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**ICCFA MAGAZINE
AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT**

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**MORE FROM
THIS AUTHOR**

►Sehee will be part of the "Going Green" symposium at the ICCFA 2008 Convention & Expo, March 26-29, San Diego, California.

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GOING GREEN

Is the green burial movement a threat to or an opportunity for the cemetery and funeral service profession? The director of the Green Burial Council explains how he sees the movement benefitting operators who embrace it.



The Galisteo River Basin site which will include burial and scattering space has many examples of what Sierra Club founder John Muir called "the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life," such as this tree, which is actually a pinion and juniper intertwined around dead wood.

Going back to 'ashes to ashes'

Recently, I had an interesting discussion about green burial with a senior executive of an insurance/casket company. For most of our conversation, the man seemed less than lukewarm to the idea, and then, even over the phone, I could almost see a light going on over his head.

"You know, maybe this thing could be for us what bottled water has been for soft drink manufacturers," he said.

On the one hand, it was great to hear him come to understand that green burial does not have to pose an economic threat to the funeral and cemetery profession and that it might actually help it by appealing to people who would otherwise choose direct cremation. On the other hand, I also realized that if green burial ever goes the way of bottled water, it's in for some real trouble.

Green burial may be just a variation on what most of humanity has always done for the deceased; at least until a century ago when the manufacturers of embalming fluid, who founded the nation's first mortuary schools, gave us "better death through chemistry." But I also know that what a growing



A closeup shows the color of the desert site.

number of consumers find captivating about returning to the earth more simply and naturally is far more authentic than repackaged tap water.

Burial customs have historically been used to honor the dead and heal the living. And the great religions of the world, from which many of our end-of-life rituals have evolved, have invited us to find solace in the knowledge that we're all connected to the same natural cycle of birth, death, decay and rebirth.



The Galisteo Basin Preserve at dawn. The burial ground and ceremonial space has permanently protected unobstructed views for many miles (plan, below). A conservation group owns the land; the owners of Rivera Family Funeral Homes and Santa Fe Memorial Gardens will handle operations (story, page 46).

“Ashes to ashes” didn’t just appear out of thin air; it’s in our spiritual DNA.

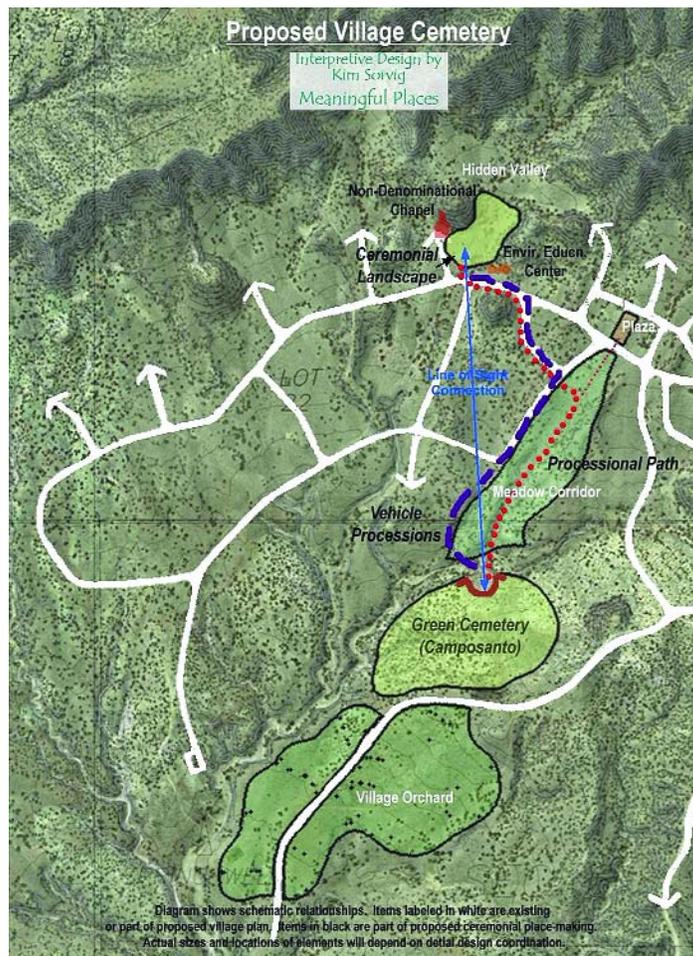
What draws people to green burial is not the opportunity to save money, or even to reduce the use of toxins and waste in the burial process. It’s knowing that their last act can be incredibly meaningful, can heal the land, heal the soul and connect them to something far bigger than a coffin or insurance policy. And I can say that with confidence, having talked to more people about green burial over the past five years than probably any person in the world.

In the end, it’s the story

Many people hate shelling out money for deathcare not because they don’t feel it’s right to pay for related products and services, but because they feel it commercializes and diminishes what they regard as an immensely sacred act. Too often, special things in life seem far less so when money enters the mix. But there are numerous examples of companies that operate in areas where it would be easy to be seen as exploitive but who are perceived as anything but.

