

FCA REPORT

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Returning 'home' to a more meaningful way of death care

By Shannon Hodges, LBSW



Care and preparation of a loved one's body at home is becoming an increasingly popular practice. The ritual of a "home funeral" harkens back to a time when death was considered a natural part of life, not a frightening event. Care workers knowledgeable about home funerals can provide guidance and comfort to families.

In my early years as a hospice social worker, I rarely, if ever, gave thought to what happened with my patients and their families after the funeral home had been called. All I had ever known was funeral-industry death care, what I thought to be the only option. How wrong I was!

After first hearing the term "home funeral," I quickly became aware of the burgeoning movement to bring death care back into the home and into the hands of the loved ones of the deceased. Caring for our own at death is a novel idea in our time, yet it exists as a sacred and ancient ritual. Home funerals are beautifully simple and yet complex in the many ways in which they can meet the practical needs of the body, the emotional and financial needs of the family, and the social needs of the larger community.

The term "home funeral" refers to a funeral or ceremony that is directed by the family of the deceased rather than by a professional funeral director. Home funerals typically take place in

the home of the deceased or in the home of the family rather than within a traditional funeral home or other institution. They are sometimes also termed "family-directed funerals." They may be carried out entirely by the family of the deceased or may involve a professional funeral director in one or more capacities, such as transportation or cremation.

Home funerals are intimate, affordable, and highly individual in nature. Those who choose home funerals do so for a variety of reasons.

The most obvious is the financial benefit inherent in bypassing the use of a funeral home and related expenses. This alone makes family-directed funerals an option worth exploring for many families.

However, the most common reason for holding a home funeral is a desire for a more meaningful

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On death and dying: Education, conversation make all the difference

By Maren E. Turner, PhD

When I first told my family and friends that I would be teaching a class on death and dying, I was mildly surprised by some of their reactions.

"You mean there is a *class* on death? Why would you want to talk about that?"

For me, however, it was a no-brainer when Dr. Deborah Altus, co-chair of the Human Services Department at Washburn University, asked if I would be interested. I didn't hesitate to say yes, because I am an advocate for having vital conversations about end-of-life care decisions.

Having a conversation about death, however, is easier said than done. Society, for example, continues to grapple about the meaning of "death-with-dignity," often suppressing as immoral any discussions related to it.

Physicians also struggle. Despite successful efforts by the Institute of Medicine and other groups to include programs on death, dying, and palliative care in 90 percent of medical programs, some doctors still will not tell patients that they are dying. These doctors believe that patients do not want or need that information. And within families, the topics of wills, end-of-life care, and organ donation sometimes present an affront to personal and cultural values.

The tension and disconnect between societal pressures, doctor and patient practices, and the personal values within and between families make it difficult to have conversations. But we need to talk if we are ever to

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The big picture

By Nancy Jobe, FCA-GKC President



As I begin my third year as president, I want to reflect on what has been accomplished in those years, and what is yet to be accomplished, with the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City.

We initiated a committee structure, with board members using their expertise for the price survey, obtaining of grants and funding, and outreach projects.

The FCA-GKC compiles information for the funeral home price survey every other year. With advanced technology, this year's price survey will be compiled with information obtained via electronic communication. Most funeral homes in Greater Kansas City are cooperative about sharing their general price list to help us provide the most up-to-date, accurate information for the survey.

Our grants and funding committee has been active the past two years, obtaining several small grants to assist with outreach projects. Each year we rely on individual donations to help with printing the twice-yearly newsletter. You will notice in this newsletter a change in the donation envelope. Please take the time to look over the envelope, and consider becoming a donor or benefactor so we can continue our mission to educate consumers.

With the help of grants, the FCA-GKC has developed a couple of educational pieces to share with

you, the consumer. If you need educational materials for your organization, residents, or clients, please contact us.

