

Cremation Memorialization in the Cemetery

by Sara Corkery



"By working together, the funeral home and the cemetery reinforce the idea of memorialization at a cemetery. This is critical in the era of cremation, where many cremated remains never end up in a cemetery." —Mitch Rose

As the rate of cremation in North America continues to grow, the amount of traditional burials is dropping. This trend affects many sectors of the death care industry, and cemeteries are no exception. Cemetery operators, designers, service providers, and suppliers are working to meet the inevitable challenges. In order to explore some of the new products and services emerging from this new era of cremation dominance, *The Cremationist* interviewed Mitch Rose and Elisa Krcileck, two cemetery professionals who are working on the front lines of this shifting environment.

Part One: Mitch Rose of The Woodlawn Cemetery in Bronx, New York

The first thing that I think of with cremation memorialization is the old adage that the consumer who is interested in cremation memorialization doesn't necessarily know what they want, but they do know what they don't like, and in order to determine what they don't like, they need to see it. So it's important that the cemetery has a wide product offering to be able to show the consumer what those choices are and then to get a sense of what best suits their needs.

Cremation-minded families often want a naturalistic setting. So many cemeteries have created landscaped gardens with boulders, trees, flowers, and soft edges to the designs of the beds. The cremated remains may exist in the ground with a memorial next to the location, or in an above-ground memorial item, but it's a very landscaped setting, a natural setting. If there's a pathway through the garden, it's not paved, but it's gravel or mulch.

On the other hand, some cremation-minded families are looking for a more structured appearance, similar to a community mausoleum niche bank or a columbarium. This is often in a patio setting, perhaps with several different columbariums around a fountain. The design is less landscaped and more architecturally interesting.

Lessons from a Glass-Front Niche Project

At The Woodlawn, we started doing some retrofitting. We found corners, interior mausoleums, and blank walls where we could put in niche banks. We added curved, glass-front feature niches. These are larger in size to accommodate larger urns and memorabilia (see photo, opposite page). We held an internal sales contest and had the counselors themselves design what would go inside behind the glass front, bringing in memorabilia, picking an urn, etc. We were able to leave one of the sample designs there when the inventory went up, so people could see it, like a pre-furnished condo model. They looked at it and it gave them ideas.

We picked the center, heart-level niches and priced them like we would a heart-level or eye-level mausoleum. This equated to the price of a single crypt, which at first we thought was pretty expensive. But we discovered very quickly, by bringing the consumer to that site, that these niches were what people wanted. They saw other items—niches with lower prices at higher elevations—at a price point that was very inexpensive.

But when they saw the more expensive glass-front, heart-level niches, those sold first. That helped us discover that your expectation of what somebody else is willing to spend is a very dangerous thing. Never put your wallet in somebody else's hands.

Funeral Home Relations are Key

With our director of sales and marketing, David Ison, we've worked hard at The Woodlawn to develop funeral home relations. We're an independent cemetery. We're not a combination and we don't have funeral home offerings. We do have a crematory, but we primarily offer our cremation services through the funeral homes rather than directly to the public.

With David's advice, we developed photographs of the sample glass-front niche I described above, including the memorabilia. These photographs were brought to local funeral homes and we spoke to them about what I think is one of the most important things about the death care industry—the fact that funeral homes and cemeteries are really in this together, especially when it comes to serving the cremation customer.

By offering glass-front niches, what we were able to do is demonstrate the value of memorialization, meaning those cremated remains are going to have a final resting place. Placing them behind glass absolutely changed the rules for the funeral home in terms of the urn. So we essentially took all our urns off the marketplace. We don't compete with funeral homes on urns.

continued on page 8



Above: Glass-front niches at The Woodlawn.

continued from page 7

But we got the funeral homes to show the photos of the glass-front niches and talk about the fact that The Woodlawn offers them.

They can say, “Here’s a picture of what can be done behind these glass-front niches. We have the dimensions of those niches, so if you’d like, go take a look at the glass-fronts, pick which one you want, come back, and we will look at urns that will fit within that niche.” So that partnership has resulted in some really great opportunities for funeral homes and for cemeteries to satisfy the needs of the cremation-minded consumer.

