

at home with the Earth

STORY BY WADE LIVINGSTON
PHOTOS BY JOSH BACHMAN

The inside of Rae Machado's home at Dancing Rabbit is also a recording studio. Each community member needs to bring in their own income while living at the village.



The headstone of Tamar Michal Friedner sits in the center of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage. Tamar died of cancer in 2010, and her grave was the first at the village.

Life and Death at the Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage

HER ONE-ROOM cabin is framed with wood, its walls insulated with a straw-and-clay infill, coated by earthen plaster made from sand, more clay—slaked, at a minimum, over night—and cow dung.

“The manure is an additive that I like to use for a few reasons,” the barefoot, tan, dark-haired woman in the October 2007 YouTube video says as she assembles the plaster before mending the cracks on her cabin’s walls. “One is, when it comes from grass-fed cattle, it has lots of amazing little fibers in it that are really great for tensile strength. It also has a lot of enzymes ... and those enzymes are great for making the plaster more durable.”

Near her cabin, she picks up a bucket of wheat paste and adds it to the mixture, which rests on a worn tarp she repurposed from a lumberyard. The lumber company, she says, would have just discarded the tarp.

“So, stomping plaster can be a lot of fun,” she says, smiling as she mixes the ingredients with her feet. You can get to know your neighbors by inviting them to help, she adds. You can turn work into a dance.

Tamar Friedner learned natural construction techniques in 2000,

when she first came to Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage—a sustainable-living focused “intentional community” on the outskirts of Rutledge—for a building internship. The Massachusetts native would return a couple of years later, purchase the cabin, and until she got sick in the fall of 2009, call it home.

Today, no one lives in Tamar’s cabin. It’s similar, in terms of building materials, to other homes at Dancing Rabbit. The gravel path that loops through the village is dotted with structures that look like

giant pieces of pottery—undulating earthen facades that seem to grow out of the ground. Plants cover the roofs of others, making them look like overgrown Chia Pets. Crawling on one exterior wall is a giant green, red, yellow, and blue beetle—a mosaic made from glass shards.

The inside of Tamar’s cabin is decorated with mosaics of wildflowers and vegetables, such as garlic. Wind instruments hang on the wall near the lone entrance. The bed is neatly made, and a couple of kettles sit on the wood stove. The stove, though,

can be “quirky,” according to the typed visitors’ guidelines, which also direct them to use the broom in the corner of the room. Guests must erase their presence.

Aside from guidelines, the desk holds another piece of paper, one with a picture of Tamar. “Honoring The Memory of Tamar Friedner Through Health & Healing,” it reads. Community members have used the cabin to host guests and for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing since Tamar died in 2010.

The piece of paper hints at Tamar’s search for health, a “year-long journey” that took her away from and back to Dancing Rabbit. And it alludes to the sense of community at Dancing Rabbit, where her fellow villagers honored her final wishes with an intimate, natural burial, just up the gravel path from her cabin.



Left: Alline Anderson, a Dancing Rabbit community member, runs the Milkweed Mercantile with her husband, Kurt Kessner. **Below:** Alyson Ewald and her daughter Cole Mazziotti relax near their home at Red Earth Farms intentional community. Alyson and Tamar were close.



Top: Nik Garvoille is the webmaster for Dancing Rabbit, as well as a baker and cook for the village's food co-op. **Bottom:** Ted Sterling shares a moment with his daughter, Aurelia.

The fellows from the nearby funeral home weren't directing this burial. No, they'd traveled to Dancing Rabbit on September 17, 2010, merely to certify that Tamar Michal Friedner's body was returned to the earth—a legal requirement. They were welcome, but they seemed out of place.

The villagers at Dancing Rabbit had dug the grave themselves. The body wasn't embalmed, and it wasn't in a casket.

Unlike most funerals, there was no artificial turf to cover the dirt and dress up the grave. Instead, after the villagers lowered the corpse into the hole using ropes, friends and family took turns shoveling soil onto the body, which had been wrapped in a shroud.

Alline Anderson, one of Dancing

Rabbit's longest tenured residents, made the burial shroud with beige cloth. A friend helped her gauge the size by lying on the floor and allowing Alline to wrap her like a mummy. It was Alline's first shroud; she found templates online and winged it. She remembers furiously sewing, using needle and thread to work through her anger; young people aren't supposed to get sick and die.

