Interview with Laura Starkey and Freddie Johnson

Karen Wyatt: [00:00:00] Today I'm very happy to welcome two special guests to the podcast, Laura Starkey and Freddie Johnson. Laura is the founder and executive director of Heartwood Preserve Conservation Cemetery. Laura is also one of the founding members of the Conservation Burial Alliance, currently serving as president of the board.

A third-generation Floridian, Laura began Heartwood Preserve on a corner of her family's former cattle ranch as a way to protect an intact longleaf pine flatwoods ecosystem while providing a meaningful, earth-friendly option for human burial. And you can learn more at the website heartwoodpreserve.com.

And Freddie is one of the founders of Conservation Burial Inc., the nonprofit organization that manages Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery in Gainesville, Florida. He served as CBI's board president for three years, prying, prior to becoming, Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery's [00:01:00] executive director in 2011.

In 2017, he was one of the founders of the national organization Conservation Burial Alliance. Freddie has been a nature lover since his childhood experience of growing up in and around the woods, creeks, and mountains of North Carolina.

And you can learn more at the website conservationburialalliance.org. So Laura and Freddie, welcome and thanks for joining me here today.

Laura Starkey: Thank you. Delight to be here. Thank you.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, I'm very interested in talking to both of you about conservation burial and what that is. But first I'd just like to hear from each of you, maybe we'll start with Laura, about, what got you interested, what inspired you to create a conservation burial cemetery?

Laura Starkey: Yeah, sure. I kinda came in the door from a different angle than a lot of people enter the funeral, cemetery profession or world. my family has been a cattle ranch, [00:02:00] land-owning family in this county and, since the 1930s. And as we moved to a different point of our, stewardship of that land, there was this corner piece of property that, I was interested in, and I had

learned about conservation burial grounds at a land trust conservation, a land trust, convention in 2006.

And I thought, "That's an intriguing idea as a tool for conservation." So I just started looking into that, that idea. And then some time went by and I had an opportunity, to start this project. So it's, that's a very short version of the story, but it's, that's how I came at it, was being able to, having access to this land as it being part of my family's, heritage, and then being able to then, utilize my resources as part of this family, to, do this [00:03:00] project.

Karen Wyatt: And so it preserves your family's land, which is really beautiful. I looked at the photos on your website, and the trees are just gorgeous. And so-

Laura Starkey: Longleaf pine trees-

Karen Wyatt: Oh ... are

Laura Starkey: amazing. They-

Karen Wyatt: They're one of

Laura Starkey: my favorite-

Karen Wyatt: They- ...

Laura Starkey: living things on the planet. They're just amazing

Karen Wyatt: They really are. so I can see why you're, motivated to, protect and preserve that particular piece of land.

Laura Starkey: Thank you. Yes.

Karen Wyatt: And, then Freddie, what about you? What brought you to g- to an interest in conservation burial?

Freddie Johnson: it was, totally unanticipated, unplanned and a twofold event. It started 30, approximately 30 years ago when I was working at a conventional, job. And I s- I started planning end of life stuff, and a will, and all of [00:04:00] that just because I was...

I, read something and it motivated me to do that. And, it finally got to a point in that where it asked th- these two questions, which probably is still on a lot of planning documents. It said, "At, for your body disposition, do you choose burial or cremation?" And, okay, I'm thinking, "They're giving me those two choices.

I don't like either of those choices," because I knew at the time what the environmental impact of both of them was. Plus, it just did not feel, like for me, to be a choice that I wanted to be my end-of-life last thing I did, which would be to have environmental impact. at the time, this was before, probably before most people had internet, certainly before I had internet.

And I, went to libraries and tried to find a, choice where I could just be laid in the [00:05:00] woods as a deer dies or a, as any, natural being in, in the forest dies, and I couldn't find anything close. Nothing. And so I eventually defaulted to cremation, like I suspect a lot of people do- and went on with life.

But then, about 15 years after that, I was at a potluck, and a friend of mine came and gave a presentation at the potluck, which sometimes people do, and it was of his experience of visiting, what was essentially, maybe not exactly, but it was essentially a conservation burial ground. And when he did that, I became really, motivated to have that in Alachua County, which is the county that Gainesville, Florida, is in.

And he and I, my friend that gave the demonstration, went to the local land trust, who was [00:06:00] another friend of mine, happened to be the executive director. His name is Hutch. And we, sat down, and Hutch loved the idea and hooked us up with Alachua Conservation Trust as, and we started a non-profit called, as you mentioned, Conservation Burial Inc.,

which, became the, startup of eventually. Took three years of planning and research, but we started Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, and now Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery is in its, I wanna say 16th or 17th year.

Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: Wow. you bring up some really good points that I wanna dive into and discuss more, Freddie, but I was thinking maybe we should talk about what a conservation burial, cemetery is, and how that might differ from a natural cemetery or green cemetery.

'Cause we [00:07:00] hear these terms all the time, and I know that they, may have different meanings. So Laura, could you talk about that a little bit?

Laura Starkey: Sure, absolutely. I think a lot of people nowadays have heard somewhere or have, can certainly have an idea of what green burial is, and green burial is really about the process of, the body going into the ground.

