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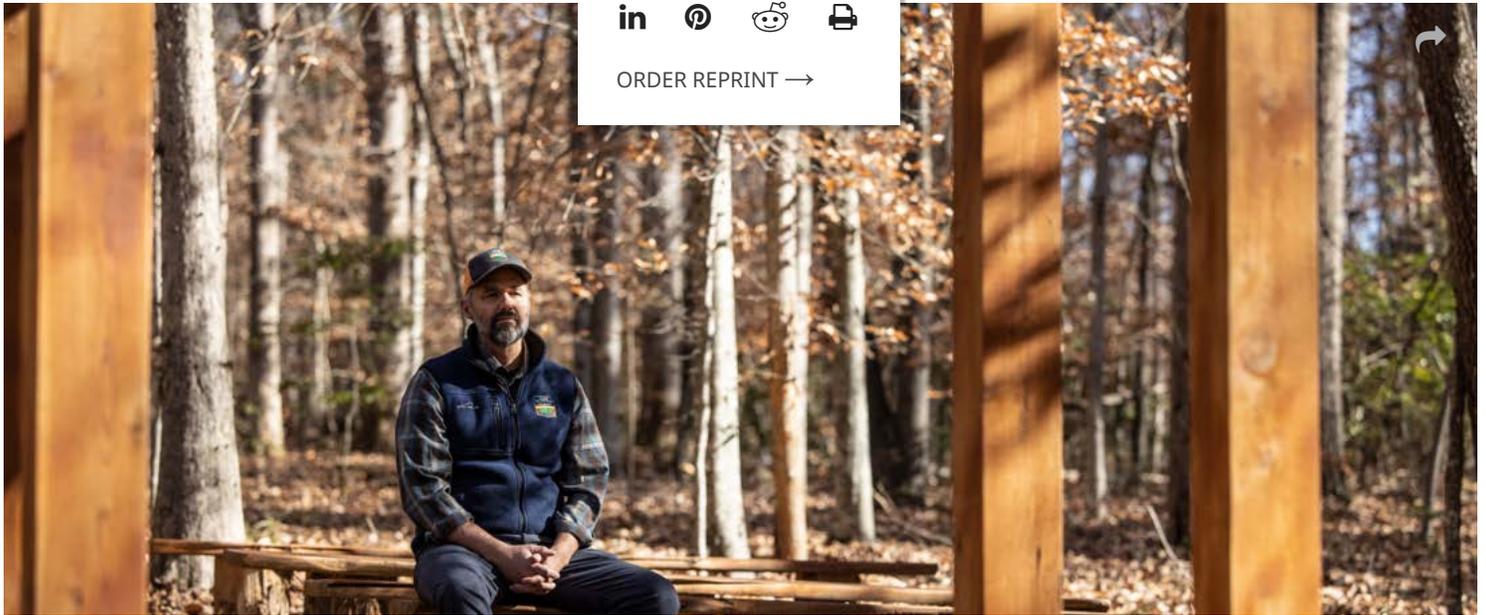
This man created a greener, prettier and cheaper kind of cemetery in SC. Here's why

BY THÉODEN JANES

UPDATED DECEMBER 06, 2021 8:42 AM



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Eric Martinson died in a Mint Hill Medical Center bed on the last Wednesday of September, multiple organs having failed him 17 days after he was admitted with a severe case of COVID-19.

The very next day, his wife of 33 years, Jean — still in shock, her eyes swollen from all the tears — was in a car heading south on I-85 toward South Carolina, hoping she'd find the type of place she and Eric had imagined could be a final resting place for both of them.

She knew immediately that it had been worth the trip.

TOP VIDEOS



Weddington routs Myers Park in Cabarrus County

“We got out there and it just seemed ... peaceful,” Jean Martinson recalls of her introduction to [Kings Mountain Preserve](#), a 38-acre tract in a rolling, wooded section of Blacksburg in Cherokee County. It’s technically a cemetery, but looks and feels nothing like a traditional cemetery.

“Then when she (Marti Layden, the preserve’s director) took us over that footbridge, over the creek and up the hill there, the sun was streaming through the trees,” Jean says, “and it just struck me: This is the place.”

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It's a beautiful piece of forest. It allows only natural burials, meaning there are no metal caskets, no vaults, and no embalming fluids. It's also all protected by a perpetual conservation easement through a partnership with the nonprofit [Upstate Forever](#), meaning there's no risk of Walmart trying to build a store there 50 years from now.

