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Sure, They’re Called ‘Green’ Funerals, But Can They Make You Money?

In This Market, Understanding Attitudes Is Key

Overseas, natural burial has been a significant component of funeral service for quite some time. In the United States, however, there seems to be disagreement over whether green burial is a passing fad or an option that will continue to grow in popularity.

It’s clear to any funeral service professional that more funeral homes are making an effort to learn more about green burial and that more cemeteries are trying to cater to consumers concerned about the environment. But many firms still are not sure whether or not offering green burial is a viable moneymaking opportunity.

To understand green burial and to make an educated choice as to whether or not to actively cater to environmentally conscious consumers, it’s imperative to understand the driving force behind the movement. That means, of course, grasping the motives of those who choose this option.

The *Insider*, therefore, is going directly to everyday people who have chosen green burial in an effort to help you understand what consumers want. More importantly, it’s time to begin considering what all this means for your business.

A Moneymaker: Family to Buy 14 More Spaces at Cemetery

Sharon Hollingsworth, of Easley, S.C., never wanted to be in the situation of having to make arrangements for her 28-year-old son, Chris Nichols, who died in 2004 of cancer. And if it were not for him, she probably would have never considered green burial, she says.

“I was not even aware of it,” she explains. “It was only when my young son was diagnosed with cancer and we realized the diagnosis was what it was ... we had to have a tough talk.” She adds, “My oldest son initiated a conversation with Chris, and Chris introduced us all to the idea of a green burial.”

Sharon, Chris’s father and his brother then set out to Ramsey Creek Preserve to pick a spot, but Chris could not join them because he was so ill. However, he had visited the site before.

“All three of us came to the decision that it would be the perfect place for Chris,” Hollingsworth says. “You could actually see the Ramsey Creek with water flowing over the rocks; you could see the sun through the trees, and it was on a knoll up on a little hill. The absolute perfect spot.”

Since picking out Chris’s resting place, which cost \$1,950, 14 more family members have decided that they will also be buried near him. Hollingsworth notes that while she likes the fact that family members can buy a spot now and lock in the \$1,950 rate, they also have the option of reserving a space but not paying for it until they die (although prices are subject to change). Hollingsworth plans to be cremated and will pay a reduced fee for her space.

Another aspect of Ramsey Creek that Hollingsworth likes is that she’ll be able to bury her son’s dog right next to him when it dies.

Ramsey Creek also fits Chris’s personality well. “Chris is gently referred to as a new-age hippie; he was an organic gardener, and all his friends were the same way,” Hollingsworth says. “They grew their own food and were just a clickish little group local to this area.” She adds, “We go regularly to visit, and we feel it’s a place of the living instead of a place where there are dying or decaying, dead things. It’s a place of life and sustaining life.”

The service – and yes, there was one – was poignant and beautiful, Hollingsworth says. “There is a chapel at Ramsey

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Creek, and at that time, the church was not finished, and we were not able to have a service inside,” she says. “So we gathered at the beginning at Chris’s biodegradable coffin, which his dad made, and his brother said a short prayer.” She notes that Chris’s body was wrapped in two handmade quilts.

About 60 people attended the ceremony, which was more than the family anticipated showing up. “Chris’s brother thanked everyone for coming, and we did a traditional prayer service, but a minister didn’t preside over the service – we did that ourselves. I read a poem that Chris had written about the very thing that he was doing – about how his body would burst into seed and live forever more.” She adds, “It was not a sad time. It was only after the fact that I think it all set in, and as a family, we were devastated after the fact. His funeral was somewhat of a relief because his illness was hard, and there is nothing pretty about cancer. It’s an ugly, awful disease.”

The family did not have a funeral director in the traditional sense, but they did work with the Dillard Memorial Funeral Home in Pickens, S.C., which picked up Nichols’ body and stored it in a cooler for one day until it was time for him to be buried. That cost \$1,500, and the family was not happy about it.

“They gave me a detailed bill after the fact, and they had that they had washed and dressed the body when, in fact, we had done that ourselves in the home before they ever took him,” she Hollingsworth says. “We bathed Chris and put on his favorite outfit before we even left the home. We did get a minor adjustment for that. The funeral home delivered the body, which was about a 70 minute drive.”

