

# CARE FOR THOSE WHO DIE AT HOME IN PANDEMIC TIMES

## Created by Death Care Professionals in Piedmont North Carolina

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# INTRODUCTION

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.

"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

As we are writing this document coronavirus is on the rise in the US. In New York City the conventional systems for handling the dead are overtaxed. FEMA has provided 85 refrigerated semi-trailers to serve as 'temporary morgues'. It is reasonable to assume that NYC will not be unique. It is also likely that smaller, more remote communities will receive less assistance.

Looking at that from another perspective, if there is a death in your home at this time, you may need to perform some tasks that are traditionally handled by professionals. We have prepared this document with the assistance of these professionals to guide you through some of those tasks with a reasonable level of safety for yourself and respect for your dead.

"Someone has died in my home--now what?" was our working title. The answer for you will depend on the conditions in your community at the time. If the usual systems and processes (funeral homes, EMS, etc.) are in place, section A will apply. If those systems are beginning to break down but you anticipate help within 3 days, section B has information you need. If professional assistance is more than 3 days off, section C will be your guide.

Death is hard. Grief is hard. Loss is hard. If you are in B or C, it will be harder because you are in new territory. But you can do this. Recruit what help you can, both physical and spiritual. Care for your dead, and care for each other. There are some ideas for that in the Resources section.

The fine print: We are not lawyers and cannot give you legal advice. We are providing this information in good faith. We cannot anticipate your personal situation. It is your responsibility to assess your own situation and make your decisions accordingly. We also are not doctors. Advice about handling bodies is based on information available at the time of writing. It is your responsibility to use the most current and reliable information available to you.

## **A. Someone has died in my home and the usual systems and processes in my community are in place:**

If you have a plan in place for your loved one's funeral and body disposition, stick as closely to the plan as you can to give yourself some sense of normalcy. But be flexible. You will likely have to modify the plan to account for municipal, county, or state precautions about gatherings and public events. The funeral home, home funeral guide, death doula, or other death care practitioner will guide you in making choices that suit the current conditions. But you must be prepared to be flexible. This isn't what you planned, it isn't fair, but many things—perhaps even this death at this time—are completely out of your control.

Do your best.

It is good enough.

## **B. Someone has died in my home and the usual systems and processes are breaking down. No one (doctors, paramedics, funeral homes, home funeral guides, death doulas) can come to help me for 2-3 days:**

At this point your plan has been put on hold. You will have to take care of your loved one's body for several days in a way that protects your health and preserves the body until help arrives.

This is a terrible time. There is a death in your family or immediate circle, and the usual people who would help you cannot be there for you for days. Likely you never planned for anything like this. You will do good work in a very difficult time—work you never imagined doing. But humans have done this work for millennia. You will do this work now. You will do it correctly even though you know nothing about it. And you will do honor to yourself, your beloved dead, and to your family.

### **1. Pronouncement of death:**

If the deceased has died with or of coronavirus, you will likely have been in touch with a medical professional during the course of the disease. This is the person you will turn to at the time of death. They will guide you in ways to confirm the death.

If the deceased was under the care of hospice or other specialists, these are the people you will ask for guidance. If they cannot get to you for some time, they will assist you as above.

If you cannot get medical guidance, ask any physician assistant / paramedic / nurse or other who has professional medical "initials" to come and pronounce the death. You can also call the

police to register the fact that a death has taken place in your home. If no one is available at the time of death, proceed with the immediate tasks at hand. Make sure to have notes / photo / video documentation as backup: attempts to reach help, steps taken to confirm death, timing.

## 2. Death certificate:

Under North Carolina law, death certificates must be completed by a licensed physician, or a physician assistant or nurse practitioner who has been specifically authorized by his or her supervising physician to certify deaths. If you are working without a healthcare provider, funeral home, or other death care guide, you will be able to obtain a death certificate from your county office of vital records. (For examples of the NC Death Certificate, the NC Notification of Death, and the Social Security Notification forms, please see the Resources section. For assistance in filling out the forms, you are encouraged to contact either of the funeral directors listed in the Contributors section at the end of this document.) You will fill out the demographic information and have a medical professional sign it. We may see in the coming weeks and months that the usual filing procedures are suspended or modified. In such a case you will be guided by the rules in force at that time. If you cannot reach a medical professional for this signature and assignment of a cause of death, the death may be a case for the Medical Examiner. Again, have backup documentation.