Beneath the shroud was a thirty-two-year-old woman with piercing blue eyes that complemented the red, yellow, and purple wildflowers covering her body. She rested on a handcrafted litter fashioned from Osage branches.

A little girl, barefoot and blond in a bright yellow dress, stood at the edge of the grave and watched someone shovel dirt into the hole. Behind her, Tamar's friends and family sat in chairs or on blankets.

They wore their usual clothes—nary a black suit or dress.

On that bright, sunny day, Tamar was returned to the earth in the heart of the village, by the playground. It was what she wanted: a natural burial, in community.

At Dancing Rabbit, roughly fifty folks have come from all over the United States to live "in community," as they say.

From an environmental standpoint, it's a how-to model for mainstreamers: Yes, you can survive and

thrive through sustainability, they'll say. Share cars. Use reclaimed materials for construction. Farm and garden the natural way. Limit fossil fuel consumption. Produce solar and wind energy. Dispose of waste in ways Mother Earth can reclaim it.

But Dancing Rabbit, founded in 1997, is also an evolving cultural experiment. "Rabbits," as they call themselves, practice "nonviolent communication" and use "I-statements." *I've heard what you've said, and I'm feeling ...* They resolve conflicts using restorative circles. They refer to each other as "Co's" to minimize gender labels. And the village

has traditionally been governed by consensus, a time-intensive process guided by "facilitators" who ensure that residents are heard and that decisions are acceptable, if not agreeable, to everyone.

In the summer of 2010, when Tamar was in Massachusetts dying of cancer, the villagers came together to discuss her final wishes.

She did not want to be embalmed, to pollute the soil with more chemicals. She did not want a casket; no need to shield her body when it could just meld with Mother Earth. And she did not want to be buried on the outskirts of the

280-acre property, an old farm that had been repurposed by the Rabbits. She wanted to be buried in the center of the village, so she wouldn't be forgotten.

"Not everyone loved the idea of having a graveyard in the middle of the village," Tony Sirna, one of Dancing Rabbit's founders, says.

Tony, who was on Dancing Rabbit's Land Use Planning Committee at the time, had to consult a lawyer to work out the legalities of the burial. The committee had to weigh the location of the grave in relation to existing water supplies and planned building sites. There were

Tamar's house was a small one-bedroom building. After Tamar died, Dancing Rabbit community members designated her home as a place for meditation and healing. Some of her artwork and personal affects remind visitors of the life she lived in the community.



also issues of community comfort to address.

A question that some villagers grappled with: On a day-to-day basis, how much did they want to be reminded of Tamar's death? Her burial would be the village's first.

Their friendship began on the drive from Massachusetts to Missouri.

Tamar and Alyson Ewald arrived at Dancing Rabbit on New Year's Day, 2002. The first thing they did was walk to the pond on the south side of the farm and slide on the ice.

Dancing Rabbit was still in its pioneering phase back then. The village—started by a handful of Stanford University students who liked the area for its flexible land-use laws and the presence of nearby Sandhill Farm, another intentional community—had yet to build

Skyhouse and Common House, two of the larger buildings that now greet visitors at the village's entrance. In the early 2000s, some people were still living in tents.

Tamar lived in a tent when she came to Dancing Rabbit in 2000 for a building internship. It was one of several internships she'd completed after graduating from the University of Vermont. Her travels had taken her to Iowa, where she learned about native plants and prairie grasses; the Southwest, where she helped reintroduce wolves into the wild; and Georgia, where she worked with endangered species.

She was a photographer who enjoyed taking pictures of nature, especially caterpillars. Tamar had this sense, Alyson says, that her physical body was going to change, that she would somehow be ... different. The women made a pact: every year, each season, they would



From left, Dancing Rabbit community members—or Rabbits—Travis Toon and Cassandra Brown clear old, dried hay, which they will use later for mulch around Cassandra's home.

venture out onto the land and take nude photos to document their physical transformations.

They stood on stumps and hung from tree branches. In the winter, they wore just their boots and scarves. They threw snowballs at each other and posed.

Three years before her death, Tamar photographed Alyson when she was just starting to show. Tamar, a doula and a midwife in training, would help with the delivery.

"It was an interesting birth; it was an unusual birth," Alyson says. "At the end, it was pretty dramatic. She



The Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage is made up of a collection of different types of houses and people, all coming together to create a community based around sustainability and living more harmoniously with the planet.

she didn't like his body language.

