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Newsletter of the Funeral Consumers Alliance
of San Antonio, Texas

September 2021

BODY DONATION FOR FORENSIC RESEARCH

from The Chicago Tribune, October 2016 by Kay Manning & Texas State Forensic Anthropology Center

Daniel Wescott runs the largest so-called body farm in the country at Texas State University, where researchers and cameras document the rate of decay of 70 bodies above and below ground, bodies clothed, unclothed and wrapped in tarps, bodies protected by wire cages and left vulnerable to scavengers. When reduced to skeletons, the bones become part of a permanent research collection.

The Forensic Anthropology Center simulates conditions under which bodies or people may be found if they are victims of crime, or missing from wandering off or in a natural disaster, such as a flood. A decomposed body produces soil that's darker in color and vegetation that reflects light differently, allowing a drone to pinpoint a location to be searched. That saves time and money, Wescott said, and then experts can determine how long a body might have been there, leading to quicker identification and finding or eliminating suspects in criminal cases. "It's all for justice, not just for law enforcement, but to keep somebody from going to jail if innocent," he said. Decomposition research and technology have better prepared Texas to handle the border-crossing deaths of immigrants, Wescott said. Bodies are buried without names, leaving loved ones uncertain as to the refugees' fate. Currently, the facility is trying to identify some 80 corpses, but "the very, very slow process" has led to only 10 names so far, he said.

Donated bodies also help train human-remains detection dogs. Lisa Briggs, a professor of criminology at Western Carolina University, started training her golden retriever Laila at 7 1/2 weeks, and the 2-year-old has found three bodies and several people alive. Briggs feels fortunate to have whole bodies with which to teach Laila because using synthetic versions of decomposed remains or even a single body part such as teeth or a placenta, as some trainers have to do, is inadequate.

"Drug dogs are trained on one scent — maybe marijuana — but with humans, there are so many variables, such as what they had on, whether it was cold or hot, medicines they were taking, if they drowned," Briggs said. "No one can understand how important it is" for dogs to be exposed to all those factors. She remembers an instance in which Laila was looking for two people presumed by police to be dead. The dog found the bodies in water by smelling the gases bubbling to the surface, Briggs said, adding that she can be asked to help on up to 20 cases a year.

She's seen the pain families go through when a loved one is missing. "I can only imagine what it's like not knowing," she said.

Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University

The mission of the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State (FACTS) is to advance forensic anthropology and related sciences

through world-class education, research, service, and outreach. FACTS is a multifaceted center that encompasses a body donation program, the outdoor Forensic Anthropology Research Facility (FARF), the Osteological Research and Processing Laboratory (OR-PL), and the Grady Early Building, which houses the Grady Early Forensic Anthropology Research Laboratory (GEFARL).

Forensic Anthropology Research Facility

The Forensic Anthropology Research Facility (FARF) serves as a resource for forensic anthropology students, researchers, as well as state and national law enforcement agencies. Research into questions relating to time since death, the postmortem interval and decomposition processes for human remains under various topographical and climate conditions are conducted at FARF.

The FARF is a 26-acre outdoor human decomposition research laboratory at Texas State's Freeman Ranch. The Texas State facility is spatially the largest facility of its kind in the world. The FARF is used by the forensic science community to gain knowledge about human decomposition and developing methods for determining the post mortem interval or time since death. The FARF is also used to train forensic anthropology students, law enforcement, and medicolegal personnel in methods for searching and recovering human remains in a medicolegal context. FARF was conceived because there is a need to develop rates, patterns, and sequences of human decay applicable to Texas and western states. The FARF formally opened in 2008. Since then, research has been conducted on approximately 650 donor individuals, with another 1000 living people pre-registered as donors to this unique forensic program. Once the donor bodies are removed from FARF and processed at ORPL, they are kept in perpetuity and accessioned into the permanent Texas State Donated Skeletal Collection. This collection of documented modern skeletal remains will form the basis of future research and be utilized for scientific research and education for years to come.

The gift of one's body is an invaluable contribution to the education of forensic anthropologists and ultimately the advancement of science. The Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State accepts body donations for scientific research purposes under the Universal Anatomical Gift Act. Your full body donation makes cutting edge research in forensic sciences and biological anthropology possible. Your gift supports scientific research, training, and professional education.