Consider Patagonia, North Face and Recreational Equipment Inc. (REI). No one would think of accusing outdoor gear manufacturers/retailers of taking advantage of anyone, though they make money from consumers’ emotional and often spiritual connection with the great outdoors.

What’s interesting to me is not only are



The plan for a “green” burial ground at the Galisteo Basin Preserve, just south of Santa Fe.

people willing to pay handsomely for the gear that helps them commune with the natural world, but they also tend to view the companies that sell them those high-end hiking boots favorably.

The fact that these companies can be beloved as well as profitable suggests what could happen for funeral and cemetery professionals who get involved with green burial, an area where people are also look-

ing to make profound connections with meaningful places.

The outdoor gear industry benefits from park service agencies that not only act as stewards of the landscapes its customers hold dear, but also act as unofficial marketing partners. Quite simply, they help provide a story as well as facilitate an experience.

In a similar way, the cemetery and funeral industry could benefit from the work being done by the Green Burial Council. This non-profit group was founded in 2005 to encourage sustainable death-care practices and allow for burial to become a means of acquiring, restoring and stewarding natural areas.

The council has established standards for certifying two levels of green cemeteries that require transparency and accountability on the part of operators and provide the public with a way to know that these burial grounds will always remain as natural sanctuaries.

The council also is about to finalize standards for cremation aimed at encouraging fuel efficiency, reducing carbon emissions and, eventually, at mitigating pollutants such as mercury.

Later this year, the GBC will launch a national network of affiliated establishments open to any funeral home or cemetery willing to include in its price list a green burial package approved by the council.

The GBC also has been laying a foundation for the acceptance of green burial by



How your cemetery, crematory or funeral home can get green

Here are some ways to get involved with the Green Burial Council. More information on all of these opportunities can be found at www.greenburialcouncil.org or by calling the GBC at 1.888.966.3330.

- Become a GBC “approved” funeral provider by including a green burial package in your general price list.
- Have your cemetery become part of this same network by allowing for burial that does not require the use of a vault.
- Operate a green cemetery by adhering to GBC standards for a “natural burial” ground.
- Co-venture with a conservation organization to run a GBC-certified “conservation burial ground” owned by the conservation group.
- Get your cremation facility certified by the GBC for having met certain fuel efficiency and anti-pollution standards. □

engaging in a highly successful public education campaign, and by having its leadership address the national conventions of organizations involved with land conservation, funeral consumer advocacy and trade associations affiliated with the cemetery and funeral business.

All of these efforts are part of the GBC’s goal of using burial to protect a million acres over the next decade. The council hopes to achieve this end by encouraging people to patronize those operating in a more environmentally sound manner.

An emerging market and model

The biggest opportunities for deathcare professionals wanting to get into this field may ultimately lie in co-venturing with conservation organizations to develop, operate and maintain green cemeteries. The model that’s been evolving in Santa Fe, New Mexico,



A natural bonsai tree in the Galisteo Basin Preserve that might one day serve as a marker.

could hold the most promise.

The conservation burial ground being developed in the Galisteo Basin, just south of Santa Fe, is a joint venture of the non-profit Commonweal Conservancy, which is using burial as a strategy for saving from development a good part of a 13,000-acre former ranch, and Santa Fe Funeral Options & Memorial Gardens, a local cemetery and funeral home, which will manage the burial ground in accordance with Green Burial Council standards. (Related story, page 46.)

Other local funeral homes will also be involved in marketing the refuge. Cremation companies that abide by the new GBC standards, including the Neptune Society, will also be promoting the cemetery to its clientele.

Burial and scattering rights are embedded in donations to the conservancy. For every \$4,000 given to the conservancy, an individual receives a whole body burial right; a \$1,500 donation provides for a cremation burial or scattering. Half this amount is tax-deductible for the consumer and goes toward the acquisition of a 1,000-acre “memorial landscape” adjacent to the burial ground. In addition, 5,000 more acres are being made available for private family green burial grounds.

The project has been orchestrated by Conservation Burial Partners (CBP), a consultancy group that brings together land trusts, park service agencies and conservation developers with cemetery operators, funeral establishments and cremation companies.

In addition to optioning scattering/burial rights from landowners and then conveying these rights to local cemetery operators and funeral establishments, CBP also lines up

established conservation entities to serve as stewards for these facilities.

The model makes sense for a couple of reasons. It allows for conventional providers to operate as “concessionaires” on land they need not own, develop and maintain. It also lets them borrow from the council the goodwill necessary to make the concept work. And goodwill is going to be an increasingly important form of capital in this field.

Conservation organizations exploring getting involved with this concept insist that facilities be operated in a way that ensures that a green burial ground won’t ever devolve into anything else.

If this offends anyone, let’s remember it wasn’t all that long ago that cemeteries, after running out of space and/or money, would simply close up shop. Although endowment funds are required in almost every state, regulatory oversight is sometimes lax, and abuses common enough, for the environmental community to demand the added layer of protection provided by the standards of the Green Burial Council.

