

December 15, 2004

Green burials

**No chemicals, no elaborate coffins, no carved markers—
just eternal rest in a peaceful nature preserve**

BY JILL KRAMER

Tyler Cassity has spent most of his 34-year-old life thinking about death. Not so much his own—it's other people's deaths that preoccupy him. From the age of 14, he's been coming up with better ways for survivors to bury, remember and honor their dead.



His ventures are both real-world and virtual. He now has more than 10,000 memorial tributes posted on his Web site, **www.forevernetwork.com**. They range from simple photos with text to elaborate documentaries combining music, interviews and footage from various stages of the deceased person's life. Friends and family visit the deceased online, much the way they would visit a grave, often posting their own thoughts, keeping the dead updated on the living.

On the real-world side, Cassity is co-owner of three cemeteries. The first one is in St. Louis, where he went to high school and launched his first video venture. His second purchase, Hollywood Memorial Park, which he restored after years of neglect and renamed Hollywood Forever, is the final resting place for old-time luminaries like Rudolph Valentino and Cecil B. DeMille. And this summer, he bought the old Daphne Fernwood cemetery in Mill Valley, renamed it Forever Fernwood, and brought to it a new concept: green burial.

People can now bury their dead at Forever Fernwood in an eco-friendly manner, using biodegradable materials. They can also preserve the burial site in perpetuity by purchasing a conservation easement planted with a tree, native grass or wildflowers. Of course, the old cemetery is still there, and customers can opt for a traditional burial there, but the new part will be free of all of the usual stone and bronze markers. It will look like—and will be—a nature preserve. A global positioning system will record the placement of each burial site. Visitors will be able to walk the grounds with Palm Pilot-sized devices that will guide them to the grave and screen a video tribute, if one has been made.

Cassity applies a new ethic to many aspects of the death biz. He chafes at the self-aggrandizing trappings taken on by the typical mainstream funeral director—the dark suit, the formality, the quasi-religious atmosphere—which he feels are intended to intimidate the customer and allow for exploitative pricing. Cassity wears casual shirts and slacks and encourages families to make their own

decisions about the funeral and the burial. He objects to what he calls the “commercialization of denial”—the cosmetizing of the corpse and the absence of rituals designed to help survivors face death, experience their grief and get on with their lives. At Forever Fernwood, families can design their own rituals, or choose one from an existing tradition.

Cassity’s hometown is Springfield, Missouri, the “Queen City of the Ozarks,” but all traces of his hillbilly accent were drummed out of him early on in speech therapy class. He speaks in a deep-pitched, soft murmur. He looks like a movie star; thanks to a heritage that includes one Cherokee and one Chinese ancestor, he has prominent cheekbones, dark eyebrows and girlishly long lashes. He’s gay. He came out to his fundamentalist family at the end of his freshman year at Columbia University, where he majored in creative writing. After an initial period in which his brother apologized for all his years of gay-bashing, his mother blamed herself for the diet pills she took while she was pregnant and his scholarly father did extensive research on the subject, the family resolved the crisis. The father and two sons still work together.

If any of this sounds familiar to viewers of the HBO series *Six Feet Under*, it’s probably not a coincidence. While many details have been changed, Cassity clearly inspired the character of the gay son, and he consulted for the writers for two seasons.

These days, Cassity splits his time between Los Angeles, where he oversees Hollywood Forever, and Marin, working at Forever Fernwood. The Mill Valley cemetery covers 23 acres of wooded hills between Tennessee Valley Road and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. It’s long been a favorite route for hikers on their way to the beach, and Cassity intends for it to remain so. The offices are housed in a long, narrow, one-story building with concrete walls and a glass roof. Cassity calls it the “dead skyscraper”—it looks like a glass-windowed box that fell over on its side.

On the day I visit, Cassity is expecting his furniture to arrive in about six weeks, so we sit at a table in an otherwise bare room and talk. For hours. Not one to answer a question simply and directly, Cassity tends to reply with historical background, often irrelevant detail and amusing tangents. He fiddles for a while with his laptop, trying to get it to respond, before finally giving up. Seems the computer—which Cassity refers to as “he”—has been temperamental ever since he (it) was burned in a fire when he (Cassity) fell asleep during a Tarot reading...Don’t ask. What follows is a highly edited version of our conversation.

• • • •

How did you get into the funeral business?

My father was in the business of making funeral pre-arrangements. It was a new concept at that time. Now it’s rather standard. You can make your decisions in advance, and that way your survivors aren’t left to fund the funeral or make the selections in a state of grief. But he’s rarely spent time in the funeral home. My brother and I got into the business when I found a tape of my grandmother after she had died. I’ve always loved technology. I had the first Apple computer and the first tape recorder. I’d hide it in rooms so I could get adult conversations recorded, since I wasn’t allowed to be in there. So I had a tape of my grandmother gossiping with

my mother. After she died, I played it for the family at the kitchen table and it was really inspiring to my brother and me. And we started these archives.