For information on body donation to the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University call 1-512-245-1900 or email to facts@txstate.edu.

Message from the Chapter President, Norman Crader

I hope this newsletter finds everyone safe and well. I want to inform our members that we were able to make some important changes so far this year. Change number one was to our web site which has been updated; so when you get a chance, look it over with our new logo on the pages. The address of our web site remains the same at www.funeraladviceatx.org, the phone number is the same 210-341-2213 and our email remains at fcasatx9@gmail.com. We've also been busy updating our master list of members. We found many updated addresses and emails as well as departed members, which will all result in less mailing costs on our hard-copy newsletter. We will be needing 4 new board members by our next annual meeting in March 2022. If interested, please call Norman Crader at 210-842-7821. I also would like to thank all of you who have donated money. Large or small, it has been very helpful to keep the newsletters coming and printing the handouts we have available at presentations. Remember, our Alliance's primary function is to educate the public on funerals and end-of-life issues .. your donations help with this. Our next newsletter, scheduled to be mailed in February 2022, will have our cemetery survey and final date for our annual meeting in March 2022. Hope to see you there.

Best Regards, Norman Crader

Treasurer's Corner, Linda Espino

Happy to be with you here in the second-half of 2021 .. much to be grateful for, indeed! Also, happy to report that we did hold our 2021 Annual Meeting and with 58 attendees (both in person and on Zoom). We had a great Q&A session with Nancy Powell, Funeral Director in Charge, at our contracted mortuary, Funeral Caring USA. Looking forward to next year .. both in-person and on Zoom. It is refreshing that our members recognize that, for a one-time \$35 donation, we provide a life-time membership .. quite a financially sound decision compared to potential costs saved! Even if your family does not end up using our contracted funeral home, the \$35 was insurance money well-spent .. less than the cost of a nice dinner out somewhere. Remember, we will do emergency sign-ups if a need arises .. or, before that happens, you could "gift" an FCA membership to family or friends (sometimes, it is hard to find a gift for someone who already has everything!). If you know of others who are thinking of joining, please encourage them to do so before we have to raise our one-time donation amount. So far this year, we are averaging 12 new members a month; our budget needs at least 15 per month. Please let us know when a member passes .. and if any of your contact information has changed since you signed on. Thank you for spreading the good word about us.

Best Regards, Linda Espino

BEXAR COUNTY PAUPER BURIAL ASSISTANCE

Bexar County provides a simple, respectful, and dignified service for families with no funding for a funeral/burial service. Families with a life insurance policy, pre-need agreement with a funeral home or have purchased a cemetery plot are not eligible for assistance. This program does not give financial support to help with funeral/burial agreements already made. All honorably discharged veterans and spouses can be buried at Ft. Sam Houston National Cemetery if eligible. The next of kin will be charged a \$28.00 fee payable to the contracted funeral home.

Individuals that may qualify for assistance are:

Deceased individual living in Bexar County 30 days prior to death.

Having died of natural causes

With no life insurance

Without a pre-need with a funeral home

Without having purchased a cemetery plot

Without a Will.

For Pauper Burial Assistance, please call (210) 335-0757.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: MEMBERSHIP PRICE INCREASE

The San Antonio FCA Chapter is proud of the fact that through frugal management of our resources we have been able to maintain a \$35.00 affiliation fee for new members for the past 13-years.

Due to increases in postage, printing costs, telephone expense and anticipated additional expenses as we enhance our online presence and technology the board has been forced to increase the Chapter affiliation fee to \$40.00 effective January 1, 2022. As always, this is a one-time fee for membership and there will be no ongoing dues to maintain membership.

Understand, this price increase has no impact on current members. The affiliation fee increase only pertains to new members. Please spread the word to family and friends who are considering membership.

WHAT TO DO IF I CAN'T AFFORD A FUNERAL? - from, I'm Sorry to Hear.com

Planning a funeral can get pricey. The fees for hiring a funeral director, having a service, buying a casket, and anything else you want for your loved one can add up. The average funeral in America in 2012 topped \$12,000 including cemetery plots and fees.

