Everyone's going to die. These St. Louis residents want to help you do it better.

Colleen Schrappen
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

End-of-life doula Amy Rush, right, presents her client Suzy Hutson with a matching sand dollar-themed bracelet she got for each of them, on the Al Foster Trail in Wildwood, where they came to be photographed on Thursday, April 13, 2023. Hutson often hiked the trail with her husband, Jeff, who died of a brain tumor last summer. *Robert Cohen, Post-Dispatch*

ST. LOUIS COUNTY — When Alan Jeude's wife died in August, six years after her Alzheimer's diagnosis, the first person he called wasn't one of their children, or a hospice nurse, or even the crematorium.

It was his death doula.

Almost a year before, as he was suffocating under the pressure of round-the-clock care, Jeude hired Natalie Turner-Jones, owner of **Companioning the Dying**.

“I had no idea what to expect,” said Jeude, who lives in south St. Louis County.

Birth doulas, who support a woman through pregnancy and labor, are relatively well-known. Fewer people are familiar with the role at the other of end of life. Death doulas, as they’re called, help people prepare for and cope with their last hours, or their loved ones’. And now demand for the service, pushed by the pandemic and an aging cohort of baby boomers, is growing.

Some, like Turner-Jones, provide respite, act as an intermediary with medical professionals or sit vigil during a client’s final moments. Others host workshops on legal documents, burial options and obituary writing. They oversee “legacy projects,” like memory albums, cookbooks and quilts.

“My goal is that everyone has a good death,” said Joan Bretthauer of Creve Coeur, who named her doula business **ACE**, for advocacy, choice, education. “You only have one time to do it right.”

In 2019, Bretthauer founded the **Midwest End of Life Doula Collective**, which recently topped two dozen members. Many came to the vocation after the death of a loved one.

Delaney Rhea of Eureka lost her father-in-law, to cancer, and her grandfather, of natural causes, on the same day.

“I was in a panic,” said Rhea. “It made me realize how little I knew.”

Three years ago, she completed a training program through Lifespan Doulas in Michigan. Rhea, who calls her enterprise the **Sacred Sunset**, compares the dying process to that of giving birth: The unknowns are immense. Best laid plans go awry. There is pain.

“The first great transition and the last great transition are so similar,” she said. “I think of end-of-life doulas as midwives for the soul.”

No certification is required for death doulas. The **National End of Life Doula Alliance**, founded in 2018, offers a proficiency badge in ethics and what it calls “core competencies,” such as communication, confidentiality and bereavement.

The alliance has ballooned to over 1,300 members today from about 200 five years ago. Almost all are women.

For most end-of-life doulas, the practice is a calling, not a bill-payer. Some work for free, especially with friends or family. Hourly rates can range from $20 to more than $100. Insurance does not cover doulas, who provide no medical treatment.

Lauren Ponder of Webster Groves has a full-time job in human resources. She opened her side business, **With Love**, as a way to prod people into thinking about the inevitable. Last fall, she coordinated the first Death Positive Festival, with speakers on green burials, estate planning and memorial artwork, at Bellefontaine Cemetery in north St. Louis.

Confronting mortality "helps you live better," said Ponder. "We really suck at death."

'With some positivity'

One of Ponder's first clients was a lifelong friend, Zach Schaefer. The two sat down together over multiple sessions and hammered out what Schaefer would like to happen — hopefully decades down the road — after he dies.

"I think how typical funerals are done is terrible," said Schaefer, who lives in Webster Groves.

They picked readings, eulogists and songs, mostly hits from his teen years in the late '90s. Everyone will eat barbecue. Schaefer's family will take a vacation after.

"I'm going to go out the way I want to go out," he said. "And, hopefully, with some positivity."

An ongoing joke between Suzy and Jeff Hutson of Wildwood had been that Jeff wanted his ashes flown to Scotland, his ancestral home, and scattered on the floor of a bar, "so he could soak up the Scotch," said his wife.

Other than that, the couple didn't broach the topic. After Jeff was diagnosed with cancer in 2021 — and in the ensuing year of chemotherapy, radiation and debilitating side effects — the Hutsons never discussed what was looming.

Finally, last April, Suzy Hutson faced reality. The tumor inside Jeff's brain was going to kill him. She would be on her own to run their marketing agency and get their daughter through college.

The clarity did little to ease her burden. The medical details were complicated and ever-changing. Decisions piled up; friends fell away.

"It was a terribly lonely situation," said Hutson. "You're literally navigating the world by yourself."

Companionship — and the assurance of being available at a moment's notice — is a key feature of Amy Rush's service, **Inspired Dying**.

In May, the two women connected through a friend. Rush, of Des Peres, mapped out what Hutson should expect in the coming weeks, organized Jeff's schedule of medications, and in July, facilitated his move to a nearby hospice house, where he spent his last days.

"Amy gave me strength," said Hutson. "I don't know what I would have done without her."

Someone to lean on

Alan and Helen Jeude moved back to St. Louis in 2016, the year they found out Helen had Alzheimer's.

As his wife's symptoms worsened, Jeude made adjustments. At first, it was manageable. He had a wheelchair ramp built onto the front porch of their house and added a security system so he would know if she went outside.

Every morning when Helen woke up, Jeude would gently remind her: "Hi, honey. This is your husband, Alan. We're in our bedroom in St. Louis."

But as Helen's disease progressed, the unknowns gathered into a storm cloud. She stopped paying attention to the Hallmark movies they'd watch together. Jigsaw puzzles were too confusing, even when Jeude sorted the pieces.

He would do anything for Helen, but he also needed to do something for himself. Jeude heard about end-of-life doulas through a relative.

In the fall of 2021, he met with Turner-Jones for the first time. The theater teacher from St. Louis trained as a doula five years ago. She calls her practice "pretty broad-spectrum."

Alan Jeude, left, becomes emotional as his end-of-life doula Natalie Turner-Jones, explains the service she offers to family members of the dying on Thursday, April 13, 2023, at Jeude's home in Mehlville. Jeude hired Turner-Jones as his wife, Helen, declined due to Alzheimer's. Behind them are photos that Jeude used to help his wife remember names. Christine Tannous, Post-Dispatch

With Jeude, that meant regular visits: once a week early on, then twice. They worked through contingency plans, filled out forms, made lists. Sometimes, Turner-Jones helped with household chores. A lot of times, they just talked.

“She was an anchor I could lean on,” Jeude said.

By summer, he had begun sleeping on the well-worn leather couch in the living room, to be closer to Helen’s hospital bed. One August morning, he woke early, at quarter to six, and checked on Helen. She wasn’t breathing.

Within 30 minutes, Turner-Jones was at his door.

Jeude could exhale.