The outreach committee has been busy with many presentations throughout the years. This year the committee is completing a resource manual for hospitals, hospices, and long-term-care facilities. The manual will contain resources to help families make difficult end-of-life decisions. We will also be revamping our website this year for better ease of use for consumers.

Each year our annual meeting provides free continuing education hours for social workers. We have offered absorbing topics geared toward end-of-life decisions while accomplishing our mission: To educate and support individuals and families in making informed decisions about death-related services, consistent with their values and lifestyles.

We need your help in spreading the word about the work and mission of the Funeral Consumers Alliance. The Greater Kansas City FCA affiliate has been helping consumers for more than 50 years. We have had an eight-member board of volunteers accomplishing all of these projects. We are looking for volunteers with compassion to educate consumers about their rights and choices. Our growth is determined by volunteers, donors, and benefactors. Please consider helping the FCA-GKC continue to grow. We have many more projects to accomplish! ▪

Learn about our 2016 board of directors

The Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City has elected two new officers and reelected two to its board of directors for 2016. Here are the backgrounds of each officer, in a nutshell:

Nancy Jobe continues as president for her third year. Nancy has spent 40 years in outreach and education. She presently works for a Medicare contractor assisting beneficiaries.

Lynn Anderson takes over as vice president, replacing Marci Michnick, MSW, LMSW, who continues as a volunteer. Lynn is a retired writer/editor, having worked at *The Kansas City Star*, the University of Kansas, and Johnson County Government—most recently as editor of the Johnson County senior newspaper *The Best Times*.

Pam Thomas, PhD, continues as secretary. She teaches anatomy at Kansas City University of Medicine and Biosciences. She is the board's longest-term member, with 20 years of service.

Frank Cockrell takes over as treasurer from Jim Fitzpatrick, who recently resigned from the board. Frank has a record of 50 years of volunteerism. Before his retirement, he was employed in financial roles at Black & Veatch, Saint Paul School of Theology, and Arthur Andersen & Co.

A new board member, **Mike Shalinsky**, also was elected this year. Mike graduated with a master's degree in social work from UMKC, specializing in gerontology and working with the elderly. He has been a social worker with Crossroads Hospice for five years.

Other continuing FCA-GKC board members are Steve Nicely and Lyle Van Vleet.

Frank, Steve, and Lyle also are members of a new, independent board formed in 2015 to assume management of Highland Cemetery of Prairie Village (see the related story on page 7). The historic cemetery, which dates from the 1860s, is the only cemetery open to the public in the metropolitan area where it's possible to obtain a natural burial. To learn more, visit www.highlandcemeteryprairievillage.com. ▪

Preplan but don't prepay

Funeral homes like to see families arriving ahead of time to plan funerals, and FCA does, too. But the funeral home will try to sell a prepaid plan, and we advise against it. Normally we say, "Preplan, yes—but don't prepay."

Prepaid contracts can be restrictive and make you vulnerable. What if you move? What if you change your mind? What if the funeral home is sold or goes out of business? What if you can't make the required payments? What if someone raids your account? All those things have happened in our community.

We suggest opening a "payable-on-death" savings account at a bank or credit union with a trusted friend or relative who knows your wishes. ▪

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achieve ultimate control over our final health care choices.

The disconnection between medical practice and family values has certainly played out in my own family. About 15 years ago, when I was conducting Caring Conversations Workshops, I tried to talk to my own family members. (Caring Conversations was an initiative between AARP and the Midwest Bioethics Center to encourage families to talk about end-of-life issues.) It didn't go well. My father, for one, informed me that he didn't plan to have the conversation. To talk about death was somehow jeopardizing his plan for a spiritual eternal life.

Years later my father seemed more open to talking, so I approached him again and asked what he wanted if his death should precede mine. He made it clear that he wanted *every possible measure* to sustain his life.