By working together, the funeral home and the cemetery reinforce the idea of memorialization at a cemetery. This is critical in the era of cremation, where many cremated remains

never end up in a cemetery. You build relationships with the funeral director so the funeral home and the cemetery realize they’re in it together, and an interesting thing happens. By talking about memorialization, the funeral director is also able to promote the idea of ritual. If you’re going to have a memorialization of cremated remains in an urn, the probability that there will be a ceremony—of any kind—is increased, because you’ve created value to permanence. Permanence in memorialization infers the same thing as what happens in a funeral service. You create permanent memories of a final tribute to somebody who has passed. I think those interlocking relationships are critical as we continue to move into the era of cremation-minded families.

Staff Buy-In

If you’re going to open a cremation garden, you want to make sure you have buy-in from your staff. Nothing is worse than investing in a particular inventory of additional niches or a mausoleum, and then your staff isn’t enthusiastic about it or isn’t showing it at the level of frequency that you want them to. People are creatures of habit, so if your sales agents are more oriented to selling the top level of the mausoleum, or they always seem to show a particular ground burial area, it’s important to break that up a little bit.

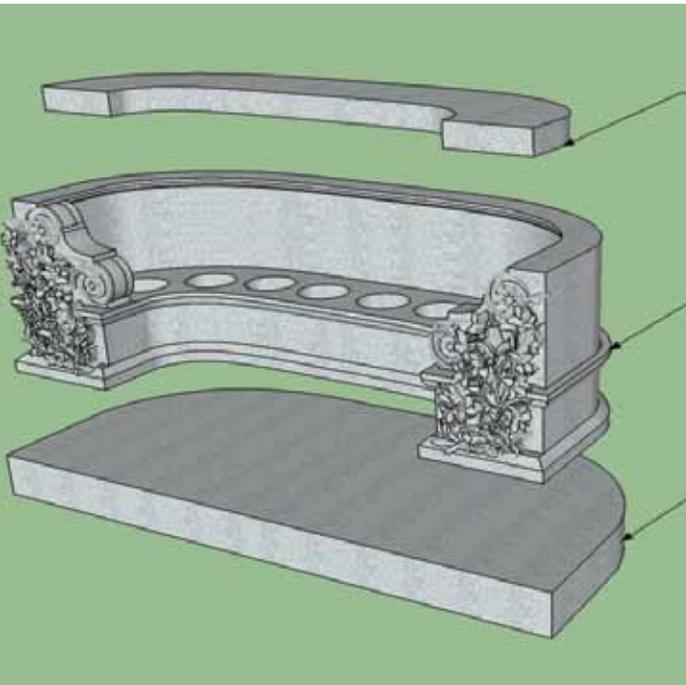
For The Woodlawn staff, doing this exercise of filling the glass-front niches with memorabilia was fun, it was interesting—it was amazing what we ended up seeing. And it gave them buy-in into representing that product to the families.

We do a lot of in-house training with our staff. Some of them have participated in coming to programs like the CANA cremation symposium, where they’re exposed to great speakers who can recharge them and create more enthusiasm. Even more important is the access to networking with their peers, because the challenges we face are pretty similar across the board.

Show and Tell

We have an ossuary for cremated remains. This provides an opportunity for us to offer a fairly inexpensive price-point for New York. With our ossuary, the cremated remains are placed in the non-retrievable commingling vault and an engraved small bronze plate on a cenotaph is included. In terms of value, it’s very reasonable. But if you decide to do an ossuary, make sure it’s placed next to other portions of your cremation garden that have a different value.

In our case, our ossuary sits near our Brookside Garden. The garden has product offerings that include memorial boulders as well as niches and bridges, with various locations to place cremated remains in the bridge. All of this is right next to the ossuary. What has happened consistently is we will notify families of our price variance. They’re interested in the fact that the ossuary offers a less expensive option, and they want to go see it. We show them the ossuary, and right next to it are these other product offerings. The tendency in our case is to sell the ossuary just a handful of times a year in relation to the other various selections.

