ashore. Terrorists strike. Buildings collapse. While the loss of life is devastating, friends and loved ones are left to deal with heartbreak and uncertainty.

Robert Jensen, who is gay, wrote the book on navigating the aftermath of disaster.

"We're not in the business of preparation. We're in response and consequence management."

He talked about his new book, "Personal Effects," from his home in Key West. He's Chairman of Kenyon International Emergency Services and is an expert in helping families and response services understand the situation and how to communicate with each other.

Jensen said it's important that families of people who die from illness have a support system in place to help them plan a funeral, grieve, etc. Disasters are completely different.

"Now they're in a mass fatality scene where they can't be identified. Their bodies might not be recovered."

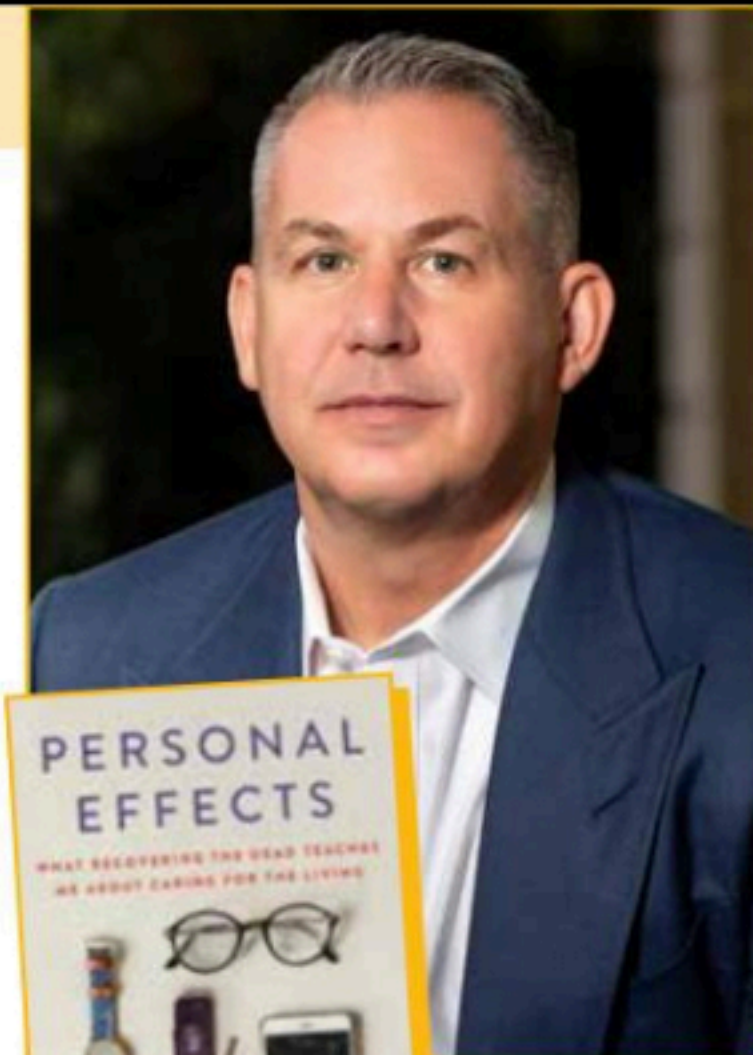
In these situations Jensen has to balance compassion with pragmatism.

"We don't use the word closure, we use the word transition. What I've spent most of my life doing is helping build a bridge so people can transition from what was normal to what will be normal. We try to help them take care of those things that are practical. Can we get the body back? How long is it going to take? Families come to these things without expectations because they haven't been through it."

The families haven't been through it, but Jensen and his team have. Their expertise means understanding the pain and answering tough questions.

"I get asked, were they alive? Were they alive when the plane hit the ground or hit the water? That's a straightforward question, but let me ask you what you mean? Do you mean were they aware? Because you can be alive and unaware. You're medically alive but you're unaware. So when you ask me a question I'm gonna answer, but I want you to know what you're asking because you will never not know the answer once I tell you. I want to make sure I'm giving you the right answer."

The Kenyon International team also works



Above: Robert Jensen, author of "Personal Effects" (pictured left). Courtesy photos.

with local responders on the ground to help deal with recovery of victims and their effects. Multiple agencies; federal, state, county, often work the scene, and it's their job to make sure they communicate clearly with families.

"You have PR people who don't focus on the action but focus on the words, and if the words don't match the action they're worthless," Jensen said.

Jensen decided to write "Personal Effects" to help people understand what happens after the TV crews have gone away.

"Here is the glimpse behind the curtain. Here's the reality. Here's how you start to take control."

He believes people need to take a breath and know what is important in stressful situations.

"Will it be cat 1 or a cat 5? Don't care because I can't do anything about it so I'm not going to waste an ounce of energy worrying about it. What I am gonna do is have a plan. Since I can't control the hurricane, what I can control is how I will respond to it when it hits."

"Personal Effects" is available on Amazon and in local bookstores. **SFGN**