



STORY BY JENNIFER STREISAND

# An act of conservation

The idea of a green burial—returning the body to the earth naturally—has, for many people, made talking about death and the end of life more natural. A green burial can be similar to a conventional burial in a lot of ways, except that only biodegradable products are used. As a result, the words “dust-to-dust” become literal rather than metaphorical because the body does decompose into the earth.

“This allows people to have their final act be one of giving to a cause greater than themselves,” says Michelle Jones Thompson, outreach and education coordinator for the Green Burial Council, a non-profit organization that advocates and sets standards for green burial in the United States. Jones Thompson is a Lafayette native. “Because of this, we are finding that many types of people are very interested in green burials including environmentalists, outdoor enthusiasts, religious traditionalists and more.”

Susan Keiser was 61 when she passed away on Sept. 5, 2008. She was a religious person, an artist, a mother, she served in the Marines, and “she marched to a different drummer,” says her husband, Tom Keiser of Lafayette. They decided that she would be the first person to have a green burial in Greater Lafayette and perhaps the first in the Midwest. Tom says that ➤

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God came first for Susan, so a green burial was very much in keeping with her religious beliefs.

“I think it is very consistent because God has put us as caretakers of this planet and that means helping to preserve this planet, and so I think it fits in well. Dust-to-dust, that’s really what it is. In a conventional burial, you go to dust, but you don’t go back to the earth because you are confined in a coffin and a vault. This way, everything goes back to a natural state,” Keiser says.

Susan’s gravesite is in The Preserve at Spring Vale Cemetery on Schuyler Avenue, which is being restored to serve as grounds for green burial for others.

“Green burials are as old as time,” says Joe Canaday, business manager at Hippensteel Funeral Home, the facility that helped the Keisers with Susan’s service and green burial. The idea of burying a body directly in the ground goes back to various points in history and even to biblical times, but in the context of our modern society, a green burial is new in the United States.

“Europe is further ahead with green burial than we are,” says Canaday. “For instance, in Great Britain, there are more than 225 green burial cemeteries, and there are plans for more.”

While the movement associated with green burials is new, elements of green are included in the funeral traditions of some faiths, notes John Benefiel, a director at Soller-Baker Funeral Homes, Inc., in Lafayette. Taking the toxicity out of embalming fluids is one of the primary aspects of a green burial. Soller-Baker offers green burials and does not use any embalming fluids.

“What is known as eco-friendly embalming, we feel is not a reliable alternative at this point,” explains Benefiel. “I think in the true sense of saying, ‘I want to be put back naturally, to return to the earth,’ then you should do it naturally,”

Besides using biodegradable products for burial, the other component is that by opting to have a green burial, the citizen, in many cases, is choosing to conserve and restore precious land in his or her community and state.

Many of the cemeteries that are being used for green burials become preserves, and funeral homes and advocates are working hard to restore the lands with only indigenous plant life. The Indiana Department of Natural Resources is collaborating with Hippensteel Funeral Home to restore The Preserve at Spring Vale Cemetery.

“We have learned what is indigenous and what trees and bushes need to be taken out because they are not native to this area,” says Donna Pridemore, president of Hippensteel Funeral Home. “You are taking an area back to its original state.”

One of the missions of the Green Burial Council is to make sure that these lands are protected for future generations, says Joe Sehee, executive director.

“How do you know that cemetery is going to be protected as a natural area 25 years from now?” he notes. “What if there are new owners or people who have a different ethic that take over?” The Green Burial Council has a certification process that is one way to ensure protection of the land.

Tom Keiser envisions what Spring Vale will look like when more of the restoration is complete: “With the ground being soft, I don’t go out much now because they still don’t have it all prepared. The ground cover is going to be planted pretty shortly, and they have

been removing some of the trees that had to come out. So when the ground firms up, I will be out there more often, and once they get all of the prairie grass and the wildflowers sown, I think it's going to be a beautiful place."

In addition to the labor involved, restoring and beautifying land is expensive. When people ask about the idea of a green burial, cost seems to be the number one concern, says Bruce Wilhoit, president of the Tippecanoe Memory Gardens, a cemetery in West Lafayette. The Memory Gardens is considered a Hybrid Burial Ground because it is a conventional cemetery that offers the option of a green burial.

"The first thing many people ask is, 'Is it cheaper?' and it can be, but it can also be equal to a conventional burial. It depends on what the family chooses to do," he explains. For a green burial, The Tippecanoe Memory Gardens requires caskets to be biodegradable, and no vault can be used.

"In a Hybrid Green Cemetery, a married couple does not have to make the same choice," Wilhoit explains. "One spouse can choose to have a green burial and one a traditional burial, and they can still be buried side-by-side."

There are different shades of green, and the option of a Hybrid Burial Ground does not include the land conservation component, which some advocates say is a critical part of a green burial.

"Once people find out that this is a means to conserve land, to potentially restore lands to their natural state and to have those lands be protected for future generations, that is very, very, appealing," says Jones Thompson. ✽



To learn more about green burials visit

- [greenburialcouncil.org](http://greenburialcouncil.org)
- [hippensteelfuneralhome.com](http://hippensteelfuneralhome.com)
- [tmgardens.com](http://tmgardens.com)



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