

## **Return Home, Auburn, WA**

TerraCon 2024: Pioneering Community Engagement through Terramation

### **Rationale behind the Idea**

TerraCon 2024 was born from the team at Return Home's deep desire to educate the community and deathcare professionals in a safe, imaginative space. As a family and staff owned funeral home in Washington, we recognized the urgent need for inclusive, sustainable, and environmentally friendly funeral practices. Traditional burial and cremation methods have significant environmental impacts, and terramation, or body composting, offers a more eco-friendly alternative. This aligns with the increasing public awareness and demand for eco-friendly options supported by studies highlighting the environmental benefits of composting human remains over conventional methods (Source: Green Burial Council). Additionally, through our active presence on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, we saw the community's need to learn about terramation while addressing their fears and misconceptions about the roles of funeral directors and death care in general. Hosting the first-ever terramation conference was Return Home's way of fostering an environment filled with education, innovation, and heartfelt conversations.

### **Detailed Description of the Program**

TerraCon 2024 was a comprehensive, multi-day conference dedicated to educating both funeral professionals and the public about terramation while emphasizing the important role of funeral directors. The event, attended by over 230 people in person and 350 more virtually, including local mortuary students and was broadcast into mortuary school classrooms across the world, and featured:

#### **Educational Workshops and Panels:**

**The Science of Terramation:** Presented by our lead scientist John Paul and Operations Manager Chris Stone, this session delved into the science behind how terramation works. John Paul passionately explained the scientific principles that underpin Return Home's terramation process. He also shared a deeply personal story about the death of his son and his burial experience, expressing how he would have chosen terramation for his son if it had been available and how he plans to choose it for himself. Chris Stone provided a detailed account of each terramation procedure, sharing how he has ensured Return Home has a process that is safe and gentle, allowing for family interaction with the process and full transparency. He also emphasized that every terramation is unique, explaining the science behind these differences.

**How it all Started: Sponsoring, Drafting, and Approving NOR Legislation:** Representative Pam Marsh from Oregon shared her personal journey of pushing for legislative change to allow for terramation. Her story was particularly poignant as she recounted how, just a year after the legislation passed, she found herself needing the services of Return Home following her husband's death. Her heartfelt testimony underscored the real-life impact of terramation and the importance of legislative support.

**Funeral Director Roles:** This heartfelt panel featured three seasoned funeral directors sharing their personal experiences with terramation. Gary Sultz, an old-school funeral director from Revelstoke, British Columbia, moved the audience to tears as he recounted how he accompanied a 19-year-old wildfire firefighter on an airplane with her siblings for a laying-in at Return Home. He freely displayed his emotions as he described how Return Home's transparency and compassionate care made him feel comfortable with the process. Jamin Mohler spoke about his experience with the family of Fritz, an 18-year-old who died in Eastern Washington. Fritz's family and friends came to Return Home for a laying-in, and a video of Fritz's mother covering him with organics garnered over 50 million views on TikTok, illustrating the powerful impact of accommodating family requests and decedent's wishes. It was Fritz's last wish to "go viral" and because of inclusive and forward thinking services, he got his last wish. Russ Weeks, a funeral home owner, shared how he brought a close family friend to Return Home and emphasized the profound experience for the family, advocating for more funeral homes to strive for such excellence.

**Panel: Regulating Terramation Facilities:** This engaging panel featured members from the Department of Licensing, the Funeral and Cemetery Board and the Department of Health discussing the pioneering regulations in Washington, the first place in the world to allow terramation. They shared insights on how they crafted these groundbreaking regulations and the challenges they overcame to set a global precedent.

**Building Europe's First Terramation Facility:** Pablo Metz shared his journey of establishing Europe's first terramation facility in Germany. He and his partner Max traveled all the way from their home country to speak and participate in the conference. He talked about the interesting differences and challenges he has encountered, including navigating various cultural attitudes towards death and funeral practices, as well as the logistical and regulatory hurdles unique to Europe.

**Panel: Hear from the Terramation CEOs:** Moderated by Jeff Jorgenson, this panel featured insights from leading terramation CEOs Micah Truman, Seth Viddal, and Pablo Metz. They discussed their visions, experiences, and the future of terramation in a candid and inspiring session. The CEOs shared how this important work has moved and changed them personally, describing deathcare as their most beautiful adventure, helping them to understand what an amazing profession it is.

