The Farley Center: A Sense of Hope and Community

Megan Miller

Madison, WI

3RD PLACE WINNER

When my Grandpa Jim died in 2013, our family inquired about a simple wicker basket for the burial, and the (possibly well-meaning) casket salesperson said, “well that just won’t hold up!” … Although I was young and didn’t know better at the time, I wish I would have had the skills and knowledge to advocate for us. We ended up having a traditional burial with embalming, a vault, a casket, and the works. It was beautiful, but I still feel sadness when I drive past cemeteries and see the toxic impacts of these rituals.

I am a Registered Nurse in palliative care, and I am especially passionate about helping folks face death with more honesty, grace, and authenticity. I host Death Cafes and recently launched a card game about death (The Creative Dying Game). I am especially passionate about green burials as a way to nurture the earth (our last gift), and as a powerful symbol of surrendering to the forces of life and death. I’ve been researching green burials and human composting for years, growing more interested in these “alternate endings”. My husband, Ryan, is a Software Engineer with a passion for organic growing and food security, and he is looking for a way to continue to transition his energy from computers to plants.

In August 2020, Ryan, our dog Jaxx, and I packed up our things and moved to Madison, Wisconsin. We had been Michiganders our entire lives, so this move was a big deal. And it was even bigger since it was happening amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Our planned trips to Madison to explore and tour homes were cancelled due to COVID-19, so when we arrived at our new home last summer it was our first time here.

When we arrived in Madison, it felt for a while like we were living in someone else’s home. Although we love Madison (especially the hikes and beaches!), it has been challenging to forge a sense of community while staying at home to stop the spread of COVID-19. We didn’t yet know anyone in Madison when we arrived and couldn’t much visit places or go to events, so we found it challenging to feel a sense of community here. With the first signs of the pandemic waning, Ryan and I started to explore how we might engage with the community here in Madison. So where do newcomers go to find like-minded friends? Google, of course!

Ryan searched “green burials in Madison, WI” and excitedly showed me the home page of The Linda and Gene Farley Center for Peace, Justice and Sustainability. It felt like the perfect marriage of my passion for green burials and his interest in organic growing. We watched the welcome video, and I could feel my excitement growing as Shedd Farley talked about the

Natural Path Sanctuary, the farm, the beekeeping… Although it was still winter at that time and we didn't yet have plans to visit, just knowing that The Farley Center was around us brought a sense of excitement and hope that soon there would be warmer days and new friends to meet.

A few weeks ago, Ryan and I had the opportunity to go to the Farley Center for a bluegrass concert with Down from the Hills. When we arrived, I was nervous (COVID-19 re-entry anxiety is real!) but my goodness, I am so glad we joined. We were greeted with so much love, offered a tour of the Natural Path Sanctuary and had an opportunity to learn a bit about the history of the Center. I didn't stop smiling for hours! Sitting in the warm sun listening to Down from the Hills, I felt a real sense that my roots here in Madison were deepening.

To me, The Farley Center and the Natural Path Sanctuary are a sense of hope and community amidst turbulent times. Although Ryan and I have only just started visiting, we both plan to come back many more times to walk the Natural Path Sanctuary trails, to see the crops grow and to meet new friends. I am extraordinarily grateful for the community that keeps The Farley Center and the Natural Path Sanctuary going, and I am glad to be a small part of it.