

and \$12,000. The fastest-growing funeral practice, a memorial service plus cremation, runs between \$7,000 and \$9,000.

The whole death experience at Ramsey Creek—grave digging, optional casket (purchased or built elsewhere), and service—will run, on average, about \$4,000. A burial plot costs around \$2,000, about a thousand dollars more than the cost of most graves at conventional cemeteries. Most states, South Carolina included, require that ten to fifteen percent of the price for any burial plot goes toward a long-term trust to maintain the property as cemetery land. At Ramsey Creek, where the ultimate goal is land preservation, more money per grave goes toward that fund. Billy Campbell, whose lifelong passion outside of medicine is botany and conservation, has worked to restore the natural character of Ramsey Creek's thirty-four wooded acres. (He eventually wants to help save a million acres of natural land through green burial, assuming that if ten to twenty percent of the baby-boomer generation were to choose this option, then the industry could raise more money for land conservation than the Trust for Public Land and the Nature Conservancy combined.)

For services like storing and transporting the body, the Campbells refer families to conventional funeral homes. For cards and books, there's a Barnes & Noble over in Greenville, about an hour away. As for the AstroTurf, there isn't any. And the little machine that lowers the casket? That's absent, too. Billy, Kimberley, and a team of assistants dig the

graves. Family members are welcome to help, and at many services they lower the pine box or enshrouded body into the ground themselves.

"As it happens, as they work," says Billy, "the men who haven't said anything at all, they'll start telling stories about the person they're helping to cover up, in a way they wouldn't have otherwise. But they're out there working, and somehow it's a little easier to do when you've been out there exerting yourself for a while. There's something about that experience, I think, that most people find oddly comforting."

If you want to get under Billy Campbell's skin quickly, call him a New Ager. When the Campbells started Ramsey Creek twelve years ago, the local newspaper ran a story that included a picture of Billy and of Kimberley, who wore her hair long at the time, along with a picture of a bronze bell that stands where the grassland melts into the forest. The headline read, CEMETERIES ENTER THE NEW AGE. Shortly after that, Billy found Ramsey Creek cited on a website as part of a trend of "liberal, PC funerals."

Billy wrote back: "What part of Genesis 3:19 do you find to be so liberal and radical? 'For dust you are, and to dust you will return.' Pumping the body full of chemicals and looking like you're alive in your best suit, that's more like a pseudo-Egyptian, New-Agey kind of thing, to me."

Billy was actually raised in Westminster as a strict Southern Baptist. He's lanky, with a

face best described as *open*: a big, ready smile that reveals big, white teeth, and ears that are proportional to all of it. Generous.

"It was all God's creation, growing up," he says. He became a born-again Christian at fourteen, and a few years later fell away from the literal aspects of that belief, from what he calls "the fairy-tale stories." Still, it's with an unmistakable zeal that he talks about man's responsibility for the earth. "If you have a truth, then you need to share it."

He often uses his lunch breaks to walk the grounds of Ramsey Creek, noting the minute changes he sees take place from day to day, season to season. Most of our conversations return to these changes: The pink lady's slipper is flowering; the persimmons are ripe; he's found an explosion of pine beetles today.

Billy spent his childhood running around the same old-growth forest where he and Kimberley now live. Once he grew up, his childhood etymological and botanical projects (boxes and jars of bugs and plants) gave way to such endeavors as purchasing land for preservation in Costa Rica and South Carolina. He also founded South Carolina Forest Watch, which monitors timber harvesting in the state.

But the real trigger that inspired his life's work was the death of his father in 1985. Billy realized that with the equivalent of what it cost for the funeral, he could have bought ten acres of land as a permanent memorial to his father. In 1996, Billy founded Memorial Ecosystems, Ramsey Creek's parent company. Now he's considered by the nation's small but



growing green-burial community as one of its pioneers. Joe Sehee directs the Green Burial Council, a nonprofit organization that has established standards and oversight for green-burial cemeteries. Sehee says that attempts at green burial in Great Britain in the early 1990s lacked much of a scientific approach (at many sites, folks would just plant a tree on top of a grave and call it green). With his rigorous knowledge of botany and ecology, Billy has introduced the complex and often delicate matters of ecosystem preservation to the process. In other words, he's made the needs of the land as much of a priority as those of the person who wants to be buried with only a shroud.

**A**part from the one hundred people buried here now, about four hundred plots are in the process of being purchased. Most of the buyers are baby boomers (no surprise when you consider that this generation spearheaded trends like home-birthing, hospice care, and getting married on the beach). But, says Kimberley, there are also people in their eighties and nineties buried at Ramsey Creek, Depression-era babies attracted by the comparatively modest prices associated with green burial and the memory of funerals they attended long ago. In the midst of waxing rhapsodic about sustainable development and conserving land, Kimberley pauses. "I mean, I hate to say it's a win-win option, because somebody obviously has to die."

One woman I spoke with, Elizabeth Stuckman, has a brother, Stuart, buried at Ramsey Creek. At the funeral, a friend identified the sourwood tree beside the burial plot as the subject of one of Stuart's favorite bluegrass songs. Now she refers to her visits to Ramsey Creek as "visiting Stuart's tree." She says, "Now, I don't think of him in that hole. I look at the tree and at the treetops and think, 'Stuart is there. He is all around.'"

Most of us seek something larger out of death—the promise of an afterlife, some assurance of permanence when that permanence is most threatened. At Ramsey Creek, assurance is found in a patch of *impatiens* growing where a son lies, or in the mountain laurel that blooms above a mother's grave, or in the sourwood rooted where a brother is buried. In this way, the dead literally become part of the living. Some say it's about as close to heaven on earth as you can get. 🌱

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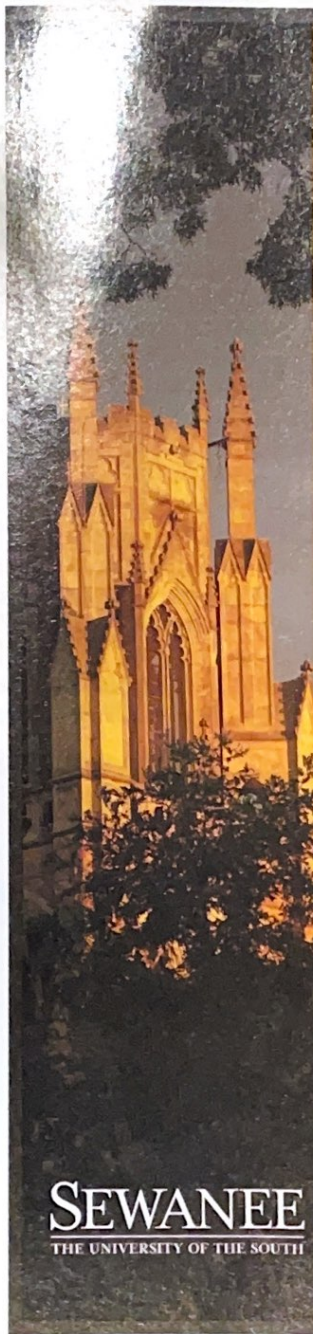


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