It's a symbolic move for Robertson, too — after all, he's pretty sure the traditional funeral business almost killed him when he was younger.

'YOU NEED TO GET YOUR AFFAIRS IN ORDER'

Terry Robertson's dad was an engineer. His brother became one, too. Robertson tries to explain why he, meanwhile, was drawn to dealing with death as a young man, but no answer that really makes solid sense comes out of him.

There was, however, a reasonable explanation for how Robertson got a cancer that almost killed him at age 30.

Throughout his 20s, while working at a variety of different funeral homes, he was being exposed to formaldehyde practically on a daily basis as an embalmer. According to the National Cancer Institute, formaldehyde causes myeloid leukemia and rare cancers, including cancers of the paranasal sinuses, nasal cavity, and nasopharynx.

The one he was diagnosed with is among the rarest: synovial sarcoma of the neck. Stage 4.

Robertson was given a 30% chance of living five years. His prognosis at one point was so bad, he says, that the chief of head and neck surgery at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston told him, "You need to get your affairs in order."

But even though he had spent most of his adult life around the dead, he never truly worried that he might be joining them.

"I think," Robertson says, "it was a combination of being young and also just having that (mindset) of, you know, 'This is not gonna take me out. I've got too much life to live. There's no way that my life is gonna end now. That's just kind of the way I was thinking. I was scared. I just didn't ever feel like I was gonna die.'"

His hunch was right. After a year-and-a-half-long battle, the treatments beat back the

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that would be his legacy.

And it was ... until he became aware of green burial grounds via trade magazines ... which inspired him to explore the possibility of opening one in the Carolinas ... despite the fact that there was a part of him that wondered whether he should be spending money on starting another new business.

AN INDUSTRY THAT’S TURNING GREEN

Green burial is a little bit old-school and a little bit new-school.

It’s old-school in the sense that it marks a return to simpler times, when the dead were wrapped in shrouds made of natural fibers like cotton or silk — or, in the most elaborate cases, put in caskets constructed by hand from pine wood or wicker — and their graves were dug by hand.

It’s new-school in the sense that it ties into the general trend of promoting eco-friendly practices that reduce carbon footprint.

Traditional funerals and burials rely not just on embalming and the toxic chemicals involved with that process, but on vaults and caskets made from materials that a) are imported via shipping methods that generate large amounts of carbon emissions and b) will never biodegrade.

If you’re wondering, by the way, whether embalming is necessary in order to safely handle the dead, the answer is generally no. The process uses chemicals that delay decomposition, and it’s done so the person looks cosmetically “normal” when on public display.

That does underscore a downside, though: Logistically, green burials can present a challenge because they need to be arranged fairly quickly before natural decomposition takes place (although it is slowed by other means, including dry ice or refrigeration).

Another potential deterrent might be the fact that because green grave sites are so much less conspicuously marked, they can be hard to find (although Robertson, like some other green burial site owners, provides precise GPS coordinates to loved ones to help with finding exact locations).

Still, relatively recently and relatively quickly, green burial has taken off.

In 2005, the [Green Burial Council](#) was founded to establish standards for the practice

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Today, there are more than 200 green burial sites in North America. Only a fraction of those, however — just eight, according to a March 2021 [report by Science News](#) — do double duty as protected nature preserves.

And Kings Mountain Preserve, in fact, might just be unique.

THE OBVIOUS (AND NOT SO OBVIOUS) SELLING POINTS

Blacksburg is a town of about 1,900 people, and when you travel along Indian Springs Road on the way to the preserve, it seems even smaller than that.

The drive is peaceful, almost traffic-less — in fact, relax too much and you might miss the entrance, marked by a rustic, tucked-away sign with a colorful logo depicting a river cutting through a wooded valley and posts into which two watchful owls have been carved. Nothing suggests a cemetery awaits down the winding dirt road.

The sign at the entrance to the property. Théoden Janes TJANES@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM

Upon reaching the main area in the forest clearing, you feel like you've arrived at a small summer camp or scout lodge. There's a covered pavilion over here, picnic tables and a fire pit over there, a log cabin up on a hill, dogwoods, hardwoods, ferns and wildflowers everywhere.

Robertson, who's now on the other side of 50 but still lean from years of mountaineering (most recently, in June, he scaled 20,310-foot Denali in Alaska), greets you with a smile and a folder containing a variety of brochures and printouts.

He seems to know, once he's gotten you out there, that you don't have to be told about the place's biggest selling point, which is its natural beauty. It's all around you.

But its other considerable draw is less obvious.

