

A NEW END-OF-LIFE CHOICE:  
HUMAN  
COMPOSTING

# A Green

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s he lay dying of throat cancer last fall, Robert Cantisano faced what he felt was one of the most essential decisions of his life: What should be done with his body when he died? An organic farmer and activist known in his Northern

California community as Amigo Bob, Cantisano was a passionate advocate for green growing, so when he heard about a Seattle company called Recompose that could turn a human body into compost, “his eyes sparked up,” says his wife, Jenifer Bliss. “He was an expert in making compost, so it was a perfect fit.”

Three days after Amigo Bob died at the age of 69 on Dec. 26—and following an at-home wake and blessing—Bliss sent his body to Recompose. Twelve weeks later she drove a pickup truck from their farm in Nevada City, Calif., to Seattle to collect the cubic yard of compost made from Amigo Bob’s remains. “I touched it and felt comforted,” says Bliss. “His spirit went on to greater things, and his body did too. By becoming compost, he’s continuing to nurture life.”

Returning his body to the earth was a meaningful end for the farmer, but until last year the process known officially as natural organic reduction was illegal in every state, where death choices have been limited to burial or cremation, both of which have substantial environmental costs (see sidebar).



# er Grave



KATRINA SPADE IS ON A MISSION TO OFFER A MORE ECO-FRIENDLY OPTION IN DEATH CARE: TURNING BODIES INTO SOIL

By **EILEEN FINAN**



**Final Act**  
“People are choosing to return to the natural cycle,” says Spade (at the Recompose facility in Seattle; the container in front of her—here filled with only wood chips and grass—holds bodies during composting).



## Laying the Groundwork



### Soil Study

In 2015 Spade began to test the decomposition process on donated bodies with help from scientists like Western Carolina University professor Cheryl Johnston (above, monitoring soil temperature with Spade).



### The Vessel

A body (not pictured), along with wood chips, alfalfa and straw, is placed in an 8x4-ft. steel tube that rotates. In 30 days microbes break down even teeth and bones.

That, however, is quickly changing: In 2020 Washington became the first state to allow the practice, and this spring Colorado and Oregon passed laws following suit. New York and California have both introduced natural organic reduction bills that are likely to pass in the next year. The growing composting movement is the realization of a decade-long dream for Katrina Spade, the founder of Recompose, the country's first human-composting funeral home, who pioneered the process and is leading the push to legalize it. "I wondered, 'What if we had a choice for death care that helps the planet rather than harms it?'" says Spade. "To know the last gesture you'll make will be gentle and beneficial just feels like the right thing to do."

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Growing up on a small farm in rural Plainfield, N.H., "we grew our own vegetables, we composted everything, and we were always frank about death and dying," recalls Spade, 43, the daughter of a physician and a physician's assistant. "Because my parents were in medicine, we talked about it with a comfort level that was a little atypical of U.S. families."

That easy relationship with mortality was given a jolt after she had her sons Riley, now 16, and Kale, 13, whom she shares with her partner Rania, a social media consultant. "Having small children growing up fast, I had an epiphany: 'Someday I'll be 70!' I started to get curious about what would happen to my body when I died." Cremation was the default in her family, "but it seemed like a waste to incinerate a body." Natural burial, in which unembalmed remains are placed directly into the ground in a shroud or biodegradable casket, was appealing, but by then she was a city dweller far from open land. "The question for me became, 'What would an urban equivalent of a natural burial be?'"

Her answer began to take shape when she was a graduate student in architecture at the University of Massachusetts. A friend who knew she was searching for a thesis topic and curious about death care mentioned the fact that some farmers dispose of cow carcasses by composting them. "I thought, 'Perfect! If you can compost a cow, you can probably compost a human.'"

By 2017 Spade's research project had become Recompose, but while the company attracted high-profile investors like *The Handmaid's Tale* au-

## One Man's Journey Back to the Earth



### 'A Champion for the Earth'

Organic farmer and activist "Amigo Bob" Cantisano (with puppet and teaching aid Woodsy) died of cancer on Dec. 26.



### Ready to Recompose

Cantisano's body arrived at Seattle's Recompose facility in a cardboard casket decorated by family and friends reading, "He loved the Earth so much that he wanted to be composted."



### Transformation

Two months later his remains had turned into 1 cubic yard of nutrient-rich soil. Seeing it "was a profound moment," says his widow, Jenifer Bliss.



### Resting Places

Bliss scattered some compost near the Sacramento River headwaters and other locations and brought the rest to their farm.



### At Peace

"His body is nourishing new life," says Bliss (at home with Amigo Bob's compost in June). "I know he's happy about it."

## A Natural Fit

“It’s a truly meaningful choice,” says Spade. “That’s what’s allowed me to put my heart and soul into it. I believe it gives real comfort to people.”



thor Margaret Atwood, it took two years of lobbying by Spade and her team for the state to pass the law allowing them to open. And it wasn’t without bumps. Catholic groups in Washington and other states have spoken out against natural organic reduction saying it doesn’t promote human dignity, with the New York Catholic Conference arguing the practice is “more appropriate for vegetable trimmings and eggshells than for human bodies.”

That doesn’t faze Linda Wolf, who was one of the first 775 people to prepay the \$5,500 composting fee to hold a spot with Recompose. “There’s nothing creepy about it,” says Wolf, 76, a semiretired psychoanalyst in Seattle. “I love the idea—go out with a bang and contribute to the Earth.”

On Dec. 20 Recompose began composting its first clients, and to date 25 bodies have been fully transformed to soil. “I don’t think it will ever become less amazing to me that this works,” Spade says. Since the Washington law passed, several composting competitors have opened in the state—a development Spade says she welcomes: “There’s a climate crisis looming, and we need more than one operator offering this.” After all, while Recompose is planning three new locations (Colorado, California and a second in Seattle),

‘You become dark, rich soil that can help a forest grow’

—KATRINA SPADE

the current facility can only compost 10 bodies at a time. Each body, which must remain unembalmed (bodies can be refrigerated prior to composting to allow for viewing) is placed in a steel cylinder and set in a beehive-like structure. Natural microbes begin decomposition, raising temperatures inside the vessels to 150 degrees—“a hallelujah moment,” Spade says. “It’s nature doing its work.”

After about two months the body has turned to mulch, and the compost is aerated and ready to be distributed. Families typically donate most of the compost to a nearby wilderness area that partners with the company and receive 64 ounces of compost (“genuinely good for your garden,” says Spade) to spread themselves. “When you hand over that box of ready-to-create-life-again soil, it’s really something,” says Spade. “You can’t be a human forever, and that can be a little terrifying. But this way you rejoin the natural cycle, and to me that’s incredibly beautiful.” ●

## THE PRICE OF DYING

End-of-life choices carry both financial and environmental costs

### Cremation

Average price: \$5,000.

Most Americans (56 percent) say they plan to be cremated, a process that releases more than 1.7 billion lbs. of CO<sub>2</sub> in the U.S. annually.

### Traditional Burial

Average price: \$9,000.

Burials put more than 4 million gallons of embalming fluid in the ground each year in the U.S.

### Human Composting

Average price: \$5,500.

Composting uses only one eighth the energy used in burial or cremation.