It's basically no embalming of the body, No concrete or other, artificial vault. the casket or the container for the body is either a, a pine box casket, some type of biodegradable casket, or a shroud. And then, the body is laid into the ground just directly. so that's the basic for a green burial.

So a lot of... There's a lot of, conventional cemeteries that might have, opened up a corner of their sect- of their cemetery that hasn't had any burials in it yet, and call it their green section. That would be [00:08:00] like a hybrid cemetery where it's really a conventional modern cemetery, but they have green burial, area in the corner somewhere.

then the next level up is a true, is a natural cemetery, where you've got the g- green burial process with- in a more natural setting, trees, meadows. more of a, a nature setting. and then, and then you manage it, more as a natural setting where you're not, trying to have everything very, landscaped and, pristine, from a modern...

from a, urban kind of setting, but more natural. And then the conservation level, which I think of as like the platinum level of green burial, which is all of those things. Green burial in a natural setting, but there's a, a, a larger permanent, protection of the land. and the intention of that, that cemetery or that burial ground is to conserve the natural [00:09:00] environment, either through a restoration project, which is what Prairie Creek is doing.

They're restoring land back to former, ecosystems that prior to farmland, or maintaining an intact ecosystem, which is what Heartwood is doing. And there's a lot of different variations of those two premises, but then we're, maintaining it as a natural ecosystem or preserving it or restoring it.

and then we have a permanent protection device, legal device called a conservation easement. Some areas of conservation cemeteries may be, are using a different type of legal, document, uh, d- deed restriction or whatever. But whatever is the highest level of land protection, which for a lot of us in this country is the conservation easement, and that's a legal document that obligates

the owners of this cemetery into the future in perpetuity to maintain the conservation value of that land.

So we're, it's protected as being a cemetery, [00:10:00] but then it's also protected as being a conservation land. so that's basically the, kind of the steps of the green burial, natural, and conservation.

Karen Wyatt: And, Freddie, I know, feel free to add to that. And then you mentioned that it took about three years to actually get, Prairie Creek going.

And so it sounds like that there's a process involved. It takes some time to, to create the conservation burial ground

Freddie Johnson: I- it does, but in, in our case, it, y- even if you're, starting a, a natural burial ground, it still takes time. But yes, it probably takes more time. Everything is dependent upon the situation, the geography, where you are- what the state statutes are. State statutes are all different, but you have to follow them. So some- sometimes the state statutes are more lenient and flexible. Other states, [00:11:00] they're the opposite. and, all of that takes time. But, the, the significant thing about our three years was we were essentially the fourth conservation burial ground, and really probably one of less than 10 natural burial grounds at that time.

there's, we've come a long way and we've got a long way to go, but, at the time that we started this, there was literally, two or three conservation burial grounds in the whole US. Now there's probably closer to 40. but a- as Laura was explaining, it does take time to address all of the things that it takes to be a conservation burial ground, and one of the big hurdles is finding, a land trust or a government entity that can hold that conservation easement and work with you.

[00:12:00] 'Cause, that has to be talked about, planned, and worked out. But based on, the, the, difference between, natural burial grounds and conservation burial grounds, I would say that generally you can think in terms of that, that c- that natural burial grounds, address for sure, they address the impact of conventional burial.

They eliminate a lot of what, in my biased opinion, is damage to the environment. and the, they're actually, also high intensity to the land. Lots and lots, like 800, 1,000 burials per acre. Natural burial grounds and conservation burial grounds both address that density to where it's many, many, times lower, and more so than, more so with conservation burial ground.

But [00:13:00] definitely natural burial grounds address that too. But when you get to the level of conservation burial grounds, you not only are eliminating all of those impacts, you're now presenting premiums for people and the planet because now you're not only eliminating the- The kind of egregious, impact, environmental impact, but you're adding things like protecting land.

and, and, up having an ecosystem with plants and maybe prairie or grasslands, which is constantly cleaning air, cleaning water. And you're, all the things that you're doing, relative to conservation for the community and the planet are, are essentially like little rainforest.

They're, providing all those benefits for climate, change [00:14:00] to mitigate some of the climate change impact that we're having.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. It's interesting that conventional burial, when you real- when you really look at it, it seems... as, as you said, it's actually threatening in a way t- to parts of our environment.

And I was just thinking about your land, Laura. A conventional cemetery there might have taken out all the trees, 'cause we need more plots of land, and, really destroy the beauty there. And because we're just natural creatures ourselves, the decomposition of our bodies isn't really a threat to the Earth at all, but it's the way that we manage it that- that creates the problems, and I think that's the thing people need to become aware of. You can make a huge difference by deciding what choice to make at the end of your life, if, if-

Laura Starkey: Yeah, I would agree. And I think, a, a point I like to bring up is that, when you look at a, [00:15:00] a, a mo- a, a basic cemetery, a conventional cemetery, it's really a single purpose piece of land.

Its purpose is to house the dead, right? So they're going to, of course, maximize that, close together, shoulder-to-shoulder, row by row, because that's the one thing they're using that land for. And, with a natural or conservation cemetery, you're... it's more than one use. The use is...

that's one use of it, but the natural, systems that you're protecting or enhancing, or restoring, that's a really important use of that land. that's, all of those, all of those benefits that, Freddie was describing is, that's, the other use of that land.

