

Ashes to ashes

In SW Florida, it's the way to go

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AFTER BRUCE THALHEIMER DIED in 2006, his wife, Nancy Thalheimer, scattered some of her husband's ashes outside Breckenridge, Colo., near one of their favorite hiking trails. The rest are slated to be launched into space next year from Cape Canaveral.

"If I ever get the opportunity, please let me go," said Ms. Thalheimer, a Naples resident. "That's what he used to say."

For a mere \$2,495, a Houston, Texas-based company called Celestis Inc. will provide for a cremation and send your ashes into the cosmos via private-industry satellites.

While leaving the earth is non-traditional, the ways we honor the dead are changing in response to the economy, culture, technology and personal beliefs. Cremation, more than any other option, is becoming the norm in many parts of the United States, including Southwest Florida. That's also the case in other coastal areas, funeral directors say, where people relocate, leaving behind networks of friends and family.

"We are at about the highest percentage of cremations in the country in Southwest Florida," said Robert D. Sheehan, managing partner at Harvey-Engelhardt-Metz Funeral Homes &

SEE CREMATION, A9 ►

"I think the popularity of cremation has grown over the years with the acceptance of the process through society."

— Robert Sheehan, Harvey-Engelhardt-Metz Funeral Homes & Crematory



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The many faces...

Whether it's Golda Meir or Shirley Valentine, Lisa Morgan doesn't just act the part; she becomes it. **C1** ►



Top Gator Urban Meyer

He was in town last week and we've got the social scene photos. **C26, 28 & 29** ►



Looking ahead

Area businesses are a little more optimistic about the economy. Some are even hiring. **B1** ►

Gun safety emphasized by local trauma doctors

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

With the recent shooting of a young child, surgeons from Lee Memorial Trauma Center want to remind parents about gun safety.

Between April 2008 and April 2009, the trauma team has treated 16 gunshot injuries of children between the ages of 2 and 18. With school coming to a close for the summer break, children will be at home and going over to friends' homes. According to federal statistics,



COURTESY PHOTO

A father teaching his son at a gun range how to handle a pistol safely and shoot accurately.

there are guns in approximately half of all households. Even if you do not own a gun, it is possible that your child will come into contact with a gun at a neighbor's house, when playing with friends, or under other circumstances outside your home.

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Real estate

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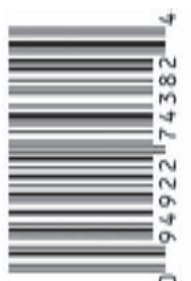
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CREMATION

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Crematory in Fort Myers.

In Lee County, records show cremations accounted for 64 percent of final arrangements last year, more than burials and entombments combined. Still, that's down from the 70 percent who were cremated here the year before. That's a rare drop since Funeral Industry Consultants Inc., in Fort Lauderdale, started keeping track in 1987. Jack Hagin, director of the firm, attributes the drop to a lower rate of death in Florida and nationwide that year, as well as mistakes in records.

"When I started working in this industry in 1960, we probably did 400 or 500 funerals per year," Mr. Hagin said. "And that was here in Florida. I don't remember doing but maybe one cremation and there was no crematory near us. It just was not something that was done."

The Cremation Association of North America projects that cremations will be the norm in this country by 2025. In 1958, only about 5 percent of people in North America chose cremation; now that number is nearing 35 percent.

The funeral industry has responded with myriad products that instill the ash with personal meaning. Some people store cremains in urns. Others divide the ash in portions, keeping some in necklaces or lockets, while scattering the rest on land or sea. An Atlanta-based company called Eternal Reefs makes artificial reefs that store ashes on the ocean floor.

Patti Weghorst, 50, is happy knowing her husband's cremains are located about 25 feet under the surface and two miles off the coast of Englewood, in the Gulf of Mexico. Since Ms. Weghorst's husband passed away in 2006, his Eternal Reef — made of cement mixed with his ashes — has become overgrown with crustaceans and plants.

"The growth that I've seen from the pictures and videos is pretty awesome," Ms. Weghorst said. "It's a pretty remarkable thing to see it after it's been down there a couple of years."

"We are very passionate about giving back to the environment. We explained to our grandkids that he's giving new life to the ocean."

Eco-consciousness is another factor that drives up the cremation rate.

"(Cremation) doesn't use up burial space, put chemicals in the ground, things like that," Mr. Sheehan said.

Cremation nation

Some people make final arrangements based on their religion. For instance, cremation isn't nearly as popular in the Midwest, or in the Bible Belt, as it is in the more-liberal Pacific Northwest. Conservative religious groups such as Orthodox Jews and Catholics favor burials; while Buddhists, says Funeral Industry consultant Mr. Hagin, are more inclined to be cremated.

"The Buddhists and Hindus have always practiced cremation," he said. "Anywhere in Asia, cremation is the disposition of choice. As those cultures have moved into this country and we're no longer primarily an Anglo-American culture, those traditions have caught on; as the cultural diversity of this country has taken on other hues and other cultures and ethnic diversities, so do the burial practices change."

