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Informed Final Choices Crestone End of Life Project

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VOLUNTEER NEWSLETTER

Open-Air Cremation: Meeting the Elements

Paul Kloppenburg is a founding member and long-time CEOLP board member and fire team leader. Here he describes the physical aspects that propel the actual conducting of a cremation.

Early on the morning of a cremation, volunteers arrive, rain or shine, whether below freezing or with insects galore, rain sprinkles or sudden winds. Several volunteers on the Parking team are already in place to guide people and cars to the proper location. Family and friends adorn the shrine table with pictures and objects of their loved one.

The day before, volunteers on the Fire team prepare the pyre for the early morning ceremony. Preparation involves the precise packing of firewood below the grate on which the deceased will lie, splitting kindling, stacking cordwood, and protecting the pyre from inclement weather. Another set of volunteers on the Site Management team sets up chairs and incense stand, rakes the ground or removes the snow, and takes care of whatever else needs attention.

When the deceased arrives, a volunteer host rings the bell, bringing attention to everyone present. The public is directed to stand on each side of the procession path with juniper sprigs in hand. The host rings the bell again, and the procession commences, usually accompanied by some form of music. As the site gong is rung, the procession enters the pyre site circle in clockwise fashion, and the stretcher with the deceased is placed on top of the grate. The family and public are invited to lay juniper on top of the shrouded body after which the Fire team carefully stacks cordwood all around it. Once completed, the fire master gives four designated mourners torches for lighting the pyre.

The next 20 minutes is a dramatic ignition of the carefully arranged pyre. Smoke billows along with the intense crackling sound of wood burning. Over the next 2 ½ to 3 hours of high temperatures, the fire settles in. The Fire team keeps constant attention to the burn for a clean and dignified cremation, all the while enduring, closeup, the intense heat of the fire. The family and public are invited to share eulogies of their loved one.

Regardless of whether a CEOLP registrant opts for open-air cremation or green burial, the process of preparing for and honoring the deceased usually takes place over a 3-day period. Family and friends can use this extended time to create a home funeral, i.e., caring for the body with the help of CEOLP volunteers, and communing with their loved one in a natural setting. All these components help in processing the loss and are transformative forces in coping with and healing one's grief.

Photo Credit: MattLitPhoto.com

Jennifer Thomson

Jennifer's husband, Philip Incao, died on Feb. 28, 2022. His open-air cremation was featured in the New York Times: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/18/us/colorado-funeral-pyre.html

1. What volunteer role(s) do you take part in with CEOLP?

- So far, I have helped with the Juniper gathering and parking.

2. About how long have you been volunteering?`

- Over a year.

3. What first motivated you to become involved?

- When my husband died and was cremated here, I thought of becoming a volunteer. I liked the whole feeling of the mission. Also, the way people worked together; there was a lot of warmth

4. What's most important and meaningful to you about it?

- I am happy to be part of that experience: The love and care of the cremation from beginning to the end I find inspiring. It is like birthing into the spiritual world for each deceased.

5. What do you enjoy about it?

- Each cremation reflects the beliefs and wishes of the deceased and their family.

6. Is there anything that has challenged you about it, and if so, how that's helped you know yourself better or grow?

- Each cremation I attend, I am faced with the thought of dying one day. This helps me to be more conscious of living. Also, I am more aware of others and their struggles in life.

News From the Board

- On **Wednesday, April 9th at 7 p.m.** mountain time, IFC/CEOLP will hold its next quarterly meeting in person at the Little Shepherd fellowship hall in downtown Crestone and on zoom.
- Guest speakers will be Hospice del Valle Executive Director Amber Cortez, LPN and Volunteer Coordinator, Kelly Diss, CNA. They will provide an introduction to hospice services in the San Luis Valley and talk about the Medical Orders for Scope of Treatment (MOST) form: https://medschool.cuanschutz.edu/docs/coloradocareplanninglibraries/default-document-library/most-form-2018.pdf?sfvrsn=35ea9abb_1 and Five Wishes form: https://www.fivewishes.org/five-wishes-sample.pdf.