

**Community Leadership Challenge:
Empowering St. Louisans to Make Eco-Friendly End-of-Life Plans**

Gina Sheridan

Miami University - Project Dragonfly

Advanced Inquiry Program - Missouri Botanical Garden 2021 Cohort

St. Louis, MO

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Conventional burial and cremation are the main options Americans consider when faced with making funeral arrangements for themselves or people they love. However, those methods are unsustainable and are a danger to the health of humans and the environment (MacMurray & Futrell, 2021; Green Burial Council [GBC], 2022). The Community Leadership Challenge outlined in this paper is a collaborative, three-part series of in-person presentations which bridge my master plan topic of natural funeral methods as a conservation strategy with my job as a public librarian.

Goals

Planning and implementing this series provided me an opportunity to learn more about natural funeral methods, effectively communicate information to a general adult audience, and meet and collaborate with death workers. The overarching goal of the series was to promote awareness of natural funeral options and demonstrate how they are socially and environmentally beneficial. A secondary goal was to get people thinking about, discussing, and ultimately making their end-of-life plans despite cultural norms that dictate we keep the topic of death unspoken.

Background on Conventional Funeral Methods

According to Herring (2019), every year in America, we bury nearly a million gallons of formaldehyde, almost six million pounds of metals, and 1.6 million tons of concrete with our dead. Embalming fluid, often used in conventional funerals, is made up of formaldehyde and methanol, and the mixture replaces natural bodily fluids in order to disguise and slow decomposition (Meiners, 2020). What began as a strategy to get soldiers' bodies home from war intact has become an unnecessary practice that contaminates water, soil, and air (Meiners, 2020). Working with embalming fluid increases one's risks of developing leukemia, ALS, or other autoimmune disorders (GBC, 2022).

Cremation is often misinterpreted as a green alternative to burial, but in reality, one 75-minute cremation uses about 630 kilowatts of electricity and releases the nitrogen dioxide equivalent of 3,650 cars driving past the crematorium, or 50 cars per minute (Robinson, 2021). Crematoria emit carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, trace

metals, and hydrogen chloride (Harris, 2007). Perhaps the greatest threat is the release of mercury vapor from dental amalgam, which is linked to brain damage (Harris, 2007). These statistics are especially alarming because the rate of cremation continues to rise. In 2021, there were 1.9 million cremations in the United States, at a rate of 57.5% of total deaths (Cremation Association of North America, 2022).

Natural Funeral Methods & Their Benefits

In general, contemporary natural funeral methods are designed to be non-toxic, sustainable, and are more affordable in many cases (Alfus, 2020). Natural burial, in essence, uses no grave liners of any kind, no toxic embalming fluid, a biodegradable container and/or shroud, a natural or virtual headstone, and usually, the use of native plantings to maintain the local ecosystems (Herring, 2019). Other natural methods include: aquamation (speeding up decomposition via alkaline hydrolysis), recomposition (or converting the body into soil), promession (freeze-drying), memorial reef incorporation, and others (Stewart, 2018). Natural funeral options can also include “green” plant-based embalming fluid and biodegradable caskets and urns (Kelly, 2015).

Presentation Series

In September 2022, I hosted a three-part series on natural funeral methods at the Grand Glaize Branch of St. Louis County Library. At each event, I stocked a table with books available for checkout and a handout I created which featured suggested books, podcasts, and websites about natural funeral methods (Appendix A).

Here was the schedule of events:

Tuesday, September 6, 2022, 2:00-4:00 p.m.

Green Burial: Film Screening and Discussion

In the 60-minute documentary film *A Will for the Woods*, Clark Wang is faced with a terminal illness and as he embarks on the journey to plan his funeral arrangements, he learns about and embraces one green burial option and even takes part in making the option more accessible in his area. It’s a personal and emotional perspective on death, while also providing education about green burial methods. Participants watched the film, and afterward, I led a discussion using [questions provided by the producers of the film](#).

Browne, A., Kaplan, J., Hale, T., and Wilson, B. (2014). *A Will for the woods* [Film]. Overwhelming Umbrella Productions.

Tuesday, September 13, 2022, 2:00-4:00 p.m.