That was the start of the Life Stories archives?

Yes, we started videotaping our father's clients in our town [St. Louis], because if they had thought about their pre-arrangements, then they were certainly comfortable with their own mortality. So our summer jobs were going out and interviewing elderly people and having them tell us their life stories. Caskets and stone and bronze as forms of memorialization didn't resonate with us—but something as simple as a voice evokes memories in a way that nothing else can. And when you add movie images to the voice—when we have funeral services and the person is present in that way, in a virtual way—it brings forth what I think all services in the past sought to bring forth, and that's catharsis. It triggers everything about that time, the feeling of that day. It all starts to come back.

How old were you when you started doing the taping?

I was 14. My brother was three years older, and he was more like the producer—he would help the family decide what they wanted to spend, what they wanted to cover. And I was more the director and cameraman and editor. But I was too young to know how to break through to someone in an interview. Rarely did I get what I could sometimes get later, which was to get the essence. It's their laugh, their expressions, their body movements. Back in the '80s, it was shocking to have these big video cameras set up in their living rooms. Now, it's easier, because everyone wants their own reality television show. It's finally ripened.

Do you still do the filming yourself?

Every once in a while. My "college" for doing it was being the subject of a documentary. It was a year of HBO having open access to follow us around. Cameras could be everywhere, and after a while you got used to it. And that's when the real stuff would start to come out. But I could tell which questions worked. Because they were trying to do to me what I'd been trying to do all along. So that was an education.

When did HBO do the documentary?

They came in 1999. They were independent filmmakers. They had just made *American Splendor*. So they did a documentary about Hollywood Forever six months after we had taken it over from bankruptcy. It really captures the place, which has a very quirky feel to it. It was aired on the HBO series, *America Undercover*.

What was the name of it?

The Young and the Dead. It makes me nostalgic to watch because we were all so young and fresh-eyed.

Is there any connection between the documentary and the HBO series *Six Feet Under*?

The series was based on two brothers, and the first year I had a very neurotic attachment to it: "That's me! That's how I talk!" I thought there was a spy, because there were certain elements of my life that no one knew. But then I realized that it was just good art. Because I knew that other people, to a lesser degree, were identifying with the characters, too.

It certainly seems like more than coincidence.

Oh, I think that the idea was taken from the documentary. That was basically admitted. The directors

wanted me to sue and I said I have no reason to sue. The more this is discussed, the better. And since then, I consulted for the second and third years of the series. And they started to say things like, "You know, you talk like he does." And I'd say, "No, he talks like I do." "You even walk like he does." "No, he walks like me!" Now they've asked me to come back, but they turned down my requirement, which was that they donate a certain amount of money each episode to gay elder housing. They would only donate a very small amount. So I haven't come back.

What made you leave St. Louis?

I'd gotten into Columbia, and I didn't think I would ever be welcomed back. It was 1988, and my family was very fundamentalist Christian, and the humans I was attracted to were not acceptable. I was coming out at the worst possible time to come out.

Coming out as gay.

Coming out as gay at the height of the AIDS epidemic. I thought I was getting out of all of the family focus on death, and walked right into a culture that was like an atomic bomb had gone off. And I was dealing with dying more than with funerals. I was living with the idea of never having experienced sex or intimacy when death or the fear of death wasn't present. And watching a generation that wasn't supposed to be dying. When they died, they were breaking tradition and tradition did nothing for them. The clergy had betrayed them so many times, they didn't want clergy. Their families didn't want to gather. In a way, it was a window into what would come.

How so?

For that generation, not just gays, it became clearer and clearer that tradition was dead. Especially in places like California. Here in Marin, 81 percent of people choose to be cremated. Of those cremations, 15 percent have some type of memorial. We went on to buy funeral homes because the profession was not willing to do what their customers were asking them to do. You get something in the mail where you select what you want, usually a \$1200-\$1800 cremation.

You mean, from a typical mainstream funeral home.

Right. Then when you die, your survivor faxes the signatures for the disposition and Neptune comes and picks you up in a white van and then you're gone. You're cremated and thrown over the ocean with 100 other cremations and that's it. I call it the commercialization of denial. You don't have to look upon death and you don't have to resolve that the person really is gone. You can stay in denial. You're also robbed of community. This is the opposite of Jewish burial. We had a green Jewish burial here last Friday. And green burial is Jewish burial.

You mean all Jewish burials are green?

Should be. I have a Jewish cemetery and funeral home down in Los Angeles. The most Orthodox casket is a simple pine box, and that's no different than what we're using. We do use other types of woods, but they'll be reclaimed, or we'll use just shrouds. Normally, the bodies aren't cosmetized. We usually don't have open caskets for Jewish services, we have a private room beforehand, and the family goes in, because it's most important for them to see the body as it is—cleaned, combed and shrouded. In Jewish law, you don't want to make the body seem as though it's alive. The Jewish tradition is very old and I think it's the best—and it's for the

survivors as well as the dead. It's supposed to trigger undeniably the beginning of grief. You can't be in denial anymore. You can, if Grandma looks like she's sleeping, which is what they would always want to see in my town—"Oh, she looks so peaceful!" Because grief doesn't feel good. But it will, in the end, hopefully, help you get through this thing that will completely change your life. In the burial, we really encourage the family to cover the grave.

