



ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



Caskets, cremation and composting: The business of death in New Mexico

BY [ALAINA MENCINGER](#) / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18TH, 2023 AT 3:57PM



Justin Crowe, president of Parting Stone, holds a person's remains that his company turned into solidified remains. (Eddie Moore/Journal)

It's not the American way to talk about death. But after months of staggering COVID-19 deaths turned into years — totalling more than 9,000 in New Mexico — death became a daily discussion.

“There were so many deaths, it was so busy,” said Liz Hamilton, a sales representative at Albuquerque-based death-care company Passages International, who was a practicing mortician at the time. “... The funeral home that I worked for, it was, I mean, it was just overwhelming – and this was a pretty small town.”

Funeral directors were sometimes forced to meet with grieving families virtually. There was debate about how morticians should best avoid contracting the disease, sometimes riddled with misinformation and confusion, Hamilton said. While her friends complained about being bored working from home, Hamilton was inundated with business.

In the years since, the dust has settled in the death-care industry. But some changes are here to stay, funeral directors and death-care providers say, and consumers themselves are leading the charge.



The kiva at Sunset Memorial Park, which contains an ossuary for cremated remains. (Roberto E. Rosales/Journal)

Cremation and cost

When Louis Salazar of Salazar Funeral Homes and Mortuary in Albuquerque first started learning about the funeral business, there was

just one funeral package. Only casketed burials were available, and each body was embalmed.

Sign up for our free weekday Business newsletter

+ But now, when families come into the funeral home he owns with his wife, Gloria, most families aren't interested in a traditional burial.

+ Louis Salazar is a fourth-generation mortician who grew up playing hide and seek in a funeral home. When his father was running the business, cremation was just a fad.

+ "My dad, I remember just boasting and saying, 'Oh we'll never get high in cremation,'" Louis Salazar said.

+ In 2015, the U.S. cremation rate surpassed the burial rate for the first time in the nation's history. That same year, Louis Salazar built a crematory. He isn't alone; in 2021, four in 10 funeral homes in the nation owned their own crematories, with more planning to buy or build one in the future, according to data from the National Funeral Directors Association.

+ The cremation rate in New Mexico and other southwestern states is higher than other regions of the U.S., said Tom Antram, CEO and president of French Funerals. By 2030, the NFDA estimates that three out of four of the dispositions in New Mexico will be cremations. And in certain counties, the rate is even higher. Robert Noblin, Belen mayor and owner of Noblin Funerals, said that in Valencia County, the cremation rate is between 80% and 85%.

Noblin, who's been running his Belen funeral home since 2005, now owns four crematories. Owning his own crematories, he said, has offset some of the lost revenue from higher-priced casket burials, and increased the number of families that Noblin Funerals can service.

“In 2005, we served 41 families,” Noblin said. “Last year, company-wide, we handled the care of over 3,100.”

As the price of funerals rise — increasing more than 200% between 1986 and 2017, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data — cremation may seem like a cheaper option. But the lower costs generally apply just to direct cremation, without a service, memorial, or viewing — a choice which a majority of Americans eschew. Almost 60% of people chose either cremation with some memorial service, or a casketed funeral with a viewing, followed by cremation.

Louis and Gloria Salazar said while many assume that cremation is the cheaper option, they often have cremation funerals that total more than coffin burials. Memorial services and viewings can add to the cost of cremation.

“There’s a misconception that it’s cheaper,” Gloria Salazar said. “When families come in here, they think \$895 ... but they come in here and dollars are not an issue. And they tell us what they want, and we plan this nice service, exactly like they want it — and at the end, they’re paying \$9,000.”

While a direct cremation with a container provided by the family cost a median \$2,550 in 2021, according to data from the NFDA, a casketed funeral with a viewing and ceremony followed by cremation costs \$6,970 – almost double the median cost of an immediate burial, and on par with a viewing followed by burial.

For Gloria Salazar, this reflects the funeral industry becoming more service based than product based. Families aren’t looking for expensive caskets or urns, but instead a meaningful service.

“Sometimes, families just want ... to be taken care of, and want to be heard,” Gloria Salazar said. “And they think that they’re calling for a price.”

Death in the digital age

Younger generations are now planning funerals — and they're doing it differently. Justin Crowe, CEO of Santa Fe death-care startup Parting Stone, which condenses cremated remains into stones, said millennials like himself are often uncomfortable with traditional funeral homes.

“I’ve been to a lot of funeral homes, as a millennial in the death-care space, and I’ve never been to a funeral home where I want to plan my parents’ funerals at,” Crowe said. “And that’s a problem.”