## 3. Body care:

Dead bodies are no more or less a hazard to you than they were while alive. If your loved one has died with coronavirus, you will take different precautions than if they died of cancer, COPD, or heart failure uncomplicated by coronavirus.

### a. If the body was infected with coronavirus:

- Continue to use all the infection avoidance practices that you used while the person was alive: masks, shields, gloves, disinfectants, handwashing, gowns, and the like.
- Do not involve any more people than necessary in attending the body.
- Put a washcloth on the deceased's face to prevent the exhalation of infectious droplets contaminating others while moving the body. The washcloth should be soaked with a bleach solution of 9 parts water to 1 part bleach.
- Do not wash or anoint the body.
- Do not change clothes on the body.
- Cover with and tuck in around the body an impervious shield--heavy-duty plastic bags, plastic shower curtain, or waterproof tarp—to prevent leakage of infectious bodily fluids from contaminating surfaces or other people.
- Immediately use the best chilling materials you have next to and around the body to delay decomposition: air conditioning, frozen water bottles, reusable freezer blocks like you might use in a lunch cooler, dry ice which many grocery stores carry (with safety precautions for yourself to avoid burns), or specialized icing materials, such as athletic or post-surgical ice bags, Techni-Ice ([https://www.amazon.com/Techni-Ice-Reusable-Packs-Special/dp/B000ZOUYV6/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?dchild=1&keywords=techni-ice&qid=1585762778&sr=8-3](https://www.amazon.com/Techni-Ice-Reusable-Packs-Special/dp/B000ZOUYV6/ref=sr_1_3?dchild=1&keywords=techni-ice&qid=1585762778&sr=8-3)), and the like.
- Continue to monitor the body (by touching with gloves and outside the impervious shield) and the chilling materials every couple of hours until you know how long the materials continue to keep the body temperature down. Then set a schedule and timers to maintain chilling.

**b. If the body was not infected with coronavirus:**

- You may follow the usual body care instructions used in home funerals. (National Home Funeral Alliance, <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org>)
- Wash / anoint the body.
- Dress the body as desired.
- Chill the body immediately and continuously as in B.3.a. to prevent decomposition.

#### **4. Ceremony / ritual considerations:**

Having a dead body in the house may mean that you will use this space for the wake or vigil, something which ordinarily takes place elsewhere. A vigil signifies a period of watchfulness, during which many people will just want to observe, pray, and/or read meaningful literature. From the time your beloved has died within your home, through the process of keeping them tended and cared for per the instructions above, and until their interment is complete, you have witnessed and walked through the most sacred of spaces. Your family can be close without physical proximity, touch without touching, gather with meaning and love.

Proceed with decoration, ritual, ceremony, and legacy building as you would otherwise, but without the usual gathering of loved ones. During this time, continue physical distancing, and invite others into your circle through photos, videos, and other at-a-distance communication devices, such as Facebook Live, Zoom, Skype, Facetime.

You can keep vigil without touching the body. You can connect through holding hands over hearts, eye contact, and speaking from an inner calm. You can create a ritual/ceremony that will engage the family, such as candle lighting, poetry, songs, sharing memories, and telling stories.

Anointing the body is a tradition within many faiths. In these extraordinary times you can use the sacred/essential oil in an atomizer and spray over the body, or even "fling" the oil rather than moving in to actually touch the oil to the body. Another gesture of touch without touch is to simply trace the outline of your hand on a piece of paper and place it on the deceased's bed / shroud / coffin. You can write messages on the hand you have created, or prayers, poems, favorite songs.

#### **5. Self-care when your loved one has died in your home:**

Particularly during periods of stress, self-care is of utmost importance even though giving yourself care may be the last thing on your mind. Self-care is taking care of and honoring your body, mind, and spirit. Self-care choices are those that improve your physical, mental, or emotional health, and move you towards healing. Here are some simple suggestions and links for guidance.

- Hug yourself. Take a deep breath.
- Recognize your emotions. Journal your feelings. Talk with someone. Take another deep breath.
- Get enough sleep. Eat good food. Drink water.

