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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Hi, Nancy — This story is really nice! But I'm checking info against the Reformer archives, and Rodney's info is a little off. I'm editing a little more heavily since that info has come via his quotes.

Specifically, Ruth Bell died Jan. 20, 2001 (not 21) at age 58 (not 57), according to her obituary. I double checked with her death certificate in case the obituary was mistaken.

I also added names where I found them. I think it accentuates the connections to community, unless you have some not-obvious reason for omitting them.

Anyway, I wanted to give you an explanation before you got the edits. Of course, you should feel free to arm wrestle over anything I do with your words in the spirit of getting it right. —Jeff

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 'In a way, it's a sense of responsibility'

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2 Rodney Bell talks about a life spent in local cemeteries

3 as a gravedigger

####END SUBHED####

4 TEXT BODY:

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5 For Rodney Bell, death provides a living. Bell works as a
6 burial excavation specialist — that is, a gravedigger.

7 When Bell, 57, was a toddler, in early 1970, his father,
8 Howard Bell, was working for Washburn Vault, then in West
9 Brattleboro and now in New Hampshire.

10 “He was going to different cemeteries with [burial] vaults
11 for different funerals, and he met this guy who dug graves in one
12 cemetery, who asked my father to help him,” Bell said. “My dad
13 was never one to turn down a job, so they started working
14 together.”

15 Bell explained that, the town crews or the cemetery
16 crews had done the digging. Eventually, towns didn’t want the
17 responsibility and cemeteries didn’t want to hire a crew, so they
18 asked Bell’s father to take over the digging chores.

19 “Back then, it was a second job,” Bell said. “He worked
20 during the day and did the digging at night. He always had
21 someone helping him. It was usually a three-man crew: either my
22 uncle, me, or my older brother, or another man. At one point, it
23 was close to 55 cemeteries my father went to.”

24 Eventually, Bell’s uncle couldn’t do it anymore, so Bell
25 asked his father if he could join the crew as a regular.

26 “I was 14 when I started working for him,” Bell said. “In
27 those days, when I was in school or later at a full-time job, we
28 worked nights and weekends.

29 “My dad would be taking care of some funerals while I
30 was digging others,” Bell continued. “One time my brother and I
31 were out until 1 a.m. We had three graves to dig in one night:
32 one in Brattleboro, one in Jacksonville, and one in Dover.”

33 Bell continued with his dad until the end of 2000. Then
34 he began working alone on Jan. 1, 2001.

35 One of the first graves Bell had to dig was that of his own
36 mother, Ruth Bell, who died on Jan. 20 of that year.

37 “It was hard to do it,” he said, “but it was harder to say,
38 ‘Let someone else do it.’ It was weird. I was thinking so many
39 things while digging.”

40 She was only 58.

41 "I was still kinda in shock," Bell said. "My family came.

42 We all stayed together as I did the dig."

43 Bell also dug the grave for his father, who died in 2019.

44 "Sadly, I've buried many people I know," he said.

45 "Family, friends, schoolmates' parents."

46 **Beyond digging holes**

47 Methods have changed over the years, Bell said.

48 In the old days, the digging was all by hand. With a

49 three-man crew, two would dig at one time, and if the ground

50 was rocky, they'd consider using a jackhammer.

51 Then in 1986, Howard Bell bought the first backhoe, and

52 a crew of two could manage the job. Today, on average, Bell said,

53 it takes about 90 minutes to prepare the hole.

54 "If the cemeteries are open," he said, "I can dig all year.

55 It's a closure thing for people, so if I can do the digging, I prefer

56 to go ahead. In a way, it's a sense of responsibility."

57 Bell likes being outside, being responsible to people and

58 to himself.

59 "It's not like a 9-to-5 job," he said. "In other jobs,

60 someone else could be in charge, or if someone else isn't doing

61 their job, it can come back on you. Here, I'm my own boss, and

62 it's all on me. And the work is mostly in the daytime."

63 Bad weather can make the work challenging, however.

64 "This spring was horrible," Bell said. "The rain. Every

65 grave I dug filled with water, and I had to pump it out the day of

66 the service. Then I was putting mud back in, and had to go back

67 later to fix things up."

68 In an emergency, there are others Bell can call on.

69 "We all have our own territory," he said, "and we help

70 each other out."

71 The process of grave digging is more complicated than

72 one might think.

73 “The funeral home calls,” Bell said. “I usually get a
74 couple of days’ notice. The funeral home orders the vault.”
75 Then, he calls the sexton — the caretaker of the
76 cemetery — and they find the spot.
77 “I dig the grave. I call the vault company. I try to show up
78 before the service, in case I have to fix anything out of place.
79 During the service, I wait off to the side,” Bell explained.
80 Once the vault is in the ground and the casket is
81 lowered, the vault company installs the concrete cover.
82 “Then I fill in the grave, rake it out, and seed it,” Bell
83 said. “That’s that. The burial permit is handed to me, and I send it
84 to the town clerk.”

85 A sense of responsibility

86 The calls from the funeral home generate mixed feelings,
87 Bell said.

88 “I’m at their mercy,” he said. “I don’t wish for a phone
89 call because it means someone has died, but also I need to have
90 those calls come in.”

91 Bell said he sometimes feels overwhelmed by the work
92 — like if he’s standing by at one funeral and is scheduled to be at
93 another one in a short amount of time.

94 “Still, I try to be sympathetic, and empathetic,” he said,
95 “because I know it’s a really bad time in people’s lives.”

96 In 2024, Bell’s wife, Maureen, died in her sleep of a
97 heart attack. She was 53.

98 “I had to work the next day,” Bell said, adding that “from
99 a human standpoint, I feel such a sense of responsibility — the
100 situation is consuming that family group, and I have a job to do.”

101 “Empathy is not a character flaw,” he said. “It’s a good
102 character trait.”

103 The shock of his wife’s death at a relatively young age
104 brought home to Bell the necessity of preparing for his own.

105 "It made me realize I need to take care of things and be
106 prepared so my children don't have to deal with unfinished
107 business," he said.

108 'You have to have a sense of 109 humor'

110 The burial business is changing, Bell said. These days he
111 gets a lot of phone calls about cremation burials. Calls about
112 natural burials, where there is no funeral home involved, are also
113 increasing.

114 Some things don't change, though. Bell's busiest times of
115 year are from mid-April to Memorial Day, and then again in
116 October and November.

117 Emotional balance is important, Bell said.

118 "You have to have a sense of humor," he explained. "I
119 used to love to sneak up on my dad when he was digging and
120 scare him."

121 Now, he said, "that happens to me."

122 "If someone walks up beside me when I'm on the
123 backhoe, I don't see them or hear them, and then they start
124 talking," Bell said.

125 "There was one year when I wore my grim reaper
126 costume when digging," he said. "You have to be able to laugh
127 about things."

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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