He was "projecting male, domineering body language" toward women, Nathan remembers Tamar saying. She also told Nathan that some of her closest relationships started with confrontation.

One time, Nathan—who'd had a few drinks and eaten a hot pepper—stumbled into Common House in search of relief. He found what he thought was a jar of milk and drank it. It seemed creamier than usual. Earlier, Tamar had gone to the organic dairy nearby and purchased a jar of raw, non-homogenized milk. She'd set it in the fridge, so the cream would rise to the top; she intended it for a wedding cake she'd been asked to bake. She'd spread the word: *Don't drink the cream!* Nathan didn't get the message.

How could you be so stupid to drink that? Tamar scolded him. *Don't you know the difference between milk and cream?*

"She was furious," Alyson says, "and swore a blue streak at him up and down the hallway."

Nathan was with Tamar in September 2009 at the Scotland County Hospital in Memphis, Missouri, when she received her cancer diagnosis. It wasn't good. She was referred to specialists in Columbia, and along with another friend, Tereza Brown, the pair traveled south to hear even grimmer news: that it was pancreatic cancer and she likely would not live for more than a year.

While in Columbia, Tamar, who had grown tired of sitting in



Kurt Kessner, the co-owner of the Milkweed Mercantile at Dancing Rabbit, collects old windows while working on cleaning up some areas of the small community.

was one of the people behind me that I was leaning on as I squatted on the birth stool and pushed the baby out. For me, that's super powerful. There she was, at the birth of my child. And there she is—there's her body—remaining here forever."

On the morning of September 17, 2010, Alyson helped prepare Tamar's body for the burial. Although Tamar had lost a lot of weight, her body was quite heavy. And it was cold, having just arrived from the walk-in refrigerator at Sandhill.

Sandhill Farm is a couple miles from Dancing Rabbit, down a rural route and off a rutty gravel road that might scrape the belly of a sedan.

Red Earth Farms, Sandhill, and Dancing Rabbit make up the "tri-communities." According to the Fellowship for Intentional Community—headquartered in Rutledge—they are three of fifty-two intentional communities in Missouri, which has more communes, as an outsider might call them, than any other Midwestern state, save Michigan.

Each community is a little different. Red Earth's focus is sustainable homesteading. Sandhill is an

income-sharing, organic-farming community. And Dancing Rabbit has more of an activist culture, committed to combating climate change. It's not unheard of for one to join Sandhill, migrate to Dancing Rabbit, and end up at Red Earth.

As September bleeds into October, some members of the tri-communities help the folks at Sandhill with their sorghum harvest. Some of the children in the area are home-schooled together. And, at Dancing Rabbit, there's often an inter-community game of ultimate frisbee to be had. Tamar, a soccer player, enjoyed a good game of ultimate frisbee. And she played the fiddle at Sandhill's annual May Day celebration.

Members of the tri-communities attended her funeral. The day before, the Sandhill folks refrigerated her body after she'd been driven through the night, from Massachusetts, by her father, Amos Friedner, and her friend, Nathan Brown.

Nathan met Tamar when he moved to Dancing Rabbit in 2005. At first,

doctors' offices, walked out onto the grassy area in the middle of hospital's traffic circle. She did some yoga.

Tamar wanted to treat her cancer through alternative healing. She started a yearlong blog, called *The Journey*, and began chronicling her experiences in September 2009.

"I went into this healing session tonight with a super *baditude*," she wrote on September 27, 2009, after she had a "men's hands on and women's distance" healing session at Dancing Rabbit. "I now feel renewed, rejuvenated, and ready to persevere on this journey. I also have a new plan and that is to take it slow. ... I am going to stop the supplements until I am in MA."

By October 2009, she was back in Massachusetts and "whacking plastic dolls with pointed metal hammers"—Tong Ren therapy, in which the doll represents the patient and the hammer strikes are targeted to

"When we were standing in the cemetery, you could hear the cars and the trucks going by. You could hear a garbage truck processing its garbage. And Tamar said, 'Mom, can you really imagine me at peace with all this city stuff I despise?'"

break down blockages and restore the body's energy. From Missouri, some Rabbits assisted her, tapping their own dolls from a distance.

"Today I am planning to start chemotherapy," Tamar blogged on November 16, 2009. "Things are not going as planned."

