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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Higher Ground is incorporated as its own nonprofit, according to the Secretary of State's database. I would bet that Manitou was originally its fiscal agent. If there's a wonkier explanation that would require restoring wording, of course let me know.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

A choice on a scale from environmental to spiritual

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Higher Ground Natural Burial launches at the Manitou
Project in Williamsville, marking the milestone with a tour and
music

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TEXT BODY:

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After several years of gestation, Higher Ground
Conservation Burial will finally be celebrated this weekend when
its natural, aka "green," burial offering is introduced to the
public.

10 The public benefit nonprofit organization, which is
11 focused exclusively on natural burial, will offer this burial
12 alternative on conserved land at the Manitou Project in
13 Williamsville.

14 Brattleboro Area Interfaith Leadership Alliance, natural
15 burial advocates, Higher Ground, and Latchis Arts have come
16 together to create a weekend, “Celebrating Community with
17 Nature: the First Conservation Cemetery in Vermont,” which
18 acknowledges the first conservation-burial cemetery in Vermont
19 and, as described in a news release, honors “the uplifting, natural
20 connections in the flow of conscious living to conscious dying
21 that feeds our soul, our community, and the living earth.”

22 The celebration features a by-reservation-only tour of the
23 burial grounds on Saturday, July 11, at 2:30 p.m., limited to 20
24 people. It will be followed by a concert with a string quartet,
25 Skylark, there at 4 p.m.

26 Skylark will perform again in Brattleboro’s Latchis Theatre
27 on Sunday, July 12, at 5 p.m. in a concert dedicated to award-
28 winning local musician, composer, and master of world music
29 Derrik Jordan, who loved performing woods music at Manitou.
30 The performance takes place on the one-year anniversary of his
31 death.

32 Going green

33 Higher Ground is a partnership of the Vermont Land
34 Trust, the Manitou Project, the Conservation Burial Alliance, the
35 Green Burial Council, New Hampshire Funeral Resources and
36 Education, and Vermont Funeral Resources and Education./

37 Its seed was planted over 10 years ago when Lee
38 Webster, a writer, educator, and public speaker from Holderness,
39 New Hampshire, offered a weekend home funeral workshop at
40 Manitou (manitouproject.org).

41 A major force behind the project and a prime mover in
42 the natural burial movement, Webster is a self-tagged “recovering
43 English major.”

44 As such, she tells *The Commons*, “we spent all our time
45 reading about death. So I actually feel pretty primed for this
46 experience.”

47 She says that both her previous conservation work and
48 hospice work were “offshoots of my general understanding of the
49 world” in which she “just want[s] to fix things.”

50 Webster said her advocacy of natural burial has given her
51 a way to use her skills and experience in development,
52 marketing, and public relations, primarily for nonprofits,
53 including the Green Burial Council, the Conservation Burial
54 Alliance, and the Home Funeral Alliance.

55 At that 2015 workshop, Webster says, “I spent time with
56 all these folks who then formed a community care group that’s
57 been the basis” for this initiative.

58 “Interest started growing,” recalls Higher Ground’s
59 director and resident steward, Michael Mayer, both with that
60 workshop and, in 2017, with “the well-attended, deeply-moving
61 natural burial of a well-loved community member, Rupa
62 Cousins.”

63 Many present, he says, wanted “to make such an
64 extraordinary experience available more broadly.”

65 Thus, Higher Ground was created in 2018.

66 At the same time, says Mayer, an informal “Caring for
67 Our Own” community took shape and has been meeting
68 monthly ever since “to provide volunteer services in support of
69 bereaved families: home funeral, transportation, gravesite
70 celebration, advance directives,” as well as death doulas and
71 hospice workers. Their cohesion is enhanced by shared “stories
72 and ponderings about life and death care.”

73 Webster credits Michael Mayer and Fred Taylor for doing
74 “the lion’s share of the work. They’ve been incredible in keeping
75 it going and meeting every obstacle with equanimity and good
76 common sense.”

77 He said he has “just been in the background helping
78 them sort of develop the plan.”

Becoming the soil

Other burial options “are industrial in one form or another,” Webster says. “Natural burial is not. You aren’t farming it out to somebody else. And that’s a big plus.”

As explained on Higher Ground’s website, embalming is replaced with sufficient cooling methods. The process uses biodegradable caskets made of woven materials such as willow or seagrass, as well as shrouds, blankets, or sheets made of linen, cotton, hemp, or other natural fabric.

Burial is deep enough to discourage animal disturbances, and at the same time, the environment provides ideal conditions for natural decomposition.

Who might opt for natural burial? Webster replies that “a lot of people approach this choice on a scale from environmental to spiritual,” as she highlights the appeal of “being buried in nature and becoming actual soil.”

Beyond the spiritual, she adds, “There’s an emotional piece to it. There’s a family piece to it, a cultural one and, I would say, a social justice piece to this. But the No. 1 lens that we look through when we’re talking about this is environmental.”

Natural burial is, she adds, the “most environmentally responsible thing that you can do with your body.” Without embalming, concrete vaults, or metal caskets, the practice has become increasingly popular now, both in and beyond Vermont as “a sound ecological choice.”

While there are other green burial sites in Vermont, Higher Ground’s conservation cemetery status sets it apart in that it requires that “a conservation easement be held by a nonprofit land trust,” Mayer explains.