When his health began to fail, medical staff urged us to keep him comfortable but withdraw all forms of sustenance. My family didn't comply, insisting that he continue to receive food and water. We soon found ourselves in an unpleasant conflict, berated because of our decision. This was followed by unsuccessful staff attempts to transfer my father to a facility far from my mother and other family members who wanted to continue visiting him daily. Still, my father ultimately had a good death, the one he wanted and not the one someone else said was best for him.

Not everyone is as fortunate as my father. But I believe we can get to a place where we are comfortable talking about death and we are consistently respectful of all persons' rights to direct their own final options.

These are goals I have personally and professionally championed for more than 30 years—as director of AARP Kansas; as a member of the Living Initiatives for End-of-Life



Maren Turner educates about the importance of honest family talk about death—before it occurs.

Care (LIFE) Project coalition, which advocated to make Kansas a good place to live and die; and as a participant in numerous conferences about end-of-life issues, most notably Last Miles of the Way Home, a conference to help advocates improve end-of-life care for African Americans. Later I joined the board of Midland Care Connections to advocate on behalf of hospice patients and their families.

And now, last but not least, I am teaching a university course about death and dying. I am encouraged that universities and medical schools are offering classes like mine that include a diversity of students from a variety of backgrounds and ages, with occupational goals that will position them to have a positive influence on society, and a sufficient amount of passion to initiate conversations within their own families.

I am equally encouraged by the academic scholars, policy makers, and practitioners who have willingly given of their time. They are all educators in every sense of the word. It is the combined efforts of educators willing to teach and students willing to learn that will help change how we look at death.

I am reminded of a favorite African proverb: "Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable." It will take the work of all of us, together, to ensure that everyone has a good death. ■

Maren E. Turner, PhD, is guest adjunct professor with the Department of Human Services at Washburn University in Topeka, Kan. Call 785-670-2116 or email maren.turner@washburn.edu.

New funeral price survey in the works

By Steve Nicely, FCA-GKC Board Member



We at the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City soon will update our two-year-old survey of 95 area providers. This time we are gathering the information by email, beginning with an emailed request for the cooperation of funeral directors. Here's how it will work:

FCA-GKC President Nancy Jobe will send a spreadsheet of prices from the 2014 survey and ask funeral operators to compare the prices under their listings with their *current* prices, then notify us of changes. If there are no changes, we want them to confirm that, too.

Funeral directors hold a variety of opinions about our price surveys. Some think it's none of our business and don't cooperate. They resent that the Federal Trade Commission's Funeral Rule requires them to hand over their price lists when requested in person. Other directors want their prices known and listed in the survey.

Almost all of them appreciate the opportunity to compare prices with the competition. For the industry and the public alike, FCA-GKC is the only place where all of that information can be found in one place. Usually we receive the cooperation of about half of the funeral homes before resorting to follow-up calls and visits.

As always, we will post the results free of charge on our website, www.funeralskc.org, and mail printed surveys to our members as part of our fall 2016 newsletter. Email us, fca.gkc@gmail.com, with questions or phone 816-561-6322 to leave a message.

FCA-GKC is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization administered by a volunteer board of directors. The organization is an affiliate of the national Funeral Consumers Alliance, based in South Burlington, Vt. ■

Note our new donation envelope (& please use it)!

Our donation envelope has changed, with two goals.

The first is to show our readers how FCA-GKC spends its *money*. You'll see that because we're a volunteer-staffed organization, administrative costs are minimal. Your funding goes directly toward meeting our goals and mission: To educate and support individuals and families in making informed decisions about death-related services, consistent with their values and lifestyles.

The second reason for the new envelope is to disclose how our board members and volunteers spend their *time and energy*. Forty-five percent of the total cash received in 2015 came from 76 donors and 55 percent came from two grants. Had we experienced a grant shortfall, some of our accomplishments would have remained undone. For that reason (true every year,) we need your support at whatever level you can afford.

Fifty-eight percent of FCA-GKC contributions in 2015 covered the cost of the newsletters, 20 percent covered outreach activities, 11 percent went toward printing and placement of "rack cards," which are pithy informational pieces distributed throughout the metro, and 11 percent went to national organization support and local administration (half national, half local).

