

Sunset Mesa families share their grief

By Don Benjamin, Staff Writer

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Last Saturday afternoon over 125 people assembled at the pow wow arbor in Delta's Confluence Park. They gathered just southeast of the point where the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers flow together -- a juncture that gives the park its name. The arbor is a collection of sturdy gnarled tree trunks standing on end in a rough circle. Above the trunks, loose weathered branches interlace to form a rustic outdoor meeting area. No roof, just a web of wood open to the bright September sun.

In the past the arbor has hosted music concerts and Ute tribal ceremonies. Last Saturday, like the nearby juncture of two rivers, the arbor channeled two converging streams—one a growing stream of horrific facts and the other a tumbling stream of raw emotions.

Many of the participants were meeting one another for the first time. They had "met" on social media, linked through a closed Facebook group, connected by a common thread of communal tragedy. For nearly two hours, people young and old walked to a microphone and shared memories of deceased friends, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, and grandparents. They spoke as survivors who had already mourned a death and as continuing sufferers whose grief has been extended by what they allege are betrayals of their trust. They spoke of loved ones left in the care of Sunset Mesa -- a funeral home, now closed, that once operated in Montrose. They spoke of loved ones allegedly abused after death and of their anguish about the uncertain disposition of bodies and cremated ashes.

It was hot—88 degrees—as Debbie Schum of Hotchkiss, one of the organizers of the assemblage, took the microphone. She spoke in memory of her close friend, a woman first lost to death then caught up in a growing postmortem controversy. "People say don't obsess over this," Schum said as she addressed the group halfway through the informal meeting, "Obsession is a little tiny thing that you focus on. This isn't a tiny thing. It's an overwhelming and consuming thing. It's horrifying. No one had our permission to do this. None of us would have agreed to these grotesque things." She paused then, unable to find words. Finally she continued with help from other organizers who joined her in reading aloud the names of deceased persons whose families could not be present.

During the afternoon meeting, more than two dozen friends and family members spoke of their loved ones. Another three dozen names were read from cards. And, according to event organizers, those 60 or so names represent just the tip of a very large iceberg.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is now gathering evidence involving Sunset Mesa Directors and Donor Services and the businesses' owner/operator, Megan Hess. Without citing sources, the organizers of Saturday's meeting allege that the bureau has recovered and is examining the remains of 850 decedents. According to organizers, 50 of the decedents are being studied at the U.S. Marine base in Quantico, Va., while another 800 are being housed at Colorado Mesa University.

In February 2018 state regulators shut down Sunset Mesa and began a hearing on nine formal complaints lodged against the Montrose-based funeral operation. The complaints stretched as far back as 2014. Eventually regulators leveled 13 accusations against Sunset and Hess and forbade the business and its owner from ever reapplying to operate a funeral home or crematorium in the state. Some of the most serious accusations, which Hess denied, were that Sunset Mesa harvested and sold human body parts without the knowledge or permission of surviving families and that cremains (cremated ashes) returned to families were either non-human substances, such as cement, or possibly remains of someone other than the deceased.

That same month, the FBI began asking families who believed they had been victimized by Sunset Mesa to fill out a questionnaire. Most of those present at last Saturday's Confluence Park meeting had completed the FBI questionnaire and many had been interviewed by the bureau. The FBI has yet to file charges against Sunset or owner/operator Hess.

Following the emotional meeting, a few individuals agreed to be interviewed. These are their stories:

Terri Reid of Cory lost her husband William on March 7, 2016. She found Sunset Mesa in the phone book and someone came to the trailer park where she lived to talk about services and expenses. The costs were prohibitive so she was uncertain what to do. She called Sunset to express her concern that the salesman was pressuring her and was told the funeral home could handle all the expenses for free if she agreed to a body donation. She was told they would harvest what they could, cremate the rest, and give her the ashes.

When news came that the FBI was seeking input from families, she filled out the bureau's questionnaire and was later interviewed by an agent. Reid said she was told the bureau had evidence that her husband's body had not been cremated as promised. Paperwork indicated that his entire body had been sold and shipped out to an as yet undiscovered location. "Those are not your husband's ashes," the agent reportedly told her.

As for the value of Saturday's meeting at Confluence Park, Reid said, "I'm glad we could all get together and see each other's faces. I got some comfort from hearing others' stories. Stories are important to share when you're hurting." As for her hopes for the outcome of the investigation, she said, "I hope that some laws get changed. This industry is not policed well. It takes more regulations to run a restaurant than to operate one of these places."

Roy Engebretsen of Montrose died on April 3, 2016. His daughter, Ellie Young, bought a double urn from Sunset Mesa because her mother Julliette and her father had both agreed that their ashes would be joined together.

"We'd been married 56 1/2 years," said Julliette, "We spent our whole adult life together."

"They were literally Romeo and Julliette," said daughter Ellie.

When news stories began to surface about Sunset Mesa, the family grew concerned. Finally, they opened the urn and Ellie and her son took on the challenging task of sifting through the ashes. Among the ashes they discovered a handful of mysterious metal objects—none of which they associated with William who was, they recalled, wearing no watch or belt or jewelry and nothing with a zipper.

They filled out the FBI questionnaire but have not been contacted. They have yet to have the ashes tested but both agree there is no way they're going to consider mingling the ashes until they know for certain.

The meeting organizers provided Ellie and Julliette with important contact numbers. They are grateful for these suggestions but they remain overwhelmed by the situation.

"I'm astonished by what we heard today from others," said Julliette. "I had no idea the investigation was so..." She paused then, unable to find words to continue.

"We're just uncertain we can fulfill my parents' wishes to be together," said Ellie.

Finally, one woman spoke on condition of anonymity. She is in touch with a lawyer regarding a legal suit and she has been cautioned not to speak to the press. Her husband died suddenly and when she was summoned to the scene, his body had already been removed. In addition to law enforcement, she found it odd that Megan Hess' mother, Shirley Koch, was at the scene. Koch was at that time an employee of Sunset Mesa.

She wanted to see her husband but she was told that the body had been taken to the hospital and then to Sunset Mesa. When the body is ready to be presented, she was told, we'll contact you. Eventually she met with Sunset Mesa staff, including Hess, who was very supportive and friendly. She paid for cremation and was presented with the ashes in an urn. She passed the urn on to her husband's family and the remains were buried out of state.

She had no reason to doubt Hess' sincerity or question the services she had provided but when news began to surface regarding Sunset Mesa, she filled out the FBI questionnaire and was contacted by the bureau. She was informed that the FBI had records showing that his intact body had been frozen and shipped to Michigan. The bureau said the receiving agency had paperwork with a signature giving permission to harvest the body. The woman alleges that she never gave such permission and suspects her signature was forged.

Reflecting on the Saturday meeting, the woman said she was amazed to learn that so many had been victimized. "First I heard it was a hundred people. Now I heard it's over 800. To see this kind of pain is so sad. It hurts me that (Hess) is still out in the community. I want to tell her how much this hurts. It's not just what she's done to the bodies but also what she's done to the families."



Terri Reid lost her husband William in 2016. She learned from the FBI that the urn she was given does not contain her husband's ashes. Instead, the bureau found paperwork indicating that his whole body was sold and shipped to a yet to be discovered location where it may have been harvested for research. Photo by Don Benjamin

Ellie Young, whose father Roy Engebretsen died in 2016, discovered this bit of metal and a handful of other metal objects among the ashes in the urn which the family received from Sunset Mesa Funeral Directors and Donor Services. She and her mother now fear that the ashes are not Roy's. Photo by Don Benjamin