Audrey Wood Hays brought the tradition of cremation from her home, Essex, England, when she moved to Cape Coral 23 years ago. Cremation was the choice of her first husband, who she met during World War II; and her second husband, who died three weeks ago in Cape Coral; and for three



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Robert Sheehan checks the temperature in the cremation oven at Harvey-Engelhardt-Metz Funeral Homes & Crematory in Fort Myers.



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Cremation urn possibilities.

children whom she survives.

For Ms. Hays, 85, and her two living children, cremation is the natural way to go. "Ashes to ashes," she says with a worldly sigh. "Dust to dust."

For others in Lee County, a funeral procession through the streets or a lengthy burial process may not feel appropriate if they relocated here from up North, leaving behind family and friends.

"When folks move and relocate, there are so many variables that really determine final arrangements," Fort Myers funeral home partner Mr. Sheehan said. "One of the reasons (cremation) is so popular in Southwest Florida is that folks retire here. At this point they don't have the network of friends and family connections, so the significance of a large service is really not part of the plan."

But in some places like New Orleans, almost 90 percent of people choose burial instead of cremation. Most churches there have their own cemeteries, Mr. Sheehan said, so members are often inclined to be buried.

Don't get burned by high prices

Money is a major factor in determining the cremation rate, especially as greater numbers of Americans face financial struggles. But for others, price

isn't a consideration. How we perceive death is personal and, in some cases, may seem irrational.

Industry consultant Mr. Hagin claims to know many poor Mexican immigrants who paid upwards of \$5,000 to \$6,000 — an average burial cost — to have their loved-ones' bodies embalmed and shipped back to Mexico in a casket.

"They felt it was the right thing to do," he said.

For the homeless in Lee County, the health department provides cremation services through a contract with Harvey-Engelhardt-Metz Funeral Home & Crematory.

There are also plenty of wealthy individuals who choose cremation. According to CANA, cremation was the choice of wealthy and well-educated Americans in the 1920s, but fell out of favor when people discovered proper underground burial was safe. Since the early 1980s, cremation rates in North America have climbed by about 8 percent annually.

"When you bury someone, you not only have the cost of the grave, but the opening and closing of the grave, and a monument marker," partner Mr. Sheehan said. "You're looking at (average) cemetery costs of \$5,000 to \$6,000, without funeral costs."

A mausoleum — where people are buried in above-ground tombs called "crypts" — may cost \$10,000 to \$15,000.

Most cremations cost between \$2,000 to \$3,000, including an urn and a ceremony, Mr. Sheehan said.

"The economy certainly has an effect on our business with regard to spending," Mr. Sheehan said. "But I don't believe it's a driver of cremation rates. I think the popularity of cremation has grown over the years with the acceptance of the process through society."

Planning ahead

The Neptune Society, a corporation that plans for cremation ahead of time, was formed in 1973 in Fort Lauderdale. The group boasts some illustrious members like French chef Julia Child, who reportedly did not believe in God or an afterlife.

For a one-time payment starting at \$1,489, they'll retrieve your remains, cremate you and provide a service.

There are 44 Neptune locations around the country.

Silvia Marchini, a sales manager for

Neptune in Fort Myers, said cremation is less expensive and "makes more sense. Our generation is not as traditional as our parents used to be."

Baby boomers want less fanfare in death and more in life, she added. "One thing I hear from my clients is 'come and see me when I'm alive, not when I'm dead,'" she said.

Some people just don't like the idea of being stuck in the ground, even after they are dead. "Honestly, I'm claustrophobic," Ms. Marchini said. "Also, there are the bugs."

Ah yes, the bugs. But it's hard to think of any kind of decomposition without sounding gruesome.

In a cremation oven, called a retort, bodies are heated to about 1,750 degrees (as required by the Environmental Protection Agency). A few hours later, only the bones are left. They are processed into a fine powder and mixed with whatever ash is left from the body. Any metal objects, like fillings or plates, are removed from the ash.

At Harvey-Engelhardt-Metz, families can view the cremation process inside a room that, like a chapel, is filled with pews. A window looks out on the retort, which looks like a huge silvery coffin.

Three people had been cremated there last Thursday. By late afternoon the oven had cooled down to about 1,300 degrees inside, and the outside surface was barely warm to the touch. Mr. Sheehan, who built a crematory on Long Island, N.Y., many years ago, oversees the cremation process at Harvey now. Death is something Mr. Sheehan thinks about almost every day.

"It's the last thing people want to talk about, and understandably so," he said. "But we all have to prepare."

Ms. Thalheimer, whose husband's ashes are slated to be launched from Cape Canaveral next year, said cremation was always a part of the plan in their family. One day her husband found out about the option from his favorite magazine, *Air and Space*. He used to fly in aerobatic air shows and dreamed of one day seeing outer space.

The one hitch is it having to wait for the launch. It was originally scheduled in California, then New Mexico. But Ms. Thalheimer is holding out for a Florida launch, so a big group of friends and family can drive to see it.

"Somewhere in 2010 is probably a more realistic goal," she said. "To me, it's worth the wait." ■