Kudos to our FCA-GKC volunteers, whose 2,400 hours of service in 2015 were directed toward outreach (70 percent), newsletters (15 percent), rack cards (10 percent) and national support/administration (5 percent).

The new donation envelope offers a number of gift options. If you wish to support the organization annually, choices exist ranging from \$25 to \$100. If you would like to become an Activity Benefactor, that's another choice. If you would support a Funeral Home Price Survey being carried out in your name, that's another choice, as is supporting a newsletter, rack card, brochure, or other special project you may visualize.

Many choices exist, and we speculate that your generosity would surprise our readers and our organization. We thank you! ▪



Join us!

We're always looking for people interested in helping with our work. Call 816-561-6322 or email fca.gkc@gmail.com to help.

The paperwork of death

By Shannon Hodges, LBSW

Death certificates and birth certificates bracket our lives. Funeral homes generally fill out and file death certificates, but what happens when someone dies and the family cares for the body at home without the services of a funeral home?

State agencies in charge of vital statistics generally deal directly with funeral directors and may not be accustomed to dealing with a member of the public requesting a death certificate. Officials in both Kansas and Missouri indicate that this is slowly changing as more families become informed of their right to provide care without the use of a funeral director. Officials in all states must protect against fraud, and need to be satisfied that a death has occurred with no foul play. It is of utmost importance that the form is filled out properly and nothing left blank, and the completed form must be signed by a physician or medical certifier.

What to do and whom to contact in Kansas & Missouri

First, if the death is unexpected or unattended, call the police or local sheriff's department to report the death. It is important to make this call in a timely manner to prevent impeding the process or causing undue involvement of law enforcement. If hospice is involved and the death is expected (even if unattended), it is not necessary to inform law enforcement.

In Kansas: Contact Sharon Marshall in the Office of Vital Statistics, Department of Health and Environment: call 785-296-1428 or email smarshal@kdheks.gov. She will mail or fax a worksheet to be filled out and returned to her. Her office will complete an original death certificate and send it directly to the doctor for signing. If it's an accidental death, the local county coroner will sign the certificate. If death is expected, this worksheet may be requested and vital information completed before death occurs. *After May 20, contact Linda Amrine: call 785-296-1430 or email lamrine@kdheks.gov.*

In Missouri: Contact Neelie Churchill, deputy state registrar with the Bureau of Vital Records: call 573-522-1716 or email neelie.churchill@health.mo.gov. She will provide instructions for submitting a written request for a death certificate. When the request is submitted, one death certificate and instructions for completing it will be mailed to the requester. The completed certificate must be mailed back to the Bureau of Vital Records by the physician or medical certifier. ▪

Landon Center to host two FCA-GKC programs

A free Brownbag Lunch Series program titled "Lowest-Cost Funerals" will be presented by FCA-GKC representatives at the Landon Center on Aging this spring and fall.

The presentations will be from noon to 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday, May 11, and Wednesday, Oct. 12, at the Landon Center, 3599 Rainbow Blvd., Kansas City, KS 66160.

Space is limited, so reserve a spot by calling Matt Chandler at 913-588-3094. For detailed driving instructions, call 913-588-1203. Parking is plentiful in a lot right outside the building. Participants are welcome to bring a lunch to eat while they listen. ▪

Unhappy about the condition of a cemetery? Make your concerns known

By Nancy Jobe, FCA-GKC President

Last fall my son, Ryan, called me from Oak Hill Cemetery in Lawrence. He was visiting his father's grave and was upset by the condition of the "natural" or "green" section of the cemetery, where my late husband is buried.

He said, "Mom, you have to come see this; it is not natural anymore."

