

Waitt Funeral Home and Cremation Service Morganville, New Jersey

Spring, Animals, and Grief Recovery

As funeral professionals, we are always looking for ways to connect and help families. Funeral homes across the country everyday run programs to educate and provide resources to families before and after a death, from preneed programs, aftercare mailers, hotlines, seminars, and holiday events, you name it a funeral home has tried it. Our team felt the need to take what has been used in the past and find a way to deliver it in a new way that would engage families but maintain our core philosophy of "Ministry to the Bereaved". With this new approach in mind our team at Waitt Funeral Home & Cremation Service would gather for creative sessions and brainstorming ideas and concepts. However, we just couldn't settle on any ideas, until one day an idea popped into our head and off, we went.

In March of 2021, my family and I purchased an old run-down farm. The farm contained two barns, a chicken coop, garages, paddocks and ranch style home. The farm is privately secluded around modern suburban housing developments, providing privacy yet a warmth to the neighborhood and reminiscent of times past. The farm was once a well-known breeding farm for racehorses. As the prior owner aged and needed to rely on others to maintain it, the farm fell into serious disrepair. So poorly maintained, that most of the paddock fencing was not connected and animals would often wonder out of the pastures into the local neighborhood. Roadways needed to be maintained, weeds that grew into trees had to be cut and removed, barns restored, fencing installed, water lines fixed you name it, it needed it.

Over the course of Spring and Summer 2021, renovations and projects began to take place. New post fencing was installed, paddocks had been redefined, access roads developed, an old 100-year-old barn was restored, and repurposed, and new equipment was purchased to maintain the grounds. In time we learned that many farm animals cannot be cared for through the end of their lives, and many are given away after years of ownership. In short, our family decided to be a place where we could be an animal sanctuary for these loved animals and provide them a new home. Over time Alpaca's, Jacob Sheep, Chickens, and even a blind Pony now call our farm home. We learned a lot, but also made a lot of mistakes, and some funny enough perhaps to have our own show about. But as each season changed it brought new opportunities and challenges on a farm, and you must always plan and prepared or the lives of the animals can be at stake. And then winter hit. Our area was hit with one of the coldest in recent years and with high accumulations of snow.

Winter of 21-22 was a learning experience. The difficulties of weather from extreme cold, freezing conditions, snow, icing of water troughs, shortened days, and care for the animals was hard to manage. By February of 2022, we longed for spring, warmth, and the joy that comes when the weather breaks. This was the ah-ha moment.

The idea was born, we would use our farm story about restoration and animals to provide hope for those experiencing grief. We would use the love of the animals to show that life has beautiful moments that we can still experience. We would use the weather seasons to show that grief goes through cycles, each just as important as the next. We would show that with love and patience life can go on.

Our plan was to hold an event over three sessions during Spring of 2022 in April, May and June to highlight the farm, "Coming to Life". We felt that a farm experience was a family event so children's activities, childcare, and crafts were important to our event. Rather than setting up tables and chairs, we brought in hay bails and pallets, flannel blankets to offset seating areas for a farm feel. Each message would be a message of hope sprinkled in with farm stories and opportunities to fellowship and wonder around and meet the animals. Email blasts to previously served families and outreach to local churches provided enough contacts for us to set dates, rsvp's and staff resources. We contacted a friend who previously led women's group bible studies to coordinate the services over the three sessions. A copy of the first email blast is attached:

The first day of Spring has arrived. As many say Spring has sprung. The flowers are sprouting. The birds are back and singing. The sun is shining later in the day. For some this is a welcome for others who have experienced a loss it can be difficult to adjust.

Why do you feel so sad? So stuck? So empty? So sad, overwhelmed and angry? Why do you long for cold, rainy, dark days? Because you are grieving.

Jennifer Stern LISW writes in her blog about grief and spring, "Because Spring can feel like pressure. Pressure to be present and live life in spite of how you are feeling on the inside. Pressure to feel a semblance of normal. Pressure to believe in the possibility of new. Spring, feels like a betrayal of your grief. Grief is not predictable. It does not follow an order as the seasons do. It is personal. It is painful. It is messy. Grief can feel surprising, shocking, never ending. Spring feels contrary to the realities of grief.....those feelings do not match the sights and sounds of Spring. And yet there is much to be learned from the audacity of Spring. Those feelings of deep grief are the winter frost forcing us to lie dormant, to turn in, to be in (and of) our grief. Trust in time that your Spring will come. That you too will begin to thaw. That in time you can and you will push through the bitter heaviness of grief. You will bloom once again, new and different. You will begin to grow towards the sun and find respite and healing in its warmth. Your Spring will come. In your time. In your way. Lean into Spring. Nature provides a model for grieving, healing, and resilience. Nature teaches us that there is a season for everything."

With the Spring Season upon us , our family is inviting you to our interactive grief program on our farm, C1 Farms in Morganville. This three part program will feature readings, a short message, moments to reflect, arts and crafts for children, but most importantly an opportunity to give of yourself and be surrounded by animals that are totally dependent on you for their needs. On a farm there is a never ending list of chores that are needed, care of pastures, woodland management, fertilizing, maintenance and the list goes on and on. Most important are water and feed to the animals. What I find amazing is that our horses, alpacas, chickens, rooster, sheep, lambs and dog totally depend on us each day to feed them. They trust completely that we will meet their needs morning and night. In giving of our time, building this connection with them our hearts are filled. Many of our animals have stories of pain and sadness from our Rooster named Doc, to our rescue of Finn, our blind pony, each with special care and needs of their own. Yet this season will bring new life to our farm with the birth of lambs and baby chicks hatching. In giving you receive, there is no great truth. There are loved ones, friends and your community that depend on you, you are important. Our hope is that through our farm story and interactive sessions day that you will find inspiration.

Full details including date and time will be released in the coming days.

Our first session was amazing. We had over 100 participants and many children making crafts and learning about animals. It was an inspiring event. Connections were made, friendships developed, and some children even saw alpacas for the first time. Each subsequent session grew in attendance and the message of loss, restoration, hope, and opportunity was given. Each month the attendance grew, and more new faces attended. Many attended all three sessions which were held at C1 Farms, Morganville, on:

Friday, April 29th from 10-11 AM
Friday, May 27th from 10-11 AM
Friday, June 10th from 10-11 AM

One of the biggest surprises were the amount of people that sought to volunteer on the farm. They looked to give of their time to help the farm, take care of the animals and in turn fill their hearts. To this day we have people that come to help with our pastures and even a retired farm manager that was at the last of the three programs, coordinated with us to re-home two miniature donkeys to the farm. Even our family and team were blessed by the program, not just in being able to provide a venue and program to reach our community but also in receiving friendships, advise and two amazing animals Summer and Coal, that now call our farm home!

The entire series of events were a success. It allowed the staff and funeral home to be seen in a completely different aspect. Overall, we couldn't be more pleased with the outcome, the impact it had, not just on our families and community but on us as well.

We are already in planning stages for an Autumn Event at the farm in 2022.