

# Towards a softer, greener, more compassionate interment future

*The need to radically alter the manner in which the mortal remains of deceased are laid to rest sees a Centurion-based entrepreneur rise to the challenge.*

**D**uring an initial conversation with Sonja Smith, managing director of Sonja Smith Funeral Group (Pty) Limited, your correspondent is initially perplexed by this the demure yet forceful individual who has single-handedly caused a dramatic course adaptation in the manner in which the remains of deceased are interred and in general, how the funeral industry conducts its business locally.

“Yes,” Smith acknowledges, “it has been a journey.” Initially involved in retail banking, Smith, after seeing a programme flighted on Carte Blanche which focused on the local undertaker industry, had to acknowledge the financial success of an industry that had turned what most consider to be macabre, into a lucrative business opportunity. However, her background also taught her that amidst the plausible reality of numbers, change was the only real constant.



*The green coffin range available from SSFG. The large coffin in the foreground is from paper loom, the one behind from seagrass and last large coffin in the background cocosticks*

Those that understood and harnessed strategic course adaptations the best, would walk away with the laureates, Smith was convinced.

So too was her conviction that industry had to tool its service towards a more empathetic approach that not only saw more sympathy being extended towards the bereaved but also in terms of the available options for interment, whether burial or otherwise. Smith, a convinced believer, understood implicitly that the industry’s limited take on interment options missed the commission to also care for the earth, making her even more resolute to change this for the better.

On a more analytical level, Smith also read demographic data to mean that increased population pressures would eventually dictate that sustainability would increasingly form part of the basket of factors that dictated interment options. Biodegradability would feature large in this scenario and so too traditional graveyard layout where space was at a premium and so too interment options that had to be tooled to cater for this.

A brief sojourn at Avbob, Martin’s Funerals and Elite Funeral Home taught Smith the basics of the industry, what worked and what didn’t. Having served her practical apprenticeship and with her distinct take on where the industry ought to head, Smith was ready for the next step of the journey.

## Sonja Smith Funeral Group

The formation of Sonja Smith Funeral Group (SSFG) finally gave Smith the ability to dictate the precise terms of her practice.

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Pivotal to this was a far more empathetic approach towards interment in general and linked to this, the need to go green.

Retooling towards increased empathy saw Smith split the focus to still provide for the functionality of the interment process but equally so, adding bereavement counselling and support services to the next of kin of for instance terminal patients that sought SSFG's assistance in both the pre and post-terminal stages.

Church bereavement services also mediated away from the typical format towards a more nuanced approach that excised the glaring, harsh and sometimes brash edge of such events and replaced it with a soft, deferential and personal approach that commiserated but also celebrated the life of the deceased.

But it was in her very special take on the vessels used for interment that Smith struck a cord.

## **Green is the colour of genius**

A chance visit to a funeral expo in the UK saw Smith touch base with the UK representatives of an Indonesian-based company that manufacture coffins from seagrass, cocostick and paper loom, these materials woven by expert weavers into intricate patterns to eventually provide for unique coffin designs that are not only beautiful to look at but which are also completely biodegradable.

In addition to redefining the South African rules completely on what coffin manufacturing and the material used to accomplish this imply, it also continues the theme that imbue SSFG total service.

"You have no idea how many ministers have congratulated me on the initiative, especially where a child is buried. The reality of a child's death reverberates most harshly when the coffin



*Cremated remains housed in containers sourced from traditional Zulu crafters*



*Beautifully bespoke details on the fittings. The seagrass sides are supported by more stiff bamboo outer edges*

lies in wait. With our green coffins, it hints at a young Moses safely negotiating the rapids of the Nile in his basket, and reaching the destination safely," Smith narrates metaphorically.

"It provides for a completely different take on what we see as a funeral. I'm convinced that such options will increasingly compete with traditional funeral fare, as a limited biosphere impose increasingly severe restrictions on interment. Individuals wishing to leave no trace of their existence are also becoming increasingly common, making this a very acceptable alternative.

In terms of costs, the green coffins are on par with the pricing of traditional coffins and caskets, Smith confirms.

The green theme is continued through to all tiers of the green coffin manufacturing process. Biodegradable plastics liners ensure the integrity of the coffins completely while pineapple and sisal fibres are used for the twined handles of the coffins. Fittings also snap together without the aid of technology to provide for secure closure options, the aesthetics hinting at the natural bent integral to the product.

The seagrass, once dried, are spun to provide the yarn that's ready for weaving. The paper loom is also spun into yarn while the cocostick are made out of the stems of the leaves of coconut palms, which are fast growing by-products of the coconut tree.

The coconut leaves are dried out and the stems separated to produce tiny sticks that are strung together to provide the material from which the coffins are made.

The coffins are provided in a quasi-traditional coffin shape and a round organically shaped version.

Vessels for the remains resulting from cremation has also been devised by SSFG, those coming from traditional grass weavers in the foothills of KwaZulu-Natal. Each basket is tastefully woven from natural materials to provide for a discrete, organically shaped, green vessel to house the ashes of loved ones.

Smith has also tried to rope in local craftsmen to manufacture a "South Africa green coffin" from cane.

## COFFIN MANUFACTURING

SSFG, however, being sensitive to the conservative needs of customers, also provide for all the traditional coffins and casket typically used for interment purposes. Those are bought in ready made from The Coffin Company, also located in Centurion.

Added to this is a personalised coffin option where themes relevant to the deceased are continued through onto the coffin exterior, the recent death of a cattle farmer seeing the exterior of the coffin lined with Nguni hide.

### Green graveyards

The latest manifestation of the move towards green funerals Smith informs your correspondent, is the anticipated unveiling of a – eco-burial park, Wiesenhof Legacy Park housing the new initiative.

Emphasis at this juncture is a complete reversal of the regimental layout of traditional graveyards. The focus is on the organic layout of graves with locations in symbiosis with the dictates of the landscape. Graves are marked with either a flat, natural stone or an indigenous tree planted by the family. The grave markers are engraved with a short message and will blend into the natural environment as to maintain the natural feel of the park. Less than twenty percentage of the property will be used for burial, allowing for large open spaces and natural landscaping between burial plots. Burial plots will vary in price according to location and will cater for various income groups.

The Wiesenhof initiative is the pilot project with further venues ready for use in Port Elizabeth, Howick, Hillcrest, Durbanville, Johannesburg and Pretoria in the near future. It also has such distinct communality with the initiatives spearheaded by SSFG, that it can almost be described as a match made in heaven.

Admittedly, such initiatives can be criticised for pandering to the delights of the moneyed classes with the Joe Soaps of the world still relegated to the mindless labyrinths of modern-day graveyards.

The principal inherent to eco burial grounds are important though. Humanity has to devise alternatives for addressing the reality of interment after death. Why ought it be a process riddled with unsustainable materials and practices? Why can't a more balanced approach not hold sway?

### Final take

A remarkable endeavour, firstly because of the gall inherent in challenging the traditional coffin-manufacturing route that to date has ruled the roost locally.

Secondly, it's permeated by a strategic vision that far outstrips the boundaries set for the local funeral industry to date.

Thirdly it makes for a softer approach to the harsh reality of death.

And finally, it encapsulates the spirit that make entrepreneurs who they are – daring to go where none have gone before.



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