

Serving on the Burial Crew

By James Gartrell

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Bluestem at its core is all about community, and communities grow via word of mouth. It is because of my parent's neighbor in Farrington Village, NC, that I even learned about this beautiful place.

My parents had had a conversation with their neighbor about a new conservation cemetery called Bluestem, and my father in turn asked if I would like to take a tour? I was reluctant at first, but he said, "Oh, they also have a volunteer program" and when I learned that I might get to cultivate the land and use a chainsaw, I immediately signed up for the tour.

On February 1st, 2022, I participated in Bluestem's first volunteer day. It was my first foray into repairing the land through land stewardship and I've met so many lovely people such as Carole, Tom, David, Andy, Ken, Dorothy and so many other wonderful volunteers. There are many little stories I could tell you, such as the time I swore off a gym membership and coined the phrase "Body by Bluestem", but there isn't enough time to tell them all. I want to share what it is like being a member of Bluestem's burial crew and my first burial experience in particular.

I was very much uncertain about death and joining the burial crew really sent me out of my comfort zone. Heidi had reached out before and offered me the opportunity on many occasions, but I wasn't ready. Until the sudden and unexpected loss of a father and husband that changed my mind. I was reminded of the sudden loss of my own friend (by suicide several years ago) and the immense grief I felt, but also the amazing support of my family and friends during that time. I knew in my heart that I needed to support this man's family. In the past given the same circumstance, I would have been timid and nervous, but this time felt different: I had a calling to serve.

The service started off understandably with a visible sense of grief in the family - the sudden loss of a loved one is so cruel, and as a member of the burial crew, it is our job to offer as much support while being hidden from sight. We want the family to know that this moment is about their journey through grief and, hopefully, repair.

Bluestem offers family members the opportunity to lower their loved one into the grave and to cover the grave with the earth. Or the members of the burial crew can do this duty for them.

Since this was my first burial service, I was really uncertain what closing the grave might be like. What I observed however was a beautiful transformation, as the family opted to cover the site almost entirely on their own. With each shovel of dirt, slow murmurs turned into stories about their father, jokes being given, communion being built. What was once visible grief was being replaced by stories celebrating their loved one.

It was a restorative moment not only for the family, but also for me.