Green Burial: A Better Way to Go

Gracie Griffin, Vice President of Customer Relations at Bellefontaine Cemetery, provided a one-hour presentation followed by a question and answer session. Using a PowerPoint presentation, Griffin shared the long history of green burial practices throughout history and the world and brought a sample wicker casket for participants to see.

Tuesday, September 20, 2022, 2:00-4:00 p.m.

Green Burial: Panel Discussion

This program featured a multi-disciplinary panel discussion on natural funeral methods facilitated by me, followed by audience questions. The panelists were: Delaney Rhea, a local end-of-life doula; Samuel Cline Perry, licensed mortician and eco-thanatologist; Michael Garrett, Director of Horticulture and Curator of Living Collections at Bellefontaine Cemetery; and January Kiefer, a retired pastor who has officiated both conventional and green burial funerals. Appendix B shows the flier that was created for this program, and Appendix C shows images of the panelists.

Audience

The community I set out to engage was St. Louis-area adult residents who are, will be, or have already pre-planned their funeral arrangements and method of disposition. This topic also attracted people who are generally curious about science, conservation, and sustainability. At least two people who attended said they have been or will be responsible for planning funerals for aging or ill family members and are not satisfied with the funeral options known to them.

Evaluation

Four people attended the film screening, six people attended the Bellefontaine Cemetery presentation, and seven people attended the panel discussion. While the

numbers were smaller than I had hoped, the people who came participated, asked great questions, and went away with new knowledge. At the conclusion of the final presentation in the series, each participant filled out a two-question paper evaluation form (Appendix D). My objective was to understand whether the presentation was useful, whether they learned something new, whether or not something they learned inspired them to take action or make a decision. The Extension University of Wisconsin-Madison (n.d.) document informed the development of the evaluation form.

Reflection & Conclusion

I am proud of and fulfilled by the success of the program series. I am also grateful for the time and effort I put into planning the event because it made things run smoothly and helped me feel prepared and confident. The most important outcomes were: the connections people made with one another, the dissemination of information previously unknown or misunderstood, and the practice and honing of my facilitation skills.

The importance of the connections that were made cannot be overstated. There was a core group of people who attended at least two of the three presentations, and two people who attended all three. One participant told me that shortly after the film screening, she attended a party where she could not stop talking about funerals and death plans, drawing a lot of curious questions and conversation among her friends. Two of the panelists realized they attended the same university and promised to connect in the near future. Panelist Samuel Cline Perry expressed how conflicted he was during mortuary science school because of the emphasis on conventional burial over more sustainable methods; his experience resonated with a participant who is currently studying mortuary science. After the presentation, the student approached Samuel to thank him and to ask if he would consider mentoring her.

Every participant, presenter, panelist, and I admitted to learning something new and interesting. Much of the information presented was new to the participants, including what natural options are available in our area, laws and regulations (and lack thereof) that surround the handling of human remains, the fact that cremation is not an eco-friendly method of disposition, and specifics about how certain methods work and how to seek out and talk to funeral service providers. The panelists learned from one

another too. For instance, end-of-life doula Delaney Rhea was pleased to learn that green burials can take place in any section at Bellefontaine Cemetery, not just in the natural burial meadow.

My facilitation skills improved over the course of the series so I am glad I had more than one chance to practice. During the discussion following the film, I realized I was talking too much rather than guiding the discussion and allowing for pauses for thought. I think I was excited to share things I had learned throughout my research, but it was eating up time and space that participants could have used to share their thoughts and experiences. Between that presentation and the panel discussion, I looked up some best practices on facilitation and got advice from a friend who is an experienced moderator. During the panel discussion, I acted more like an information solicitor and guide, allowing the panelists the full breadth of the stage.

Overall, this Community Leadership Challenge was extremely beneficial to me as a student of biology and a public librarian. I learned a lot and was able to share that knowledge and connect people. I plan to continue my relationships with the panelists by finding other ways to partner with and support them. And I will continue to hone my leadership, facilitation, and communication skills with confidence.

References

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Appendix A

Resources made available to participants at each presentation.

This [Natural Funeral & Green Burial Resource List](#) handout was provided to participants. Scanning the QR code at the end of the document directs people to an electronic, [clickable version](#) in which book titles link directly to the library catalog.



Table of books for checkout. Photo by Gina Sheridan.

Appendix B

Flier created by Kimberly Fischer and shared via email, social media, and in print.