- Tools for healing: say / write your good-bye, do a forgiveness meditation, write a letter, legacy project (see below), grief counseling, bereavement support group.
- You're going to be sad and you are going to be hurting, but you are going to be okay. You are not alone. "We, The Bereaved – A meditation on Grief – A Short Film" (13:45) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=lwzhZTZ2QCo&fbclid=IwAR2\\_YdrEQVu1ywcs2b51MBWKE-5CnsRRk8iKPcq\\_ay8NA4Ytyawo31le7fM&app=desktop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=lwzhZTZ2QCo&fbclid=IwAR2_YdrEQVu1ywcs2b51MBWKE-5CnsRRk8iKPcq_ay8NA4Ytyawo31le7fM&app=desktop)
- Our physical presence may be restricted for now, but our imagination and the love we hold for each other is limitless. <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/funerals-dying-in-absentia-inspiration-tips-during-covid-19>
- Coping With Loss – One Step at a Time <https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/basics/info-2017/grieving-death-bereavement.html?migration=rdrc>
- For a variety of grief support groups: <https://www.forums.grieving.com>

## **6. Creating a legacy project after your loved one has died:**

A legacy project expresses a life, preserves the past, and inspires the future. Legacy projects can be created even after your loved one has died. "No one is lost who is not forgotten" (anonymous).

- Legacy projects can be in many forms: memory books or boxes, letters, photo albums, videos and audios, a slide show, quilts, a recipe box or book, songs, poems, crafted objects, paintings, or collages.
- The content of the legacy project can include how you want to remember your loved one including simple everyday items, cherished stories, objects they collected, meaningful symbols, letters or cards they wrote you, seashells or rocks from trips together, inspiring quotes they would say, a piece of their jewelry or clothing ... anything that reminds you of them.
- Legacy activities and guides: <https://legacyproject.org/activities/index.html>
- Create a Memorial website: <https://www.forevermissed.com/>
- How to make a teddy bear from clothes: <https://www.instructables.com/id/How-to-make-a-teddy-bear-out-of-shirts/>
- Digitizing pictures, tapes, film: <https://legacybox.com/>

## **C. Someone has died in my home and the usual systems and processes have broken down. I will not have help in this situation for more than 3 days:**

If you have a death in your home and will have no help for many days, you are now in the situation of most nineteenth-century Americans. At this point you may have to consider burying the body of your loved one on your property. This now is a matter of your health and the dignity of the deceased. Keep in mind that in North Carolina home burial is legal even in ordinary times. Again, home burial is a return to a practice of humans all over the world for millennia. You will

do the best for yourself, your family, and your deceased loved one. And it will be sufficient and good.

## **1. Pronouncement of death / Death certificate:**

Follow instructions Section B.1 and 2.

## **2. Body care:**

### **a. If the body was infected with coronavirus:**

- Continue to use all the infection avoidance practices that you used while the person was alive: masks, shields, gloves, disinfectants, handwashing, gowns, and the like.
- Do not involve any more people than necessary in attending the body.
- Put a washcloth on the deceased's face to prevent the exhalation of infectious droplets contaminating others while moving the body. The washcloth should be soaked with a bleach solution of 9 parts water to 1 part bleach.
- Do not wash or anoint the body.
- Do not change clothes on the body.
- Shroud the body as indicated below in section C.3.
- Bury immediately (within 12 hours).

