



# In Touch

Bay Area Funeral Consumers Association

[www.ba-fca.org](http://www.ba-fca.org)

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Fall 2019 Issue

## Composting Corpses: Progress and Questions Answered

*Notes from an Interview with Katrina Spade of Recompose  
by Deborah Meckler*

In our spring *In Touch* newsletter, you learned that the Washington State legislature was considering legalizing the composting of human remains as a death-care option (see [www.ba-fca.org/InTouch2019Spring.pdf](http://www.ba-fca.org/InTouch2019Spring.pdf), page 3). Well, it has come to pass that Washington governor, Jay Inslee, has now signed the law legalizing both composting and alkaline hydrolysis in his state.

Katrina Spade is the person who dreamed up the idea of composting human remains as one more answer to how to minimize the environmental impact of dealing with bodies. She worked with experts in soil science, engineering, and sustainable agriculture, to confirm that composting works on whole bodies. She has enlisted funeral specialists, death doulas, legal counsel, designers, and her own architectural knowledge to design a facility with an air of comfort and calm suitable for funeral services as well as for composting. She has numerous newspaper articles written about her efforts, has done TED talks (just Google Katrina Spade), and has testified before the Washington legislature in the effort to make composting a legally available option for what to do with your body when you are done with it.

Spade and her team are “doing a million things at once” to get **Recompose**, a commercial human composting business, up and running in Seattle by about March of 2021. Somehow Ms. Spade made time to talk to this reporter and answer my many questions.

My most burning question was how the composting process works so fast. It was



**Katrina Spade**

reported previously that a body could be completely decomposed within 6 months. But the website, [Recompose.life](http://Recompose.life), has more recently claimed that it takes only 30 days to turn a body—bones and all—to soil. Thirty days? How is that possible? Spade explained that the reason we usually find bones remaining long after the rest of the body has disappeared is that bones dry out and dry bones don't decompose. So the answer is to keep things moist. The Recompose method uses wood chips, straw, and alfalfa along with about 20 to 40 gallons of water per body. (This compares favorably with the 285 gallons of water per body used in the alkaline hydrolysis process.) The specially-designed Recompose vessels (patent pending) also work to break up the big bones into smaller pieces that will facilitate a faster decomposition.

Another question that that people often ask about composting human remains is “What about the smell”? The gardeners among you will know that properly aerated compost does not smell. But then again, we casual gardeners usually stick to composting plant material. Rotting flesh is quite another matter. But it turns out the aeration principle still holds. In South Carolina there is a “body farm” where forensic research is done using  
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### Do you shop at Mollie Stone's?

Mollie Stone's and others will make a contribution to BAFCA every time you use the Mollie Stone's escrip Community Card. See [www.ba-fca.org/MollieStoneInstr.html](http://www.ba-fca.org/MollieStoneInstr.html) for details. Every little bit helps!

### MEMBERS: Update your Info

Do you have a new address? A new phone number? Have you given us your next-of-kin information? Your date of birth? Have you decided or changed your mind about the mortuary you want to use? WE NEED TO KNOW! And we especially need a good email address for you. Send an email to [office@ba-fca.org](mailto:office@ba-fca.org) with your updated info. Or go online to [www.ba-fca.org/MemUpdateForm.html](http://www.ba-fca.org/MemUpdateForm.html). Or call us during office hours or send the info via US Mail. We accept all forms of communication!

**I asked my daughter if she'd seen my newspaper. Newspapers are old-fashioned, she said, handing me her iPad. The fly didn't stand a chance.**

(Composting, continued)

corpses left out in nature to decompose under a variety of circumstances. It is also a place where they train cadaver-sniffing dogs to find those corpses. Those expert sniffers completely ignored a well-aerated pile of woodchips harboring a composting human corpse. That sounds like (smells like?) pretty good assurance that our less-acute-than-dogs' olfaction will not be offended. The Recompose vessels are designed and operated to optimize aeration. This keeps all those tiny critters—the busy little decomposers—working at top efficiency, and coincidentally reduces odor. And for good measure, filters are used to freshen the through-flowing air.

So having shown that the vessel system works and having gotten composting legally approved, it now remains for Spade and her team to get a business up and running. They have found a site for their facility, and have started looking for their first real employee—participants up to this point have been volunteers, consultants, and investors. Spade expects to start with about 30 vessels, manufactured in the U.S. from powder-coated steel. Because the system is modular, Spade expects that the number of vessels could grow to around 80 in the initial facility. When the business is up and running smoothly, Spade hopes to license the technology and offer training for entities who would like to help people return their bodies to earth.

I had questions about the sustainable sourcing of the materials used inside the vessels. Currently the body is placed on, and covered with, a combination of wood chips, straw, alfalfa, and of course some water. Spade says she hopes to get the wood chips from arborist waste, when trees are trimmed or cut down. Straw is essentially agricultural waste. But alfalfa, which supplies nitrogen to keep the tiny composting organisms nourished and happy, is a commercial agricultural product. Spade says they will be experimenting with various other ag wastes and tweaking the process in hopes of finding a good substitute for the



alfalfa so as not to be in competition with the food supply.