However, funerals don't have to cost that much! You can have meaningful funerals and memorials at any price point. Below are some tips to keep funeral costs low as well as alternatives to a "traditional" funeral that will you save money on your own or your loved one's send off.

Costs of funerals vary greatly from funeral home to funeral home. That's because the cost for funeral home services is not regulated by the government. This means that all funeral homes have the ability to set their own prices.

By calling a few (3-5) funeral homes that you are considering and requesting information on their services and pricing, you can cut your funeral costs dramatically. Be sure to ask for the prices of services à la carte so you can compare apples-to-apples. Keep in mind that the least costly funeral options are direct cremation and immediate burial.

Some local Funeral Consumers Alliances conduct and publish a regional price survey of area funeral homes. These prove to be great resources in addition to your own research.

Green burials help the environment. Green burials or natural burials are also helpful for your wallet. By going green you can save yourself from many of the expensive funeral costs. Two ways to go green and save money when paying for a funeral are: 1. skip embalming, and 2. seek a cemetery that doesn't require use of a burial liner or a burial vault (natural burial grounds are great for this!) On average if you cut these two expenses you can save around \$1,900.

Body donation is another great way to save money on a funeral. When you donate your body, the organization you donate your body to absorbs most, if not all, of the costs of donating your body and the subsequent cremation. There is a feel good factor as well – by donating your body you are also helping advance medical technology and teach aspiring doctors.

With infant or a child's death, in most states, you have the option of caring for your child at home and without the care of a funeral director, which can help reduce funeral costs. If you choose to use the services of a funeral director, know that some locally-owned funeral homes and cemeteries offer burial and cremation services for babies at a discounted price or free of charge. Do not hesitate to inquire with several local funeral homes to see what accommodations they will make.

If you or your loved one is an honorably discharged veteran, you are likely eligible for veteran burial benefits. These benefits

include getting a free burial plot in a national cemetery including opening and closing costs or a burial allowance to cover

funeral costs. You are also entitled to a burial flag, government headstone, and a presidential memorial certificate.

Direct burial and direct cremation can

save a ton of money compared to a "traditional" funeral. Direct burial or cremation saves because you don't have to pay for expenses like embalming, a viewing, a casket, or a burial plot with opening and closing fees. You can still have a memorial service for your loved one at the time of cremation or at a later date in a meaningful place for the deceased. For direct burial you may request to have a graveside service hosted by the family, clergy, a celebrant, or the funeral director or host a life celebration for them anywhere else you wish. The good thing about both options is that you can have a meaningful ceremony that honors the life of the deceased whenever and wherever you want.

You can skip the cost of funeral homes all together by having a home funeral. To have a home funeral you just need to pay for death certificates, a burial plot, and a casket. Home funeral guides often operate on a volunteer or donation basis to assist you in preparing and honoring your loved one after they die.

You can find a home funeral guide by visiting the National Home Funeral Alliance website.

If the deceased was part of a social assistance or welfare benefit program, there is a good chance that the state they live in also has a program that will help you pay for a funeral. This is usually called an "indigent burial". In this case, the state government will help you pay in full or in part for the funeral.

In instances where you have exhausted all viable cost-reducing and fundraising options and the funeral costs are still over budget, consult with your funeral home of choice to see whether they offer payment plans. Some funeral homes offer in-house payment plans to spread the cost of the funeral over a longer period of time. Others may partner with a 3rd party finance company (Springleaf Financial, At-Need Credit, etc.) to offer financing programs for goods and services rendered.

Another great resource for navigating the funeral planning process is to contact your local Funeral Consumers Alliance who can give you advice and guidance on individual state laws and assistance available. As the local experts, they can steer you in the right direction to have a meaningful funeral for yourself or your loved one no matter what your budget is.