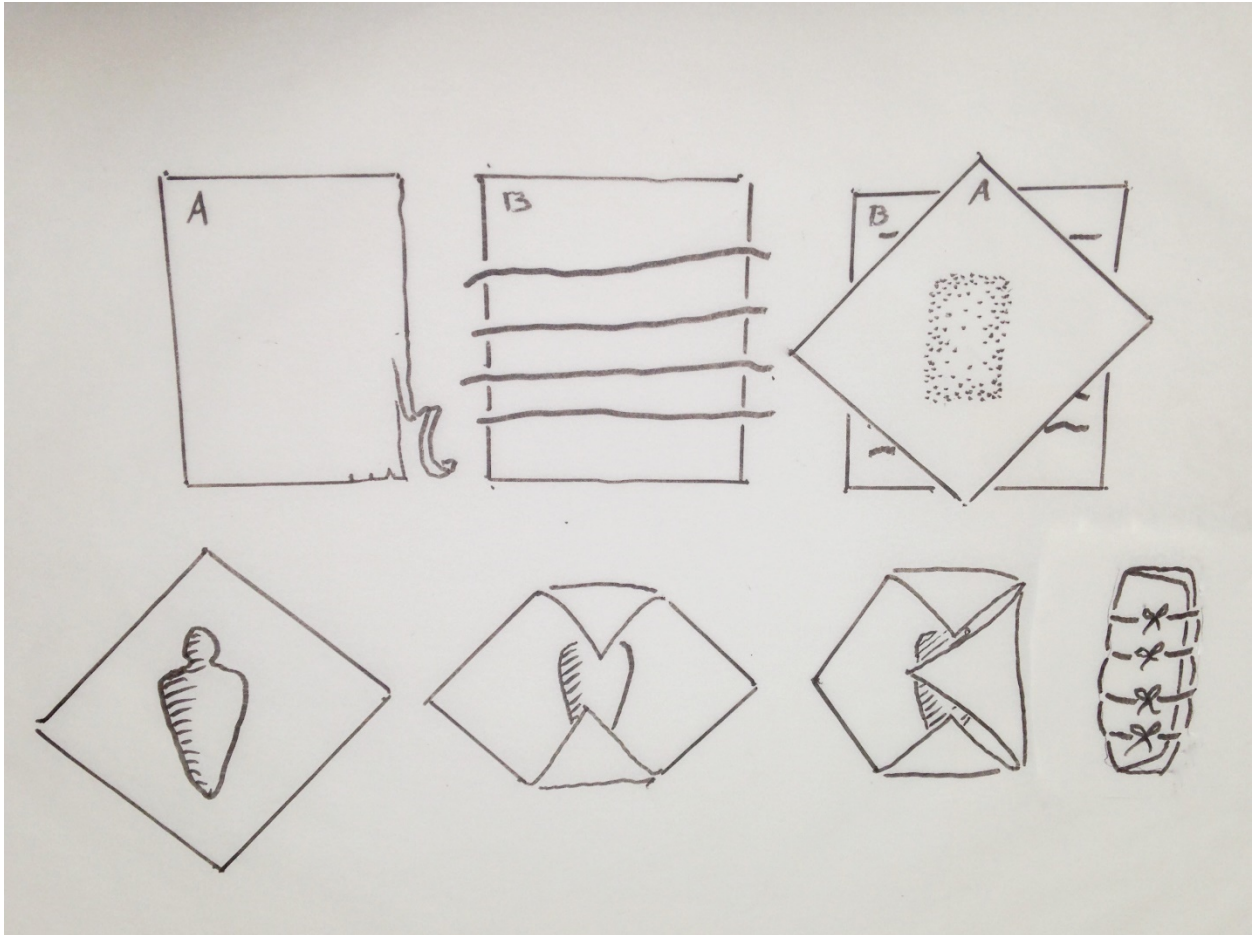
### **b. If the body was not infected with coronavirus:**

- You may follow the usual body care instructions used in home funerals. (National Home Funeral Alliance, <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org>)
- Wash / anoint the body.
- Dress the body as desired.
- Chill the body immediately and continuously as in section B.3.a. above to prevent decomposition.
- Shroud the body as below, or if you have time buy or build a biodegradable coffin. You have an opportunity now to be creative in a way you may not have anticipated: decorate the container (shroud or coffin) with messages or art.
- Bury the body at a time that seems fit. In ordinary times, families might wait as long as 3 days for people to assemble and a ceremony to come together. You may not want to wait that long for burial, and you may plan for a ceremony at a later time.

## **3. Ceremony / ritual considerations:**

See Section B.4

## 4. How to shroud a body for burial:



1. You will need 2 flat sheets, A and B, scissors, and a bath towel. 100% natural fibers are best for quick decomposition—cotton, linen, bamboo.
2. (B can be a fitted sheet if necessary)
3. Starting at the bottom of sheet A, snip, then rip off 4 strips lengthwise, about 3 inches wide.
4. Lay sheet B over a bed or table, and lay the strips crosswise on it.
5. Lay sheet A diagonally over sheet B, and place a towel as shown.
6. Using disposable gloves, place the body on top. To wrap for burial, first bring the corners down over the head and feet. Then bring the sides over, tucking and folding as necessary.
7. Tie securely but gently at the ankles, knees, hips, and shoulders.
8. Sheet B is used as the carrier.