Hollingsworth notes that the funeral home seemed to be intrigued by what the family was doing, and staff members took it upon themselves to stay for the service. It was hard for the family to know what staff members were thinking as they watched. “If they did look down upon it, I think they did not show that to us. My take on it is they were just in awe of what we were doing. In 2004, it was almost unheard of.”

When asked if she would have been open to the funeral home being more involved in the service if its staff knew more about green burial, Hollingsworth says she would have appreciated that option. “Kimberley and Billy Campbell (the owners of the preserve) guided us where we needed it,” she explains. “Since then, I do know that our local funeral home has introduced a line of handmade pine boxes that is available in their showroom, and I know they took pictures of my son’s coffin.”

Hollingsworth appreciates the fact that at least the funeral home seems to be trying to make some effort now to cater to those interested in green burial. “I think they are doing the right thing,” she says.

Are Traditional Services Just Too Drawn Out?

One of the reasons that Genevieve Maiberger, 82, of Teaneck, N.J., likes green burial is because traditional funeral services – in her opinion – just last too long. That’s one of the reasons why she’s choosing to be buried in Greensprings Natural Cemetery in Newfield, N.Y.

“I had always wondered about the amount of time involved in regular funerals, and I also was concerned with the formaldehyde that they used in the bodies, and that this is going back into the soil and back into our water supply,” she says. “I remember I had to take care of my father’s funeral arrangements back in the 60s, and I remember it was a long, drawn out thing, and my stepmother was unable to function because of the grief.”

Maiberger initially thought of cremation, but after hearing about the Ramsey Creek Preserve in South Carolina, she reconsidered. She then heard that Greensprings would be opening in upstate New York, and when it did, she took a drive up there with one of her daughters.

“I think they had two burials at the time and were just opening up the place, but it was such a beautiful view, and I thought it would be a peaceful final resting place for myself.”

As Maiberger tried to make arrangements, however, she was frustrated that the funeral directors in her area did not seem to know much about green burial. Then, Greensprings pointed her in the direction of Bob Prout, co-owner of Prout Funeral Home in Verona, N.J., a firm that has embraced natural burial options.

She drove about 30 minutes to meet with Prout, passing by other funeral directors in the immediate area. And she gives him high marks for helping her out. “He was unbelievable,” she says. “I had no idea it was so efficient. Everything from receiving the body to the transportation. We spent quite a bit of time going over it.” She adds, “He’s into the environment, he drives an environmentally-friendly car, he has solar panels on his funeral home, and he’s seemingly truly involved in the environment.”

In addition to wanting to have as little effect on the environment as possible, Maiberger also never liked the idea of being put into a casket. Instead, she’s opting for a simple shroud. “It will sound very odd to you, and I’m trying to think desperately of the Edgar Allen Poe short story where the guy dreaded dying, and he’s put into the casket and he was not really dead,” she says. “And I thought it must be terrible because when they finally opened it up, when they thought they heard him, they found a clawed, scratched casket.” (That story, by the way, is titled “The Premature Burial.”)

Maiberger does not want a lot of fanfare when she dies, but she has told the Prouts that her daughters can ride up with her body to Greensprings. “But that’s all; I don’t want other people involved,” she says.

As far as the money involved with a green funeral service, that was not a significant factor in her decision, Maiberger says. She did note, however, that she imagines she saved money simply because she wants her services to be simple and quick. Holding services over a few days “just prolongs the grieving process” she says.” She adds, “I imagine I will spend in the neighborhood of \$5,000.”

While that may be less than the average funeral, it certainly is more than a direct cremation. So in this case, at least, Maiberger finding out about green burial could be considered a good thing.

Maiberger notes that she’s very happy that she chose green burial. “Now,” she says, “I feel that I’m the one in charge of how I will leave the Earth.”

‘A Beautiful Way to Go.’

Lois Martin, 57, of Bushkill, Pa., struggled mightily in deciding her funeral arrangements. “Being dropped into a hermetically sealed casket bothered me,” she says. “I looked into cremation, but I was not crazy about this either. It wasn’t appealing to me, but it sure beats being in a box in the ground.”

