



Joe Sehee: the face of

The funeral service profession didn't know it, but in 2002, a major happening was under way that would change the industry's landscape.

That was the year that Joe Sehee, 46, a former Jesuit lay minister who had been doing strategic communications work for the cemetery and funeral industries, decided to walk another path.

For a while, Sehee had floundered on just what it was he wanted to pursue. Already, he had served as a chaplain at the University of San Francisco, where he directed the peace and social justice program and served as a pastoral minister. He had been involved with social advocacy work for a number of years, mostly working in the field of affordable housing. Likewise, he had done his share of corporate work, having been recruited by IBM in the late 1980s, where he researched how big ideas are born. But he still hungered to pursue a mission of his own making.

"I really thought we were moving out of L.A. to get out of death care,"

Sehee said. "I never knew I'd be throwing myself into it even more."

And so with his wife Juliette in tow, he moved to the fringes of Joshua Tree National Park in California. His plan was to build an ecological retreat named "The Pilgrimage," where people could find some sort of solace in the fierce landscape. In the process, he hoped to find some solace of his own, having made the journey to Joshua Tree after a former spiritual adviser urged him to explore how early monastics found peace in barren terrain.

Sehee is no longer as closely tied to the Jesuit community, but his soul has largely been forged by their teachings. He has a photo in his office of Father Ignacio Martin-Baro, a Jesuit leader he visited in 1986 while leading a fact-finding mission to Central America. Just a few years later, Martin-Baro was murdered by a paramilitary group while working on behalf of El Salvador's poor. "More than any other person, he taught me what a commitment to social change is all about," Sehee said.

For two long years, Sehee oversaw the building of The Pilgrimage, the retreat he had thought would provide fulfillment. But as time progressed, he lost interest in the project and began thinking more about the fierce landscape he had become a part of, how it was endangered and how much he wanted to preserve it.

"We were both very much impacted by that environment," Sehee confided. "My wife and I were both city slickers that had never spent time in the desert. We were on the verge of hundreds of spectacularly empty acres, and Joshua Tree Park was only about seven miles away."

On the fringes of civilization, Sehee began to notice things that he never noticed before. "I saw how much life and death are intertwined in nature," he said. "And I wondered why so much of conventional death care seems devoid of life – especially cemeteries. There are coiffed grounds but nothing natural."

After a great deal of reflection and with the backing of his wife, who conducts home funerals, Sehee sold



the Green Burial Council

the uncompleted home that they had been living in with their newborn son, Sam. With that money, he established the Green Burial Council in 2005, an independent, nonprofit organization founded to encourage ethical and environmentally sustainable death-care practices. His intention was, and still is, to use the burial process as a means of facilitating the acquisition, restoration and stewardship of natural areas.

“In a way, the death of the retreat center gave rise to the birth of the council,” he reflected.

Forming the Council

Behind Sehee’s foray into promoting green burial in the United States is a strongly held belief: “When you think about returning to nature and being part of this cycle we see all around us ... birth, death and rebirth ... it really provides a solace.”

Most people, however, would not sell their home to pursue such a mission. They would not take on credit card debt, loans and all the uncertainty that comes with starting

something bigger than oneself. But Sehee became convinced that some sort of organization was needed to tout green burial.

“It dawned on me that the idea would only work if you could engage legitimate conservation organizations as stewards, and they were only going to get involved if there was a legally enforceable mechanism that would make sure the operators of green burial grounds had the appropriate ethic – one rooted in transparency and accountability. I thought about it and realized unless there was an independent entity that could provide oversight and guidance, then there would be no opportunity for much traction.”

For instance, a cemetery could tout itself as being green, but if there is no deed restriction, it could simply change its business model if it decided that burying people with conventional markers was more profitable.

Once he decided to form the council, it was up to Sehee to bring together leading experts in consumer affairs, conservation and environ-

mental groups. Likewise, he relied on the expertise of Billy Campbell, a rural doctor and environmentalist who opened the Ramsey Creek Preserve in upstate South Carolina in 1998, the first modern “green” cemetery in the United States.

The council board includes Ernest Cook, senior vice president and director for the National Programs for the Trust for Public Land; Sharon Hermanson, a senior policy adviser with the American Association of Retired Persons’ Public Policy Institute; William R. Jordan III, director of the New Academy of Nature and Culture; and Rob Rosenheck, a filmmaker, photographer and author whose work has focused on environmental issues.

A Green Burial Package

One of the Green Burial Council’s most important initiatives to date has

Above (Left to Right): Joe Sehee in Santa Fe; Sehee (at left) listens to Father Ignacio Martin-Baro while in El Salvador in 1986; Sehee’s wife, Juliette, raises up their son, Sam, with the landscape of Joshua Tree, Calif., in the background. (Photos courtesy of Joe Sehee)

been its approval of funeral homes that offer a Green Burial Package.

The idea for the green burial package actually came from Thomas Lynch, an owner of Lynch and Sons Funeral Directors in Michigan, and a well-known poet. Since deciding to pursue Lynch's plan, the council has been closely working with funeral directors.

"We've been doing everything with them from coming up with different techniques for preparing and presenting a body without the use of formaldehyde-based embalming and coming up with this Green Burial Package."

The intent is to offer a package that environmentally-conscious consumers can have confidence in. "We've got customers that are looking for you guys," Sehee said, referring to funeral directors and cemeterians who cater to "green" consumers. "You can put a price on it, charge whatever you want ... it is a really easy proposition, and we do some monitoring to make sure consumers get what they want. We

have taken out some of the guesswork for consumers."