After the composting is complete and everything is reduced to soil, families will be able to take some of the soil home if they want, to keep in an urn or use in their garden. The remaining soil will be donated to nearby conservation land.

One more interesting benefit of composting is that bodies can be “returned to earth” without requiring a dedicated plot of land as do burial or even green burial. Unlike cremation, there is no air pollution produced, and unlike alkaline hydrolysis, there is no liquid effluent. It is not even necessary to purchase a container for the body, such as a casket or urn. It is estimated that composting a body would save over a ton of carbon dioxide as compared to other disposition methods. All the carbon from the human remains and the wood chips and other matter are sequestered in the resulting soil to be taken up by the plants that subsequently grow in that soil and the creatures that eat those plants.

## ***New Office Manager***

We have a new office manager for BA-FCA, Lana Foster. She is working on Wednesday and Thursday mornings, 9 to 12.

Lana lives in Antioch. She received her B.A. degree from Willamette University in Oregon, majoring in chemistry and pre-Med. She also took Spanish courses, which is a help in this and her other part time job in customer service. Previously she was a Transplant Data Coordinator in the UCSF Medical Center, Transplant Services where she managed the waitlist for abdominal and thoracic transplants.

She had a rough start in her BA-FCA job. After two weeks she was driving here and was in an auto accident where her car flipped and she was slightly injured and her mother was very seriously injured. The mom is only now recovering. While Lana was out of service, various board members did the best they could with mail, office phone, and email. At present the phone is set to ring first in the office and then at Marjorie Bridges' house, to catch the calls when Lana is not in the office.



## **Tributes**

### **With thanks to these donors**

Each year our organization receives gifts made to honor respected individuals or in memory of loved ones who are missed. Below are the financial tributes we have acknowledged since the last newsletter:

#### ***In Memory of:***

***Edna Fong by Helen Charette***  
***Edwin Bridges by Helen Charette***  
***Edwin Bridges by Jennifer Harris***  
***Edwin Bridges by Jane Hillhouse***  
***Edwin Bridges by FCA of California***  
***Harry Langdon by Dian Langdon***

#### ***In Honor of:***

***Elsie Yamamoto by Martha Yamamoto***

## Virtual Cadavers

This year a few U.S. medical schools will offer their anatomy curriculum without any cadavers. Instead their students will probe the human body using three-dimensional renderings in virtual reality, combined with physical replicas of the organs and real patient medical images such as ultrasound and CT scans.

The program developers hope technology can improve on some of the limitations of traditional approaches. It takes a long time to dissect cadavers, and some body parts are so inaccessible that they may be destroyed in the process. Plus, the textures and colors of an embalmed cadaver's organs do not match the vibrant colors of a living body, and donated bodies tend to be old and diseased. Organs are very flat and compressed.

Virtual anatomy tools, in contrast, provide a more faithful view of living organs, helping students form a foundational understanding of the body's structures. Through virtual reality headsets, or augmented-reality goggles, students can examine an organ from all angles. They can connect structure with function by watching a beating heart or moving joints.

Going cadaverless is also an economic decision, especially for new programs. It costs several million dollars to build a cadaver laboratory, which requires a lot of space as well as safety measures that meet legal regulations. And although cadavers are donated, medical schools still pay for preparation, maintenance and eventual disposition.

There may be drawbacks, however. It may be hard to develop a perception of depth in a virtual body, and students will miss out on seeing bodies' natural anatomical variations. They may lose the emotional, even philosophical impact of working with a cadaver, commonly seen as a doctor's first patient. It is also unclear as yet whether students will learn as well with digital tools.

From the perspective of a prospective cadaver, those of us who elect to donate our bodies should definitely have a Plan B in case we are replaced by technology.

*Excerpted with modification from Scientific American, October 2019*

## Steve Jobs on Death

"No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is a destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new."

~~ Steve Jobs

*IN TOUCH* is issued twice a year from the offices of Bay Area Funeral Consumers Association, 463 College Ave., Palo Alto, CA 94306

## Grandparents (Humor)

(Reported by a teacher who asked for stories about how the students spent their Christmas vacation.)

We always used to spend the holidays with Grandma and Grandpa. They used to live in a big brick house but Grandpa got retarded and they moved to Florida. Now they live in a tin box and have rocks painted green to look like grass.

They ride around on their bicycles and wear name tags because they don't know who they are anymore. They go to a building called a wreck center, but they must have got it fixed because it is all okay now, they do exercises there, but they don't do them very well. There is a swimming pool too, but all they do is jump up and down in it...with hats on.

At their gate, there is a doll house with a little old man sitting in it. He watches all day so nobody can escape. Sometimes they sneak out, and go cruising in their golf carts.