Martin first considered green burial after watching a television special on Ramsey Creek. That got her thinking. “I believe this is an excellent idea for land conservation,” she says. “It can allow people to have a park to walk through, and if you are going to conserve land, why not use it for something beneficial?” She adds, “People – especially the baby boom generation and those a bit older – are concerned about the environment and want to get back to the simple things in life. “

The one concern Martin had, however, was that Ramsey Creek was so far away from her, and she knew that it would be difficult to be buried there without being embalmed. But then she heard about Greensprings, and from that point on, her decision was easy.

“When I bought a piece at Greensprings, a burden came off of me,” Martin says. “As soon as I decided to do it, I really felt better.”

What complicated matters, however, is that Martin had a heck of a time finding a funeral home that would give her the kind of service she wants. “I told a funeral home in Port Jervis that I wanted a transport, and they were not crazy about it,” she says. “The woman did not know what I was talking about; she had never heard about this green burial.”

But a couple weeks later, Martin went to the Global Green Expo in Jersey City, N.J., and was happily surprised to find Prout showing off ecologically friendly caskets and shrouds. “I told him about my experience, and he said he could transport my body,” she says. “I asked him if he would mind coming to get me in Pennsylvania, and he said, ‘No.’ So, I decided to set up everything with him.”

Martin wishes there were more funeral directors out there like Prout. “The funeral industry should look at this as an option and maybe not put their noses up at it,” she says. “There needs to be more funeral directors like Mr. Prout who are

not in it completely for the money. It says something good about him. At least he's not ashamed to offer it."

As far as a service, Martin echoes the famous author, poet and funeral director Thomas Lynch and says that it's "more for the living than the dead." Personally, she doesn't care if one is held for her or not, but she realizes she needs to take her family and friends into consideration. "I say come visit me when I'm alive," she says. "I have requested that any money or flowers go instead to a rescue shelter or animal shelter."

What Does it all Mean?

The reasons that these consumers give for choosing green burial and the criticisms they direct toward traditional funeral services should not be taken lightly.

Sure, every funeral director – and cemetery for that matter – would prefer that people have traditional funerals with a casket. But what would you rather have: A green burial or a direct cremation? Then, the question is not so easy to answer.

It is evident that both funeral directors and cemeteries need to do better. While it is certainly debatable as to how harmful formaldehyde and mercury are to the environment, or whether there are any negative effects by burying people in vaults and caskets, it is clear that some consumers consider these aspects of funeral service to be problems. And the question should not really be whether or not these arguments have merit, but rather, how can you bolster your profits by understanding and adapting to consumer preferences?

Some questions that might be worth asking include:

- Should you embrace a customer's desire to choose green burial, or are you better served in trying to convince them traditional burial is not as harmful to the environment as they think? Keep in mind that you are dealing with the baby boomer generation, which wants things their way!
- Are there environmentally friendly products out there that you can offer to consumers that you are not currently making available?
- If you represent a cemetery, how can you better position it to better appeal to those interested in green burial?
- If you are a funeral director, how can you reach out to green consumers while still turning a profit?
- If you are not serving green consumers, is one of your competitors honing in on this market, and if so, what are the consequences?
- What sort of natural burial options are there in a 50- mile radius? What about a 100-mile radius?
- Are you certified as a green funeral service provider by the Green Burial Council, and if not, is this something you should pursue?

It's not a far stretch to compare green burial with cremation; some firms that have a high level of service and charge for it are still doing quite well despite a high cremation rate. People like Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council, point out that we've seen this story before when old-fashioned funeral directors tried steering people to a casket and vault instead of a cremator, and they lost.

There is not necessarily any one right answer when it comes to the types of questions posed above. However, as people become more concerned about the environment, and as larger numbers of people begin choosing green burial, it is time to at least start thinking about how to respond.

Bob Prout and Joe Sehee will be on the panel of Kates-Boylston's webinar on green burial. The webinar, titled "Green Funeral Service Strategies and Practices," will be held at 2 p.m. Eastern Time, Sept. 24. For more information, visit www.katesboylston.com/green.

It's Certainly Not the Same Old Song!