No-Frills 'Green Burials' Offer New Way to Go to the Great Hereafter

Ellen Macdonald got the idea to open the first green cemetery in Central Texas while watching an episode of "Six Feet Under," an HBO series about a family that owned a funeral home, in 2007. "It was the first time I saw a burial portrayed as really beautiful and natural," said the Austin resident, 56, of the main character's green burial. "This person was wrapped in a shroud and family members lowered the body into the ground themselves. That was how I wanted my burial to be, but there were no other options at that point where I lived." The only green cemetery in Texas at the time, Ethician Family Cemetery, was in Huntsville. Macdonald, left a career as a research neuroscientist at Stanford University and purchased a little under 10 wooded acres in Cedar Creek, 10 miles east of Austin. The first burial at Eloise Woods Community Natural Burial Park — named for her grandmother, Eloise Brown Sutin — was in 2011. Today, the green burial movement in Central Texas is growing, and it is largely led by women who are looking to change the conversation surrounding death and death care. "We call it a movement now, but at one time all burials were what we now think of as green or natural," Macdonald said.

Green burials allow bodies to decompose naturally and don't inhibit or delay the decomposition process, she said. Her cemetery follows the standards set forth by the Green Burial Council, a nonprofit organization that certifies green burial grounds, funeral homes and product manufacturers. Bodies are not embalmed, there are no cement grave-liners, and caskets and shrouds must be made of biodegradable materials. Families have the option to dig the grave and even lower the body into the grave themselves. Texas law does not require the use of a licensed funeral director when burying the dead, and bodies must be embalmed or refrigerated only if they will be held for more than 24 hours. Since it opened, 123 people and 154 animals have been buried at Eloise Woods.

Green burial "started as a fringe movement, and it's just really taking off. More and more people are liking the idea, but right now it's still unfamiliar," Macdonald said. Her park caters to a range of people from environmentalists and people of all faiths to those who want a "no fuss, no frills" burial.

When Maria's godmother first mentioned wanting to be buried as naturally as possible, Maria, who preferred not to give her last name, had never heard of green burial and was surprised to learn that it was an option in Texas. Her godmother was buried at Eloise Woods on Dec. 10. "It was absolutely perfect for her. I can't say that it would be perfect for a lot of people, and a lot of families might not be comfortable with it, but it was what she wanted," Maria said. She describes her late godmother as a hippie who practiced earth religions and was environmentally conscious. The burial was easier than Maria imagined because her family did need to worry about arranging a viewing. "It did not feel like we were under obligation to meet what everybody else expected." Kate Kalanick, executive director of the Green Burial Council, said operators of green cemeteries "don't have to sell people on [green burial]. They hear about it and it makes sense to them." The council estimates that more than 60,000

tons of steel, 1.6 million tons of concrete and 4.8 million gallons of embalming fluid are buried annually. More than 70,000 trees are cut down each year for wood caskets. Green burials are also significantly less expensive than traditional funerals, which cost between \$7,000 and \$10,000. An adult plot at Eloise Woods is \$2,250.

Green burial also reflects the larger industry trend for more personalized funerals, he said. "It's a lot more exciting, because families are personalizing [funerals] and you have to be more creative." When Macdonald became interested in green burials, there were few resources to turn to, and an internet search yielded only 11 green cemeteries. "I had to learn how to do everything on my own," she said. In the past two years, she has been contacted by dozens of people across the country who are looking to start their own natural burial parks.

One was Sunny Markham, 62, who along with her cousin, manages Countryside Memorial Park in La Vernia, east of San Antonio, which previously was owned by Markham's late former husband. Eight people and six cremated remains have been buried there since 1981, and the first natural burial took place in 2009. Most have been close friends and family, and Markham hopes to expand the cemetery's reach. She is also a proponent of home funerals, having first experienced them in 2009 when she helped bury her friend Andrea Burden, an Austin artist, at Countryside Memorial. "The experience was as if she was right there guiding us," she said of the process of washing, anointing and dressing Burden's body before laying her in the cardboard casket they decorated. "The beauty of a home funeral is that you are actually hands-on with your beloved's body. It's all about the natural grief process, and in our culture that part of the process is taken away by the mortuary services industry," said Markham. Close to 300 cemeteries are certified by the Green Burial Council. Many, such as Our Lady of the Rosary Cemetery and Prayer Gardens in Georgetown, are hybrid burial grounds — traditional cemeteries that offer a green burial section. Eloise Woods also brought Melissa Unfred, 37, to Austin. Unfred is a licensed funeral director and embalmer and a self-described "modern mortician" who has worked in the industry since she was 17, when she took a summer job at a funeral home in Lubbock. She helps families arrange home vigils and educates them about green burial options, including Eloise Woods. She also is training her eight-month-old border collie to become the state's first grief therapy dog. "We've been led to believe that bodies are dangerous. Unless someone died from Ebola or something like that, there's no emergency when you've died," Unfred said of the misconception surrounding leaving a body in the home for a short period after death. For her, green burials are part of a larger "death positive" movement. "Austin is really where the home funeral movement can take off, because we have a green burial park here, which we don't have in other places," she said. "Families that do home births also want to do home funerals." *From Reporting Texas, by Molly Smith*

Recompose, the first human-composting funeral home in the U.S.