## 5. Home burial:

Burials on private property are legal in the state of North Carolina. In ordinary times you might console yourself by calling the local department of environmental health about grave placement, but if you cannot get through to someone in that office, you can feel confident by following these setbacks:

Distance from property line	50 feet
Distance from perennial stream	50 feet* *Alamance Co. requires 1,500 feet if upstream from a public water supply intake on an unimpounded stream
Distance from public water source (river, reservoir, lake, etc.)	300 feet
Distance from well / septic tank or field	Well 50 feet* / septic 25 feet *Alamance Co. requires 100 feet from well
Depth	~3.5 feet with 18" of cover

If you have the strength and agreeable soil, you may be able to dig this grave yourself. Read "Grave digging DIY." <https://piedmontpinecoffins.com/grave-digging-diy/>

The carrier sheet should be placed in the grave along with the shrouded body, flowers, biodegradable mementos (letters, food, art, poems). And the grave should be closed immediately after any ceremony.

After the burial hand-draw a map of the property showing the gravesite, distances from property lines, water sources, etc. Provide GPS coordinates if you can. When you are able, file this map with the deed to your property at the Register of Deeds office in your county. The location of the grave will be revealed to any subsequent owner of the property to protect the gravesite itself and to protect your legal access to the gravesite for care and remembrances.

### **LOCAL GRAVEDIGGERS (or Google "Backhoe Services Near Me"):**

- JASON ANDREWS—Alamance Co.  
Andrews Landscaping  
919.812.3028
- CHUCK SHARPE—Alamance Co. (will travel within a 60-mile radius of Burlington, NC)  
S & S Excavating  
336.214.8522
- RICKY PEARCE—Vance Co.  
Pearce Backhoe Service  
252.492.7228

## **6. Self-care when your loved one has died in your home:**

See Section B.5.

## **7. Creating a legacy project after your loved one has died:**

See Section B.6

## **RESOURCES**

- **Image of a NC Death Certificate (available at your county vital records office), NC Notification of Death, and Social Security Notification:**



NC Death Certificate.pdf



NC Notification of Death.pdf



Social Security Statement of Death.pdf

- **Comfort care for everyone while your loved one is dying in the home:**

1. Atmosphere is important.
  - Arranging the space: desired place of death, position of the bed, placement of special objects, comfortable seating for visitors at an appropriate distance.
  - Set the tone, set an intention, consider how many people are in the room at one time. Remember to also allow your loved one time alone if they desire that.
  - Items to bring out and place: (scented) candles, essential oils, flowers, pictures / paintings, quilts, any items that stimulates precious memories.
  - Adjust the lighting (turn off or dim overhead light), allow fresh air, incorporate nature.
2. Vigils are a reverent observance at the bedside of the dying. A time and place of gentleness and expression of devotion. If you cannot be with your loved one in person, most of the following can be done remotely with phone and livestreaming video.
  - Consider the attitude at the bedside, how people will speak, the use of touch or not, and who will be there for last breaths.

- Place your hand on your heart during physical / social distancing, while looking into the eyes of your loved one and those with you.
  - What to do: play their favorite music quietly, stimulate shared laughter with a funny movie or comedy show, read poetry, sing. \*Listen\*
  - Music brings a ceremonial aspect to being present with someone who is dying.
  - Bring their favorite comfort food, and soothing drinks.
3. Legacy projects to create together: A legacy project expresses a life, preserves the past, and inspires the future. We all want to be remembered. A legacy project is a way to shift focus on the life lived, improve emotional connections, and maintain hope through purpose. “The world isn't connected by molecules. It's connected by stories, traditions, memories, hopes, and dreams. We are connected by the legacies passed down from those who came before us and the legacies we pass down to those who come after us” (Susan V. Bosak). “No one is lost who is not forgotten” (anonymous).
- Legacy projects can be in many forms: memory books or boxes, letters, photo albums, videos and audios, a slide show, quilts, a recipe box or book, songs, poems, crafted objects, paintings, or collages.
  - The content of the legacy project can include how your loved one wants to be remembered, cherished stories, objects they collected, and meaningful symbols. Explore their life's meaning by asking them open-ended questions about their accomplishments, life lessons, values and beliefs, spirituality, an important person, a favorite pet, their career, a happy vacation ...
  - Record them telling a favorite story from a time in their life.
  - Help them write a “legacy letter” or “lasting letter.” This letter is written to someone they care about, who can read those words long into the future. It can be long or short, be a love letter, an instruction or confession, and everything in between.
  - Legacy activities and guides: <https://legacyproject.org/activities/index.html>
4. Guided imagery can bring peace, release tension, promote deep breathing, and ease pain. You can create your own easily, using all five senses. For example, “walking on a beach” – speak softly and slowly – describe what you see (blue sky, nine pelicans soaring), hear (ocean waves, seagulls calling), feel (sand in your toes, warm sun, soft breeze in your hair), taste (salty air, picnic food), and smell (sun lotion, ocean). Or try any of these free visualization scripts: <https://www.innerhealthstudio.com/visualization-scripts.html>
5. When you can't be with a dying family member: \*Connect with group calls and/or video calling. \*See one another on either side of a window while talking on the phone. \*Other ideas for “window visits” are: bring pictures to hold up, dance, act out a mimed skit, do cartwheels, bring something engaging and interactive. \*Sing solo or with a group through a call, video chat, or outside their home (have them open a window to hear you). \*Share a communal meal on a video platform like Zoom, maybe using a recipe of theirs or creating a menu based on their favorite foods. \*Create a private Facebook group and send invitations or a link to only selected people. In the group you can post discussion prompts or questions: How did you meet? Favorite memory? What did you learn from them? Find even more ideas at: <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/funerals-dying-in-absentia-inspiration-tips-during-covid-19>
6. Give yourself care too. Practicing self-care allows the caregiver to remain more balanced, focused, and effective, which helps everyone involved.
- Be kind to yourself.
  - Hug yourself. Close your eyes. Breathe.
  - Recognize your emotions. Journal your feelings. Talk with someone.