So it's... that's kind of one of the ways I like to think about it too, is that, think of it from a land use perspective that, if you got a shopping mall [00:16:00] on a

piece of land, it's pretty much a single use. You got parking and you got a building with commercial in it, or, townhouses.

You got parking and you got, homes in it. and maybe a little landscaping, but the purpose of it is people house, right? but if you've got a nature preserve, you've got all of those environmental benefits, all of that ecological, robust, biodiversity and wildlife and, clean air, clean water, Fred- you know, like current, like all the, doing all the good to the planet that we all know by now that trees are helping.

trees are a good thing. And, and, not... and if it's in a meadowland that, you know, the pollinators, having places for pollinators and having, all of this other stuff that is this natural life that, we all, you know, whether we're a, a, a big k-environmentalist or not, we all know that it feels good when we're in nature.

we don't have to... we can call it forest bathing, but we all know what it is when we're out in the woods, that it feels good and it's good [00:17:00] for the environment. It's good for our souls. It's good for, just the land itself. So, having that, perspective of that it's not just for cemeteries- For burying the dead.

It is for burying the dead, but it's also got all of these additional added benefits.

Karen Wyatt: And Freddie, I liked it that you were mentioning that when you heard about your two options, cremation or burial, you already knew, that's not good enough. That's not, that's not really what you want. And I think there are a lot of people now who are concerned about the environment, who want to be eco-friendly in things they do, and want to help preserve the environment.

And really, y- what you mentioned before, our burial can have a significant negative impact on the earth if, we don't know about it and know what our options are. And so I know you found out about natural burial, but are there any other, aspects of that, that, you wanted to mention that [00:18:00] are available as options other than the, the common-

Freddie Johnson: Well-

Karen Wyatt: common-

Freddie Johnson: The, there, there is more awareness. I think as you point out, I think there needs to be more and more awareness and, will be. But there is more awareness now about the impact of flame, called flame cremation,

because you have, you ha- cremation has a lot of emissions into the air. it's significant.

It also has mercury emissions into the air, which ends up in air and water, and the, the mercury comes from, amalgam in dental fillings. But around the world, cremation is probably predominant, and you, in our country you've seen it go from the nine- 1980s cremation was like 10% of the choice. And then, [00:19:00] somewhat because of the elaborate level that the conventional, conventional burial, had gotten to where it was very expensive, very elaborate.

So people s- were kinda like, it's kinda what's happening now. People became more aware, "This is crazy." So they very quickly chose cremation. now a lot of times there were religious reasons when they just weren't gonna do that, but the point is, around the world cremation has an enormous benefit.

not benefit, but impact. And, a- and it, but it d- it is generally m- costs less. Particularly if you talk about direct cremation. Direct cremation meaning, no bells and whistles. You just, the family gets back remains. But that, that's very [00:20:00] economical. So, that's been a driver. and, what, what is happening now is people are becoming more aware, at least environmentally, that they want something different.

And of course there's natural burial, there's conservation burial, which a lot of people still don't know about. Even natural burial people don't know about. But there's other areas like alkaline hydrolysis, which is, under the cremation category, but it does not use flame. It does save a lot of environmental impact, but it also requires a lot of, equipment and facility and energy to do that.

But it certainly is more environmentally, friendly than flame impact, but that was created because of the concerns about the, impact, environmental impact of [00:21:00] cremat- flame cremation. There's also... I'll let Laura explain some of the other ones. And because I don't wanna keep talking, but Laura, you can share- about the other choices that have popped up, because people are looking for alternatives.

Laura Starkey: Yeah.

Yeah. I would add to that. yeah, I know, human organic, composting, human organic-

Freddie Johnson: Reduction ...

Laura Starkey: reduction. Thank you. I was like, "What's the wrong, other word?" NOR. natural organic r- reduction.

Anyway, it's some, it's also kinda termed human composting, but basically the body is literally composted in a facility that has, puts them in kind of these, containers that also have layers of organic matter, alfalfa, grasses and things like that. And it's, it's processed, and over time.

And, the end [00:22:00] product is the human remains are broken down naturally or, through that process I should say, into the, the final product is a lot of, rich soil that people can then use for gardening or, whatever, they choose. But, so again, that's getting a lot of, traction right now.

so and a lot of people are interested in that. It's only approved at this time in, in a handful of states, but different states are approving that. The thing I would wanna point out about that is it's a process. It's a m- it's a thing. You have to, have a f- facility that's approved to be able to do it.

Meanwhile, if you really wanna do the most environmentally and also the simplest, option that is the z- lowest impact enviro- environmental footprint, just put the body [00:23:00] in the ground and protect the land around it, and that's what conservation burial does. We just put the body in the soil and return it lovingly and with dignity and, care.

the family is involved in the process. It's a beautiful, natural, and simple process. It doesn't take a whole system of facilities and, business plans on that. it's pretty simple. So anyway, I just... Yes, there is those, there are those other options. There's also, memorial reefs where people are taking cremated remains and, you know, putting them into...

mixing them with concrete to create, reef balls, and go out in certain d- be part of, certain, areas of restoration of, reef areas and under the water. where if you have scuba gear, you can scuba dive out and see those, those balls as they grow [00:24:00] with life, which I think is, that's cool.

that's, pretty cool. but, anyway. So those are some of the other things that are, out there.