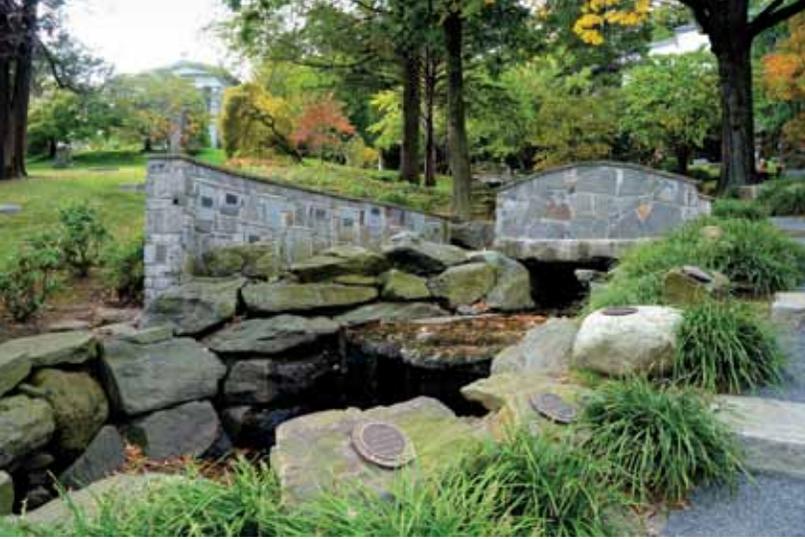


Above: Vintage-look bench design for cremated remains.



Above: A bench in place at The Woodlawn Cemetery.

continued on page 10



Above: The Woodlawn's Brookside Cremation Garden.

continued from page 8

"Ritual is a pretty broad word. It doesn't have to be religious. It doesn't have to be ceremonial. But the ritual of paying respect to the loss of life with survivors is important." —Mitch Rose

Offering Special Options

The Woodlawn is a historic cemetery, so we had a vendor build us custom cremation benches (*see photos, p. 8*). I took photographs of the various monuments and benches that were in the cemetery, none of which were cremation benches. We gave the pictures to the vendor and the vendor provided us with several designs for what eventually became a historically accurate cremation bench. The final result looked like it was old and built from a different time in terms of the style. The benches were relatively inexpensive to build. However, the price point we put on them was very significant because they were in a very special area with high visibility, and they had a very private, exclusive sense to them. That created, at the very highest price point level we've ever seen, a particular message to us that having the wide offering will bring in the consumer. Presenting all those offerings will allow the consumer to make the choice themselves. They're not going to make that choice until they see it. They've go to see all the things they don't want before they see the thing that they do want.

The shapes and sizes of above-ground inurnment sites are pretty similar to that of monuments now. We think of monuments over an earth burial, and how there are various polishes and colors, sizes, etc. That trend of variation continues to move into above-ground inurnment rites with various shapes and sizes.

Careful Planning and Thoughtful Design

The amount of space you need to develop cremation inurnment rites is probably the best news about cremation. It's so small, and the amount of volume you can get into a relatively small area provides a great opportunity. That said, I have seen many cemetery sections for cremation that, unfortunately, over-

capitalized on that density. The rites themselves were relatively restricted in overall size, but the proximity of each and every one of them was so close that the end effect, once burials were made and inscriptions were added, was a very condensed, almost cluttered look.

I think it's important to make sure that you don't overpopulate the size of your cremation garden. It's a small area that will accommodate a large amount of cremated remains. That can be a very dangerous mistake and one that you have to watch out for before you get excited about how many cremation rites you can get in. The return on investment of an inventory development is certainly driven by the amount of units you're getting into the confining space you're developing. If you want to maximize your return, put more units in. But this can create a much denser environment. Aesthetically, that may not be as pleasing to the eye as it may appear to be on your financials. Be careful not to clutter the design. Be cognizant about how it will end up looking.

