

# La Crosse, Wisconsin

## Natural burial option offers sisters a 'simple' return to the earth

“This earth has nourished me all these years,” says Sister Helen Gohres, a 91-year-old FSPA who resides at the community’s skilled nursing facility on St. Joseph’s Ridge near La Crosse. “It’s now my time to return that nourishment to the earth with my body.”

For Sister Helen, this sentiment is the ultimate expression of the Franciscan tradition of care for creation that reflects her wish to be honored in death with a natural funeral and burial. She first expressed her desire in 2007 during a conversation with Sister Sharon Berger, FSPA mission councilor, who had just returned from attending a workshop on establishing natural preserves with space for green burials. “I shared this information with Sister Helen, who has been an advocate of environmental concerns and justice and peace issues much of her life,” recalls Sister Sharon. “Sister Helen told me that a natural burial is exactly what she wanted.”

A process for researching the possibility of natural burial for FSPA began in the following months. In September 2009, the La Crosse County Board granted approval for FSPA to establish a cemetery on its Villa property on St. Joseph’s Ridge. Fourteen circles with six graves in each have been plotted on the 1.36 acre site. Preparation of the site with the planting of native prairie grasses and flowers will begin this spring.

Several FSPA have now elected green

burial. In making this choice, sisters must first convey their wishes to their family so that they understand the difference the arrangement will make in her funeral and burial. Sister Karolyne Rohlik, who volunteers as a driver and resides at Villa St. Joseph, has shared the joy of her own decision with those she loves. She says that Earth has always called to her—first as a child and then, since professing her first vows in 1954, as a Franciscan woman committed to care for God’s creation as St. Francis did.

“Sister Helen and I have talked about this,” she says in reference to their decisions to go back to the earth upon their death. “The most natural, most beautiful experiences we have are to be born and to die. What is there to fear?” she questions.

The Villa staff is prepared to help Sisters Helen and Karolyne and others to realize their desires for natural burial, and a protocol has been established. As the use of traditional embalming chemicals is prohibited, the body will ordinarily be buried within 36 hours of death. Villa seamstress Sister Mary Ann Gaul

has prepared rosaries and burial garments, all with natural fabrics, and FSPA carpenter Jerry Moriarty has constructed a simple wooden burial container that is also completely biodegradable.

Just as Villa staff members are committed to respectfully returning the bodies of their sisters to the natural cycle of life, so too are funeral directors Joe Schams and Josh Sonnenberg. Joe and Josh are partners of Coulee Region Cremation Group, a niche

business that offers not only traditional and cremation services, but natural funeral and burial services as well.

They say that while the rising costs for



*Sister Mary Ann Gaul, volunteer seamstress at Villa St. Joseph, works with biodegradable fabric to construct a burial garment.*

and the ecological damage from traditional burial and cremation have led to renewed interest in green alternatives, the business of natural funerals is somewhat unique. Joe has been conducting research for the past six years on the availability of green funeral services provided on a regular basis and says that, to his knowledge, Coulee Region Cremation Group stands alone. “According to the National Green Burial Council, no one else is doing this. Josh and I are honored to work with the sisters, and do so with utmost respect. Who better to revolutionize green funerals and burials than the FSPA?”

Coulee Region Cremation Group will assist Villa staff with the newly developed natural funeral and burial protocol. A visitation, funeral Mass and committal service will be held at Villa St. Joseph. A memorial service will be held at St. Rose Convent at a later date.

Perhaps it is these changes to come at the end of life for FSPA’s beloved sisters, those choosing natural funerals and burial, that are the most difficult to conceive. “When it happens,” says Villa St. Joseph Administrator Sister Jean Michael Treba, “it will be very different

**Continued on page 11**



*Sister Helen Gohres has chosen a natural funeral and burial for herself.*

Photo courtesy of Villa

## Natural burial

continued from page 9

from the customs we have always preserved.” She and Sister Mary Ann have been working with Villa Liturgy Coordinator Sister Louise Marie Guralski and Director of Pastoral Care Sharon Rohde, Congregation of Divine Providence, to create a new rite of spiritual passage. “Some of the sisters have decided it’s not right for them,” says Sister Louise Marie, who feels that at the end of every discussion the important conclusion is access to the option. “I like that we have a choice.”

Sister Karolyne does too. “The earth is sacred, our bodies are sacred,” she says. “Every time I pass by the spot intended for the burial site I think, ‘this is where I’m going to be!’ You can’t get any more sacred than that.” ■

FSPA has been involved with for the past 10 years, so I think there is great potential for us to continue our relationship in some manner with the TSSF in Bolivia. After my return, I was able to give a presentation of my experience to the sisters at St. Rose Convent and in the process speak a bit about the Franciscan tradition. This tradition merits more attention among us who profess this way of life, and I believe this experience is one way in which it can be shared with a broader audience. The world is hungry for an alternative way of interacting with each other personally and professionally, and the Franciscan tradition presents many opportunities to enhance these relationships.

It will be important for us as a community to continue to find ways to reach out to others to share the gifts we have been given, to receive from others the gifts they have and to work together to bring about justice. We can do this

other on the journey. We are “pilgrims and strangers” wherever we go; yet among each other, we are also “pilgrims and sisters/brothers.” In each other, we find God, and we share that love and goodness. ■

## Education

continued from page 5

communicate to her students the momentous value of Franciscan spirituality and her deep love of the Eucharist as they go home each day and into the future. “Planting the seeds of faith, justice and peace, love for God’s creation and respect for diversity in young people has ramifications far beyond the years they are in school.” She joyfully proclaims: “I believe that as FSPA, we have a history to remember and share, as well as much to accomplish—a future to create—in the church today!” ■