

## 'Green' burials gain ground on Long Island

October 12, 2009 by JENNIFER SMITH / [jennifer.smith@newsday.com](mailto:jennifer.smith@newsday.com)



The Rev. Daniel Degyansky has presided over enough burials to know what he doesn't want at his own: no headstone, no pricey coffin and absolutely no embalming fluid.

Concerned about the environmental impact of traditional burials, he and his wife, Kathleen, have made plans to be wrapped in shrouds and placed directly in the earth. "I've seen \$8,000 caskets put into the ground," said Degyansky, 53, an Eastern Orthodox priest at St. John Chrysostom Church in Woodside, Queens. "To me there are better ways of exiting this world."

Growing interest in such simple "green" burials has prompted two Long Island funeral homes to offer services such as biodegradable wicker coffins that contain no toxic glues or stains. People can choose from several cemeteries in Nassau and Suffolk that do not require burial vaults, concrete liners installed underground to prevent graves from settling. Some call vaults an environmental no-no because of the resources needed to make and move heavy concrete.

Those who crave more direct communion with the earth can buy a plot upstate at New York's only green-certified burial ground, Greensprings Natural Cemetery near Ithaca. No coffins are required there, but machined headstones and toxic chemicals such as formaldehyde, a primary component of embalming fluid, are banned.

"Let's face it, when you embalm a body, you're releasing chemicals," said Peter Moloney, a partner at Moloney Family Funeral Homes, which has six Suffolk locations.

His firm and O'Connell Funeral Home of Southampton are among four in the state certified by the Green Burial Council, a nonprofit based in Santa Fe, N.M., promoting environmentally sustainable burial. Both Island businesses have been certified since June and still offer the full

range of traditional products - vaults, embalming and high-end coffins. Still, said Kenneth T. Rothwell of O'Connell Funeral Home: "People are concerned about environmental protection. What better thing to offer them than an entirely green burial?"

Proponents say the practice harks back to the way most Americans were buried before embalming became popular after the Civil War. It also echoes some Jewish and Muslim funerals, where bodies are buried quickly in shrouds or in simple wooden boxes. State law does not require embalming.

"Green burial calls for embracing decay and regeneration," not delaying decomposition, said Joe Sehee of the Green Burial Council.

A 2007 survey on funeral planning by the AARP found 21 percent of respondents would be "very interested" or "interested" in burials that were more environmentally friendly than traditional interment with embalming. Older people seemed less intrigued; 44 percent of those 65 and over reported no interest.

"We don't see this as an option for everyone," said Sehee. But for those who go green, "we want them to know that these practices have been vetted in a legitimate way." Among the group's requirements: So-called low-impact cemeteries can bury coffins made of only natural or plant-derived materials and funeral homes must include eco-friendly options on price lists.

Both Long Island funeral directors said a number of customers had expressed interest in their new services. Rothwell has signed up about half a dozen customers for environmentally friendly burials, he said.

A dozen or so local cemeteries do not require vaults, including New Montefiore Cemetery in West Babylon and Rockville Cemetery in Lynbrook.

In search of a more natural setting, the Degyanskys bought plots at Greensprings. There, some grave sites will eventually revert to woodland, said the cemetery's founding president, Mary Woodsen, a science writer at Cornell University.

Said Woodsen: "We want people to be able to return to the earth as quickly as possible."

### **THREE TYPES OF BURIAL**

Green burial proponents say conventional burials use up natural resources and introduce potentially hazardous substances into the environment. Here are some environmental pros and cons of three approaches.

#### **Traditional: \$7,960 to \$12,680**

Landscaped grounds can absorb greenhouse gas emissions, but are often maintained with pesticides and fertilizer. Embalming fluid may expose funeral home workers to formaldehyde, a

potential carcinogen that can also leach into soil and groundwater (although it breaks down quickly).

Coffins made from hardwoods can lead to deforestation, while stains and glues may pose hazards to manufacturing workers. Non-biodegradable materials, such as metal caskets and trimmings, are also a concern.

Concrete vault liners installed to prevent grave sites from settling consume energy during manufacture and transport. Mining for metals and granite used for headstones can cause environmental damage. (Funeral home charges, lowest-price casket, embalming, estimated cost of grave site and vault at local cemetery, charge for opening/closing the grave. Headstone prices vary.)

### **"Green burial: \$4,995 to \$7,995**

Aims to reduce waste and use of hazardous chemicals such as formaldehyde, which is also used to make particle board and plywood.

Bodies are not embalmed using toxic chemicals. Coffins are made from sustainable, fast-growing materials such as willow or bamboo. But cultivation can still be harmful if land is cleared to grow the wood, and importing such products from abroad generates greenhouse gas emissions.

Swapping a casket for a shroud shrinks the environmental footprint further. Some green cemeteries use grave sites to preserve land from development and provide habitat for birds, animals and native plants. As in traditional burials, bodies generate a small amount of methane as they decompose. (Funeral home charges include transport upstate to green-certified cemetery, cost of grave site and opening/close charge there, casket prices vary.)

### **Cremation: \$2,195 to \$2,804**

No need for a casket, and it remains the most affordable option of the three. Cremation emits more greenhouse gas emissions than burial at the time of interment, according to a 2007 study commissioned by an Australian public cemetery.

However cremation still has a smaller environment footprint over time than conventional burial, the study found, due to fossil fuels used to maintain lawns and cemetery grounds. (Funeral home and crematory charges, does not include container for cremated remains.)