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## Marcos Breton: Caring for the dead at home

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Every time Heidi Boucher goes to her corner store in Fair Oaks, the checkout person will ask what she plans to do with the big blocks of dry ice she buys.

Boucher used to make up little white lies, but now she tells the truth: She uses the ice to care for the dead.

In her spare time, but more and more with each passing month, Boucher works as a kind of midwife for the recently deceased. She is a home death care worker, a natural death care provider.

People use her in lieu of a funeral home. Day or night, she will drive to clients' homes to care for the body of a loved one.

First, she will clean the body with a delicate sponge bath. She will help change the body into a

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Marcos Breton

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suit or whatever attire the family has selected for the final repose of a life just ended.

Then, she will gently ease the body into a coffin and expertly pack it with dry ice to keep the body cool.

And she will return each day for three days to change the ice for the body's proper care until it is time for burial or cremation.

Boucher has been offering this service for more than 20 years, since early 1986, when she cared for the body of a dear friend's 6-year-old son, who was accidentally run over by his father. That first case was her hardest.

Since then, Boucher, who charges on a sliding scale, has practiced her vocation at the solemn request of families grieving all sorts of deaths. She's prepared the bodies of suicides and the victims of horrible accidents. She has tended to people who led good, long lives and people who died far too young.

A few weeks ago, she cared for the body of a man who died in his early 50s and left two small children. When she is working, she is stoic, respectful and focused on what she has to do.

"I'm really good at disconnecting and doing the work," Boucher said. "It's not until later that I may climb into a bathtub and have a good sob."

She has seen so many cancer-related deaths that the images of each are like photographs in her soul. "I don't fear death," she said over lunch on Thursday. "I fear how I'm going to die."

Vibrant at 47, Boucher is a set designer for movies and television in her working life. She is a mother and a grandmother. Her look is often jeans, T-shirts and tousled hair.

She is also a leading devotee of a home death care movement quietly playing out across America.

In home death care, the body is not embalmed. Families embrace the ancient custom of communing with their dead, caring for them in the here and now – and hereafter. The practice is legal in California for families with the power of attorney to care for their dead relatives.

Some in the movement have strong feelings toward the funeral care industry and cite home death care as a holistic and far less expensive alternative.

Boucher is driven more by the belief that death is part of life and that it's healthier for families to have some time to grieve and let go of a loved one in their own way and in their own space.

She has learned that for some, a funeral home is the best way to go because some families don't have the emotional capacity to have a deceased loved one in their home.

Before agreeing to do a job, she first determines if the family can handle it.

For those who can, Boucher has driven as far away as Oregon to help with the process. She once drove to Santa Barbara for a getaway and had just arrived when her phone rang. A family needed her in the Bay Area.

She went. She can be a shoulder to cry on, or she can fade into the background.

For a while, Boucher was getting one call a year. But for reasons she can't explain, her phone is ringing a lot these days. Or people are tracking down her email address: heidibouch@comcast.net.

On Tuesday morning, around 5:30 a.m., her phone rang again. A beloved 94-year-old gentleman in the care of his Carmichael family had just passed away. Could Boucher please come?

"When I arrived, the body was still warm," she said.

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H. Buswell Roberts had lived a robust life as a judge in Buffalo, N.Y., years ago. He passed away of natural causes in the home of his son, Miles.

When Boucher finished her work, the late Mr. Roberts lay in a simple casket in a shirt and tie. Candles lit the front room of his son's spacious home. Photographs of the deceased rested on his casket, showing a handsome, commanding man in the fullness of life.

On Thursday night, family and friends reminisced about the deceased in the presence of his body. On Friday, he was taken to his final resting place.

"I feel complete," Miles Roberts said. "The love and tenderness that we were able to give him, we got in return."

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