**Redefining Sustainability: The Deeper Impact of Terramation:** Brie Smith and Katey Houston discussed the profound impact of terramation on the funeral industry. Brie Smith shared her journey of being a Senior Executive and Founder of Return Home and the significance of creating new rites and rituals from scratch through the eyes of a funeral professional. Katey Houston spoke about the individual service to families and how it is transforming funeral service. She shared her experience of being revitalized by the unique and personalized services developed at Return Home, which often include the presence of the body, a practice uncommon in their state. This rejuvenation has renewed her passion for the funeral industry and its future.

**Respecting Tradition: Cultural and Religious Perspectives on Terramation:** Moderated by Rev. Susan Cutshall, this highly anticipated panel featured Rabbi Daniel Weiner, Pastor Dan Lloyd, and Reverend Jessica McKimmie. They discussed how each religion views terramation and how it aligns with their scriptures and doctrines, offering invaluable insights into the cultural and religious acceptance of this innovative practice.

**Family Panel:** This heartfelt panel included a family from The Natural Funeral and two families from Return Home, with one family still having their loved one in the terramation process at Return Home. They shared their experiences with the terramation process and the funeral professionals involved. Their stories highlighted the compassionate and transformative impact of terramation on their grieving process, providing deep emotional insights into how terramation helps families heal.

**Keynote Address by BJ Miller:** BJ Miller delivered an inspiring keynote that discussed the link between hospice and deathcare, emphasizing the importance of mental health in both fields. His talk underscored the critical role of holistic care and compassion in end-of-life services.

**Tours:** Two separate sets of 40 attendees toured our terramation facilities to witness the process firsthand, understanding every step and how it works. This was the first time a terramation facility has been opened in this capacity, allowing people to delve deeply into the process. Each tour was a two-hour event that ended in a luncheon.

**Networking Opportunities:** The event provided a platform for funeral directors, environmentalists, and community leaders to network, share ideas, and explore collaborative opportunities. Funeral professionals had the chance to talk with legislators to understand how to get the ball rolling in their states. The public also engaged with funeral professionals from all walks of life, highlighting the role of the funeral director and proving that funeral professionals are here to serve families and meet them where they are.

Community Engagement Activities: Interactive sessions both in person and virtual allowed community members to ask questions, share their thoughts, and learn more about how they can support and participate in green funeral practices.

### **Benefits Provided to Funeral Home and Staff**

TerraCon 2024 significantly benefited our funeral home and staff by positioning us as leaders in sustainable funeral practices. It allowed professionals in deathcare and the community to get to know the faces of the professionals who will care for the families who choose this service. It provided an opportunity to share ideas with those in traditional deathcare and vice versa, and to mingle with people and legislators looking to get terramation legalized in other states. The event also allowed our staff, mortuary students, religious leaders, and scientists to discuss mental health in deathcare and how we can support each other. Additionally, it served as a springboard for mortuary students who attended to find out more about the profession, learn from both experienced and new directors, and discuss how to maintain mental health in deathcare.

### **Benefits Provided to Families and the Community**

For families, TerraCon 2024 offered invaluable information and reassurance about the terramation process. The educational sessions and facility tours demystified body composting, making it a more accessible and acceptable option for those seeking sustainable funeral practices. The community at large benefited from increased awareness of and engagement with environmentally friendly alternatives, contributing to a broader cultural shift towards sustainability.

### **Improvements and Future Plans**

While TerraCon 2024 was our inaugural conference, we have already identified areas for improvement. Future iterations will include more interactive sessions, expanded networking opportunities, and greater involvement from international experts. We plan to make TerraCon an annual event, continually refining its format and content based on attendee feedback and emerging trends in green funeral practices.

In conclusion, TerraCon 2024 was a groundbreaking event that not only educated and engaged the community about terramation but also reinforced our commitment to sustainable funeral practices. By fostering a dialogue around environmentally friendly options and emphasizing the critical role of funeral directors in our profession, we have set a new standard for community engagement and environmental stewardship in the funeral industry. Additionally, Matt Baskerville wrote a feature-length article about his experience at TerraCon 2024 in the May edition of the NFDA Director Magazine, further highlighting the event's impact and success.