



JUBILEE PARTNERS REPORT

Fall 2023

"Maintain justice and do what is right...Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people' ...for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

Isaiah 56:1-7

One of our neighbors from Burma, Nu Ru, passed away this summer. Russ Dyck remembers Nu Ru as someone who was always smiling, with a big ear-to-ear grin. Nu Ru was a leader in the local Karen Baptist Church; pastor Rolled Gold explained that Nu Ru's job "was to pray for the people of the church." When he led the prayers for the people during the Karen church service each week, Nu Ru's prayers often began with jokes and laughter. "There was a special joy about him," Russ remembers.



Karen neighbors prepare for Nu Ru's burial.

Nu Ru was buried in Jubilee's cemetery. The burial, attended by about 150 people, was preceded by a traditional Karen wake, a 24-hour event full of lively music and food as well as prayers. The graveside service included more prayers and hymns, and after the casket was lowered into the grave every person present ceremonially threw a handful or shovelful of dirt into the grave. When the grave had been filled in, the site was covered over with many fresh-cut flowers.

Jubilee's cemetery has become a meaningful point of connection with our Karen and Karenni neighbors, as a number of people from those communities have been buried in our cemetery in recent years. This is a continuation of a longer story: over the decades this one-eighth acre plot has been a place where we could offer a peaceful and dignified burial to people who had experienced prison, homelessness, war, and displacement, as well as to other friends and neighbors and to members of our own community. In this

newsletter, we'd like to share a little about this special piece of land, and the meaning it holds for us.



The graves at the Jubilee cemetery are marked by a range of simple white crosses, customized headstones, and other personal touches.

Jubilee's cemetery was first established to provide a burial place for a man named Jesus Torres. Jesus was a refugee from Cuba who lived at Jubilee in 1980, the first full year of the community's existence. Jesus died suddenly at Jubilee on Christmas Day, the result of a severe asthma attack. The cemetery was hurriedly cleared and registered with our county government so that a respectful burial service could be held for Jesus. His grave lies at the northernmost edge of the cemetery, marked by a hand-painted sign on a white concrete cross.

The next four people to be buried in Jubilee's cemetery were all men who were executed by the state of Georgia, or who died while in prison on Georgia's death row. Since the beginning of the community, members of Jubilee have been engaged in visiting people in prison, including those who have been sentenced to death. This ministry was motivated by the New Testament commands to visit those in prison and also to bear witness to God's love for all people regardless of what harm they have done.

In 1983, the state of Georgia began executing prisoners again for the first time in 20 years. At that time, when a person was executed, the family was responsible for the costs of burial. If the family could not afford burial services, then the state had the executed person buried within the prison complex, where no family members would ever be able to visit the grave. The graves in the prison have no headstone and no names attached to them — no markers recognizing the humanity of the people buried there. There is only a flimsy plastic tag in the ground, bearing the deceased person's prisoner identification number.

Jubilee decided to offer its cemetery as a cost-free burial option that would affirm the value and dignity of every human being, with no exceptions. The burials were a joint effort with the Open Door Community, a Christian community ministering to people living on the streets of Atlanta and also to prisoners on death row. Jubilee provided the burial site; the members of the Open Door organized the burial services. Later, Jubilee helped establish an execution burial fund to provide financial assistance so that burials for executed people could be held in a cemetery of the family's choice. Since 1983, not a single executed prisoner has been given a dehumanizing prison burial, even though burials of prisoners in Jubilee's cemetery have been rare since the burial fund was established. The most recent burial in our cemetery, as it happens, was for the co-defendant of the first executed man to be buried here. Her death sentence had been reversed on appeal, and so she died many years later after serving a long prison sentence. At the request of her family, we accepted her ashes and buried them this November in a simple ceremony on a sunny autumn day.

Two of Jubilee's founders, Ed and Mary Ruth Weir, are also buried in the cemetery. After helping to start Jubilee, Ed and Mary Ruth went on to found a house of hospitality called New Hope House, whose purpose is

to minister to the families of death row inmates. They were joined in that work by Lora and Bill Shain, and the four of them are now buried near each other in a New Hope House quadrant within the Jubilee cemetery.