From The Seattle Times, January 22, 2021, Brendan Kiley

Somewhere in Kent, Washington, tucked anonymously into acres of warehouses and light-industrial workshops, the first full-service human-composting funeral home in the United States is operational.

After nearly a decade of planning, research and fundraising — not to mention a successful campaign to change state law — Recompose is finally converting people into soil.

Outside, the entrance to Recompose looks like most of its neighbors — just another unit in a tall, almost block-sized building with plain metal siding and big, roll-up warehouse doors. But inside, it feels like an environmentalist's version of a sleek, futuristic spaceship: spare, calm, utilitarian, with silvery ductwork above, a few soil-working tools (shovels, rakes, pitchforks) on racks, bags of tightly packaged straw neatly stacked on shelves, fern-green walls, potted plants of various sizes.

One immense object dominates the space, looking like an enormous fragment of white honeycomb. These are Recompose's 10 "vessels," each a hexagon enclosing a steel cylinder full of soil. One day in mid-January, eight decedents were already inside eight vessels, undergoing the process of natural organic reduction (NOR) or, more colloquially, human composting.

The first bodies were "laid in" on Dec. 20, 2020, a landmark moment on a nearly 10-year journey for Recompose founder and CEO Katrina Spade. She first began mulling funerary alternatives during a minor mortality crisis of her own, as an architecture student at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with a partner and two young children.

Spade researched her options, which were limited to traditional burial (too toxic and expensive), cremation (too carbon-intensive) and rural green burial (too rare and inconvenient for most city dwellers). She started thinking about composting as a kind of soil-based cremation and, in 2013, finished her Master's thesis: "Of Dirt and Decomposition: Proposing a Place for the Urban Dead."

Recompose costs \$5,500 for everything: the body pickup (in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties), the paperwork, the process itself and an optional service. (Body transport from further away can be arranged, for an extra fee, and Recompose has already accepted bodies from California and the East Coast.)

The Recompose process takes 30 days in a vessel full of wood chips and straw, then another few weeks in "curing bins," large boxes (one per person) where soil is allowed to rest and continue exhaling carbon dioxide. Once that process is complete, friends and chosen family can either retrieve the soil themselves, or donate it to an ecological restoration project at Bells Mountain near Vancouver, Washington. So far, most have elected to donate.

Each vessel, Spade explained, is carefully monitored for temperature and moisture content — sensors take temperature readings every 10 minutes — to make sure the microbes inside are getting what they need for safe, efficient composting. Each vessel is slowly rotated a few times during the process. (All compost needs turning.) State regulations say the soil must maintain a temperature of 131 degrees Fahrenheit for 72 hours to safely cook away pathogens like fecal coliform and salmonella. The state also requires Recompose — and a third party — to test for those pathogens in the resulting soil, as well as heavy metals, including arsenic, lead and mercury. (The state also prohibits people who have contracted certain diseases — tuberculosis, prion infections like Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease — from undergoing NOR.) "This is a very controlled process, completely driven by microbes," Spade said. "It's fueled by plant material and monitored in a very rigorous way." Oxygen is another necessary ingredient. Air is blown into each vessel through one set of tubes while exhaust is released through another set, passing through carbon-activated filters.

Friends and chosen family of the deceased can watch that laying-in process over livestream — or, once coronavirus restrictions are lifted, in person. So far, about 30% of the bereaved have chosen that option, including the Bontrager family, who assembled a soundtrack of their mother's favorite music. The final song, Charlotte Bontrager said, was "Under the Boardwalk" by the Drifters.