Sehee and the council have also taken away some of the guesswork for funeral directors and cemeterians as well. He noted that when he recently spoke to members of Selected Independent Funeral Homes at its annual meeting, a funeral director came up to him and said he could not do green burial in his state. "So I got my wife on the phone, and she read him the law," Sehee said. "What we have discovered is many funeral directors have either been given bad information in mortuary school or after they got out. Many of them are surprised to learn you can transport a body across state lines without embalming in most cases, that some air carriers can transport unembalmed bodies and that you can have a viewing without an embalming."

Already, about 40 funeral homes have lined up to promote green burial package offerings through the council. Sehee hopes that one day, funeral directors will acquire a comfort level

with using refrigeration and dry ice just as they have acquired a comfort level with embalming.

Until more funeral homes begin offering a Green Burial Package, however, Sehee said the council would in many instances be forced to work with consumers individually. "We would love for this to be in all states," Sehee said. "We have a number of people who already have it in their price list, but we have a ways to go."

There are a few different ways that the Green Burial Council will note in writing that it has approved an offering. Here is an example of language used to note the council's approval of an offering:

"This establishment is one of a select number chosen by the Green Burial Council to offer this package. It provides everything necessary for a graveside burial within a green cemetery, conventional cemetery and, in certain instances, on private property. Storage, transportation and the handling of paperwork are all included in this fee; the cost of a

Kent Casket

burial container, which can be either a shroud or biodegradable coffin, is not. A public viewing without the use of formaldehyde-based embalming can be arranged for an additional charge. Five percent of the proceeds from this package go to the Green Burial Council, a nonprofit organization that encourages environmentally

“That’s 80 to 90 percent of the market for green burial,” Sehee said.

A Booming Trend

So far, Sehee is pleased with the progress the council has made. The public really has embraced the concept of green burial, he said.

“We have been averaging over

One thing the council has been certain not to do is take money from consumers because it does not want to turn into a membership organization. And while the council has had input from funeral directors, it does not want to work with them too closely because that would morph it into a trade association like the National Funeral Directors Association.

In the future, Sehee hopes to create an endowment for the council, which would allow it to continue doing its good work. And more importantly, he wants funeral directors and cemeterians to realize that they have a stake in this movement. “More green burial grounds means more of an interest in green funeral services, so it’s in the self-interest of funeral directors and cemeterians to support that,” he said.

Behind all of his endeavors, however, Sehee is motivated by a couple of bonding principals: the desire to help people grieve in a meaningful way and to protect the environment. “Ritual just isn’t the service where the rabbi or priest comes in,” Sehee said. “The whole thing is ritualistic and needs to be approached that way. Why do we whisk bodies away at three in the morning? Why don’t we allow people to pray and cleanse the body as we used to? Every part of this is important, and it’s part of the grieving process we need to really be sensitive to. I think this green burial idea is really going to invite people to more fully participate in end-of-life rituals.”

In the end, Sehee believes the green burial concept today is similar to cremation 30 years ago. It’s just starting, and smart funeral directors and cemeterians are positioning themselves to benefit from it. But those who are shrugging it off are making a big mistake. •

Visit the Green Burial Council’s Web site at www.greenburialcouncil.org.

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sustainable death care and the use of burial as a means of facilitating the restoration, acquisition and stewardship of natural areas throughout the United States.”

Giving 5 percent back to the council is simply a recommendation. “We’ve realized we almost have to give away our services at first,” Sehee said. “We will probably charge an annual fee of \$100 to start out. And the 5 percent is something that people can opt out of if they have a problem with it. Of the dozens of funeral directors we’ve spoken to, only one has.”

As it has begun to promote its Green Burial Package, however, the council has had to be careful not to interact with funeral directors with a heavy hand. “One of the distinguishing characteristics of our organization is we are working hard not to gut out any economic incentive for cemeteries and funeral directors to operate in an environmentally friendly way,” Sehee said. “I really believe that is what true sustainability requires. We’ve been very careful to promote a completely voluntary, market-based approach, and so far it is proving successful. We’ve been able to walk this line and engage both conservationists and the death-care industry along with consumers.”

According to Sehee, green burial can provide consumers with more meaningful, simple and sustainable end-of-life rituals while providing funeral homes and cemeteries a way to engage consumers who would otherwise opt for a direct cremation.

100,000 visitors a month on our Web site,” he said. “And what is really staggering about this is that most people are not looking to do anything right now – these are people just trying to get their mind wrapped around this concept.”

According to Sehee, the council is fielding more inquiries from people in their 40s, 50s and 60s than people in their 70s, 80s and 90s. That suggests that as time goes on, green burial will become more popular, and cemeterians and funeral directors will have that much more of an incentive to participate.

Those who choose green burial tend not to be motivated by money but by a desire to help the environment and connect with it in a way they never have before. Also, the majority of green burial is currently a preneed phenomenon, Sehee said. “There is a green cemetery in New York that has sold 115 plots, but only a dozen of them were at need.”

Looking Ahead

Sehee currently lives with his family in Santa Fe because he’s close to a potential project that involves a real funeral home, a real cemetery operator and a real conservation organization. His mission, at this point, is to promote green burial throughout the country.

“We are trying to leverage our resources to do whatever it takes to get more green cemeteries off the ground,” Sehee said. “And we have been trying to set up partnerships with land trusts, private landowners, cemetery, funeral companies and conservationists.”