

Home funerals offer a personal goodbye

By Pam Chickering Wilson
Union staff writer

Sullivan – Death has never been a distant concept for Sue Rheingans. A former hospice volunteer, she regularly helped patients, and their families, through the last months of life. And as the mother of a son with special needs, she had been told almost since his birth to prepare for the eventuality of his death.

"All through his youth, I was very involved in advocacy," Rheingans said. "I have been to a lot of funerals for children with special needs.

"At one point, I was thinking about training to be a funeral director, but to me, even embalming never seemed natural," Rheingans added.

Instead, she began looking into becoming a home funeral guide, receiving training in California to enable people to handle their own family funerals, from the care of the body after death to meeting all of the legal requirements.

Now Rheingans, of the Sullivan area, has joined with retired Jefferson teacher Fran Vandre to start Personal Farewells, a service for people who desire a more personal, more natural farewell for their loved one.

To answer their most frequently asked questions, yes, it is legal in Wisconsin for family members to prepare their own deceased loved ones for burial, and if the land is rural or semi-rural, they can even bury family members on their own land. Law does not require embalming in most instances.

It's not for everyone, but for some families, the personal farewell process provides a much greater sense of connection and closure. It's also far "greener" and much less expensive than a traditional process as handled by a funeral home, which can cost up to \$12,000;

"A home funeral can cost \$2,000 or less," Vandre said.

"It's an option we think people should be educated about," Rheingans added.

She noted that American families tend not to plan for or research funeral options, partly because the culture teaches people to fear death and to push it away.

"In our culture; we've been brought up to believe that dead bodies are scary," she said.

"We don't accept death as part of life," Vandre said. "Infirmity and death are taboo topics."

And still, everyone dies, each in his or her own time, so this is a transition all must go through.

It's best for each family to talk these issues out and determine what they want well before the moment of a loved one's death. Some people even choose to plan their own funeral, giving them some control over the inevitable.

"I got into this movement four years ago, after I went to the funeral of a young man in town I knew who had been home-schooled," Vandre said.

"When Andrew died, his family, who were very simple people, were not comfortable with a heavy metal coffin, and his mother didn't want the last person who touched him to be a stranger."

Vandre described how Andrew's uncle placed him in his coffin after the young man's death, how mourners at the funeral wiped their tears with his shroud, and friends and family members brought back the highlights of his life with personal inscriptions on his coffin.

"It was the most emotionally gratifying funeral I have ever been to," Vandre said. "The loss was gut-wrenching, but it was still a wonderful place to be."

After Vandre's retirement from her decades-long career teaching language arts and working with youngsters with special needs, she decided to look into the home burial movement.

Rheingans received her training in California with movement leader Jerrigrace Lyons of Final Passages, who has helped more than 600 families through the home funeral process. Meanwhile, Vandre trained with "death midwife" Lucy Basler, a follower of Lyons, in Wisconsin.

As part of their preparation, both Vandre and Rheingans received hands-on training in the care of the body after death, how to wash the body and keep it cold, how to dress the body, and how to negotiate all of the required paperwork to meet all legal requirements.

The duo didn't know each other before learning that they both shared an interest in home funerals. Learning that they lived so close, Vandre and Rheingans got together 'just to see if we clicked," Vandre said. It worked so well they went into business together earlier this year, forming a limited liability corporation.

"We talked to the coroner and the registrar, among lots of other people to make sure we know exactly what's required in Jefferson County," Vandre said. "For us, it's very cathartic to be able to take care of a loved one when they die," Vandre said. "That's not the way we've done it in our culture for many generations, but when the time really comes, I think a lot of people wish they could. What greater gift could you give a loved one than to care for them at death?"

Rheingans referred to a quote from Lyons; saying, "It's strange to think that we care for somebody all our lives, and then as soon as their heart stops or they stop breathing, we send their body away immediately; It's very disruptive. "It leaves the space empty, people feeling helpless," the quote continues. "Their confidence to take care of this person has been undermined by giving this ritual away to other people."

Vandre said that when her father died in August, her mother chose to involve a funeral home, but did agree to delay funeral officials arrival so that the entire family had a chance to say good-bye. "It was very healing for all of us to be there, to be with him for three or four hours after death, and to watch him physically change," Vandre said.

"It was as if you could see the spirit leave," she said. "Mom told me it was the best thing we did, to give everyone time to be with him before the funeral home took him away."

The "green" aspect of home funerals has made this a growing trend in recent years around the country; It marks a move back toward the burial traditions of several generations ago, when all funerals were handled at home. At that

time, groups of church women often helped prepare the body during "laying of the dead" and the hand-made coffin sat right out on the dining room table before its procession to the church and/or cemetery.

In contrast, Rheingans said, modern tradition depersonalizes death and calls for extreme measures to be taken in order to preserve the appearance of a body from which the spirit already has fled.

"We are caretakers of the earth, so why are we sticking all this cement, embalming fluid and formaldehyde into the earth?" Vandre asked.

There are some situations in which home funerals are not appropriate, as with deaths from massive trauma received in a car accident. However, for uncomplicated deaths, if the body is handled properly, home burial is perfectly appropriate, the women said.

"If you allow two to three days for the visitation and funeral, properly handled bodies don't smell." Vandre said.

"They're not dirty; they're not going to give off germs."

Vandre and Rheingans said that they are less interested in making a profit with Personal Farewells than in raising awareness and helping to educate people about this choice.

For this reason, they've created a website, along with sent out brochures and letters to churches letting people know they are available to assist.

"We are not handling this work for people, but, rather, helping people do it for themselves," Rheingans said. "We have great planning guides to help families make all the decisions they need to."

Personal Farewells also has enlisted local master woodworker John Brower of Jefferson to build coffins and urns for remains for anyone who requests them.

For more information, people may visit www.personalfarewells.com. Both Vandre and Rheingans also welcome questions via phone or e-mail. Rheingans can be reached at (262) 365- 8532 or at suerheingans@aol.com. Vandre can be reached at (920) 723-2122 or at personalfarewells@Charter.net.



Fran Vandre, left, and Sue Rheingans help plan home funerals