Green Burial

PANEL DISCUSSION

Tuesday, September 20
2:00–4:00 p.m.

Panelists:

Delaney Rhea
End-of-Life Doula, The Sacred Sunset

Michael Garrett
Director of Horticulture, Curator of Living Collections at Bellefontaine Cemetery

January Kiefer
Retired Pastor & Storyteller

Samuel Cline Perry
Licensed Mortician and Eco-Thanatologist

Learn about green burial from different perspectives.
Adults. Registration required.



Grand Glaize Branch

1010 Meramec Station Road | Manchester, MO 63021 | 314-994-3300

Program sites are accessible. Upon two weeks' notice, accommodations will be made for persons with disabilities. Call 314-994-3300 or visit www.slcl.org.



Appendix C

Photos of the September 20, 2022 panelists and me (facilitator).



From left to right, Samuel Cline Perry, Delaney Rhea, Gina Sheridan, Michael Garrett, and January Kiefer. Photo by Kendra Holliday, used with permission.



Samuel Cline Perry, Delaney Rhea, Michael Garrett. Front row, Gina Sheridan and January Kiefer. Photo by Kendra Holliday, used with permission.

Appendix D

Actual evaluation forms participants completed after the panel discussion.

<p>One new thing I learned today is:</p> <p><i>burial services</i></p>	
<p>Because of the information I learned today, I intend to: (circle all that apply)</p>	
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Think more about this topic</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Talk with a loved one about end-of-life plans</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Change my pre-arranged funeral plans</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Explore what options are available in my area</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Seek out more information</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Find a funeral service provider</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pre-plan my funeral !!!</p> <p>Other: _____</p>
<p><i>Thank You!</i></p>	
<p>One new thing I learned today is: <i>Articulate people involved in the "death industry" Very informative</i></p>	
<p>Because of the information I learned today, I intend to: (circle all that apply)</p>	
<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Think more about this topic</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Talk with a loved one about end-of-life plans</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Change my pre-arranged funeral plans</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Explore what options are available in my area</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Seek out more information</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Find a funeral service provider</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Pre-plan my funeral</p> <p>Other: _____</p>

One new thing I learned today is:

that bedding and blankets made of natural materials are used in green burials

Because of the information I learned today, I intend to:
(circle all that apply)

- Think more about this topic
- Seek out more information
- Talk with a loved one about end-of-life plans
- Find a funeral service provider
- Change my pre-arranged funeral plans
- Pre-plan my funeral
- Explore what options are available in my area
- Other: _____

One new thing I learned today is:

QR codes for decedents
 * Sensing the importance of needing to educate & present options + reinforcing

Because of the information I learned today, I intend to:
(circle all that apply)

- Think more about this topic
 - Seek out more information
 - Talk with a loved one about end-of-life plans
 - Find a funeral service provider
 - Change my pre-arranged funeral plans
 - Pre-plan my funeral
 - Explore what options are available in my area
 - Other: *See how to become involved in the work w/ my background*
- the need to address this*

One new thing I learned today is:

Because of the information I learned today, I intend to:
(circle all that apply)

- Think more about this topic
- Talk with a loved one about end-of-life plans
- Change my pre-arranged funeral plans
- Explore what options are available in my area
- Seek out more information
- Find a funeral service provider
- Pre-plan my funeral
- Other: _____

One new thing I learned today is: vaults & decomposition
 purpose of vaults crinkly eyeballs ☹️
 "shades of green"
 sisters of the earth book
 Death is a promise.

Because of the information I learned today, I intend to: Midwife for souls
 (circle all that apply) the last chapter matters. Yes

- Think more about this topic
- Talk with a loved one about end-of-life plans
- Change my pre-arranged funeral plans
- Explore what options are available in my area
- Seek out more information
- Find a funeral service provider
- Pre-plan my funeral
- Other: _____

One new thing I learned today is:

Many new things: services provided by a death dula Bellefontaine's green burial options (can be in traditional area); industry laws

Because of the information I learned today, I intend to:
(circle all that apply)

Think more about this topic

Seek out more information

Talk with a loved one about end-of-life plans

Find a funeral service provider

Change my pre-arranged funeral plans

Pre-plan my funeral

Explore what options are available in my area

Other: _____

Thank you!