The people buried in the cemetery also include two other refugees who died of medical conditions while they were living at Jubilee, Francine and Elizabeth Paw. It includes the parents of partner Blake Ortman, Les and Hope, who spent the last years of their life living at Jubilee. Six of the graves belong to people from the Open Door Community, all formerly homeless men who later became residents of the Open Door. In April 2024, the ashes of Murphy Davis, the minister who co-founded the Open Door with her husband Ed Loring, will be buried in the cemetery as well.

In recent years, most of the burials in our cemetery have been local friends and neighbors like Nu Ru. Two years ago, our long-time neighbor and friend Chip Chandler passed away. Chip is the person who first directed Jubilee's founders to this piece of property when they were out searching for land to buy for their new community, and he remained close with the community through the years. Chip had a great love for the North Georgia forests and used to give us good advice on managing the forested parts of our property. It is very meaningful to have him resting now on this land. Another person buried in the cemetery is a man whom no one from Jubilee had ever met. He was buried here at the request of our county coroner's office because no family was available to receive the body. He is another neighbor of ours, one whom we did not know but who was known by God.

More than half of the graves in the Jubilee cemetery are marked with the same white concrete cross and hand-painted sign that marks the grave of Jesus Torres. These simple markers were first made for us by the Trappist monks at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers; they are similar to the crosses used in the monks' cemetery. Some of the grave markers have been provided by family and friends of the deceased; they may be small, engraved stones or more elaborate traditional headstones. Many of the Karen and Karenni graves are capped with a slab of concrete and bordered with quarried stones or bricks. Chip's grave is marked with a living rosemary plant and bordered with natural stones from the gravesite.

Almost all of the graves were dug by hand, using shovels, mattocks, and pickaxes. The ground in the cemetery—mostly packed clay and mud rock—is not easy to dig in, but



Above: A procession in the early 1990's.

Below: A procession in 2016, led by our Karen neighbors.



there is meaning in the labor. At the time when some of the earliest graves were dug, Jubilee was hosting refugees from the wars in Central America, where it was common for people suspected of anti-government sentiments to be kidnapped and murdered by government-sponsored death squads. When Jubilee was preparing the graves for death row prisoners, some of the Central American refugees saw a connection with their friends and family who had been executed by the death squads in Central America. They joined in the digging as a way to remember their loved ones, whom they had never been able to bury. Robbie Buller remembers the liturgical rhythm of the digging as these war survivors worked in the graves. With each swing of the pickaxe, they named the people they were remembering: "Esta para mi Madre. Esta para mi Padre."

It is not difficult to find evidence in cemeteries of the many ways in which our society is divided. Not long ago, people of different races and classes were buried separately as a matter of policy. Today burial places still tend to be segregated by the same forces that produce segregation in our neighborhoods, churches, and communities. In the small cemetery on Jubilee's property, though, the deceased span many of the differences that separate and divide people in our society. Poor people and affluent people lie near one another. Black, Hispanic, Asian, and White people. University-trained professionals and those with little formal education. Immigrants and native-born. Prisoners and free.

It wasn't really planned out this way. We just cleared a plot of land, and over the years it filled up with all the diversity of God's children, as the community responded to the various circumstances that arose. But now the cemetery has become more than a place where we extend our hospitality to those in need of a respectful burial. It's a gift in itself which we are thankful for: a reminder of the reality that, in spite of the forces that tend to divide us, God's love holds all of us in the same embrace.

from the people of Jubilee

Who we are

Jubilee Partners is an ecumenical Christian service community in northeast Georgia. We offer hospitality to refugees, asylum seekers, and other immigrants who have fled violence or persecution.

We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization; donations are thus tax-deductible.



Jubilee residents and Comer neighbors help decorate the town for Christmas.



A glimpse of our fall season in the great outdoors:

Top left: BBQ-ing undeterred by a little rain.

Top right: Our Thanksgiving service featuring folks from 16 countries!

Right: Moving irrigation lines together from garden to garden.

Bottom and left: A hay ride and our annual sweet potato harvest.

Thank you all for being a part of our lives!



View Jubilee's newsletter in color online at www.jubileepartners.org!

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Jubilee residents gather for a day at the Botanical Gardens.