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## **Natural burials take dead gently to a green good night**

**By ELIZABETH BIRGE**

In life, Lou Tafuri loved to fish off the waters of Long Beach Island or Island Beach State Park.

In death, he sleeps with the fishes. His family couldn't be happier.

Tafuri, who died in 2005, was cremated after donating his body to science. Shortly before the ashes were returned to his daughter Susan, she learned of a program that could provide her father with an eternal resting place better suited to him than an urn.

Today his remains are part of a concrete ball that makes up an artificial reef seven miles southeast of Great Egg Inlet, where fish roam, plants grow and anglers fish.

Soon his daughter will be able to visit him: She plans to take scuba diving lessons.

"You're in the ocean, you're back to nature, you're not clogging up land," said Susan Tafuri of Hazlet, whose father, a Navy veteran, had full military honors at the viewing of the reef ball the day before it was deployed. "The majority of people I know never go to the cemetery."

Memorial reefs are part of an emerging movement in the United States toward simpler, less costly, more environmentally friendly burials. The goal is to return individuals to the earth with as little trace or intervention as possible while preserving green space.

Called natural burial or green burial, the practice is generally defined as one in which the body isn't embalmed, is placed in a biodegradable casket and then is set in a grave without a concrete liner. Cremation, while not a perfect form of natural burial because of the energy required to complete the process and the dioxin and mercury released into the air, is accepted in this category because the remains leave little or no "footprint."

The savings can be significant. The average cost of a traditional funeral is \$6,000 according to the Federal Trade Commission, though some can exceed \$10,000.

The cost of a green burial is less than a third of that, and even lower if it involves cremation and scattering the ashes.

These practices are familiar to those of certain religious faiths, including Jews and Muslims, whose traditions and laws call for burial as soon as possible after death, with no viewing and no embalming. While they may be environmentally sound, centuries of faith dictate the arrangements, not concerns for open space, groundwater, or a simpler way of dealing with death.

### **NATURAL BURIAL**

The first green cemetery opened in 1998 in South Carolina. Since then a handful have followed, including ones in California, Florida, Texas, New York and Washington state. They tend to attract people interested in environmental issues or those who have had a close relationship to nature.

Everyone in Genevieve Maiberger's family, for example, was buried in the traditional manner, she said, except her husband, who was cremated 10 years ago. But a few years ago, the retired teacher from Teaneck read an article about Greensprings Natural Cemetery in upstate New York, and she was sold.

"I have always thought that we should preserve the environment," said Maiberger, 81. "I think this natural burial is ideal to make our planet a better place for all of us to live; we're contaminating it every time we bury someone."

Last year she drove up to Newfield, N.Y., in the Finger Lakes region to look at Greensprings, almost 100 acres of protected meadow and woods, and left feeling at peace with her decision.

"You go up this country road and you finally come to this beautiful area that's surrounded by trees and nice bushes," she said. "It's beautiful and you look out there and you think this is so beautiful and so peaceful and so restful."

As with many other green cemeteries, the operators of Greensprings aspire to the creation of a preserve where nature takes its course and provides nutrients to the life growing above the earth.

"I love the idea of just returning to nature," said Mary Woodsen, president of the cemetery, speaking of her own plans to be buried. "Nature has been taking care of death for a long, long time. I just think it's part of the natural cycle."

At Greensprings the dead may be buried with or without a coffin. No grave stones are allowed; instead, families may have a field stone engraved with the deceased's information which is placed on top of the grave.

New Jersey doesn't have any green cemeteries, but those who wish to be buried in one out of state can arrange it.

According to state law, a body can only be released to a funeral director. But what happens next is entirely up to the family. Embalming is not required by the state unless the body is held longer than 48 hours or has a communicable disease, according to a spokesman from the state's Division of Consumer Affairs. Neither are concrete liners or caskets required by the state, although individual cemetery boards may mandate them as a condition of burial.

### **SIMPLIFY, SIMPLIFY**

New Jersey laws do require that the dead, if they remain here, be buried in state-licensed cemeteries, meaning you can't turn your extra acre of property into a family cemetery.

One difference with a natural burial, according to funeral directors, is everything must happen quicker because without embalming, the body begins to decompose immediately.

"Burial takes place a little bit sooner than if you're having a traditional funeral," said Bob Prout, the owner of Prout Funeral Home in Verona, which will work with families interested in natural burials. "You're still able to have a ceremony, there would be no problem there."

Sam Delaney, funeral director at the William J. Leber Funeral Home in Chester, said that even without widespread knowledge of the natural burial alternative, people are downsizing their funerals.

"People are talking about simplifying; they don't want elaborate funerals with visitations," he said. Like Prout, his funeral home has also established a relationship with Greensprings. Mark Harris, author of "Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial," believes the new options represent a dramatic change in the way the public thinks about death.

"Baby boomers brought a somewhat environmentally friendly approach to many changes in life," said Harris, who wrote an environmental column for the Los Angeles Times for 12 years. "They took a natural approach to childbirth, they fueled the appearance of organic grocery stores; I feel that the same will happen as we approach the end of life."

Indeed, eventually Susan Tafuri's father will have company in his underwater setting.

"I'm going to have one," she said, "and I'm going to put them all in with me, my three dogs and the ashes of another."