I had visited the grave site a year before and had noticed that the area was overgrown with weeds, which was OK because wild things are natural. But to my dismay, Ryan was right, there was "junk" at a new grave site at the foot of my husband's grave. A metal owl was hanging from the tree we had planted in remembrance of Randy. It was difficult to walk to the gravesite because the poison oak and weeds were taller than I am. We noticed that the majority of gravesites were decorated with "unnatural" items left by visitors.

Maybe they were not aware of the rules of a natural burial area? Someone should tell them, we thought. After all, I am a big advocate for Oak Hill Cemetery's natural burial area. But how could I recommend it in the condition it was in at the time?

I began researching the cemetery's rules and



policies for the natural burial area. I found several rules not being enforced, such as Natural Burial Plot (Section 15C), which states that "Native plants, flowers, grasses and Redbud, Service Berry trees are the only decorations/planting permitted. No artificial flowers, wreaths, tree chimes and/or any other decorations will be allowed." And "No shepherd hooks, or ceramic, glass and/or other type of figurine will be permitted."

I crafted a letter asking the city administrators to look into cleaning up the natural burial area of Oak Hill Cemetery. I was pleased with their immediate response to my concerns. Within a few weeks of requesting action, action was received.

Thank you to the Lawrence city administrators and staff who have made the Oak Hill Cemetery Natural Burial area one of the nicest in the Kansas City vicinity.

So please consider this: If you see a concern with the condition of cemeteries where your family members are interred, speak up. Cemetery maintenance can only be corrected when brought to the attention of those in charge. ■



Left: Personal mementos and decorations like these are inappropriate in a natural burial setting and fail to honor green cemetery guidelines. Above top: Ryan Jobe near the grave of his father, which had become overgrown with weeds and poison ivy until cemetery officials were notified. Above bottom: The Oak Hill Natural Burial section as it looked after cemetery officials were notified of family concerns. Their response was quick and thorough. It's always important to let cemetery officials know about your worries.

Misinformation abounds

Home funerals, family rights & the law

By Shannon Hodges, LBSW

Lack of understanding and awareness of the right of families to care for their own dead can create significant barriers for families who choose home funerals. Please consider the following examples:

- While deciding how to handle arrangements for natural burial following her spouse's sudden heart attack, a local woman elected to keep the body of her spouse at home. However, sheriff's deputies refused to leave the body in the care of the family, insisting that the body must be taken to a funeral home because "it's the law." Clearly, this was incorrect and was a violation of her rights as next of kin.

- An area funeral director told a group of touring students that the law stated that in order to have an open casket, the body must be embalmed. When challenged by one of the students, the funeral director remained insistent that the law requires embalming. Upon looking up the statute, the funeral director admitted that he was in error. There is no such legal requirement, although many funeral homes have a closed-casket policy for unembalmed bodies.

Families desiring to direct the funeral care of a loved one must know the law and advocate for their rights. Following are some of the most frequent questions regarding home funerals and family death care:

Are home funerals legal? Yes. Home funerals are legal in every state. Ten states have restrictions requiring families to use a licensed funeral director in one or more capacities. Kansas and Missouri have no such restrictions.

Is embalming a legal requirement? No. Embalming is not required by law in any state. Many funeral homes require it if there is to be an open-casket viewing, but this is a business policy and not a legal

statute. Embalming is done for cosmetic reasons and to prevent decomposition for a short time, but has no bearing on public health or sanitation.

How soon must an unembalmed body be buried? Kansas and Missouri laws state that a body must be embalmed or refrigerated (cooled) within 24 hours of death, *but extensions are possible if no health hazard or nuisance will occur*. This means that home-funeral families must take measures to cool the body with use of dry ice or frozen gel packs, generally placed underneath sheets surrounding the body. A family may keep a body at home, if properly cooled, for an unspecified amount of time. One to four days is customary.

What about the death certificate? A death certificate must be obtained from the Office of Vital Statistics, and procedures vary by state (see "Paperwork," page 4). When completing a death certificate, families must write the specific words "acting as such" on the line designating a funeral director. Once completed, the certificate must be signed by the physician or coroner and filed within three days of the death.