Charlotte Bontrager, had read about Recompose a couple of years ago in a newspaper article. "As I've learned more about Recompose, I've found it to be a very graceful and beautiful way to go," Bontrager said. "It's the natural way, the way every living thing in history has eventually been cared for, from an apple core to a human — you're not being burned up, not being pumped full of embalming chemicals and taking up space in a container. It seems like a peaceful way for the body to move on to the next phase."

"I discussed it with my mom," she said. "We talked about how cool it was and why it took so long to get a service like this. I remember her saying: 'If it's at all possible when I die, I want to go that way.' Longevity runs in my family — her uncle died a year ago at 104 — and I said: 'Oh mom, you'll be around another 30 years. I'm sure it'll be in place by then.'" Two years later, her mother was in a Seattle hospital with a mortal, previously undetected lung condition. Bontrager refused to search for disposition options until her mother had passed. Once she had, at 5:45 a.m., a month before what would've been her 75th birthday, Bontrager googled "Seattle" and "human composting" — and found that Recompose was ready. "My mom was a very humble, loving person and would not want any kind of spotlight," Bontrager said. "But she'd be thrilled to know she was among this first group of pioneers."

4 Reasons Why We Avoid Talking About Death (But Should)

Most of us still don't have a will, or more importantly, any idea about how we'd want to be treated at the end of life. And when we do die, we tend to view it as a shameful defeat rather than a natural part of being alive.

With the exception of Wendy, who outwitted that forest witch in 1575, everyone reading this article will eventually die. Yet, even in such a deadly time, we haven't learned how to plan or even discuss what happens before or after our death ...

Death Is Rare And Expensive (So It's Easy To Ignore). The weird thing about our modern relationship with death is that it's a side effect of a really amazing human story. In short, there's simply less bucket-kicking. The average world lifespan in 1900 was 32. The average world lifespan in 2020? Around 72. That's multiple extra lives. There were amazing breakthroughs (think heroic polio vaccine), and boring fixes won by collective action (think heroic municipal sewer). Not only are we really, really good at keeping older people alive, but we're also really, really good at ensuring that kids don't die. In 1900, 30% of all American deaths were under five; a century later, it was 1.4%. Children that used to die right out the gate are saved routinely. Advances in medical science mean that death plays out differently. Back in the day, disease wasn't a long road of maybes and treatments and possible healing; it was a short cliff because there was nothing medical science could do for you. Even the medical interventions available meant that you would die quickly -- it turns out you don't live very long in a doctor's care if mercury's a go-to medicine. Today, there's usually something a doctor can do to prolong a life, even if we're not taking the quality of that extended life into account. On top of all that, death's hella expensive. To say nothing of medical bills, the single most common cause of bankruptcy in the US, the average funeral in the United States is over \$7k. That's when most people can't come up with \$500 for an emergency expense and increasingly turn to crowd funding to help cover the cost of a funeral. And if there's one thing that we don't want to discuss with anyone, it's not death; it's money. Put all of this together, and people will go to absurd lengths not to talk about death.

Not Facing Death Has Huge Consequences (While You're Alive). All of this would be fine if there weren't any consequences. I mean, we put off stuff all the time, and it doesn't come back to bite us. Right? [Right?](#)

Earlier, we mentioned how the majority of American adults don't have a will, with the biggest reasons being that they A) haven't gotten around to it and B) don't have enough assets to pass on to anyone. But even the assets thing is important when you don't have a ton of money. If you die, your SO has to go through probate court to get ahold of, say, your junker that they need to get to work. That can be a huge pain in the ass, courts not being ideal environments for, you know, people in mourning or broke people for that matter. And it could've been avoided with a few sheets of

paper you probably could've gotten for free. Plus, with a will, you can demand your funeral have good liquor, entrance themes, and pyrotechnics.

It's Not Just "Fighting" And "Giving Up." Disease is one of those nebulous concepts we love to punch in the face. We don't treat cancer; we fight it. We don't care for heart disease; we declare war on it. Hell, we threatened to curb-stomp COVID into oblivion. There's some sense to this. People need to feel like their disease is something that can be overcome. It's comforting and provides real benefits.

The problem is, death isn't like that. Death is going to win, regardless of what Silicon Valley tells you. (And Christ alive, if there ever was a group of people who shouldn't be immortal ...). When we think about getting anything but 'THIS. IS. SPARTA!' from a doc, we think of it as a straight shot into the ground. But it's not.