Where it’s all going

How things unfold for green burial is anyone’s guess. Will it become an eco-fashion victim or find its way into the mainstream? Might the concept actually bring about a paradigm shift in the American way of death?

There are signs that the latter is a definite possibility. Consumer interest appears solid and growing, as evidenced by the more than 100,000 people now visiting the Green Burial Council Web site each month, and the increasing inquiries cemetery and funeral homes report receiving from families about green burial.

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Film focuses on alternative families, providers

B-side Entertainment, an online distributor of independent films, is selling downloads of a documentary, “Lasting images: alternatives to traditional burial.” The film, directed by Hammon Hendricks and produced by Joan Hendricks, is just over 50 minutes long.

The documentary provides a good overview of a number of alternatives, most of which involve cremation, ranging from the now familiar (scattering at sea) to the avant garde (art created from cremated remains). Interviews with the people involved, and a few services (a green burial, a reef launching, a fireworks party) provide insight into what the people who choose these alternatives find appealing about them.

The film begins with people talking about death, and then focuses on a number of alternatives to traditional service and memorialization options.

The first profile is of Billy and Kimberley Campbell, Memorial Ecosystems, South Carolina. A specific service at their green burial ground is shown. The deceased has been wrapped in quilts made by his grandmothers and put into a casket made by his father and signed by friends and family—even by his dog, via muddy pawprints.

Another segment shows a cremation, with ICCFA-member Craig Cates, president of Meadowlawn Memorial Park & Crematory, San Antonio, Texas, explaining the process. Cates is quoted as saying at one point, “The last thing I ever thought I’d be was in the cremation business.”

Also included:

- a reef-making (family members are shown participating) and launching by Eternal Reefs (McAllister-Smith Funeral Homes, Charleston, South Carolina, is mentioned as having referred a customer to the reef company);

- a profile of Sea Services, Juniper, Florida, which offers scattering and full-body at-sea burial;

- Karen Medicus, who creates Remembrance Beads incorporating cremated remains from people or pets in glass. She says: “The ritual I think is what we’re missing in life now, and to look at new ways to explore those rituals with alternatives is a wonderful thing, because a lot of us who are environmentally oriented don’t relate to the traditional casket kind of burial.”

- LifeGem Memorials, Elk Grove Village, Illinois, which uses the cremation process to manufacture diamonds; an artist who uses cremated remains in her (non-memorial) art; and Space Services, Houston, Texas, which launches rockets carrying a symbolic amount of remains into space with a message from the family.

- Suzanne Wiigh-Masak, president of Promessa, Gotenborg, Sweden, who is working on a process of freezing and drying bodies to speed up decomposition so that the remains basically can be used as compost.

She says: “I can see a new kind of graveyard where you can choose, ‘I want to be in the rose garden,’ or ‘I want to be in the rho-



Above, the title page to a documentary distributed through B-Side Entertainment. Though only burial is mentioned in the title, the film deals with funeral service options as well. Below left, one of the people at the fireworks party for a woman who chose to have her cremated remains mixed with fireworks set off while her friends watched and ate, drank and reminisced about her. Below right, fish shown swimming around one of Eternal Reef’s memorials.



dodendron park’ ... and a little memory stone.”

The film ends by asking the people interviewed what their final disposition plans are. You can view a two-minute excerpt or order the complete film online (for download and viewing on your computer) at <http://bside.com/films/lastingimages>. □

GOING GREEN

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Favorable coverage the past couple of years by the Associated Press, NPR, PBS, CNN, Slate and even People, has demonstrated, if nothing else, that green burial provides a context that allows the press to more easily discuss death care.

Conservation organizations are considering green burial, though cautiously, as a potential new tool for protecting endangered land, according to articles published in professional journals, presentations made to affiliated organizations and, of course, their actual involvement in at least a dozen projects nationwide.

More cemetery and funeral professionals are making green burial products and services available. A growing number of conventional cemeteries are allowing vaultless burial, if not developing their own “natural

A week doesn’t go by that we don’t hear from a cemetery or funeral home asking how it might get involved in green burial.

areas.” And a week doesn’t go by that the council doesn’t hear from a cemetery or funeral home asking how it might get involved in green burial.

There is a possibility that green burial could get co-opted and “green-washed” down the drain, as has happened with so many “carbon trading” programs recently. Already one allegedly “green” cemetery has been exposed in the national media for making a number of false claims, leading one major national conservation group to adopt a “wait and see” approach to green burial.

One thing we know for sure is that no one—not consumers, not the cemetery and funeral profession, not the land—will bene-

fit if green burial “does for us what bottled water has done for soft drink manufacturers.” You may recall that bottled water was once considered a healthy and environmental option. But as the public has learned more about “springs” that are phony or too far away, as well as the ecological footprint associated with all that plastic, bottled water has fallen out of favor with many people and is now even banned in some places.

For green burial to work in a way that’s both economically and ecologically sustainable, the funeral and cemetery profession will have to play an important role in helping protect the concept and make “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” meaningful again. □