Nobody there cooks, they just eat out. And they eat the same thing every night—early birds. Some of the people can't get out past the man in the doll house. The ones who do get out, bring food back to the wrecked center for pot luck.

My Grandma says that Grandpa worked all his life to earn his retardment and says I should work hard so I can be retarded someday too. When I earn my retardment, I want to be the man in the doll house. Then I will let people out, so they can visit their grandchildren.

## The Future....

BAFCA is an organization that has been around, variously named, for 67 years. We would like to keep going. We feel that the information we publish and the services we provide are a public benefit. We need people willing to help. **We need volunteers and Board members.** We need fresh ideas about how to operate. If you or anyone you know has fresh ideas and is willing to help, please email us at [office@ba-fca.org](mailto:office@ba-fca.org) or call Margie Bridges at 650-321-6584.

We are down to a four-member Board of Directors since the resignation of Roberta Bailey at the end of June. We thank her for her many years of loyal assistance. She will continue to help with the annual meeting, mortuary price survey, and office projects when she is in town. Remaining board members are Allan Behr of Half Moon Bay, Peter Lee of East Palo Alto, Byron Chan of San Francisco, and Penny Phillips of Campbell. Board meetings are held monthly for two hours in Palo Alto. Members are welcome to attend. Call 650-321-2109 for information about time and place.

To be or not to be a horse rider,  
that is Equestrian. ~ Mark Simmons



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### RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

BA-FCA is a  
non-profit organization  
dedicated to protecting the right to  
choose meaningful, dignified,  
affordable death care, and to  
providing information to help make  
these choices.

### More Price List Noncompliance

Two national consumer protection organizations and two California-based consumer organizations have released a report showing that 25% of funeral homes in six large urban areas in California use a loophole in state law to hide their funeral prices. In Alameda County, only 27% of funeral homes are compliant, and three fifths of the non-compliant ones are associated with the nation's largest funeral home company—Service Corporation International (SCI), which goes under the name Dignity Memorial. The Consumer Federation of America says "In all of our research nationally, we have yet to find one Dignity Memorial funeral home that posts prices online."

**Before I Go, You Should Know**—This \$15 booklet contains useful forms (powers of attorney, advance directives, etc) and lots more! Order by emailing [office@ba-fca.org](mailto:office@ba-fca.org) or calling 650-321-2109.

### News You Can Use

**FCA-CA Annual Conference:** The FCA of California is holding its annual conference on Nov 9 in Santa Cruz. **All are welcome.** Register at [www.fca-calif.org/2018-registration-form](http://www.fca-calif.org/2018-registration-form). After the business meeting, the first topic will be "Updating Your Tech Contacts." Following the included lunch, the presentation will be "Our Carbon Footprint and all the Options: Cremation, Aquafication, Green Burial and Recomposition" presented by Brand Angell, UCSC professor and member of the Green Burial Council, and Holly Blue Hawkins of Last Respects Consulting.

**Reimagine the End of Life:** Mission Hospice is putting on a series of events Oct 24 to Nov 3 throughout the Bay Area asking big questions about life and death called Reimagine ([www.letsreimagine.org](http://www.letsreimagine.org)). It includes 200 events as well as conversations, interactive rituals, comedy shows and food experiences, many of which are free.

Free events include *One Last Thing: Interactive Installation*, 10/25 in SF; *When I Killed My Father*, about assisted suicide, 10/26 in Berkeley and 11/2 in Mill Valley; *Taking Charge: Planning for Your Health & Financial Future*, 10/30 in Foster City; *Grief: Writing to Heal*, 10/26 in San Mateo. And many more. Contact Mission Hospice, 650-554-1000, for more info.

**Veterans Clinic and Cemetery:** A congressional committee has approved another \$26 million to build a clinic for veterans and a national cemetery at the former Alameda Naval Air Station. The money is in addition to the \$87 million already appropriated for the project's design, engineering and environmental work. The cemetery will be a columbarium with niches to house the ashes of up to 300,000 veterans. Interments must be above ground because the site near San Francisco Bay is filled wetlands.

Work will be done in 10-year phases, with the first section due to be complete in about 30 months.

**Coroner Move:** The coroner's offices in San Mateo County will be relocated to the San Mateo Medical Center, 222 W. 39th Ave., San Mateo. The \$10 million budget to accomplish this was adopted Sept. 24 along with other revisions to the county hospital. Currently the coroner administrators are at 50 Tower Road, San Mateo, in rented rooms with the sheriff's crime lab. The pathologists who do autopsies are stationed at the medical center.

**Generational cheat sheet:** Many news stories are referring to named generations. Here is some guidance on the birth years for each generation:  
Gen Z, iGen, or Centennials: Born after 1996  
Millennials or Gen Y: 1977-1995  
Generation X: 1965 – 1976  
Baby Boomers: 1946 – 1964  
Traditionalists or Silent Generation: 1945 and Before