

Business

By Thomas A. Parmalee & Tanya Kenevich

Mausoleums & Niches resonate with families

The 10th and largest community mausoleum at St. Michael's Cemetery in East Elmhurst, N.Y., is about to open, and if Ed Horn has anything to say about the matter, another one will be constructed soon.

St. Joseph's Community Mausoleum should be open within weeks, and about half of the 2,700 mausoleum spaces have already been sold, according to Horn, the cemetery's director of sales, marketing and community relations. The building also has room for 1,500 glass-front niches for cremated remains, and about a third of those have also been sold.

Horn says that St. Joseph's will be the first mausoleum in a series of three buildings that will be called The Holy Trinity. "The argument here is we are selling; now let's start planning the next one," he said.

Easier said than done, as management is typically interested in conserving capital as opposed to salespeople who are interested in selling. "Salespeople always have to be thoroughly optimistic at all times,

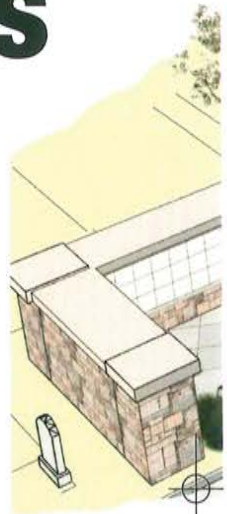
and management always has to be conservative at all times," Horn said. "It balances each other out."

It's no surprise that St. Michael's and other cemeteries are increasingly finding a market to sell niches, but the fact that mausoleum spaces are also in such demand seems like a good sign for the cemetery profession in general. "You do have traditionalists who will only consider in-ground burial, but now it seems almost daily that there is more and

more need and a calling for above-ground memorialization in an above-ground mausoleum," Horn said.

St. Michael's, which is a religious cemetery open to all faiths, continues to perform well in a tough economy, Horn noted. Last year, it did about \$7.7 million in sales, and he expects this year to be even better. "This year has already been remarkable," Horn said, noting that if the pace is kept, it will be the cemetery's best year yet.

And so far, the investment in St. Joseph's Mausoleum seems to be paying off. "In the new building, we've scoped out





areas for private rooms, and we put into St. Joseph's about 10 of these private rooms," Horn said. "A family came along and put two private rooms together for the largest single sale: \$450,000." The private rooms feature a stained-glass window with the family's name.

The building's glass-front niches are also proving to be popular. "We saw the popularity of glass-front niches pick up about five years ago," Horn said. "They became fashionable because people could walk in and see individuals honored for who and what they were; families are able to honor their loved ones in their own particular way." He added, "That really has taken hold with those families who want cremation but still want a way to memorialize a loved one." Horn has seen families place baby shoes, pictures of fishing trips and other personal items into the niches to make them special.

To understand why St. Michael's continues to succeed in selling

mausoleum and niche spaces, it's necessary to appreciate the workplace culture. "We've always relied upon direct mail, and we always get a strong return on our investment, but more important than that is how we serve the family by having the same person work with them at all times," he said. "Our people stay here forever, and families get to rely on one person who has served them well in the past."

St. Joseph's mausoleum cost about \$6 million to build, Horn said. Along with stained glass, it also features marble hallways, candle stands and a dramatic tower.

Permanent Places to Mourn

C. John Linge, president and CEO of The Cedar Group – which consists of Cedar Memorial Park Cemetery

Association, Cedar Memorial Funeral Home Co. and Iowa Cremation – oversees the second-largest death-care provider in Iowa. Cedar Memorial Park Cemetery manages the largest perpetual care fund in the state.

In order to educate the public about mausoleums and columbariums, the staff at Cedar Memorial opens up its grounds to tours and community events. This head-on approach seems to work; Linge has found that his mausoleum and columbarium sales continue to grow.

Linge believes that the idea that the body is not underground might be a selling point for families who want to keep their deceased loved one clean, protected and dry in a mausoleum crypt. Cedar Memorial's mausoleum uses a "positive ventilation" technology that allows fresh air to

Left: St. Joseph's Community Mausoleum, under construction in this photo, is about to open. (Photo courtesy of Ed Horn) **Above:** In this plan for Calvary Cemetery in Queens, N.Y., Grever & Ward used niche walls to maximize the value of irregular space. (Photo courtesy of Grever & Ward Cemetery Planners)



Above: Glass cremation niches are quickly growing in popularity, especially at Cedar Memorial. (Photo courtesy of Cedar Memorial)

well as aid tremendously in odor management.

In addition, some families might just feel more comfortable with a mausoleum crypt instead of earth burial. No matter what, it's important to give the family what they want, Linge believes. "Options are wonderful to be able to offer to families," he said.

Just like at St. Michael's, glass-front niches are popular at Cedar Memorial's 85-acre cemetery. Linge recently had to order more glass niche cabinets for his columbarium; Cedar Memorial already has close to 500 glass niches, and it will be adding 75 more in the next few months. Within five years, Cedar Memorial will have a conser-

come into the crypt space, as well as being able to release the stale air outside. This system promotes the

drying out and mummification of the body, which will greatly lessen gas buildup in the casket and crypt, as

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vatory filled will glass niches.