+

Several local funeral homes have added in options to plan online or over the phone. According to 2021 consumer trends data, about 65% of people nationwide planned services online. But of that number, almost half said they ultimately finished funeral plans in person with the help of a funeral director.

+

+

+

Antram of French Funerals said the pandemic increased the number of people taking advantage of online planning at the funeral home. But, he said, most families still want to plan in person.

+

“This is a pretty intimate conversation,” Antram said. “We do have the ability for families to go do most of it online without ever talking to us, but very few do.”

+

But technology isn’t just for planning. To try and overcome “death avoidance,” Crowe launched the “Death Curious” podcast. Natural Burial New Mexico, which operates a private burial ground outside of Belen, recently started using social media to share its services. And Passages International, an Albuquerque-based company that sells environmentally friendly burial products, started a geocache program for people scattering cremations, allowing families to document the exact coordinates of where their loved one is scattered and upload videos and photos about their lives.

+

+

+

The innovation isn’t limited to alternative death-care providers like Parting Stone. Parting Stone’s services and Passages products have been adopted by many traditional funeral homes as well — a welcome surprise, Crowe said.

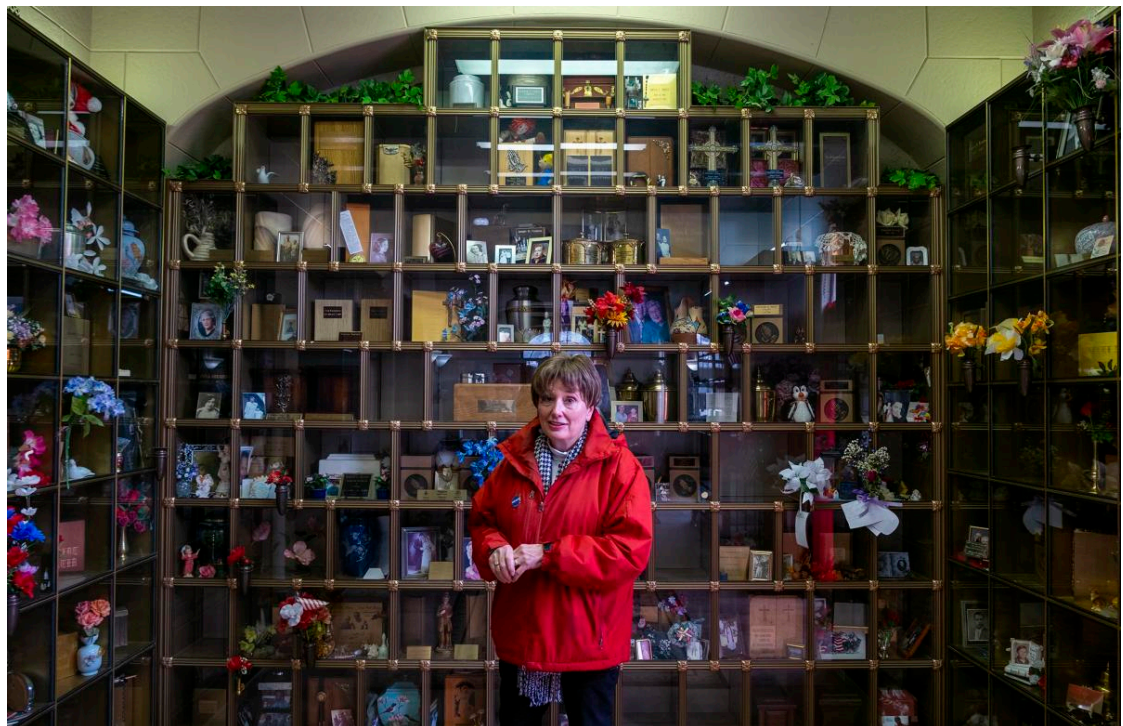
“When we launched, I knew the reputation of the death-care space adopting new technologies, and it was not positive,” Crowe said. “I was shocked.”

French Funerals was one of the early adopters of Parting Stone. And Antram said that alternative services besides urns and caskets are becoming more widely known — and funeral homes need to keep up with the trends.

“It’s only becoming more broad, more mainstream,” Antram said. “We see things like that happen and Justin, what he created in Parting Stone — 20 years ago, that would have never been a pipe dream of a product.”

The who of death care

As more Americans become “nones” — people with no religious affiliation — memorial services have changed as well, with more people moving away from traditional religious figures.