- Meditate, go outside, take a walk. Spend some time alone. Take a break.
- Get enough sleep. Eat good food. Drink water.
- Caregiver Help Desk – It’s a free call. Staffed by caregiving experts to help you find the right information you need to help you navigate your complex caregiving challenges. 8:00 AM – 7:00 PM ET. 855-227-3640

- **Web resources**

National Home Funeral Alliance	<a href="https://www.homefuneralalliance.org">https://www.homefuneralalliance.org</a>
Funeral Consumers Alliance	<a href="https://www.funerals.org">https://www.funerals.org</a>
National Funeral Directors Association	<a href="https://www.nfda.org/covid-19">https://www.nfda.org/covid-19</a>
Centers for Disease Control & Prevention	<a href="https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html">https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html</a>
The Inspired Funeral	<a href="https://www.theinspiredfuneral.com">https://www.theinspiredfuneral.com</a>
Green Burial Council	<a href="https://www.greenburialcouncil.org">https://www.greenburialcouncil.org</a>
Oregon Funeral Resources & Education	<a href="https://www.oregonfuneral.org/pandemic_care_guide.html">https://www.oregonfuneral.org/pandemic_care_guide.html</a>
Grave digging DIY—by permission of Don Byrne	<a href="https://piedmontpinecoffins.com/grave-digging-diy/">https://piedmontpinecoffins.com/grave-digging-diy/</a>

## CONTRIBUTORS

These death care professionals stand ready to help with advice, further resources, and services. You are encouraged to contact them about their particular fields of expertise.

- **NEIDRA CLARK**, End Of Life Doula, Death Café facilitator, and advocate for green burials, home funerals, and conscious dying. She specializes in legacy projects, vigil planning, and caregiver support, <https://www.BalanceForLifeAndDeath.com>
- **HEATHER HILL**, funeral director and Death Café host, Renaissance Funerals & Crematory, 919-866-1866, [heather@rfhr.com](mailto:heather@rfhr.com)
- **JOHN JULL**, coffineer and community activist, [www.aldergrovecaskets.com](http://www.aldergrovecaskets.com), [john.jull@aldergrovecaskets.com](mailto:john.jull@aldergrovecaskets.com)
- **JAY ROBERTS**, 40 years plus as funeral director, embalmer, and crematory manager. Lowe Funeral Home & Crematory, Inc., 336-228-8366, [jay@lowefuneralhome.com](mailto:jay@lowefuneralhome.com)
- **PAT SCHEIBLE**, shroudmaker, [ptschbl@gmail.com](mailto:ptschbl@gmail.com), 919-563-3449
- **ANNE WESTON**, founder, Green Burial Project, <https://www.greenburialproject.org>
- **SARA WILLIAMS**, home funeral guide, funeral / memorial celebrant, Death Café host. Learn more at <https://www.shroudingsisters.com>.