Karen Wyatt: yeah. And how about for- Yeah ... to be buried in a conservation ground, I as- I assume of course y- you can't be embalmed 'cause we don't wanna put those chemicals into the ground.

Is it a problem if someone has, metal joint replacements?

Laura Starkey: Yeah, we, it's just general practice. We don't, we're not interested in doing anything invasive on the human body. if there's a pacemaker, it's standard practice to remove the pacemaker after the person passes away. It's pretty, pretty simple procedure.

It's, anybody can, at the funeral home can manage that just because you don't wanna put that in, into the ground or into a crematory. So that's removed. But any implants, we, it's, we don't need to... We don't wanna get into, cutting into [00:25:00] people, being invasive to do that.

It- we just ask people just to do, do their best in terms of maybe don't be buried in a polyester suit.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah.

Laura Starkey: let's, go back to some cotton pajamas or just a shroud, but yeah, we, yeah, we're really... I don't know of anybody that's, proposing to, do anything invasive.

Karen Wyatt: and it seems like the point is to make it simple- and s- and something natural- and easy that people can carry out. Absolutely. And, I was wondering about the grounds itself, the conservation grounds. Are there, to be a conservation burial ground, are you restricted to certain things that you can plant?

do they have to be within the natural ecosystem of that area, whatever plants are, or trees are brought in? Or are there restrictions like that?

Freddie Johnson: There are indeed, and that's all a part of the commitment to, being a [00:26:00] conservation burial ground. There, e- every, every conservation easement which has a lot of that information contained in it is, an agreement between the landowner and whoever's gonna use that land.

So in this case it would be the, the, the organization that holds the conservation easement. Could be, like at Prairie Creek it's the actual county holds that because our partner in the project is a land trust, so they can't hold the easement, and they also own most of the land. but- But, all of, that information almost always, if not Laura can back me up on this, but y- you're always gonna have in that conservation easement the fact that you're gonna control invasive species,

and you're always gonna be limited to anything that you put in there has to be healthy and native to the environment.

A- and, [00:27:00] but the degree and the specifics of, y- what I'm saying is every conservation easement is gonna be different, but there are certain aspects of the conservation easement that's gonna be about that very thing- That, yeah ... of making sure that in perpetuity what you're doing is gonna support the sustainability and the health and the vibrant, uh, vitality of the ecosystem.

And that, that's a very good question, but yeah, that's a very important reason that in the per- perpetual nature of conservation easements is what make them so powerful when it comes to things like climate mitigation and saving land, cleaning air, cleaning water, having a space for the, for people, for the community to, Laura pointed out earlier.

Now you're talking about a use that has no limitations th- that are respectful and [00:28:00] reverent. You can go out and go bird watching. You can go star gazing. You can r- ride rikes, ride bikes. You can ride horses. You can run. You can meditate. You can go out and have a picnic. You can have... At Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, we're now having music in, the cemetery, string music.

it's just, y- it's almost infinite the number of really cool things you can do in conservation burial grounds, and they generally do have trails, for hiking. And you can find all sorts of living creatures that-

that's their home. And we often refer, in conservation burial, refer to those, to the cemeteries or the burial grounds as, living memorials.

Laura Starkey: Fred- thank you, Freddie. You know, Freddie, I'm gonna amend what I was saying earlier about the land use purposes of this land. [00:29:00] you're making really good points about all these other uses. It's not just cemetery, burial of the dead, and the ecosystem services, like the, the ecological, benefits of a nature preserve, but all of those recreational, passive recreation, active recreation, picnicking and meditation, all of those things.

That's another, very important human benefit and use of that, of this land. So yeah. Yes.

Karen Wyatt: The, the land isn't lost t- to other human

Laura Starkey: uses. Yeah. So I amend my two-point, y- land use. It's really three, four, five, many more. thanks for- Yeah ... pointing that out.

Karen Wyatt: I really love that, 'cause what's occurring to me is first of all the beauty of it, and we talk all the time on this podcast about how do we restore people's relationship with death in a way because our society has become death avoidant and death phobic.

And having a beautiful piece of land where you can [00:30:00] actually go walk and have a picnic and meditate and spend time, it's restoring this sacred idea that death is part of nature, we're part of nature. It all comes together on that land, and it doesn't have to be something that we wall off with a, a huge stone fence or, we...

Doesn't have to be- something that we separate from us. It's a place where we can continue to live even as we know, when I die, this is where I will also be. I think that's really beautiful.

Freddie Johnson: Yeah. you just hit on a very important and valuable aspect of natural burial, and particularly once again, conservation burial, because that, you- death phobia that you speak of, part of the, solution to that, or making headway, is actually having participation with death.

And that [00:31:00] means, like in natural burial, once again, instead of as the conventional and modern funeral industry finally got to the point over 100 years that, there was a separation between w- originally our ancestors cared for their own, and they were intimately involved with death and dying.

