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Green Burials Becoming More Popular In Texas



Reporting
Mark Johnson

FORT WORTH (CBS 11 News) —

To many people a funeral is a sacred rite, one usually filled with great tradition. But those traditions may slowly be changing. A more environmentally friendly form of burial is emerging.

Simple and natural. Those are the cornerstones of a so-called green burial. It may not be for everyone, but supporters say it's how nature intended our bodies to be buried.

Along a stretch of road in the quiet tranquility northeast of Huntsville, Texas, there's someone lurking in the ground.

"Death, believe it or not... is inevitable," says George Russell, founder of the Universal Ethician Church. "Why not make it a fun experience?"

Russell and his fellow church-goers practice an emerging trend known as green burials. When a parishioner dies, they are buried exactly as they are. No autopsy, no embalming, and no casket. Just the dirt surrounding them.

"Within a matter of hours, the micro-organisms begin to feed on you, and then you become a part of the root systems of the nearby trees," Russell explains. "The trees are feeding the birds and the butterflies and the wildflowers, and you are perpetually a part of this beautiful wilderness. That's what's meant to be, that we recycle in perpetuity. That's everlasting life if there ever was."

Russell says people shouldn't feel creepy about this because nearly everyone's ancestors were buried this same way. He's right. Embalming and metal coffins only became popular 150 years ago during the American Civil War.

"I don't understand why everybody's so worried about somebody when they're dead, when they can provide a service to humanity," Russell says.

His mother, Marjorie, was the first to be buried on a section of land near his home. He says she believed in green burials, and completely felt the concept of being recycled in nature. One day after she died, she was lowered into the ground, covered only by a quilt.

"People gathered the spanish moss and we covered her in spanish moss, and everybody grabbed a shovel and that was that," he says of the funeral.

Afterwards, Russell recalls receiving a lot of flak for what his family did.

"Oh that's such a horrible, horrible thing," he said, mocking the comments made to him. "What an

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evil son. He didn't honor his mother.' No, I honored my mother because that was her wish."

The concept of green - or natural - burials is beginning to catch on around the country. Mike Carranza manages the Heritage Funeral Home near Killeen. He's already done ten green burials.

"There's a lot of information out there as far as things that are going that way as far as going green, as far as houses, vehicles, everything you look at," Carranza said. "Why not a funeral?"

George Russell's passion for green burial stems from his desire to save nature. For other folks, green burial comes down to one simple thing: money.

Sollie Jackson says he's excited about being able to give himself back to nature, but also likes the idea for another reason.

"I don't have any money, and this here accommodates a lot of people," Jackson explained.

A green burial at the Heritage Funeral Home costs around \$3,000. That's about \$5,000 less than a traditional funeral. To be buried by George Russell, you must first become an Ethician, but he says it can happen even after you die. The cost, he says, is negotiable based on your situation.

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