

To live

Unequal in life, they  
say, **equal in death.**

**Not exactly.**

and

The recent pileup of bodies at Cook  
County's morgue has thrust the **financial  
disparities of eternal rest** into the spotlight.

in die

Here, a glimpse into the postmortem circumstances  
of **four very different** sets of Chicagoans.

Chicago

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By **Jake Malooley** Photographs by **Andrew Nawrocki**

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“These are people, too, and they deserve some kind of burial.”

**The lost souls**

As snow begins to accumulate on the mass grave dug in a corner of Homewood Memorial Gardens, a rented U-Haul truck arrives carrying the grisly cargo. Tom Flynn Jr., 42, whose father owns the south suburban cemetery, hops out of the vehicle’s cab and throws open its roll-up rear door, revealing stacks of plywood caskets from the Cook County morgue. With gloved hands, Worsham College of Mortuary Science students earning extra credit lift the 25 identical coffins into the long, muddy trench.

Inside the cheap-looking boxes are the remains of 22 adults and as many as 72 babies and fetuses, up to two dozen of which Cook County Medical Examiner’s Office personnel are allowed to pack together in the same casket. Some of the bodies are unidentified indigents. Some have been ID’d but are unclaimed. Others died without assets, and surviving family members couldn’t or didn’t cough up the money for a proper burial.

Off to the side stands a hooded figure clad in black, a cigarette in one hand, a shovel in the other. The gravedigger extends a large, chapped paw to introduce himself: “Boogie.”

“As in Boogie Man?” I ask.

“Truth.”

**GRAVE CONCERN**  
A backhoe dumps dirt on plywood caskets during an indigent burial at Homewood Memorial Gardens on February 10.



**REST INTENTIONS**  
 “God doesn’t always come calling for you when you’re in the best financial situation,” says Leak, standing in his funeral home’s casket showroom.

ground. “They’re making people feel we don’t have anything to do with our loved ones because we can’t pay for the burial,” she says. (“[Hudgens-Wilkins] had been called more than once and told the date and time” in advance of the burial, Cook County Board President’s office spokeswoman Liane Jackson says. “There’s no policy that prevents families from attending [the Homewood Memorial Gardens burials] and there’s no attempts ever to dissuade families from attending.”)

As veteran Worsham professor Timothy Kowalski, a certified celebrant, begins the memorial over the line of coffins, it becomes painfully clear no family members will attend this burial. The rumbling backhoe that dug the grave fires up. With each load of dirt dumped onto the coffins, the low-grade wood splinters and caves in—one final earthly insult.

With melting snow dripping off his nose, ruddy from the cold, Kowalski finishes the service. He reads a prayer by English priest and poet John Donne: “There shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity.” The hope is that an equitable afterlife awaits.

**The customers**

The sign hanging above the main entrance to Leak & Sons Funeral Home on South Cottage Grove Avenue reads **FOUNDED BY GOD**.

“Any business worth its salt is,” says Spencer Leak Sr., a besuited 74-year-old with a head of regal silver hair that would make the Founding

Fathers jealous. Following in the footsteps of his dad, the Rev.

Andrew R. Leak Sr., he runs the busy, 79-year-old “death care” operation with the help of his three boys: Spencer Jr., Stacy and Stephen. The funeral home’s low-slung building has several chapels. Nearly all its rooms are carpeted, and everything is an oddly consoling shade of brown.

“If a family has come to me,” Leak continues in his preacher-like tone, “it’s because God has sent them. You don’t just take a gift from God and mishandle it. You honor it.” Leak is speaking specifically about his poorer customers, those whose loved ones died while on welfare. As he talks, he’s hobbling on arthritic knees through the funeral home’s showroom, packed with floor-model caskets. There are sleek, silk-lined boxes that run as much as \$30,000. But at Leak & Sons, the high-end

For the better part of 30 years, Homewood Memorial Gardens has held the contract to perform the county’s pauper burials, partially because no other cemetery bids. “These are people, too, and they deserve some kind of burial,” Flynn says. Annually, the cemetery interrs about 200 indigent people on its ten acres. But today, Flynn notices something disturbingly different in the air: the overpowering odor of rotting flesh. “The smell of death,” he says. “A lot of these bodies have been at the morgue for a few months, so they’re decomposing.”

The scent could’ve been expected; this indigent burial, held February 10, is the first following the news that broke in January of an alarming backlog of bodies at the morgue. In the 2012 budget, beginning last July, Springfield slashed funding for public-aid burials to \$1.9 million, down from \$12.6 million in 2011. The meager reserve was spent by August 15. By the time the state decided in November to add \$8 million, the morgue’s coolers were already over capacity. Now under the close watch of reform-minded Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, the Medical Examiner’s Office has ramped up burials.

