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It's your funeral -- why not make it 'green'?

By Veronica Torrejón

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For her three small boys, Arian Hungaski chose a natural childbirth. For herself, she chooses a death ritual that is equally organic: No funeral director, no embalming and no polished metal casket.

A home funeral and a handmade biodegradable box decorated by friends and family are all Hungaski needs when her time comes.

The Lynn Township woman's choices put her among a small but growing number of people in the country opting for a so-called "green" burial. The philosophy embraces natural and ecologically friendly burial practices such as using wood and other materials that decompose with the body, nourishing the soil, the trees and other life.

Exactly how many make the choice to go out green each year is difficult to gauge, but the movement has caught the attention of funeral directors, who, rather than fight the change, are looking to cater to it.

"I think [funeral directors] recognize it's like cremation was 30 years ago: They are going to have to get involved in it or it will pass them up," said Joe Sehee, founder and executive director of the national nonprofit Green Burial Council.

The council's Web site [www.greenburialcouncil.org], one of many that provide information about cemeteries offering green funeral packages, now boasts nearly 120,000 hits a month.

"People don't really visit Web sites about death," Sehee said. "So that is remarkable."

The open approach to death isn't remarkable for Hungaski, who feels so strongly about home burial she recently helped put together a how-to booklet for friends, family and others in her community. At 31, most healthy women haven't taken the time to plan their funeral, but life has shown her that time on this earth is uncertain.

When she was 7, in 1983, her 3-year-old sister died in a car accident. Her parents wrapped the girl in a shroud, placed her in a simple wooden box and buried her in a small local graveyard in a hole they helped to dig.

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"That was my first vivid experience with death," Hungaski said.

It was also the first of many funerals she would attend within a close-knit, rural Christian community in Albany Township, Berks County, that tends to eschew elaborate funerals and embalming, she said.

Later, as an adult married to a man from a more traditional background, Hungaski attended burials organized by funeral directors. She watched as they ushered families in and out of funeral parlors and to the graveyard. Seeing a body that had been embalmed, with colored cheeks and perfectly coiffed hair, was as foreign to her as it was unappealing.

"It was as if they were trying to make them look alive," she said.

The atmosphere was in stark contrast with her grandfather's death in 2004. The family sat at his bedside near his ashen corpse.

"It was so easy to see and comprehend he was dead, instead of hearing 'he's gone,'" she said.

Later, when she told her husband she wanted to be buried at home, to her surprise he not only embraced the idea for her, but for himself.

Green funeral movement

The reasons behind the green funeral movement are as varied as the people who make the choice for themselves or people they love. Some prefer a return to nature. Others want to minimize damage to the environment caused by burying metal caskets and bodies pumped full of embalming fluid.

Others choose a green burial for nostalgic reasons. Proponents are quick to point out the notion isn't necessarily novel. It was the way things were done for generations -- people died at home and relatives prepared the body for a public viewing before burying it in a family cemetery.

Today's practices, including embalming, didn't become commonplace until the Civil War, when Northern families wanted bodies preserved so they could be shipped back home, said Bethlehem author Mark Harris, who recently published a book titled "Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial."

The book explores alternatives including burial in one of a handful of natural cemeteries in the country where bodies are buried in biodegradable caskets or shrouds, with grave markers that blend into the landscape.

"It makes sense," Harris said. "It's a return to tradition and it speaks to an old-fashioned American value, the do-it-yourself mentality."

Cost also is a powerful motivator for change. Home burial is much less expensive, said Hungaski. In the farming community where she grew up, it also is practical. The average funeral will typically cost about \$6,000, said National Funeral Directors Association spokesman Pat Lanigan .

The do-it-yourself route costs about \$2,000, and even less without a funeral director, Hungaski said.

Navigating laws

Hungaski is so passionate about the issue that about two years ago she teamed up with longtime family

friend Penny Rhodes, 64, of Albany Township to put together a home burial how-to booklet. They printed 30 copies, and charge a \$10 printing fee for each copy. Their booklet includes a funeral checklist and a list of state laws governing the practice.

Although zoning laws vary by municipality, Rhodes and Hungaski found that generally speaking, in Pennsylvania bodies are required to be buried at least 2 feet below ground and 150 feet from a water supply.

Rules also vary by cemetery. Many require concrete burial vaults, said Lanigan, who owns a funeral home in Pittsburgh. Heavy equipment is routinely driven across cemeteries and the weight can cause graves without vaults to cave in, he said.

Navigating the various laws and regulations can prove tricky, especially when the clock is ticking after someone has died. Lanigan said. Choosing an eco-friendly funeral or even a home burial doesn't necessarily mean taking a funeral director out of the equation. A good funeral director is familiar with all state and local laws and will be open to helping families fulfill any last wishes, including a green burial, he said.

Most of the time, Lanigan said, families prefer to focus on mourning.

"A lot of times the families say, 'you do that, that's your job,'" he said. The two women recently hosted a home-burial

Do it yourself

When her father, Leon, died in October 2006, Rhodes and her family washed and dressed his body, then placed it in the bed where he died. They cranked the air-conditioning to high and wrapped him in a family quilt.

Rhodes' brother built the coffin out of plywood. One of her sisters brought brushes and an assortment of colorful paints so everyone, including the grandchildren, could decorate the coffin with personal messages, rainbows and balloons. The family placed the pine box directly into the earth in a church graveyard near Leon Rhodes' home in Bryn Athyn, Montgomery County.

Removing the fear and taboo from death is one reason Rhodes is motivated to share her knowledge with anyone who will listen. She now advises families in her community who want a home burial.

"It feels like midwifery but at the end of life," she said.

She considers it a gift, to be able to talk about death, to ask "how do you want it to be." She's found most people are relieved to talk about it, especially those of her generation.

It was Rhodes' baby boomer generation that reclaimed natural childbirth, she said. Rhodes remembers how the book "Childbirth Without Fear" Rhodes fully expects baby boomers will reclaim the process of dying as well. Both Hungaski and Rhodes believe there is a synergy between birth and death, which is why Hungaski chose to birth her three boys with a midwife and why she chooses a natural burial.

For Rhodes, the choice is just as personal, but much closer at hand.

"Her generation is having babies and my generation is thinking about dying," she said.

veronica.torrejon@mcall.com

610-861-3634

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