“That ensures that documented stewardship guidelines are closely monitored under the agreement and practiced in perpetuity,” he says. “For us, a conservation strategy was developed with and committed to by the Vermont Land Trust. It’s the only such arrangement [the Trust] has in the state.”

A long road

Higher Ground's long road to fruition has "culminated in a sign-off from the state's Act 250 office last fall; imminent recording of the final town-approved site plan, and pending updated acknowledgement of the Newfane [Development Review Board]'s prior approval," Mayer explains.

"These together are what [will] trigger the town's issuance of the conditional use permit to operate natural burial grounds," he adds. "After eight years of processing, all are on board with final paperwork set to be executed."

Clearly relieved to see Higher Ground become a reality, Mayer wants to move past the struggles encountered along the way and focus "on the upbeat, community building, consciousness-raising nature of the project as part of a growing movement."

Beyond Mayer, founding members of Higher Ground include 20 initial placeholders — subscribers to conservation burial — and two other founding board members: Taylor, longtime president of Manitou and professor of ecology and nature-based spirituality; and Andrea Capron, documentation and organizational coordinator.

The Manitou Project "has been honoring Community with Nature on 223 acres of conserved land," for 40 years "with 9 miles of trails, sacred sites and labyrinths for wandering and hiking. It's an intergenerational playground with camps in collaboration with Vermont Wilderness School; seasonal celebrations; guided time in Nature known as 'forest bathing;' and woods concerts among the pines such as with Skylark."

Helping out

[Skylark](#), a contemporary string ensemble based in northern Vermont, has, according to its website, "decades of experience in the professional music community" with an eclectic sound and repertoire that "challenge the boundaries

146 between classical and folk traditions, creating innovative and
147 original works for all audiences. Influenced by the Nordic, Celtic,
148 and American regions, Skylark's music is melody-driven with
149 unique energy, irresistible flair, and undeniable beauty."

150 The quartet, featuring Jane Kittredge (violin), Ben Lively
151 (violin/guitar), Ana Ruesink (viola), and John Dunlop (cello), is, a
152 press release states, "thrilled to be hosted by two such magical
153 places," Manitou and the Latchis.

154 Kittredge and Dunlop grew up in Vermont, trained
155 elsewhere, and ultimately came back. Lively, the group's violinist,
156 guitarist, composer, arranger, graduated from Middlebury College
157 then moved to Vermont from New York City several years ago.

158 Ruesink attended University of Vermont and now teaches
159 there, as does Kittredge. All perform with the Vermont Symphony
160 Orchestra (VSO).

161 Kittredge recently described Skylark's music as
162 "innovative and eclectic. We all have classical training and we all
163 have a love of folk music that comes from the Nordic, Celtic, and
164 American regions. It's really interesting — the contemporary
165 fusion that's happening in European countries and in terms of folk
166 roots. There's a lot of innovative composition and arrangement
167 that's going on."

168 Skylark caught the attention of Mayer at a VSO-
169 sponsored performance in Windsor in early March when Mayer
170 noted that Skylark's would be "a great performance" to hold at
171 the Manitou Reserve.

172 "We hit it off," Kittredge recalls. "I loved what he was
173 describing in terms of Higher Ground, and thought it'd be a great
174 venue to bring our music to."

175 Natural burial, she adds, "is a wonderful way to honor
176 one's life and to honor the land that we live on. And there's a
177 certain harmony there that I think connects with music in a very
178 special way."

179 Both concerts, Mayer adds, are intended “to celebrate
180 community with nature, captivating music, and diverse faith
181 traditions, all honoring Vermont’s first conservation cemetery.”

182 Prior to each performance, Mayer “will briefly introduce
183 Manitou and Higher Ground, their connection, how the
184 nonprofits formed, land was acquired, and other work was done
185 to meet community needs shared by loved ones, friends, and
186 neighbors.”

187 Latchis Arts Executive Director Jon Potter recalls: “We
188 did a film and Q&A last year about medically assisted suicide,
189 and folks involved with green burial in this area were there to
190 share information about it at the event. It certainly piqued my
191 interest. It’s something a lot of us don’t think about and probably
192 should.”

193 The idea for Latchis Arts to support the Higher Ground
194 project came about when Potter and Mayer were singing together
195 in the Brattleboro Concert Choir this spring. During a break,
196 Potter recalls, Mayer “brought up this great quartet, Skylark, and
197 suggested we have them for a concert at the Latchis. I just took it
198 from there.”

199 At the Latchis, Potter explains, “so much of what we do
200 is about gathering people together to learn about each other,
201 support each other, and to nurture understanding of the world
202 around us.”

203 This event “fits that bill,” he says.

204 And, Potter continues, the “the music will be
205 breathtaking.”

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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206 For Skylark’s Saturday Manitou Woods concert, a
207 reservation and carpooling are strongly encouraged; reserve
208 tickets at rtaylor@antioch.edu. Tickets for the Sunday concert at
209 the Latchis are \$20 at latchis.com (\$25 at the door). Participation

210 in this pre-concert tour on Saturday at 2:30 p.m. is free for the
211 first 20 people who respond to mmayer92@gmail.com. For more
212 information about Higher Ground, visit
213 highergroundconservburial.org.

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