While the volunteer pallbearers continue to place the coffins, Homewood administrator Kelly McCarthy ambles over, peering at the register of those slated for burial. She remarks on the unique names of a set of twin babies, Rain and Storm.

Farther down the list of overdue burials is Raymond Hudgens. On October 8, the 59-year-old suffered a heart attack and died in the West Englewood home he shared with his brother, Lorenzo. Today, after four months at the morgue, he will finally rest in peace. But Raymond’s family will not be here to say a final good-bye.

“Raymond was mentally challenged,” his sister Peggy Hudgens-Wilkins says over the phone a couple of weeks after the burial. “You’d have to instruct him to take a bath and do all those things.”

Raymond was receiving about \$2,000 a month in government assistance, says Hudgens-Wilkins, a 51-year-old professional caretaker. A memorial was held, and Hudgens-Wilkins was under the impression that Raymond’s remains had already been cremated. But she says a family member, who had been Raymond’s state payee for two years, secretly decided to let the county handle the remains and keep the money that would’ve gone toward a burial. It wasn’t until a letter from the Cook County Medical Examiner’s Office arrived on Lorenzo’s doorstep that she realized Raymond’s body was still sitting at the morgue.

Without the means to fund Raymond’s postmortem expenses, Hudgens-Wilkins resigned herself to the idea that her brother would be given a pauper’s burial. She had one simple wish: to be there. For months, she says she called the morgue asking when the interment would take place and didn’t receive a straight answer.

When the news of the morgue pileup broke, Hudgens-Wilkins saw the horrifying photos on TV: stacks of bodies wrapped in blue plastic. “I couldn’t rest at night,” she says. “I could only imagine the worst—that my brother was rotting. My brother’s remains were treated like garbage. No one has a right to be treated that way.”

Hudgens-Wilkins says despite many calls, the medical examiner didn’t respond about the date of her brother’s burial until after they put him in the

**“I get an inordinate amount of kids killed in the streets.”**

**A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN** During funeral services at Beyond the Vines, mourners have been known to dress in Cubs attire.



caskets aren't as in demand as the plain, public-aid model covered in navy broadcloth, priced at \$350.

That's why Leak was disturbed to receive a letter last summer from the Illinois Department of Human Services stating it could afford to pay for public-aid funerals only through August 15. Normally, the state reimburses directors like Leak \$1,103 per welfare funeral, only a third of the price of his cheapest services.

As other funeral homes began turning away people on public aid, Leak bit the bullet and welcomed those customers. From mid-August until state money started flowing again in January, Leak & Sons funeralized about 125 deceased free of charge. (At Leak's request, the state has agreed to retroactively reimburse him.)

Leak also patiently waits several months for the state to reimburse him for customers paying through the Illinois Crime Victim Compensation fund, which covers funeral costs of innocent violent-crime victims. "Because the word is out that we wait for the state to pay and don't demand money prior to the service, I get an inordinate amount of kids killed in the streets," he says. Another potential contributing factor: Leak & Sons is located in high-crime Englewood just off a stretch of 79th Street known to be controlled by the Gangster Disciples.

"I turn on the television at night and I hear so-and-so student was shot. The next day, I walk into

work and there's the name [on the arrangement list]," Leak says. "It's not the kind of money you want to make in this business."

Formerly the director of the Cook County jail and chairman of the Cook County Board of Corrections, Leak currently chairs Black on Black Love, a 29-year-old campaign to break cycles of criminality in African-American communities. Despite his public stance against violence, Leak feels it's his duty to serve everyone with objectivity regardless of their means, the circumstances of their deaths or their gang affiliations. On more than one occasion, he says, God has sent to his funeral home rival gang members who pumped bullets into each other during a shootout.

"Their friends come to the service saying, 'Mr. Leak knows how to deal with one of us when we go.' Is that something I want being said about my funeral home? Yes," he says. "It doesn't matter if they're killed or die of natural causes, or if they're rich or poor—they deserve to have a decent funeral."

**The diehards**

Dennis Mascari lived and died by the Cubs. After he succumbed to cancer in June at the age of 63, his funeral featured a seventh-inning stretch of sorts that would've made Harry Caray proud. Toward the end of the service, Dennis's 35-year-old son, Jason, stood to lead mourners in a rousing rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

**“He talked about streaming the Cubs games so people interred there could hear them.”**

It was a moment befitting the setting: Beyond the Vines, a “cremation arena” that Dennis opened in 2009 inside Bohemian National Cemetery on the Northwest Side, offering “eternal luxury skyboxes for Cubs fans.” It is modeled after Wrigley Field’s ivy-covered center-field brick wall, with old stadium seats from the Friendly Confines installed on-site for visitors.