A traditional funeral service with a traditional cemetery service will cost, according to his research, about \$15,000 on average. A green burial at the preserve can run more than \$8,000 cheaper. Cremation services with cemetery space are also less than half the price at the preserve.

Why are green burials so relatively inexpensive? Generally speaking, it's because they don't include the steep costs of embalming, ornate caskets, or concrete vaults.

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'OH MY GOSH! THIS IS GORGEOUS. BUT...'

The short answer, he believes now, is yes.

This year, Robertson says, Kings Mountain Preserve has had a combined total of 21 “at-need” and “pre-need” services (“at need” being for families who are dealing with a death that has already occurred, and “pre-need” being for individuals who are planning ahead, prior to their passing). Pets — including his own, a gray Tabby named Gary — have been buried there already as well.

It’s been hugely gratifying to see people finding what they need here. It’s also been no small relief. Because all of this was, of course, a gamble.

In recent years, as he was becoming more interested in the idea of green burial, Robertson was also becoming closer and closer to paying off his Pineville funeral home. And that was a big deal, because he was also about to start paying for his oldest son, TJ, to attend Furman University, [South Carolina’s most expensive college](#).

But he couldn’t resist the pull toward the green burial business. In some small way, he saw it as promoting funeral practices that might reduce the risk of diseases like the one he suffered through as a young man; mostly, though, he simply saw it as an environmentally responsible alternative to his more-traditional business.

“I was about to pay my funeral home off last year. We had everything planned. Then all of a sudden I come to my wife and I’m like, ‘You just gotta hear this.’ And she didn’t kill me,” Robertson says, chuckling. “She bought in. She said, ‘Yeah, let’s do it.’”

So that was the easy part. Realizing the vision was much harder.

At almost every turn, there was more work to be done (removing trash that had been dumped at the end of one of the service roads, cleaning up the cabin, cutting the roughly 3-mile trail throughout the different sections of the preserve, etc.) and more money to spend (paying to have endless amounts of deadfall trees removed, paying to have the outdoor areas around the cabin re-stained, building the pavilion, etc.).

The pavilion at Kings Mountain Preserve in an early stage of its construction last year. *COURTESY OF TERRY ROBERTSON*

In the meantime, of course, no money was coming in. “So there was struggle,” Robertson says. “But I look at struggle as kind of a door for growth. And I had had an

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And although it's been a grassroots effort to get the word out, it *is* getting out.

EVERYTHING JUST SEEMS TO FIT, NATURALLY

One of the people word got to, early on, was Marti Layden.

She says she decided about five years ago that she wanted a green burial — “because I didn’t want to spend a lot of money on a funeral, honestly” — but didn’t connect with the green cemetery in Asheville and otherwise could only find traditional cemeteries that had set aside small areas for green burials. She didn’t want that.

Then, in November 2020, a friend sent her an article on [Natural Awakenings Charlotte’s website](#) about Kings Mountain Preserve, which had opened just a few weeks earlier.

She made the hour’s drive from Mooresville without an appointment, lucked into an impromptu tour, and before it was even over, she thought: *This is what I’m looking for.*

The next month Layden came back to pick out a plot.

“He (Robertson) allowed me just to take time to be out there by myself, and I picked the area that’s called Fern Ridge,” she says, referring to an area that features a blanket of Christmas ferns on a forest floor that rolls down to the banks of Kings Creek. “And I said, ‘Terry, I know this sounds ridiculous, because I’m not gonna hear anything once I’m dead, but I can hear the stream. I love the sound of water flowing.’ I’m finding a lot of people like that, too. A lot of people are leaning more towards, ‘OK, I can see the water, or I can hear the water, I like this area.’”

A photograph taken in the Fern Ridge section of Kings Mountain Preserve by Terry Robertson. *COURTESY OF TERRY ROBERTSON*

She knows this because Robertson liked her enthusiasm so much that, out of the blue, he asked her to come work for him part-time, as the preserve’s director.

It’s a gentle enthusiasm that goes with the serenity of the setting.

Another piece of the Kings Mountain Preserve puzzle that feels ... like a natural fit.

Just like the ferns, wildflowers and native trees that are already springing from the cremains of people who have been laid to rest in the living memorial area of the preserve (cremains that have been treated with a soil amendment so as to neutralize

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you think of a cemetery and you think of death, Robertson says as he stands in the middle of the preserve, the late-morning sun streaming through the colorful fall leaves.

“But when you come out here, you’re surrounded by life.”

This story was originally published December 5, 2021 6:00 AM.

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