How Should You Handle 'Unusual' Musical Requests?

You might have recently read a report about Centennial Park, a leading provider of cemetery, crematorium and memorial services in Australia, which released a list of the “most unusual,” “most played” and “most popular” funeral songs. It was the “most unusual” list that got the most attention.

The top 10 “unusual” funeral songs requested in Australia, according to Centennial Park, are:

- “The Show Must Go On,” by Queen
- “Stairway to Heaven,” by Led Zeppelin
- “Highway to Hell,” by AC/DC
- “Another One Bites the Dust,” by Queen
- “I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead,” by Bon Jovi
- “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,” by Monty Python
- “Ding Dong the Witch is Dead,” from “The Wizard of Oz”
- “Hit the Road Jack,” by Willie Nelson
- “I’m Too Sexy,” by Right Said Fred
- Power Crows and AFL Team Songs

The variation among funeral songs seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. A funeral consultant in the U.K. tells the *Insider* that overseas, popular choices also include “Goodbye,” by Dudley Moore and Peter Cook and “Who Wants to Live Forever,” by Queen. “It shows that many people are moving away from religious services and want to celebrate a life,” she says. “In the past, we have created theme funerals, recently organizing a rock n’ roll funeral, with bright lights, making the effect like a disco.”

A funeral professional with Waverley Cemetery in Australia notes that the cemetery recently had a family request ABBA’s “Dancing Queen” be played at the final committal. “Also, the theme from the TV show ‘Dr. Who’ played as the hearse and mourning coach arrived.” The funeral professional adds, however, “We are very aware that there is a difference between light-hearted and irreverent or rude. We encourage meaningful participation in the funeral and continued visitation to the cemetery. ... we do not let irreverent activities be played out on our grounds.”

Melissa Abraham, an author and musician who recently delivered a presentation at the International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society in Melbourne, Australia, notes that the changing role of religion in society has much to do with new choices regarding music. “Some years ago, funerals were held in churches, where the occasion of a death provided the opportunity to reinforce a religious belief,” she says. “Now, more often than not, it is the religion that forms no more than a background canvas on which to honor the death of one, specific named individual.” She adds, “More and more funerals have no religious mention at all. But even atheists believe that our actions can influence others long after our deaths, and so we all do ‘live on’ in some way and should be remembered.”

While these new preferences should be respected, funeral directors should not just hit the “play” button automatically, Abraham warns. “Take a close listen through popular commercial songs before the funeral day – if they are not well known by all attending, the newcomers will assume there is a message in the lyrics for them, and they will listen intently to find it. Not always a great idea, especially when you listen with new ears to the actual words of the songs you may sing along to in the car!”

However, Wilson Toothman, a funeral director with Toothman Funeral Home in St. Clairsville, Ohio, says he’s more than happy to oblige “unusual” requests. “You name it, we get it,” he says. “And if it means something to the family, I am more than willing to bend over backwards to find it for them. Country is a big favorite in this area.”

Dale Clock, of Clock Life Story Funeral Home in Michigan, says there are no “strange” or “odd” requests from families. “There are just personal requests,” he says. “Songs touch the hearts of many people in different ways. We are here to make services meaningful, and when we place our own personal bias on songs by labeling them as ‘strange’ or ‘odd,’ we send a bad signal.” He adds, “The best services include music that reflects the culture and the life of the deceased. Embrace it all. Music is cool.”

FSI Newswire

Class-Action Suits Target Warren Funeral Chapel

COLUMBIA, MO. – A woman who made arrangements with the beleaguered Warren Funeral Chapel recently filed a class action lawsuit in Boone County Circuit Court, the Columbia Tribune reported.

Kathy Johnson filed the suit Aug. 1. She claims she “suffered the indignity, embarrassment, insult and outrage of having her loved one’s remains negligently and intentionally mishandled” by the funeral home.

The funeral home agreed on July 30 to shut down its facilities in Columbia and Fulton for 15 days pending a hearing in Boone County Circuit Court. According to a news release from Attorney General Jay Nixon, investigators recently found bodies being stored without refrigeration or embalming for more than 24 hours. One body had been rotting for more than 10 months, and caskets that were soiled were reused.

