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Dust to dust: a natural cemetery gets back to basics

Green burial: A natural option

By DAWN HINSHAW

As Michael Bishop headed toward woods where he's creating a cemetery outside Swansea, he stopped in midsentence and stood still.

Up ahead were two pair of preening wild turkeys, wandering the countryside.

"I'd much rather have that roaming over me than lawnmowers," said Bishop, who runs Dust to Dust, a "green" cemetery where embalming is not allowed and the people who use caskets have one choice — a handmade pine box put together with wood pegs.

Bishop, 39, is an advocate of simple, old-fashioned burials, a movement that is growing as more people seek a natural return to the earth at death.

An environmentalist in blue jeans and a T-shirt, Bishop does not arrange funerals but observes from a respectful distance, just in case he's needed, as families say their last goodbyes.

Since starting the cemetery in autumn 2009, Bishop has buried nine people and presold several additional plots, though he won't say how many. Among the reserved plots are two for horses who'll be buried next to their devoted owners.

Natural burials seem to appeal equally to those who are biblically inspired and those unwilling to follow convention.

For some, money is a consideration as well. Bishop sells 8-by-10 burial plots for \$800.

Bishop does not require caskets; cotton shrouds are fine. Headstones must be flat and made of a natural material, stone or wood. His intent is to sow gravesites with seed and let nature take its course.

The idea of his nature preserve cemetery began to form when Bishop witnessed the aftermath of a car wreck killing a woman and two children. He realized he should plan for his own death, but said he recoiled at the quote he got from a local funeral home.

He looked into establishing a family cemetery at his mother's place in Swansea and, the more research he did, the more conflicting information he found.



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Once he worked it out, he said, he decided to give other people the option he sought for his own family.

His mother, Judy Bishop, a retired high-school biology teacher, said the idea of a communal cemetery just evolved. "It still seems like a very personal, family sort of thing," she said.

"I have just always felt a very strong connection with nature. I've walked this land so much that, well — it's home."

Her son got two acres rezoned for the cemetery, adding deed restrictions to ensure the property would remain in a natural state, he said.

Then he recruited a neighbor, Mike White, to build caskets and help families with transportation. Just recently, White found a sawmill in Chapin where he could get rough-hewn pine, wood that's pretty and plentiful.

Bishop is an environmental investigator for Clemson Regulatory Services, "kind of like an ag cop." In that job, he keeps an eye on the purchase of potential bomb-making materials, makes sure people who handle pesticides are licensed, visits organic farms to make sure they're truly organic, samples fertilizers to confirm ingredients.

Establishing a nature preserve is right up his alley.

He said he knows people in at least five counties, farmers with pretty land, ready to jump on the "green" cemetery bandwagon. "In my mind, I could see hundreds of acres of land protected."

Natural burials seem to be catching on in South Carolina.

"It's sort of where we were with cremation 20 years ago," said Mike Squires, director of the S.C. Funeral Directors Association. "This is another valid option for a family."

Four or five natural cemeteries have approached the S.C. Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation in the last couple of years, prompting the board to develop a two-page set of rules now before the Legislature, spokeswoman Lesia Kudelka said. While natural cemeteries are not licensed, they may be required to set up endowments, for example, to pay for long-term maintenance of the cemetery and its trails.

The Bishops plan to landscape, but haven't done much more than establish a row of burial plots at the edge of woods. Families enter the property from a dirt road then through a pasture planted in Bermuda grass.

They seem pleased with the setting.

"Everyone was just so amazed at how beautiful, how peaceful and how calm it is out there," said Sandy



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Back to basics

According to the S.C. Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, Dust to Dust is one of four or five nature preserve cemeteries that operate in the state. In addition to meeting certain land-use restrictions, these cemeteries:

- Do not allow embalming.
- Use only burial containers made of natural materials.
- Do not permit vaults.
- Do not offer perpetual care.

With the budding interest in nature preserve cemeteries, state government is setting new rules for their operation. See www.llr.state.sc.us/POL/Cemetery/Forms/NaturePres

For a more general look at green burials, log on at www.greenburialcouncil.org

Piano of Lexington, who visited last week to plant sunflowers on her husband's grave. John Piano died in November.

Sandy Piano said Bishop was casual and kind, allowing the men in her family, including a son with Down's syndrome, to lower the casket into the grave.

David Hallman, who lives in Columbia, heard about Dust to Dust from his wife's hospice nurse.

"I knew there had to be a more natural way," he said. "She gave me the literature."

While most people shy from end-of-life preparations, Hallman said it was "a privilege and an honor" to prepare Mary Hallman's body for her final rest. They'd been married 49 years.

He washed and clothed her in what she would have wanted to wear.

"Back to basics," Hallman said. "The way it was, and the way it should be now."

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Tips and advice

The Funeral Consumers Alliance of South Carolina has a website with some tips and resources. Log on at www.scfunerals.org.

Also see the National Funeral Directors Association website at www.nfda.org