With soil?

Yes, it can be a handful, or a child's shovelful. On one green interment, the friends and family covered the entire grave. It's an act of finality, so you can begin the next stage of grief.

It sounds like you did a lot of research into this.

It's from working in a Hollywood cemetery. We've had movie stars and a few punk rockers, but it's really about immigrants—Russian Jews, Armenians, Latins, Thai Buddhists. There are so many different traditions to learn and then serve. We catered to their needs and studied what they wanted. And I pick from each one things that I think are really working for people. We try and do circles of remembrance instead of everyone seated in rows, facing forward, looking at one person. It was something I read about, that the Universalist Church had done, which we kind of appropriated for everyone.

Tell me more about the videotaped tributes you do.

While I was in New York, my brother acquired 13 funeral homes in St. Louis and in our hometown in Springfield and he was doing well. But the tribute was at the core. So we still had both traditions—we had the body, open casket, the person "sleeping" and also the big-screen television. But it worked. People would get catharsis. My first tribute was mainly photos with some home video. I was amazed at how simple but how powerful it was to just start at the beginning and go to the end with images and music.

Does the family choose the music?

Yes. In the Midwest, it's a lot of "Memories" by Barbra and "I Did it My Way" and some country-western. But when I watched my first tribute being shown, it was better than anything I'd ever done, which was kind of upsetting and inspiring.

Why was it upsetting?

Well, I'd sat in so many writers' workshops and roundtables where we'd all read our writings and I'd never had an experience where something that I'd created had such an impact on people. Nothing I'd ever done before had caused people to laugh and cry in a period of eight minutes. It was a form that was obviously needed. And it was a form that didn't exist before. That was the inspiring part. No one reads the Great American Novel anymore, so it's probably good I didn't write it. Our archive is America, it's their stories being uploaded weekly. There are over 10,000 individual archives now. And those range from one picture with text to full-fledged, 15-minute productions. We're starting to make things that look like documentaries for some people and things that look like reality television for other people. Now we're helping people compile ongoing histories of their children's lives, beginning in the prenatal period. That's what Forever Studios does, we document lives.

Why did you sell all your funeral homes?

They weren't making all that much money. It seemed

like it was too late for the dream of becoming a conglomerate. The giants were already giants. So we sold all the funeral homes and we were left with me and this crazy idea that we were going to make these computerized memories. The cemetery was much more important to me than the mortuary—the cemetery as it was conceptually, an institution whose purpose is memory, a place to connect the dead, the living and the unborn. The substance of those memories had always been Stone Age and Bronze Age, and I felt there should be a new substance—images, digitally preserved. More people visit our online cemeteries to view archives than they do to come visit loved ones who are buried there. They talk to them, many of them talk on a weekly basis, tell them how they're doing.

What drew you to the green burial idea?

The idea is certainly not new, it's something that began with our primitive ancestors. But it came back when the tradition of cremation was starting to be normal.

And that happened because people realized it was insane to keep putting bodies in the ground?

And insane to pay so much money for it. The green tradition was started in Great Britain in 1992 by Nicholas Aubrey as an outgrowth of the natural birth movement. Soon after having seeing his child delivered by natural birth, he began to witness his father's decline and decided there needed to be a natural death movement—it was so wonderful to go through that process at birth, there should be a corollary for death. He wanted to put the process back in people's hands.

How much space does a green burial take up, compared to a traditional one?

For a body, we have a 9-foot circular easement. In a traditional burial, it's usually 8-by-3.

So you're taking up more room.

We're preserving more room. This is about not wasting land. We're creating permanently preserved green space by combining burials with conservation easements. We're creating one of the most impermeable barriers to development you can have.

Aren't all cemeteries barriers to development?

No. It's possible to vacate cemetery land and build on it. It was possible in St. Louis to build a monorail through a black cemetery. It's unpopular, but you need an additional tool to keep it from happening. And [mainstream] cemeteries are not "green," because they're so green, if you know what I mean. In California, to keep a 63-acre cemetery green at the height of summer can cost \$15,000 in water, to keep the beautiful lakes with the water lilies. They're not "green" because it's not native grass. Here, when you have that 9-foot easement for a body, or the 1-3-foot easement for cremated remains, you purchase a restoration easement. It can be native grassland seeded with wildflowers, it can be native coastal oak, it can be redwood. We're working with restoration ecologists who are studying what was in the land, what was native, what was invading the land, what butterflies came, what birds came, and they're planning what should be here. So it's restoration and it's preservation.

ARCHIVES: [More Pacific Sun Features](#)

PHOTO OF TYLER CASSITY BY RORY McNAMARA

[return to top](#)

MARIN'S BEST EVERY WEEK