And you become a f- you would get more fear from something the more separated you are and the less you know about it, and the less you experience you have. So you will find in the natural burial movement, and particularly in, in natural burial cemeteries and conservation burial grounds, one of the components that's carried forward is the opportunity, and even encouragement, to participate.

That means, you don't have to. we allow people to find that, what I'll call courage. [00:32:00] But it's really, I've seen it happen many times where there was fear there, and once they were in nature, even though they said they weren't gonna participate, they found themselves intuitively anticip- participating.

Lowering their loved one's body, putting in a handful of earth or a shovelful, helping cover, cover the grave. That, this is always, in my experience, regardless of, where, in terms of natural burial grounds and conservation burial grounds, that's always a part of the experience. That changes things quickly.

And people that are very stiff and tight with s- anxiety when they come. And you see them relaxed and loose- when they're walking away. Often just you can feel, the, The significance of how their energy has [00:33:00] changed for the better, and there's even a, a certain, comfort that you can detect.

and also the other thing that you'll see in natural burial practices, natural burial grounds, conservation burial grounds, is the... in most states you can care for your own e- even without a funeral home involvement. although some states do require that the funeral home be involved, you can still have a home funeral where the family takes care of their own.

Those, that's very beautiful when it's meaningful to the family and they wanna do that. Doesn't happen that often, but when it does of- ha- happen, it's really nice to be able to offer that for folks that it's already meaningful for them, it's just a matter of whether they can do it or not. And, they need, to have a, burial ground that helps them with that.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. They need support [00:34:00] and education about that 'cause it just hasn't been a common part of our society , and how we handle dying and death in our society. But I really believe that hands-on approach, families touching the dirt, putting the dirt in, lowering the body, I believe that really helps with grief as well because it almost like pushes you over the edge to actually start to feel your emotions and feel the grief and not, be avoiding grief as well.

'Cause I think that's another, another thing that happens in our society. But y- you're there with the dirt on your hands, and you can't deny it. Yeah. You just have to face the grief and experience it

Laura Starkey: Absolutely. Yeah. For sure. I think that, that relaxing, that sort of calming effect that Freddie mentioned, we notice it all the time, and everybody else, I think, the, in this, this world that we're in, [00:35:00] have said similar things that just how it's really transformative for people to have these, to come out for these burial services, whether it's the immediate family, or, the guests, the neighbors, the, coworkers, the relatives.

So it's pretty powerful. Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: And one question I have, and you could start, Laura, w- for this one, is how long does it... how far in advance do you have to prepare if you would like to have this type of burial? is it something that y- you could ask your

family to arrange at the last minute when you die, or is it really important that people start taking the steps and learning about what's available in advance?

Laura Starkey: It's always a good idea, I would say to anybody that, you're in a conversation with, it's always a good idea to at the very least tell your family or your friends, whoever's your closest [00:36:00] people, what you wish for. Just let them know. That's the first thing you can do. The second best, next best thing is, make a plan.

Write it down. Get it written down. Next best thing is pre-plan for it if you can. set aside the money. some cemeteries are licensed to be able to actually sell and, the space and services ahead of time. you can make payment plans, whatever, or, pl- other places you can just make a reservation.

so, there's, depending on what that cemetery is, but just find out, do your homework, just to learn because we just don't know. we see it all the time. people who, didn't expect to die, and they thought- they had plenty of time or never had the conversation.

People that have been around a long time still never had the conversation, We've had people who are like, "I was married to him for 60 years. We never once had a talk about it," And other people are [00:37:00] like, "Oh, she told me the first week we dated," So, just let your people know.

so as much as you can do to plan ahead- In terms of, , getting it, at least, spelled out somehow. But in terms of at the point of someone passing away, a lot of people have the impression that, okay, mom just died at the hospital. Do we have to get her out there tomorrow? do we have to do it tomorrow or the next day?

No. We just tell people, "Take a breath. It's okay. You can just, get some rest. you don't even have to call the funeral home right away." But, basically what happens within the first 24 hours of the person's, death, they need to be in... put placed under refrigeration. That's what a f- funeral home service will do.

If you're doing a home funeral service, there's, ways to chill the body and keep it cooled. but basically, it... the body, once it's under [00:38:00] refrigeration, under a chilling, certain level, it can... It just basically pauses the, decomposition process that our bodies naturally, any human, any, animal, any, any creature that's, that dies, there's a certain process that naturally happens.

So the refrigeration just, it's just like putting your vegetables in the fridge. it's gonna pause it from- breaking down. so you just put the... The body does need to be refrigerated, but other than that, there's not a huge rush. We've had people... we tell people, if you need...

you've got relatives that are coming in or, you've, gotta, get, your wits about you we can schedule it for a week out. We've had people weeks out, because they had, situations where they really needed certain family members to get home and be able to, or come back to, for the burial.