When people think of palliative care, if they ever have, it's understood as "giving up," as in giving up the fight against death. We hate giving up. We watched *The Karate Kid*, its four sequels, a reboot, and still went for a spin-off series for Netflix for a reason.

But palliative care is just a branch of medicine that focuses on relieving the symptoms of illness. You can get palliative care at any stage of a disease, not just at the end of life. Hospice care is a specific kind of palliative care that a person can receive when they likely have six months or less to live. This usually, but not always, means the patient has discontinued aggressive treatment so their team of doctors can focus on managing their symptoms well.

Palliative care docs are consultative; that is, they usually work within a team of physicians, and they start by asking questions. One doc I spoke to, Meredith, described the beginning of the process like this: "We always start a consult with the question of what you understand about what's going on with the patient medically. It gives us insight to the patient themselves, how understanding they are of their disease process. [After that] we always talk about what they're hoping for and what they're fearful of."

You're Not Alone In This. Whenever you try and learn something, especially something as important as how to die, the best thing to do is build a community. Book clubs, forums, classrooms, schools, universities; these are all communities we've built around learning stuff.

There isn't a death school (even though there are, interestingly, classes about death), so it's up to us to make them. There's a really cool project called Let's Have Dinner and Talk About Death, where people ... have dinner and talk about death. But importantly, the set-up gives the conversation a structure with specific questions, needs, and recommendations, so you're not just swimming in an existentialist nightmare soup.

It's one of the things, I think anyway, that makes death so frightening in our minds: we think we're facing it alone. We're not. If you're willing to talk, to listen, to be vulnerable, you can find quite a lot of life in this process we call death. Because in thinking about how to die, we understand, if just a bit better, how to live.

From Cracked.com, July 20, 2021, Steven Assarian

13 Things the funeral director won't tell you - by Gail Ruben

Great funeral planning information from Joshua Slocum, executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance (www.Funerals.org), and funeral directors in Illinois, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Washington. You probably won't hear funeral directors telling you:

1. Go ahead and plan your funeral, but think twice before paying in advance. You risk losing everything if the funeral home goes out of business. Instead, keep your money in a pay-on-death account at your bank.
2. If you or your spouse is an honorably discharged veteran, burial is free at a Veterans Affairs National Cemetery. This includes the grave, vault, opening and closing, marker, and setting fee. Many State Veterans Cemeteries offer free burial for veterans and, often, spouses (www.cem.va.gov).
3. You can buy caskets that are just as nice as the ones in my showroom for thousands of dollars less online from Walmart, Costco, or straight from a manufacturer.
4. On a budget or concerned about the environment? Consider a rental casket. The body

stays inside the casket in a thick cardboard container, which is then removed for burial or cremation.

5. Running a funeral home without a refrigerated holding room is like running a restaurant without a walk-in cooler. But many funeral homes don't offer one because they want you to pay for the more costly option: embalming. Most bodies can be presented very nicely without it if you have the viewing within a few days of death.
6. Some hard-sell phrases to be wary of: "Given your position in the community ...," "I'm sure you want what's best for your mother," and "Your mother had excellent taste. When she made arrangements for Aunt Nellie, this is what she chose."
7. "Protective" caskets with a rubber gasket? They don't stop decomposition. In fact, the moisture and gases they trap inside have caused caskets to explode.
8. If there's no low-cost casket in the display room, ask to see one anyway. Some funeral homes hide them in the basement or the boiler room.

9. Ask the crematory to return the ashes in a plain metal or plastic container — not one stamped temporary container. That's just a sleazy tactic to get you to purchase a more expensive urn.

10. Shop around. Prices at funeral homes vary wildly, with direct cremation costing \$500 at one funeral home and \$3,000 down the street. (Federal law requires that prices be provided over the phone.)
 11. We remove pacemakers because the batteries damage our crematories.
 12. If I try to sell you a package that I say will save you money, ask for the individual price list anyway. Our packages often include services you don't want or need.
 13. Yes, technically I am an undertaker or a mortician. But doesn't funeral director have a nicer ring to it?
- Joshua Slocum, executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, is also coauthor of *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*.