A good way to do that is through renditions. Today, most of the major suppliers will readily offer Photoshopped renditions. They'll take a picture of a particular area, then they'll take it back

to their office and bring you back a Photoshopped design with these particular items in these particular places. Other vendors are using 3-D renditions such as SketchUp, where you're actually able to move in a three-dimensional sense, where you can actually walk through the design—a virtual tour.

There are many elements to consider with any construction, but in cremation memorialization they're more important than ever. Certainly you have a manufacturer or supplier, many of which have design and build companies. There are benefits in using a design-build company in relation to one-stop-shop, cost, etc. You may also use an engineering consultant, because what looks good on paper may not necessarily translate physically into the known factors of your physical environment or your regulatory environment. But I think that often a final piece of that three-pronged approach to internal development is missed, and that's an architect. In the cemetery world, an architect might not come to your mind right away because you're tending to use design-build, and perhaps an engineer or construction company. But the architects who we've found the most success with are those who don't come from the cemetery industry. They come from the landscaping and building construction industry. What they bring to the table is a high level of awareness of space and spatial dimension. When we've developed mausoleum complexes or cremation gardens, or even interior renovations of existing space—retrofits—we've become increasingly cognizant through the work of architects of trying to assess what it will feel like when people walk into this space. Is it going to feel like we put something in there that wasn't there before? Or is it going to feel like what we have added was there all the time, and it's a natural fit? I think it goes back to development of long-range planning strategies that will allow for the backfilling of interior portions

of your construction. To be developed in the future, but with a retrofitted sensibility.

The tendency is, I've been here x number of years, I know where these spaces are, let's put up a niche bank, let's get a design-build company, let's just do it. And I would advise everyone to really step back and realize that with long-term cemetery design—especially when it comes to cremation-minded families—creating an overly dense offering can really backfire. The independent-minded cremation consumer, who is questioning the need for a funeral home or wondering how to minimize the use of the funeral home in many cases, is not even assessing that a cemetery has to fit into this equation at all.

The Value of Ritual

These independent-minded consumers won't come to the cemetery because they don't see the need. Eighty percent of these cremated remains are not coming to the cemetery. But 100% of the families are using a funeral service provider. So the funeral home environment is always going to be there to serve those who have lost someone.

In the cemetery world, we have a bigger challenge to even get them to think that the cemetery is something they might even want to think about. To do that, funeral home relations are going to become increasingly important. The value of memorialization at a cemetery really does interlock with the value of some kind of ritual.

Ritual is a pretty broad word. It doesn't have to be religious, it doesn't have to be ceremonial, but the ritual of paying respect to the loss of life with the survivors is important. How that plays out is, of course, pretty wide open. It can be tough for the funeral service provider to explore new trends in this very traditional industry—an industry, very much like the church, that is bound by past conventions. With more and more unchurched families, we find that they bypass the whole piece. They can do everything online.

Marketing with Social Media

One thing you need to do is absolutely recognize the power of social media. I don't have a Facebook account, but if I did, I don't think I would have an interest in posting all my experiences. But today, for the generation doing that, it is completely natural to post all your experiences on Facebook, especially when it comes to commerce: it was negative, it was positive, I bought this, I bought that. We're discovering in our digital marketing that it's a wonderful tool to reach the consumer.

