

INFLUENCER

Visiting the Dead

Finding history, art and solace in New Jersey graveyards.

For Katie Calautti, a writer living in Hunterdon County, cemeteries are not the gloomy, frightening places of horror movies. In fact, spending time in graveyards helps lift her depression and has gotten her hooked on cemetery history and artistry.

“Cemeteries are such restful, peaceful places, very park-like and beautiful,” she says. “They really are calming and grounding for me.”

Her passion for graveyards, and her popular Instagram series, “Pastries With the Dead,” were ignited one Sunday in 2021, when, feeling low, she drove

to Frenchtown, bought a donut and hot chocolate, and wandered into the cemetery. “It matched my mood,” she says. “I was like, *This is cool. I like this.*”

In her Instagram series, which is also on Substack, she documents her trips to New Jersey cemeteries. “Once you visit one, you start noticing that they’re everywhere,” she says. Her interest in death—“I think about it at least 100 times a day,” she says—seems to have struck a chord; her series has nearly 3,000 followers on Instagram. “People seem to be fascinated by conversations about death,” says Calautti, who is a medium and “into the death-

positivity movement.”

A lover of history, Calautti was also captivated by the intricate carvings and symbols on old tombstones. She’s taken a course in cemetery history with a Harvard professor and meets monthly with academics in the field. She recently took a stone-carving class in Vermont, which her followers helped fund. “There’s this whole network,” she says. “There’s even an Association for Gravestone Studies.”

One of her favorite cemeteries is the old burial ground in downtown Westfield, which inspired Charles Addams’s New Yorker cartoons, which in turn inspired *The Addams Family* TV show. There, she’s found death’s head symbols (winged skulls) and “some really incredible examples of soul effigies” (a cherub or person’s face with wings), she says. “And lots of headstones with matching footstones, which is rare.”

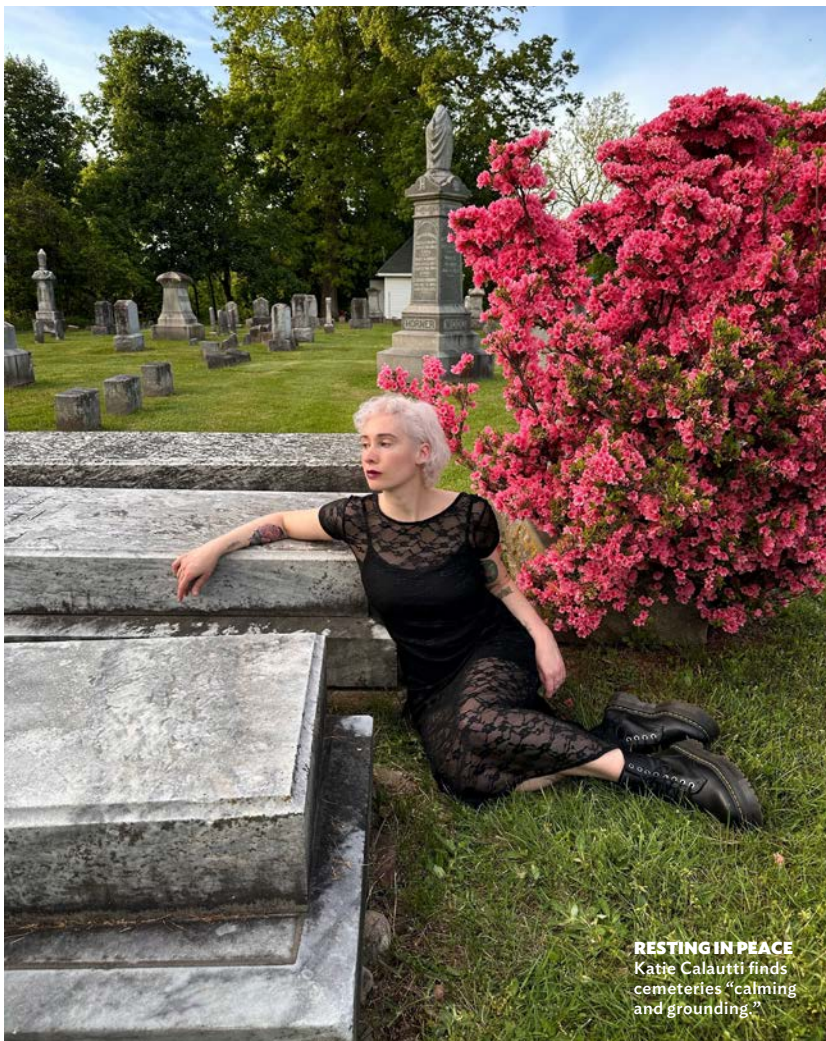
Footstones, she explains, were meant to resemble the footboards of beds where the dead could rest in peace; headstones are shaped like headboards.

Westfield’s graveyard also features the “super beautiful” work of New Jersey stone carvers Jonathan Hand Osborn, Henry Osborn and Ebenezer Price. She says, “Jonathan Hand used to sign his name at the top of the stone, so his name got billing over the dead person’s, which is hilarious to me.”

Another find is the cemetery’s mistake stone, where “someone misspelled something and had to actually carve it out to fix it, and there’s a hole there,” Calautti says. “They’re so fun.” There’s also a practice stone, where apprentices would try out designs on the bottom of the headstone, which would be underground, or so they thought. “But with erosion, you can see their work,” she says. “It’s so freaking cool.”

Calautti thinks Covid helped move the topic of death more into the open. “In the Victorian era, death was intertwined with our lives,” she says. “People would visit cemeteries and have wakes in their parlors.” A Latin phrase, *memento mori*, (remember, you must die) was popular on old tombstones, she says. “We have always been obsessed with the idea that we are not here for a long time, we’re here for a good time.”

—Julia Martin



RESTING IN PEACE
Katie Calautti finds cemeteries “calming and grounding.”