Dennis’s ashes were interred in the center of the wall, where an inscription reads, PLEASE TAP HERE AFTER THEY WIN. He joined close to 20 fellow Cubs fanatics, who paid \$2,900 to as much as \$5,471 for a cubbyhole. The epitaphs are equally apropos: HOPE THE BOYS WIN TODAY!; SPORTSMANSHIP, WIN OR LOSE!; I SAW RUTH AND GEHRIG PLAY AT WRIGLEY; WAIT TILL NEXT YEAR!

It wasn't until the man who raised Dennis on a strict diet of North Side baseball passed away that he hatched the idea for Beyond the Vines. “They cremated my grandfather and put him in a typical

## Around Town

mausoleum,” remembers daughter Jennifer, 33, who has taken over control of the wall in her father’s wake. “That whole process got my dad thinking about death and the bereavement process and the sterility and gloom of going to a typical cemetery.”

Dennis’s biggest plans for his brainchild were cut short by his death. “At one point,” Jennifer says, “he talked about streaming the Cubs games at the wall so that the people interred there could hear them.” On the website, Dennis had also announced plans to introduce burials “in left and right fields” (a.k.a. both sides of the wall). But Jennifer isn’t certain in-ground interment will ever be offered. Blasphemously, Dennis even floated taking the Beyond the Vines concept to St. Louis for fans of the Cardinals, the mortal enemy of the Cubs.

What Dennis seemed to intuitively recognize is the trend noted by the National Funeral Directors Association in Brookfield, Wisconsin: baby boomers throwing “unique services that reflect the hobbies, passions and interests of someone who has died.” In our increasingly secular society, more people are willing to spend extra dough for a personalized, themed funeral instead of a cookie-cutter religious service.

Beyond the Vines even offers catered hot dogs. “It’s just a different experience of mourning,” Jason says.