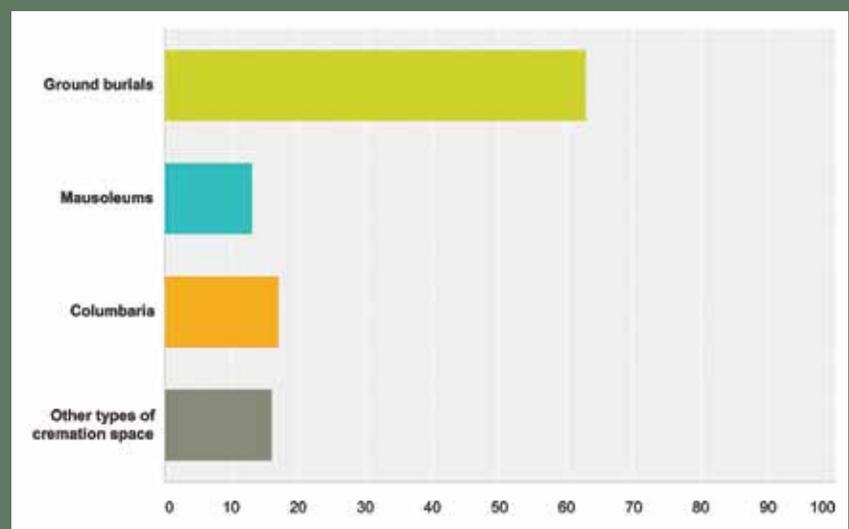
If you want to advertise on Facebook there's one very important component—you have to have a Facebook account. Your business should have a Facebook account, even if you don't like Facebook and you don't want to post. The good news is there

continued on page 12

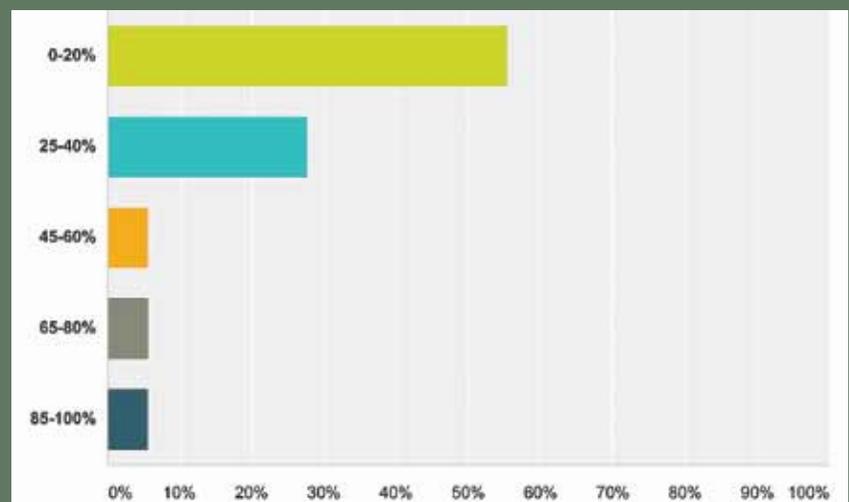
CANA Cemetery Member Survey on Cemeteries and Cremation Memorialization

In preparation for this article, CANA was interested in learning how the recent growth in cremation is impacting our cemetery members and the cremation-related memorialization products and services they provide. In January, we invited our cemetery members to take part in a short survey. A selection of the final responses are summarized below.

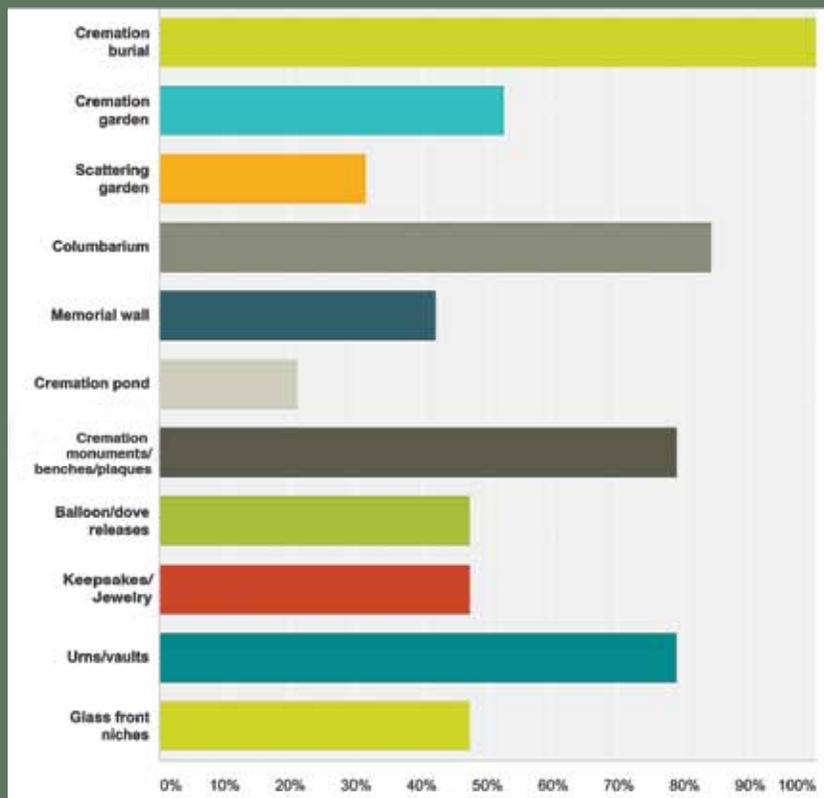
What percentage of the interments in your cemetery are allocated to:



