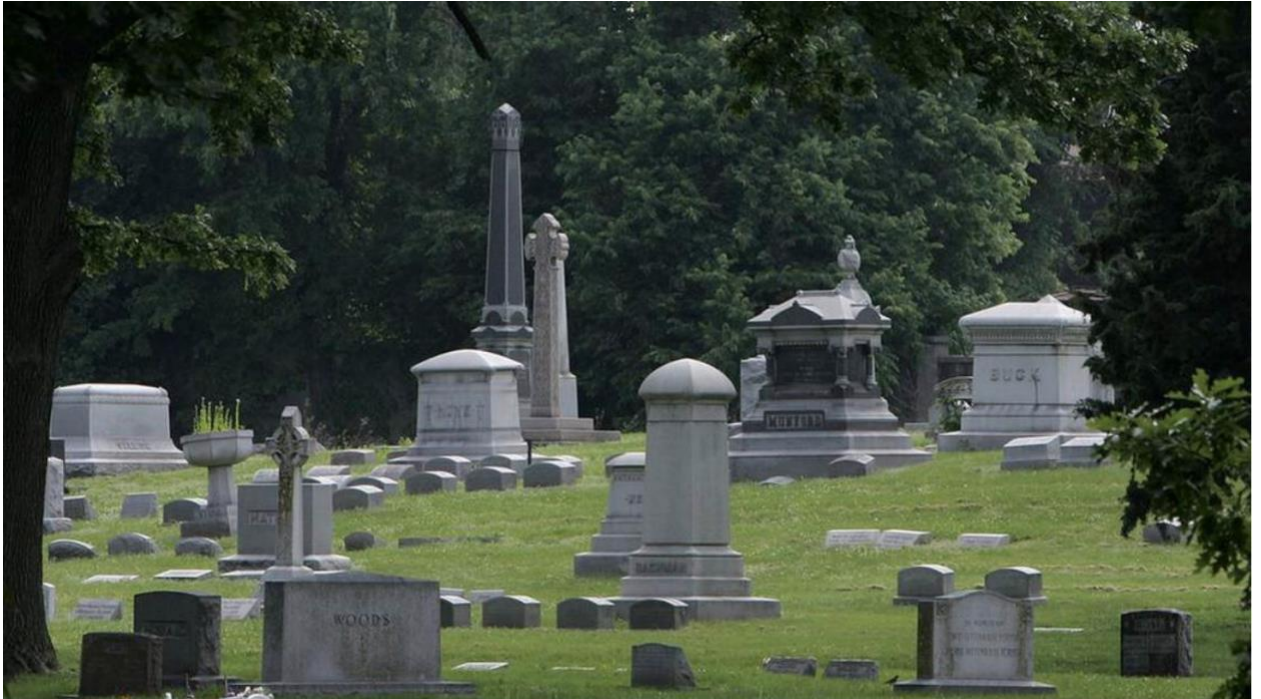


GUEST COMMENTARY

This Kansas City group shows you don't need steel caskets, concrete vaults for burial

BY STEVE NICELY *SPECIAL TO THE STAR*
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Elmwood Cemetery is thought to be one of the only places in the Kansas City metropolitan area that allows natural burials. JILL TOYOSHIBA *THE KANSAS CITY STAR*

Sixty years ago last month, several members of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church united over their concern that some area funeral homes were “over-selling” their products and services to financially vulnerable families struggling with loss. They founded the Greater Kansas City Memorial Society, which is now the nonprofit consumer protection agency known as the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City.

While there are many fine local funeral operators, some still engage in questionable practices. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the industry’s resistance to natural burial, also known as green burial. That’s the way our ancestors were buried before the 1900s, without embalming or even funeral homes. Families placed their loved ones’ bodies in wooden boxes or shrouds and buried them 3 or 4 feet deep.

With a natural burial, there are no steel caskets. No concrete vaults or grave liners. No packing the earth on top so mowing equipment can be driven over soon after. Instead, mounds are left on graves to settle with the weather, and bodies decompose naturally to become rich “earth-to-earth” compost. But for 10 years, the FCA-GKC could not find a single local public cemetery that allowed natural burial. Jewish and Muslim cemeteries do, but they’re not available to the general public.

“There’s no demand for natural burial,” we were told by funeral providers and cemeteries.

Then, in 2015, the FCA-GKC found the historic one-acre Highland Cemetery of Prairie Village, with an aging sexton who was ready to pass on its responsibility. Highland allows natural burial, just as it did in the 1860s when it was founded. Three FCA-GKC board members and two local residents formed a nonprofit corporation and took over management of the cemetery. At that time, it had 150 unsold graves. Four years later, all had been sold — mostly to families seeking natural burial. Don’t tell us there’s no demand.

Last year, the trustees of the historic Elmwood Cemetery relaxed its policy of requiring burial vaults and now allow natural burial. Cemeteries in Columbia, Missouri, and Lawrence, Lansing and Salina, Kansas, also offer it, but to our knowledge, Elmwood is the only one in this metropolitan area with space available.

The FCA-GKC’s mission is to provide information and education about options such as natural burial, and price lists for all 113 area funeral homes. The average price for a standard funeral in the Kansas City area (including embalming, a visitation and a service, but not including a casket or cemetery costs) is almost \$6,000, but individual funeral homes charge from \$3,500 to \$9,100 for the same services. For a direct cremation (no embalming, visitation or service), the average price is \$1,763, ranging from \$675 to \$3,590. These are huge price variances. Whether grieving loved ones are unemployed, underemployed or gainfully employed, it pays to know the difference.

The growing choice of cremation now functions as a counterforce against high funeral prices. Cremation furnaces here currently claim about 55% of our dead bodies. It is economical and convenient, but one thing cremation is not is environmentally sound. Piped up the chimney into the atmosphere are all of the body’s carbons and enough burned fossil fuel to drive an automobile 500 miles. Natural burial is by far the most ecological choice.

Many options exist now that are natural, economical and environmentally responsible. The FCA-GKC, affiliated with the national Funeral Consumers Alliance, exists to let you know about those choices. The organization has no membership fees and depends entirely on donations and the work of dedicated volunteers. Visit funeralskc.org for more information.

Steve Nicely is a 15-year board member and past president of the 501(c)(3) nonprofit Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City. He is a retired Kansas City Star journalist.