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Environment
Texas cemetery offers green burials
Back to nature philosophy includes pay what you can



Brett Coomer / AP

George Russell stands near the site of the Ethician Family Cemetery east of Huntsville, Texas.

By Liz Austin
The Associated Press
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HUNTSVILLE, Texas - George Russell believes in ashes to ashes, dust to dust. No embalming fluid. No airtight caskets. No steel vaults.

Thatâ€™s why he offers a different kind of funeral at his Ethician Family Cemetery â€™ Texasâ€™ first â€™green cemetery.â€™ There, bodies are wrapped in cloth for burial under towering pine and oak trees near Lake Livingston.

â€™It is wonderful if my body nurtures this huge oak tree, and in its branches are the nests of beautiful songbirds,â€™ said Russell, 58, who plans to be buried the same way at his familyâ€™s private plot near the cemetery. â€™In that way you really never die, because you become a part of that songbird, you become a part of that tree, you become a part of that beauty.â€™

The cemetery on 81 acres of dense forest about 90 miles north of Houston marks a growing trend in burial options that donâ€™t harm the environment and allow the body to decompose naturally.

Florida, S. Carolina as well

Green cemeteries are common in the United Kingdom, but the first one labeled as such in the United States opened in South Carolina in 1996. Another followed in Florida, and Russell opened his in November. No national statistics track the number of green cemeteries, but Billy Campbell, president of Memorial Ecosystems in South Carolina, said a handful of others are planned around the country.

Bob Fells, external chief operating officer for the International Cemetery and Funeral Association, said itâ€™s hard to predict whether green cemeteries will become more commonplace.

â€™I donâ€™t think anyone really knows what things are really going to click with the public ... and what kind of things just have a novelty value,â€™ he said.



Terri Reed, a 52-year-old investigations assistant with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security who lives near Russell, was the first person to buy a plot in his cemetery.

Reed said traditional funerals have become too materialistic.

â€™Iâ€™m the kind of person who just



Brett Coomer / AP file

Plots in George Russell's Ethician Family Cemetery are marked by wooden stakes.

doesn't like the way modern America commercializes everything," said Reed. "I've always been interested in the idea of just being passed into the earth, you know, without all the rigamarole that the funerals go through nowadays."

Russell had those same concerns. He said he wanted to give families an affordable alternative to funerals, which industry experts say averages around \$5,000. That excludes a burial plot, which can add thousands.

Environmental reasons, not cost, motivated 59-year-old David Cocke to buy a plot. The chemistry and civil engineering professor at Lamar University says he disapproves of the huge amounts of water, pesticides and herbicides used to keep cemetery grounds immaculate. And cremation, he says, wastes energy and pollutes the air.

"You're left with not much of an alternative, if you want to be environmentally conscious about what you're going to contribute to the future pollution load," he said.

Rain forest inspiration

Russell, who owns an educational video production company in Huntsville, got the idea for the cemetery in 1968, when he and his wife lived in Central America. After watching natives bury their dead in the rainforest, he knew he would not want to spend eternity in a traditional cemetery.

"They'd lovingly dig a little grave by hand, say under the branches of a huge rainforest tree with orchids cascading down and parrots squawking," he recalled. "It was just as if you had returned to the Garden of Eden."

The plan germinated in Russell's mind for decades before he discovered Lake Livingston and the surrounding undeveloped land and realized it was the perfect spot for his 248-plot cemetery.

The land was mapped out in the 1970s as a resort and retirement community called Waterwood. But most people who bought land there couldn't afford to build a house after the global oil slump hit in the 1980s, and it never was developed.

Russell's family wanted to preserve Waterwood, so he and his parents bought 2,500 acres near the lake, about 10 miles from the Sam Houston National Forest. Besides the cemetery, they have used the land to establish sanctuaries for alligators and eagles, a 131-acre longleaf pine preserve and a 110-acre research forest.

"I feel like the only permanent legacy that a person can leave is a piece of America that's beautiful," Russell said. "With this concept, even in death, in this cemetery ... that beautiful forest will always be there for everyone to enjoy."

Lids and low costs

Russell said he will allow nature to care for itself in the cemetery. But he is trying to design a temporary "lid" for the graves that will protect them from animals until the body decomposes. No one has been buried at the cemetery since the state gave its final approval for it to open.

People who buy a plot, each of which can accommodate up to 12 graves, cannot plant flowers or cut down or damage trees. They are encouraged to install markers with short biographies of the deceased and must submit a record of the exact location of each grave using GPS equipment.

Anyone can buy a one-quarter to one-third-acre plot by making whatever donation they can afford to the Universal Ethician Church, an interfaith, ecumenical congregation that Russell founded a few years ago. The funeral can cost next-to-nothing if that's what the family wants, he said.

"I've seen so many families who spend money, sometimes tens of thousands of dollars, to pickle grandmother or their mother or their father or their child," he said. "The sad thing is that we tend to be so caught up in our material selves and our material world and what other people think."

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