No matter how many glass-front niches the cemetery puts in, they seem to sell out, Linge said. "There is a higher level of personalization," he said. "They are so popular; they really are quite wonderful."

Families are able to buy a personalized urn to place in the niche, a specialized photo of the deceased and one other personalized item. Linge believes that this personalized memorial, along with the urn sitting in a glass niche, creates a strong bond and connection with the family. In addition, having a permanent place to mourn is also beneficial for family, friends and later generations, he said.

As cremation continues to grow, companies are preparing themselves for the baby boomer surge, including Jeff Johnson, regional director of the central region (Canada and U.S.) of Carrier Mausoleums Constuction in Ontario, Canada. Currently, Ontario has a 60 percent cremation rate, and

if you go west of Ontario, you can reach cremation rates as high as 80 percent, according to Johnson. To prepare for columbarium interest, Carrier Mausoleums manufactures its own cremation niches in its own facility, because of the immense popularity of the product. The company even increased its staff in the cremation facility to keep up with the growing need for these products.

Some of the biggest selling points of mausoleums or columbariums are those little extras that can add a touch of peace and harmony when loved ones visit the deceased. These options can include beautiful, cascading, man-made waterfalls, natural-looking brooks, open-sky features for natural light and plants. People love water additions, Johnson said. "It's a very relaxing and soothing aspect when you're visiting someone who's passed away," he said.

Johnson believes that mausoleum areas should be more like lounges, complete with coffee and

comfortable seating. Many religious families will come visit for an hour or two, and Johnson believes that the family's comfort should be key.

In order to keep Cedar Memorial dignified for families, Linge has put rules and regulations into effect for personalization options. When a family has the freedom of personalizing a gravesite, a mausoleum place or a glass niche, sometimes they can get carried away; this can result in a cluttered area. Linge believes that the personalization options must be there, but he does enforce some rules in order to keep a certain "special dignity," he said.

For Linge, the job as a cemeterian is important. He believes that cemeterians such as himself are the preservers of history, taking records and keeping those who have died "alive" in a historical sense.

Cremation can sometimes be trickier than a mausoleum crypt or an earth burial. Although Linge has no problem with scattering of cremated

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Above: Niche walls, such as this one in Greenwood Union Cemetery in Rye, N.Y., can be adapted to fit into a variety of environments. (Photo courtesy of Grever & Ward Cemetery Planners)

remains, it might be frustrating for future generations who want to visit their loved ones but don't have a specific place to do it. This can create a less tangible place for memory.

However, with columbariums and niches, this tangibility of a place of memory can be reacquired. "At the end of the day, you need that tangible place," Linge believes.

Cemeteries that are not incorporating mausoleums and columbariums into their plans in a big way are making a mistake, because if families are not given these options, they will go elsewhere, Linge said.



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Planning is Key

Dave Ward, president of Grever & Ward Cemetery Planners in Orchard Park, N.Y., emphasizes that planning is key for cemeteries looking to put in new mausoleums, columbariums and niche walls.

Ward said his company has been quite active in developing master plans with niche walls and columbariums. "They are a lot more upscale than even a few years ago," he said.

Niche walls and columbariums are tending to go in more prominent areas and are no longer just being tucked away into a corner of the cemetery, Ward said. "The attitude seems to have changed - at least at the ones that are successful."

Even cemeteries with a limited budget should be thinking beyond the first project, Ward said. "It's important not just to figure out where you want to put the first unit but the next one and the one after that," Ward said. "That is where it pays to do an overview. The turnaround is sometimes less than five years before the first unit is selling out, and you are looking at

putting in additional ones. If you don't have a master plan, these things just end up being a jumble."

Ward admitted that he usually finds himself on a soapbox to gently persuade people to look at the bigger picture. "Assume it is going to succeed rather than just testing the water," he said. "Phase two comes a lot quicker than anyone expects."

It's also a good idea to come up with a detailed plan because if you are putting a project out to bid, you want to have a defined criteria so you can

compare apples to apples.

Ward also noted that he's seen the cost per niche come down because new materials are being used, such as metals and fiberboard. "The biggest mistake continues to be undershooting the quality that the public is expecting," he said. "The public is seeing these walls and columbaria many times for the first time ever, and if they are not done as a centerpiece, they may not notice it. But if they see it as they drive in, they start to ask questions."

One cemetery that has done a partic-

ularly good job in putting in niche walls and columbariums is the River Bend Cemetery in Westerly, R.I., a Grever & Ward client. "They have not been afraid to charge a good dollar for the space," Ward said. He added that a lot of cemeteries continue to underprice their niche spaces. "There is no reason it shouldn't be at least four times the construction cost, and some are maybe getting as much as 10 times the construction cost," he said. "If you make it beautiful enough, people buy into it." ♦



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