So, there's that part of the, the pa- the, process that, does not need to be a big rush. I would [00:39:00] say, yes, make your plans in terms of... because we don't know what, driving home today will bring, heaven forbid. But, it's just nice to let somebody know what you wanted. But in terms of at the point of death, you do have time to, to have the, burial service that you would like,

Karen Wyatt: and Freddie, your story is such a good example. You not only planned ahead, you got all the information you needed, and you started your own, conservation cemetery to make sure there's something available. Which actually, I would love that if people listening think, "I wanna be buried in a place like that," and then find out, is there one in your area?

Is there one nearby? Yeah. And what would it take to, to start one or inspire someone else to start one? 'Cause maybe other people are looking as well for this type of cemetery.

Laura Starkey: Absolutely. And I think, I just, we just had a burial service a couple days ago, and I spoke with a man who, a family member, and he's like, you guys need [00:40:00] one up in Duval County," which is Jacksonville.

And I said, there's one in Gainesville." He's like, "It's not close enough. We need one in Duval," and I'm getting ready to retire in a few years. Maybe I'll... I was, so I was like, "You need land. You need people to help you with it. You need, some resources to get it started." But anyway, we just, if anybody out there that's listening to this is interested in either connecting with a group that's already working on it in your area, or just trying to find other people that would be interested in it, come to our website, theconservationburialalliance.org.

and we've got, we're just really trying to help encourage people to connect with each other to help get the, get, learn the steps of how to, make it happen. It is a, it is not an easy thing. it's, it's, a big project, but it's doable, and there's a lot of different models of how people are doing them.

So for example, just taking, Prairie [00:41:00] Creek and Heartwood Preserve, we are close. I was just up there with one of my staff two days ago and we... Or last, late last week and helped them with a burial. And we, so we really, collaborate whenever we can and support each other, but we have very different models.

They're a nonprofit. I'm a, we're a for-profit. They, sell only, like Prairie at, at, the time of death. We do pre-planning. y- we're in the Tampa Bay area. They're in North Florida. They're doing restoration, we're doing conservation, So but there's, so there's a lot of different other models around the country based on what your market is, what, who are, your people are, what's your... Are you in a very rural area? Are you mountainous? Are you in the desert? Are you in, a ur- We're in a more urban, suburban area, so what works here is different than what works even just two hours north at Prairie Creek, which is different than, what works out in Washington State or in North Carolina or Michigan.

there's, a lot of different models out there [00:42:00] and, and, ways to make it happen. But, we're really trying to support each other in our endeavors as well as support organizations and groups of people that are just trying to find a, way to make it happen in their community.

Karen Wyatt: And I was interested, Freddie, in, in you were talking about the fact that the conservation burial is at the land trust. It preserves the land. It makes sure that some owner down the road isn't gonna sell off the cemetery where all your loved ones are buried and turn it into something else. build condominiums on it or something.

And I don't know if that's something to discuss more about how that works, but, why that's a real why that's really important actually, that we need to know it will be there for perpetuity

Freddie Johnson: Yes. it's the highest level, of l- it's the highest legal protection that you can get for land and ecosystems, [00:43:00] and probably the number one, provider of conservation easements are land trust.

But there are other possibilities that are government agencies or maybe soil and water, projects or o- operations that, that deal, still government related. C- it can be done, but, probably if you look around to what's been done in conservation burial, the majority of them, the conservation easements are with land trust.

In our case, it's the county. That's not very common, but you'll also see, nature preserves that will have the, the... There's, So but what you said is exactly true.

It's the highest level. even cemeteries, s- when you bury someone, the, there's a level of protection [00:44:00] by most state statutes that, that it's, a burial ground, so it's now a burial ground, it's protected.

But I can tell you, and you can very easily find burial grounds and cemeteries that have parking lots over them now. So how did that happen? And, a lot of times d- it happens i- where it shouldn't have happened at all. Even legally it shouldn't have happened. But sometimes it happens legally because you have eminent domain- and those bodies are moved somewhere. Yeah. And that land, no matter how nice it was, is now a parking lot or an apartment complex or condominiums, shopping centers. But, with, a conservation easement, not only do you have that level of protection, but you usually have a whole nother organization besides the operators that...

And you have, all of, in the case of, in the case of Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, you [00:45:00] have Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, you have the non-profit CBI, you have the non-profit Alachua Conservation Trust, you have thousands of families that are a part of that project, and you have the conservation easement.

So I won't say it couldn't happen, but it's gonna be the least of our worries probably when things fall apart to where- conservation easements are being threatened. But it could happen, unfortunately.

But it's the highest level. There's- And unless you know something stronger, Laura.

Laura Starkey: I, I was gonna add to that, the concern also isn't, personally, professionally, myself, I'm not worried into the future about this becoming townhouses or a shopping strip.

it would be more of a, concern that the next owners or the owners after them might [00:46:00] come in and say, if we got rid of all these pine trees and these palmettos, we could put in some mausoleums- and we could just put more burials closer together. We could do, we could sell big, huge monument tombstones.

We could make a lot more money by maximizing the cemetery use of this land." So- So yeah, it'll still be a cemetery, but you can make a heck of a lot more money off of this land as a cemetery if you're packing in those bodies and you're selling vaults and you're selling fancy- caskets and you got big, huge monument headstones, and you've got mausoleums and columbariums, and just go cha-

ching, cha-ching, cha-ching when you look at those columns of, of, in a building that's a mausoleum.