A month later, after "two rounds of chemo therapy and more importantly lots of acupuncture, tong ren, tuina, and loads and loads of positive energy from people around the world," the masses in her pancreas shrank by 95 percent. She planned to go a month without chemo.

In February 2010, she felt strong enough to travel back to Dancing Rabbit for a visit; she showed up bald. She wrote about sled rides,

peeing in the snow, solar panels on roofs, the absence of cars, and having no cell phone reception. Her blog post was simply titled "Home."

"End of my rope," she titled a post in mid-June 2010. "I am starting chemo on Monday. I believe this is the last ditch effort."

In 2010, Eva Friedner took her daughter, Tamar, to New York, where Brooklyn and Queens meet, to where some of their relatives are buried. The women stared out at the gulch of graves.

"When we were standing in the cemetery, you could hear the cars and the trucks going by," Eva says.

"You could hear a garbage truck processing its garbage. And Tamar said, 'Mom, can you really imagine me at peace with all this city stuff I despise?'"

She was in a lot of pain the last three months of her life. Eva sang traditional Hebrew chants at her bedside. Nathan, who'd left Dancing Rabbit to be with Tamar for her final ten weeks, remembers she was constantly hungry, even though eating elevated her pain. She watched a lot of the Food Network, Nathan says. She was trying to zone out.

Tamar died on September 12, 2010. As she passed away, her sister, Sharon Friedner, cradled her head. Eva started chanting. A peaceful look appeared on Tamar's face. "I have been doing this for so many years," Eva remembers the hospice nurse saying, "and I have never seen such a peaceful, beautiful passing."

A Massachusetts funeral home took possession of Tamar's body and packed it in a container filled with dry ice. Nathan and Amos, Tamar's father, picked up the body on September 13, 2010, and drove for nearly twenty hours, through the night. At first, a little steam seeped from the container.

They didn't speed. "How would we explain the body in the back if they were pulled over?" they joked.

Meanwhile, Dancing Rabbit began preparing for Tamar's return. The villagers started digging a grave.

The procession started at Tamar's cabin. Nearby in a house called Bluestem, Tereza, Alline, and others prepared her body for burial. They put salve on her face before wrapping her in the shroud.



The Milkweed Mercantile sits near the entrance of Dancing Rabbit. The Mercantile is a bed-and-breakfast that also offers dry goods to community members.

They struggled to wrap her body, Alline Anderson says she probably made the shroud too form-fitting. Some of the linen ties that wrapped around the shroud, securing it to the body, were too long. Alyson cut a piece as a keepsake. To this day, it's fastened to her purse—a reminder that nature is in control.

Once the pallbearers got the body through the cabin door, they proceeded east along the gravel path that led to the playground. Family, friends from the tri-communities, friends from back in Massachusetts, and others—such as some of Tamar's fiddle students from Rutledge and Memphis, Missouri—lined the path and, as her

body passed, fell in line behind the pallbearers.

Eva led the group in some traditional Jewish chants. Some people sang. Others offered remarks. Loved ones placed mementos in the grave: wildflowers, a seashell, and some garlic.

No headstone marked the site.

Today, a rough stump of a boulder marks Tamar's grave. It's decorated with a mosaic.

The mosaic pops with color. It's a kaleidoscope of greens, browns, yellows, reds, and blues—a collection of images crafted by her fellow villagers.

Her family chose the images. There's a purple cone flower, a black-eyed Susan, and a rattlesnake master—wildflowers and prairie grass native to Scotland County, some of which the Rabbits replanted when they reclaimed the farm.

There's a yellow tomato and a white garlic bulb; garlic was her favorite. The violin strikes up memories of her music when she fiddled in the Rutledge Ramblers. And at the top of the mosaic, there's a monarch butterfly set against a blue sky.

"I think the meaning is that we've been here long enough that we've had births and we've had deaths," Tereza says about Tamar's burial. "We did it our way, kind of, not the usual way because we

don't do really anything the usual way here. And so we kind of got to show ourselves that that's what we're still doing here. We did it in the way that felt good to us and her family."

If not for the headstone, an outsider might mistake Tamar's grave for another garden in the village. It's surrounded by natural prairie grass and flanked by an Asian pear tree. And sometimes, from the grave itself, garlic will sprout.

Faint whiffs of compost tease your nose at the gravesite. The only sounds are the crunch of gravel underfoot, the whap-whap-whap of wind turbines producing electricity—and sometimes, at the nearby swing set, the laughter of children.