Johnson doubts that her mother was buried at Rockbridge Cemetery, as owner Earl Warren Sr. promised.

According to Johnson’s lawsuit, she made funeral arrangements for her mother, 89-year-old Beckie Harris, on March 16, 2006. She later tried finding her mother’s grave in Rockbridge Cemetery but could not do so. The funeral home could not tell her where the grave was, or if she’d even been buried. Attorneys Samuel Trapp and William Nacy filed the class-action suit.

Another complaint was filed Aug. 5, this one by Patricia Johnson (Kathy Johnson’s niece), on behalf of her sister, Mable Lee Mercer-Shelley. Johnson says that her sister’s body was mishandled by the funeral home, that the Warrens could never tell her the location of the body or why the area in the cemetery where she was supposedly buried kept being dug up. She now worries that her sister is among those bodies found at the funeral home.

Other Developments

From July 11 to July 16, investigators removed seven bodies from the funeral chapel. On Aug 1, investigators removed an additional six bodies that they believe to be the embalmed remains of people who died months ago.

“My understanding is (the additional corpses) were basically overlooked by inspectors,” Dan Viets, the attorney for the Warrens, told the Columbia Tribune. “I will say I suspect that at least some of these were people whose

Warren Funeral Chapel Timeline	
March 16, 2006	Kathy Johnson makes funeral arrangements for her mother with Warren Funeral Chapel
September 2006	Harold Warren Jr. files for bankruptcy
October 2006	Harold Warren Sr. and Helen Warren file for Chapter 13 bankruptcy protection
Feb. 28, 2008	Warren Jr. takes over for Warren Sr. as funeral director in charge
July 11	Investigator remove seven unidentified bodies from the funeral home
July 30	Warren Funeral Chapel agrees to shut down operations of its facilities in Columbia and Fulton
Aug. 1	Six more unidentified bodies are removed from the funeral home
Aug. 1	Kathy Johnson files lawsuit against the funeral home
Aug. 3	NAACP holds fundraiser for the Warrens
Aug. 5	A second person, Patricia Johnson, files a complaint with the attorney general’s office against the funeral home

families had never paid to have them cremated. In some cases, I believe the Warrens are very sympathetic, and when people come in and say a family member died and people ask, ‘Will you help us out?’ – unless it’s cash upfront – this is what happens.”

According to the Columbia Tribune, one of those bodies has been identified, and family members possibly linked to three additional bodies have been contacted to confirm identities.

These bodies were all embalmed, according to Dori Burke, chief investigator for the Boone County medical examiner. The tentative identifications were made using the funeral home’s log. However, none of the bodies has identification on them, and two of them are badly decomposed.

The newspaper, citing an unnamed source, reported that the funeral chapel gave the purported cremated remains of some of the additional bodies removed Aug. 1 to family members.

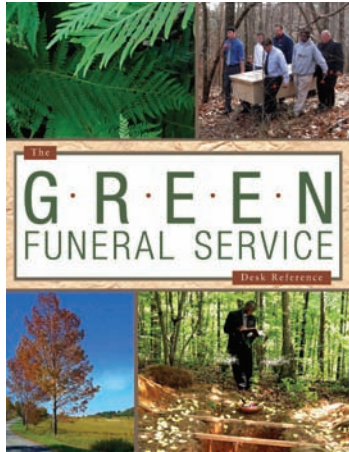


Thomas A. Parmalee, executive editor

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The Book



The **Green Funeral Desk Reference** is a 100-plus page book that serves as a comprehensive guide for funeral service professionals interested in green burial. The book, to be published in September, includes profiles, how-to stories, background on the green movement, survey results, provider lists and much, much more.

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The Webinar

The **Green Funeral Service Strategies and Practices Webinar** includes three of the most innovative thinkers involved in natural burial: Joe Sehee, founder and executive director of the Green Burial Council; Bob Prout, co-owner of Prout Funeral Home; and Doug Flin, principal and owner of the Cemetery Planning Resource Alliance (CPRA). This webinar, to be held **Sept. 24, from 2-4 p.m.** (Eastern Standard Time), is sponsored by CPRA Studio.

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