That's still a cemetery, but that's a much more highly developed cemetery that is not a conservation cemetery. So that's also the protection is from, not from just oh, it might turn into a shopping [00:47:00] center or a parking lot, although that is a concern, especially in some states more than others. But in my mind, it's also a concern that someone might come in and, yeah, it's still a cemetery.

We're gonna still keep those bodies in the ground. We're just gonna chalk a bunch of bo- a lot more in there, and we're gonna make a lot more money off of this- Yeah ... by getting rid of the conservation element of it. That's what the conservation easement protects from- Protects ... yeah, fret- Pr- Protects it from, and like Freddie said, we've now got thousands of families who are, going, "Oh, no you don't.

You're not gonna do that to our Prairie Creek. You're not gonna do that to our Heartwood Preserve." That's where, that's, we're building a community of people who are, truly committed to this place, you know- that are, they have got loved ones buried here. They've got their own plans to be buried here.

They love this place. They love these places. And, so between them going, they're, we are the community as well as the, the legal protection that, that [00:48:00] the easement holds where the, the land trust that holds that easement or the agency that holds that easement, they have the legal, power to challenge anybody who dares go against that conservation value.

So it's, it gives them some, some power, some, some legal fortitude as well as, we got all the people that are gonna be, like, lining up Yeah Should anyone in the future try to do that. So that's, kind of-

Freddie Johnson: And- That, that's an important point for sure. Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: And you, and Laura, you mentioned headstones, which I, wanted to ask about is, are, I assume there aren't any headstones, but are there markers of some sort at, that are allowed at each of the graves for both of your cemeteries?

Laura Starkey: Yeah, we each have different ones, and then other, ceme-, conservation cemeteries around the country. It just kinda varies by location. There are some that are in areas of the country where there are natural stones,

[00:49:00] in the ground, and they might allow for someone to take one of the stones that they dug up for that burial and engrave it.

we don't have any s- natural stones in Florida. The only natural stone in Florida really is, limestone, which is not in our ground here, and it's not, it's kinda, it can, k- kinda crumbles. so it's not, good for that. What we have chosen at Heartwood Preserve is a metal plaque, it's about five by seven, that goes, on, on a stake at the ground level that it does allow for name and dates and, a f- maybe a, a few words if inscribed in it.

but that's our choice, and, Prairie Creek has a, different option. Freddie can des- describe that one. But again, it's, it goes, it's just, it's a kind of an individual decision- of the cemetery- Makes- ... based on those things. But basically no upright, permanent headstones. Now, some people might put some, some, driftwood pieces or, you know, put a stick [00:50:00] in and kinda naturally create a little sculpture or something, that's biodegradable that's gonna naturally, weather back down.

But, as far as permanent things, that's, what we have, and it kinda depends on each, each location.

Karen Wyatt: Okay. And for you, Freddie, at Prairie Creek?

Freddie Johnson: Very similar. We've, yeah, the, the whole point is to not have... We want to, we want folks to have markers, which is, at Prairie Creek similar to what Laura said.

But it's just a brass marker that's, that has a secure stake to hold it in place. The most important thing, most conservation burial grounds and natural burial grounds use GPS.

the, the natural burial m- movement in general is probably overall, it's, relatively new in terms of its rediscovery of natural burial- which was the original burial. Yeah. [00:51:00] But, but this is the one that I call traditional burial, but the conventional cemeteries and funeral industry will call their modern burial traditional, but it's pretty easy to say which one is really traditional. But the point is, that now most of these natural burial cemeteries and conservation burial grounds use GPS, and I would say that, this generation, this new generation and movement actually does a better job with less.

The, you don't see all the landscape intrusions and distractions, but you actually have a better, more accurate, tracking of where bodies are. And, the fact that the

density is very low gives you a lot more leeway as well in terms of, you don't have to worry about intruding on someone else's little rectangle.[00:52:00]

so it, it really is good, and most, most people just wanna know if they can see a marker with a name and a, and dates or, and simple information, and then know that they can look at the landscape, and it's more about how has that landscape changed season to season. It's not about how that landscape, changed in terms of memorial statues and markers.

That's not the, that's not what people are finding value in with natural burial and conservation burial.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, that's such a good point. And one question comes to mind because I know someone who owns a plot of land who's wondering what to do with it for the future, And, so I was wondering how, is there a minimum size for a plot of land to become a conservation cemetery that, or are there any restrictions like that, size-wise?

I don't, I don't know if that makes sense, but... [00:53:00]

Freddie Johnson: Yeah. Well- It makes perfect sense.

Laura Starkey: Yeah. You wanna ta- take that one, Freddie? I think it, it varies- Yeah, well- ... state by state, so I know- that kind of depends, but-

Freddie Johnson: Yeah, it- Yeah ... if you wanna be certified, you, actually, technically, legally, you could have a conservation burial ground and not be certified.

I would say that most everybody, as a m- movement standard, it's really, as you probably could, suspect, any time you have a new movement, it's really good to have a certifier that you're actually doing what you say you're doing. If you're, the Green Burial Council, which is a certification nonprofit, and they have a, these standards for conservation burial cemeteries, which are the highest standards of natural burial.