May I transport a body in my car? Yes. Transport in a private vehicle is legal in Kansas and Missouri after a death certificate has been signed and filed. Transport in a private vehicle across state lines is legal with a transit permit, which must be obtained from and signed by the state registrar.

What about final disposition? Most home-funeral families choose either cremation, which must be performed in a licensed crematory by a licensed operator, or natural burial, in which an unembalmed body is buried in a biodegradable container or a simple shroud. Local natural burial cemeteries currently exist in Prairie Village (Highland Cemetery of Prairie Village), Lawrence (Oak Hill Cemetery), Ottawa County, Kan.

Shannon Hodges is an articulate spokesperson for the soulful rituals of a home funeral.



(Heart Land Prairie Cemetery), and near Rocheport, Mo. (Green Acres Cemetery), and are increasing nationwide.

Where can I get more information?

Comprehensive information on home-funeral care and related legalities is available from the National Home Funeral Alliance: www.homefuneralalliance.org.

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experience than that provided by the modern funeral home. Those who have experienced a home funeral report the deep comfort and healing that is created by providing love and care to one's own.

Home funerals take us back to our historical roots, to a time when death care was the domain of the family and community rather than of the for-profit funeral industry. Thus, home funerals return us to the time of our ancestors, when death as a part of life was known, and caring for our dead was part of the deep wisdom of our souls. ■

Shannon Hodges, a graduate of the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, is a medical social worker with Grace Hospice in Lawrence, Kan. She has more than 12 years of experience in end-of-life care. Shannon is a member of the National Home Funeral Alliance and serves as a death educator and home funeral guide. Shannon believes that all stories have endings and endings matter. Phone 785-550-4388 or email Shannonhodges_12@yahoo.com

Funeral homes will provide help with elements of a natural burial

By Steve Nicely, FCA-GKC Board Member

My wife and I, and several friends and acquaintances, bought 32 graves in Highland Cemetery of Prairie Village, the only place open to the public in the metro area where it's possible to obtain a natural burial (no embalming, no grave liner, the body buried in a shroud or other biodegradable container).

Would a funeral home help us accomplish that, we wondered? How, and at what cost? Several of us asked officials at three funeral homes these questions.

Yes, they would gladly help, said funeral directors from Amos in Shawnee, Porter in Lenexa, and the Kansas City Funeral Directors in Kansas City, Kan.

The cost would depend on what services were wanted (as with any funeral), and the savings would not be significant. We would save about \$1,500 on embalming and the grave liner, but some of that would be offset in added refrigeration costs. We could spend \$2,000 or \$3,000 on a nice wooden casket made and blessed by monks, or \$350 for a burial shroud from a website in California.

The funeral directors asked us what services we wanted, and most of us were not sure. It's hard to decide these things in advance when we don't know what our circumstances will be. So maybe it's best to wait a while.

For most of us, saving money was not the chief motivation for choosing a natural burial. The sacredness of nature was. We like the idea of decomposing in contact with the earth and actually becoming earth again. We want to support future life as soon as possible, not wall our bodies away from it.

Would the funeral home permit a visitation period with an open casket containing an unembalmed body? None refused.

Here are thoughts expressed by three of the people who visited the funeral homes:



Mark Smith, of Amos Family Funeral Home (top in white shirt) answers questions about arranging funerals involving natural burial. Visitors asking questions, clockwise from foreground: David Johnson, Don Kosmicki, Karen Kosmicki, Patty Wernel, Tom Scott, Frank Cockrell.

Patty Wernel: Our meeting was very informative and gave me a direction to pursue. I am involved in funerals in our parish. When I got home, there was a message of a funeral the next day and the funeral choir was to sing. I later found out our team is in charge of the funeral luncheon. I say these things because I experience their importance for the family. I will have a Mass and, hopefully, have it planned.