Gail Rubin, the “Doyenne of Death” tours the cremation niches at Fairview Memorial Park. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Journal)

Gail Rubin, the “Doyenne of Death,” is a registered celebrant, a “wedding planner”-like role that organizes a memorial. As a celebrant, Rubin interviews family members and incorporates personal elements

into the funeral. She did a service for a man who was a fan of “Lord of the Rings,” and read a passage from a leather-bound copy of the books. Another man was beloved for his homemade peanut butter in life — at his memorial, every attendee received a bag of peanuts.

“It’s amazing how creative people can get,” Rubin said.

The ownership of funeral homes is shifting, as well.

+ Before buying the family-owned funeral home in Belen, Noblin was working for a privately owned funeral home in Virginia. But that location was bought by a corporate chain — a change in ownership that Noblin said is becoming more common, especially if families don’t have children or relatives to pass the business onto.

+ “Corporations are everywhere,” Noblin said. “For some owners, that might be the only option to sell.”

+ Most funeral homes in the U.S. are still independently owned. But Noblin said some corporate funeral homes are more focused on numbers than families.

+ But some changes to who handles death have been positive, said Elizabeth Davis, vice president of marketing at Passages, as a new generation of funeral directors and morticians enter the industry.

+ “Traditionally, the funeral home owners are older men who maybe ... passed down through the generations, and they’ve been doing that for 100 years,” Davis said. “You’re starting to see a lot more young women enter the industry.”

+ Davis said this change goes back to historic death-care practices, when women were generally in charge of funeral rites.

Going green

On 40 acres of privately-owned land outside of Belen, Claire McFadyen and Bryan Beard bury people in La Puerta Burial Grounds, wrapped in simple shrouds or willow carriers.

McFadyen and Beard are part of a growing movement for environmentally friendly burial, as many reject the larger carbon footprints of casketed burial and cremation.



Bryan Beard and Claire McFadyen stand near an open grave at La Puerta Burial Ground outside of Belen. (Roberto E. Rosales/Journal)

“Even before I knew about natural burial, I told him, ‘Just stick me in the ground and I want to turn back to dirt’,” McFadyen said.

McFadyen and Beard work with local funeral homes to get death certificates and burial permits. But they offer more choices than just cremation or burial, part of a growing interest in personalized death care that reflects the values of the deceased.

“People are actually thinking about things that matter to them and how that affects every aspect of their life,” McFadyen said. “I think people are thinking more long term, like, what is my impact? Not just now but even after I’m gone?”

The idea of a natural burial may sound familiar. “Doyenne of Death” Rubin said while natural burial has been growing in popularity, centuries-old Jewish burial practices are similar to natural burial.

Environmentally friendly burial company Passages has grown since its inception in 1999. CEO and president Darren Crouch started Passages by selling a handful of products in the back of a northern New Mexico funeral home — now the company's offerings have exploded into hundreds of different death-care products, including bamboo cremation containers, willow and sea grass carriers and urns made of biodegradable material.



Bryan Beard stands with the wagon used to transport bodies to their final resting place at La Puerta Burial Grounds. (Roberto E. Rosales/Journal)

Although there are more choices now, not all green burial options are available in New Mexico. Alkaline hydrolysis, or aquamation, which reduces a body into water, and natural organic reduction, which composts a body into soil, are prohibited in New Mexico despite the lower environmental impact. Both processes are legal in Colorado, and aquamation was legalized in Arizona last year. In January of this year, New York became the sixth state to legalize body composting.

“Most people, when they walk into a funeral home, they’re presented with a multiple choice,” said Seth Viddal, managing partner at the Natural Funeral in Colorado, which offers both body composting and aquamation. “...Do you want our version of a cremation or do you want

our version of a burial? And that's worked for a pretty long time until people realized that between those two options, neither one of them is really generous or even considerate of the effects on the planet."

Viddal said when Colorado moved to legalize body composting, there was opposition from two forces: funeral directors, and the Catholic Church. But Viddal said over the course of testimony — which the Natural Funeral participated in — many funeral directors in the state changed their tune.

Crowe said the increase in green options — and alternative disposition in general — are consumer-driven.

"These are coming up not because the industry wants them to come up, but because the consumer wants them to come up," Crowe said.



A plot marker at La Puerta Burial Ground, decorated with dried flowers. (Roberto E. Rosales/Journal)

[Home](#) » [ABQnews Seeker](#) » **Caskets, cremation and composting: The business of death in New Mexico**

Albuquerque Journal and its reporters are committed to telling the stories of our community.

**• Do you have a question you want someone to try to answer for you?
Do you have a bright spot you want to share?**

We want to hear from you. [Please email yourstory@abqjournal.com](mailto:yourstory@abqjournal.com)

+

**Questions about the Legislature?
Albuquerque Journal can get you answers**

+

+

+

+

+

+

+

+