And you can go to greenburialcouncil.org and you can find those. But to your [00:54:00] point, there is a minimum of 20, I think it's now 20 acres for a conservation burial ground. if you want it to be a natural burial ground, you, could definitely do that for less acreage. But since conservation burial is about land and- saving and protect- and restoring land, that's why the minimum is there. However, there's an exception to that rule in the standards. If you have

land that you wanna have a conservation burial ground that actually is contiguous with already saved land, like a nat- a national or a state park or another conservation burial ground, something that is protected in perpetuity, now you can have, I think it even goes down to five or 10 acres.

Karen Wyatt: Oh.

Freddie Johnson: if it... Because what you're doing now is you're making something that's significant, more significant- More, yeah ... in terms of-

Yeah,

Karen Wyatt: Huh, that makes [00:55:00] sense. this is so interesting, and so I assume people can go to the Conservation Burial Alliance website to get information first if they're looking for a conservation burial cemetery in their area, or if they're interested in starting one.

Because I was just thinking, I have no idea where else these exist, but you were saying it's kind of a growing movement, and more and more- seem to be popping up everywhere.

Laura Starkey: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And, on our, we've got a lot of resources on the website, and there's a list that's on there of ones that we know about.

and then, um, the membership, we do have a, membership, dues for, joining the CBA, which again, just to distinguish from what Freddie was explaining about the Green Burial Council, they're a certifying nonprofit. The CBA is not a certifying nonprofit. but we [00:56:00] do have also, standards that we, we all agree to adhere to with our invi- individual projects.

But again, some people are members that maybe are a part of a n- natural cemetery project, but still, support what we're doing and have a lot of overlap we still can all support each other. So but the benefits or some of ways that we support each other, through the CBA are we have, like a Google forum where you can just email e- the whole group and say, "Hey, who's got an idea about, liability insurance?

who does... what are you guys doing? Or who's doing this? How are you..." like just operational questions of things, then everybody can chime in, as they have an answer. Or we also have a startup forum of, for people who, are starting

something up. They're in the early stages, planning or early implementation, not quite there yet, not quite operational yet.

[00:57:00] so we've got a forum for them to get together and, a few of us that are already operating, can get on there and give some, tips and, answer some questions. And then we have an operators forum where we, those of us who are, have been doing this for a while now, we can get on there and, it's a Zoom meeting every other month that we talk about, "Hey, what's going on in your world?"

and then we bounce around different things, so- And then, some newsletters and we have some webinars that we've put together in the past that we still have, accessible for, members to, read, to view. And, so it's g- it's got some good... It's, it's a supportive organization.

we're... it's all a volunteer, a volunteer working board, and, small. It's an alliance. It's not, we don't have an office space per se. We're all across the country. so it's... But it's just a really [00:58:00] good group. We've started a- about seven years ago, and then we g- we filed for 501[c][3] and received that status in 2000, 2020, so during- COVID. When COVID hit, we were all like, "We're old hat with working on Zoom." So we, had been meeting on Zoom for a couple years at that point. So that was, so that was not an adjustment for us. But we did, file for our IRS nonprofit status and received it, so we've been an organized, organization since September of 2020,

Karen Wyatt: gosh, I want... I really appreciate you, Laura and Freddie, for coming on and sharing all this information, and I hope it will draw people to learn more about the Conservation Burial Alliance. And if you're like Laura and you have some family land that you'd like to conserve, or if you're like Freddie and you wanna investigate, "Hey, I've, where's, where can I be buried in this way?"

maybe you'll be inspired to [00:59:00] start, your own conservation burial cemetery. So, thank you to both of you.

Laura Starkey: Absolutely. Thank you. It was just a delight to be on here. Thank you so much, and we're excited about the work we're doing and, getting the word out any opportunity we can. So if anybody else wants to have a, any of us, not just me and Freddie, but, any- anyone else, from our team that, wants to, have a talk with any groups or, just come see what we're about, we'd really welcome everyone to join us and come learn and support each other.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, definitely. And we need this to be a topic at conferences and, so

Laura Starkey: that- Absolutely ...

Karen Wyatt: more information gets out.

Laura Starkey: For sure. Yeah. there's so many different angles of, groups, not just land conservation or, death care related, but, estate planning attorneys and, you know- healthcare workers and, social workers. There's a lot of different directions to, to- Yeah ... get this word [01:00:00] out. Yeah

Freddie Johnson: Thank you for your program, Karen, because you're a big part of getting the word out and helping people understand their choices, which is... that's all that we really want. We wanna know, we want folks to know this is a choice, and we want folks to know who are interested in having something like this that it's doable, and we're here to help as much as we can.

And thank you again for what you do.

Karen Wyatt: Oh, you're welcome. I'm happy to do what I can to just spread the word, and we're g- we're gonna boost this movement and keep it going. Absolutely. Thank you. Thank you

Laura Starkey: so

Karen Wyatt: much, Karen. You're, so welcome.

Laura Starkey: All

Karen Wyatt: right. Take care. All right. You, too. Bye. Bye

Laura Starkey: now.