I look at my death as an extension of my life. As each of our lives is unique, so will our deaths be, and I feel it's important to keep those values. In line with the pope's encyclical "On Care for Our Common Home," I do not want a vault. It is a blessing to be in a caring community where we can make this journey together.

Don Kosmicki: Thanks for the guided tour of reality in regard to the necessity of planning the place to take our bodies. It seems to be the loving thing to do and requires us to do the work. Avoiding the unnecessary burying of concrete boxes and elaborate caskets is part of that act of love.

David Johnson: I was surprised by how open all of the funeral homes were to a natural or "green" burial. It seems there may be more demand for this now and in the future, with more attention to environmental concerns in

the news media, politics, and science.

As I look back on our visits and the entire process, the things that I have decided are:

1) The important decision was on the burial site, to choose a site that allows for natural burial. Everything else is secondary.

2) Regarding a funeral plan, an important consideration is whether to bury immediately or have a ceremony prior to burial. I am leaning toward allowing a few days before burial to allow for out-of-town visitors and a ceremony. This makes the process more complex and requires more planning.

3) Another decision point is whether to preplan a funeral service and burial and possibly prepay. I am neutral on this, but think it is important. I would like to engage my family more in this process, but am finding that difficult. I am leaning toward preplanning but will probably wait a few more years, since I am only 70. If my wife dies before me, her funeral and burial will be a test case. If I die first, the burial site is already determined. My family will have to deal with the rest. I may write a paper on how the process needs to happen and leave it with my will and other papers. ■

Funeral Consumers Alliance
of Greater Kansas City
PO Box 7012
Kansas City, MO 64113



816-561-6322
fca.gkc@gmail.com
www.funeralskc.org

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Az-Zahra Islamic Center gets a cemetery of its own

By Frank Cockrell, FCA-GKC Treasurer, and Steve Nicely, FCA-GKC Board Member

The Az-Zahra Islamic Center in Kansas City, Kan., recently won Unified Government approval for a one-third-acre cemetery on its grounds.

The cemetery will provide for burials in the customary Muslim way of returning the body directly to the earth in its natural state. The approval means that center members may be buried on the center's own property, at 8353 Leavenworth Road.

The cemetery has space for 150 burials in graves positioned diagonally from northeast to southwest. Bodies are buried in shrouds on the bare earth, lying on their sides with their heads facing northeast toward the holy city of Mecca.

This method of burial, usually within 24 hours, is the customary Islamic practice, said Jameel Agha, a member of the Islamic Center board.

"We believe that earth-to-earth is the divine law and we don't change it," he said.

The cemetery is a response to the center's constitution, which grants members the right to funeral services, washing of the body, and burial.

Neighborhood meetings were held last April, with no objections being raised. The Unified Government, however, granted approval of the special-use permit subject to the following conditions:

- Bodies will be buried 6 feet below ground level.
- Graves will be marked by headstones placed flat on the ground.
- Burial prices will include grave preparation, digging, and cost of the plot.
- Long-term maintenance of the cemetery will be funded by setting aside \$500 from each sale toward an escrow account held jointly in the name of the Az-Zahra



Jameel Agha is a member of the Az-Zahra Islamic Center board. The center has received approval for a cemetery on its grounds, to provide burial according to customary Islamic practice.

Islamic Center and a Unified Government staff member.

The escrow account requirement is a hurdle not easily overcome, Agha said. For one thing, the Unified Government is having difficulty finding a staff member willing to take personal responsibility for the account. The \$500 escrow requirement will also make the cost of each grave rather expensive. The center has not yet set a price for the graves. ■

"The modern westerner has lost *loss*; death as a community event, and mourning as a communal practice, has been steadily killed off. And this, incidentally, is our inheritance." — from *Death's Summer Coat: What the History of Death and Dying Can Tell Us about Life and Living*, by Brandy Schillace

Other excellent books to explore:

When Breath Becomes Air, by Paul Kalanithi
Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End, by Atul Gawande