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Coffins are out, diamonds are ... forever

CHUR, (Switzerland) - AT the end of their days, most people end up six feet under or up in flames, others get frozen or mummified.

But some lucky ones are spending eternity as sparkling diamonds, thanks to a peculiar chemical transformation.

For a fee, a company called Algordanza in the eastern Swiss canton of Graubunden offers a service to turn ashes into precious stones.

Every month, it gets 40 to 50 commissions - some as far away as Japan.

One came from secretary Lilly Hess-Sollberger, who saw an article about the service and made her daughter Michele Galmarini-Hess promise to call Algordanza when she passed away.

She died three years ago at 82 and her ashes are now a half-carat blue diamond pendant that adorns her daughter's neck.

'I wear it day and night, even when I go to bed. For me she's alive, and it does me good,' said Mrs Galmarini-Hess who lives in Montreux.

When asked about the diamond, she said some have shuddered but most people find it a 'great' idea.

'You can't imagine how many of them ask if they can kiss the stone,' she said.

Mr Rinaldo Willy, 28, one of two co-founders of Algordanza, said the commissions come from 'all kinds of people - they could be bus drivers or professors in philosophy.'

At the firm's laboratory, about 15 machines run non-stop alongside employees wearing plastic protective glasses who work behind a yellow and black line that visitors are not allowed to cross - out of respect for the dead.

'Five hundred grammes of ashes is enough to make a diamond while a human body leaves behind on average 2.5 to three kilogrammes of ashes,' said Mr Willy.

Potassium and calcium, which makes up some 85 per cent of the ashes, are first separated from the carbon.

The carbon is then subject to extremely high pressure and heat -1,700 degrees C, a process which compresses it into graphite, a carbon allotrope or a structurally different form of carbon.

More pressure and heat are applied to the graphite to turn it into diamonds - the hardest allotrope of carbon.



The whole process costs between 2,800 to 10,600 euros (S\$6,000 to S\$22,657), depending on the weight of the resulting stone (from 0.25 to one carat), and does not include the setting of the stone. -- PHOTO: AFP

The entire process takes six to eight weeks, hardly a fraction of the time it takes for the formation of natural diamonds which take thousands of years.

When the process is complete, the crude diamond still requires polishing and cutting. Many are cut into heart-shaped stones which can be worn as a pendant or mounted on a ring.

'Each diamond is unique - the colour varies from dark blue to almost white,' said Mr Willy. 'It's a reflection of the personality.' - The industry of 'human diamonds' is booming - Mr Willy acknowledges that it is impossible to prove that each diamond is indeed made from a particular person's ashes. 'DNA burns,' he explained.

But the 'chemical imprint' of the ashes, determined at its arrival to the laboratory, allows for documentation to be made and for the finished product to be traced, he said.

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Algodanza, which means 'remembrance' in Romansch, one of the four official languages in Switzerland, defends this as a reasonable price.

'A burial could be very expensive: it costs 12,000 euros in Germany,' said Mr Willy, who would not divulge his company's revenues.

Not all agree with the process. Undertaker Yannick Abel-Coindoz, who works for the Murith funeral home in Geneva, said he has never received a request to transform ashes into a 'life gem', as some call the stones, and has no plans to offer the service.

'It's not in line with our ethics of burial and remembrance,' he said. 'To wear your loved one as a ring and carry it with you everywhere prevents you from distancing yourself and thereby recovering from the loss.' Yet the industry of 'human diamonds' is booming, with similar companies in Russia, Spain, Ukraine and the United States.

Founded in 2004, Algodanza has already expanded to 20 countries, including six outside Europe, and employs about 100 people in all.

Mr Willy said it is particularly popular in Japan, which sends between two to four urns daily, and the firm is setting its sights on China and India.

For Mr Willy, a mobile world is fueling demand for such services. As people move farther from home, grave upkeep becomes difficult. And though cremation is increasingly popular - and the norm in some countries - special permission is generally needed to transport urns across borders.

Though most life gem requests come from families after a loved one's death, Mr Willy said people are starting to ask for his firm's services themselves in living wills before they die.

Individuals can even pay beforehand, with an insurance policy that covers their wish to become a diamond... forever. -- AFP