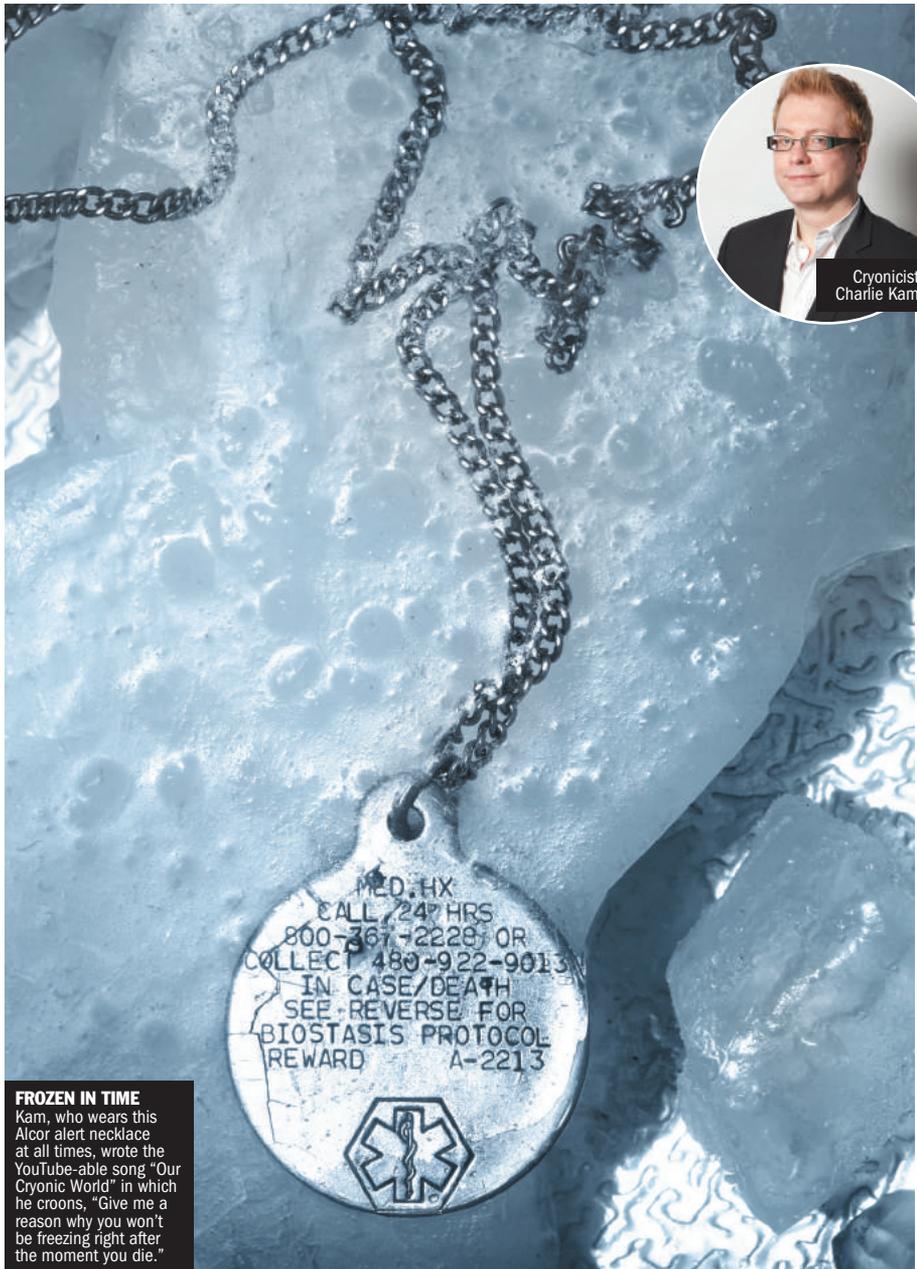
### The cold cases

If he dropped dead today, Gold Coast resident Charlie Kam expects whomever discovers his corpse to also notice his jewelry. Hanging around the 39-year-old’s neck is a silver medallion engraved with a 1-800 number and steps for prepping Kam’s body for cryogenic preservation, a process known as cryonics.

As instructed by the pendant, the person will call the number to notify the Alcor Life Extension Foundation that another one of its paid members just bit the dust. The Scottsdale, Arizona, company will then dispatch a “transport team” to retrieve the body. At Alcor’s warehouse, Kam’s blood will be drained and his body pumped with cryoprotectant to fortify his cells against freezer burn. Two small holes will be drilled into his skull to make sure the antifreeze is also defending his delicate brain tissue. Kam finally will be submerged in a stainless-steel tank full of liquid nitrogen and cooled to -196 degrees Celsius. And there he will chill until advanced medicine and science can bring him back to life. Or so he believes.

“Somewhere between 2020 and 2045 you’ll probably see people brought back,” predicts Kam, a nine-year Alcor member who was raised on the Northwest Side. “There are so many things we can cure now that we couldn’t 100 years ago.” In line with Alcor’s other 956 members and 111 stored patients who’ve pledged their faith and money (\$620 annual membership dues, \$200,000 for whole-body preservation), Kam believes thawed bodies will one day be repaired and revived at the cellular level.

Think that sounds nuttier than a squirrel turd? So does Laurie Huget, executive director of the Cryogenic Society of America, headquartered in Oak Park. She says much of the organization’s PR work involves undoing the damaging conflation of cryonics with cryogenics—the study of



**FROZEN IN TIME**  
Kam, who wears this Alcor alert necklace at all times, wrote the YouTube-able song “Our Cryonic World” in which he croons, “Give me a reason why you won’t be freezing right after the moment you die.”

## “I don’t know if I’m going to wake up on Earth or on Mars or on a space station.”

extremely low temperatures and their technical applications, from manufacturing to medicine. “Cryonicists can freeze people,” she says, “but I don’t know who’s gonna come up with a way to bring them back to life.”

For cryonics member Paul Battista, it was George Lucas who persuaded him to be a future corpse. When Princess Leia thawed her frozen-in-carbonite beau, Han Solo, in *Return of the Jedi*, Battista’s ten-year-old mind was blown. “It made me so curious about what the future might hold,” says the 39-year-old from Schererville in Northwest Indiana. “I always feel tomorrow is going to be better than yesterday.”

In 1999, Battista signed up with Alcor’s biggest competitor, the Cryonics Institute, about 20 miles

outside of Detroit. The organization boasts 991 members, with 108 human patients and 86 pets already on ice. Battista makes a modest salary working in shipping at a retail warehouse, so he will use a life-insurance policy to cover the \$28,000 cryopreservation price tag. Kam’s similar policy costs \$500 to \$600 per year. (Cryonics is not covered by most mainstream insurance companies; Kam and Battista went through an insurer recommended by a CI member.)

Potential immortality may not come cheap, but the cost doesn’t curb the enthusiasm of Kam and Battista. “I don’t know if I’m going to wake up from cryostasis on Earth or on Mars or on a space station,” Battista says with a chuckle. “It doesn’t matter. As long as I wake up.”

PHOTO: NECKLACE: ERINA DUFOR