May 2026

Informed Final Choices — Crestone End of Life Project

Issue #14

# VOLUNTEER NEWSLETTER

## In Memoriam

Stephanie Gaines, CEOLP's co-founder and longtime leader, died May 4, in Madison, Wisconsin, where her son and his family live. She was 82.

Stephanie was the primary reason CEOLP came into legal existence. Through many months of determined, tireless effort, she cut through red tape at the county and state levels and, with the help of others, established CEOLP as a nonprofit and presented its vision at endless meetings. Once established, Stephanie led the organization for years, helping refine the volunteer roles and processes, setting policies, and serving as CEOLP's institutional memory.

As a practicing Buddhist with an eclectic and encompassing spiritual outlook, Stephanie embodied the sense of pure, selfless service expressed in a phrase she repeated frequently: "Leave your shoes at the door." Meaning, leave your ego and all self-interest behind as you enter into this space of simply being here for someone else. A memorial service at the pyre in Crestone will be held the morning of **June 18th**.

## CEOLP: A Brief History

Ask one of Crestone's old-timers, like today's featured volunteer, Paul Kloppenburg, and they will be proud to tell you about CEOLP's long and storied history. The tale begins in 1998 when the first of eight private open-air cremations took place, sometimes in the back yards and driveways of local residents. It wasn't until October 2006 that CEOLP was officially founded as a non-profit 501.C13 community service organization, an achievement that would not have been possible without the support of the Crestone community and the local Saguache County commissioners.

The first authorized open-air cremation at the current pyre site was held in January 2008. Since then, volunteers have facilitated the cremation of 93 residents! In 2022, local interest led to further development of a dedicated natural burial ground adjacent to the pyre. CEOLP has so far conducted five natural burials.

## News From the Board

- The next IFC/CEOLP quarterly meeting will take place on **July 8th at 7 p.m.** in person at the Little Shepherd fellowship hall in Crestone and on zoom. Guest presenter, Karen G. Johnston, an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister and practicing Buddhist, will explore issues of mortality and death education. To learn more, visit her website: https://datewithdeathclub.com/
- CEOLP's next Registration Party will be held **July 18th from 2-4 p.m.** at Crestone's Charter School. CEOLP volunteers will be standing by to help you fill out forms and answer questions.

## Volunteer Highlight

Co-founder along with Stephanie Gaines, Paul serves as the long-time site manager and fire expert of CEOLP. Perhaps a less known fact is that he is also the driving force behind the "Precious Home Planet" billboards along Highway 17 in Saguache County.

**Paul Kloppenburg**

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

- Fire master, grave digger, site improvements, care of body, constructing stretchers, pyre torches etc., participating in podcasts and zoom meetings, leading site re-enactments, all aspects of green burial, parking maintenance, including weed pulling, along the entire road.

2. About how long have you been volunteering?

- Since before the founding and inception of CEOLP.

3. What first motivated you to become involved?

- Realizing that the Crestone community wanted alternative forms of caring for the sick and those who have passed.

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

- Most important is that as a volunteer community we can work/serve together regardless of what one's background may be. I find it meaningful when we adopt a large, holistic view of the stages of life, and how as a community we evolve in ways to deal with these stages that is humanistic, grounded, and allows for celebration!

5. What do you enjoy about it?

- When there is a cremation/burial what I enjoy seeing is a Community with a capital 'C' as there is a broad representation of our local community. Seeing folks walking into the pyre circle rather bereaved - yet, when they leave they're noticeably more buoyant, more talkative -- if not having laughter and a sense of humor. The ceremony is a deep process that touches many and it is a direct, healthy way to assimilate and work through often tangled emotions.

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

- Working with volunteers is challenging, but also full of wonderful surprises, as each person adds color to the event. Growth for me has been in 'seeing - learning' that many people have many ideas of what the afterlife is like, and peoples' beliefs/religion will set the tone