Burial vaults and grave liners - www.funeralplanning101.com

While funeral planning you'll run into a lot of information regarding burial vaults and grave liners. The purpose of a burial vault is to prevent the ground from caving in once it has settled. Burial vaults can vary wildly in price, from as little as \$200 to upwards of \$10 000 US. The purchase that most practically fills this need is a concrete grave liner that need not cost any more than \$400.

There are very few states that actually require a liner, though the cemetery and funeral home may not tell you this. Some cemeteries will require you to buy a liner or burial vault in order to keep the costs of maintenance down. This is a fair requirement, as long as they're up front about the fact that it's their own stipulation. If you don't wish to buy a grave liner or burial vault, you can shop around for a cemetery that doesn't require them.

A burial vault, which encases the entire casket, is bigger, stronger and more expensive than a grave liner, and it generally comes

with a warranty. Neither kind of burial container will prevent the decay of your loved one's remains; any cemetery or funeral provider that makes this promise, or hints that it is possible, isn't being honest. Burial vaults and liners only protect the casket and keep the ground around it solid.

You should be able to shop around for a burial container. The Federal Funeral Rule requires that funeral homes or cemetery owners provide you with a complete list of prices and descriptions. You are allowed to buy a burial container from third party sellers. If the cemetery tells you that this will cost extra, shop around for a cemetery that will charge less or nothing at all to allow a lower cost burial container to be brought in.

Darryl Roberts is a vocal critic of the funeral industry. He despairs at the industry's attitude toward burial vaults. In his testimony before the Senate, Roberts warned of funeral homes that lead consumers to believe sealed vaults somehow protect the remains of the deceased. He also criticized members

of the funeral industry who push expensive burial vaults when much cheaper grave liners will do just as well.

Expensive sealed burial vaults are one of the biggest swindles to be found in the burial industry. Most insiders even admit that they actually create more of a mess than any other containers. They don't allow the remains to properly dry, as they would under normal conditions. There is very little reason to buy a sealed vault in place of a grave liner.

Vaults or liners are necessary because the ground moves and settles as the casket eventually decays. Wood placed into the ground will decay in a matter of months in some climates, and certainly after a few years almost anywhere. Caskets made of more durable material may last longer, but also eventually break down; a vault or liner will keep the ground around the casket sturdy. When funeral planning, approach the subject of burial vaults and grave liners with the knowledge that nothing can prevent a casket from decaying.

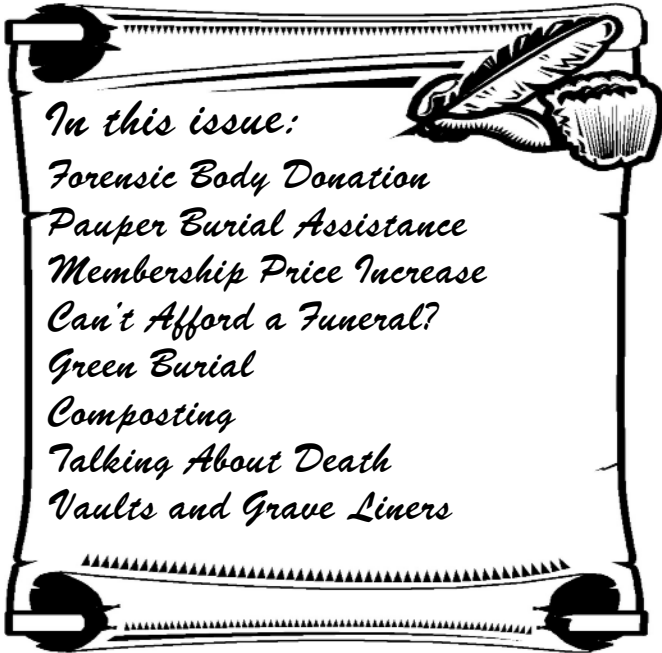


Funeral Consumers Alliance
Of San Antonio
P.O. Box 701884
San Antonio, Texas 78270-1884

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FCASA Choices, P.O. Box 701884, San Antonio, TX 78270
210.341.2213 fcasatx9@gmail.com funeraladviceatx.org

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