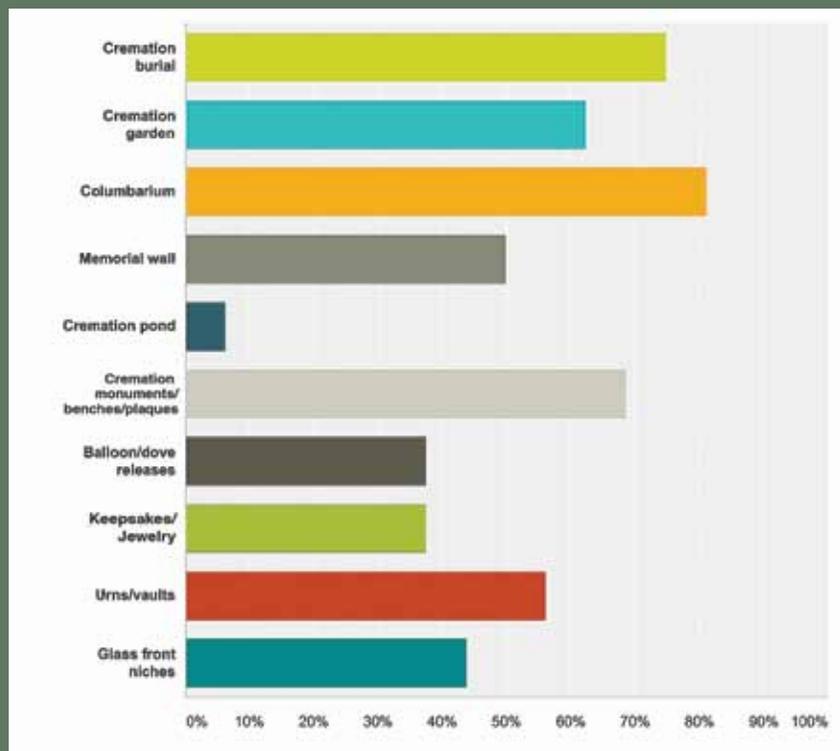
What percentage of growth in cremation-related sales has your cemetery experienced over the last ten years?



Which cremation memorialization products and services do you currently offer?



Which cremation memorialization products and services do you plan to offer in future?



continued from page 11

are a lot of young, energetic, entrepreneurial people who make a business out of digitizing, packaging, preparing, and creating that whole opportunity. It is the way to reach that market and it is the way to get that advertising to the right place. We're seeing more and more e-mail leads coming in than we ever saw before, all because of the process I just described. When people become engaged, they are more subject to receiving a message in a positive way.

Many years ago we were told, "You gotta have your Yellow Page ad, you gotta have your direct inserts, you gotta do your newspaper advertising, and you gotta do your direct mail because all of them together are what's going to trigger a response." Social media gives you the exact same platform. You've got to have your Facebook ad, you've got to drive people to your website, and your website has to be very friendly and open to creating leads. It's a whole different world, it's an entirely different type of marketing, but it's the same thing—just different tools. Those of us who've been in the profession for a long time really have to take a look at our toolbox and come to various conventions and things of that nature to discover other tools out there that we haven't thought of—or worse, haven't chosen—to put inside of our toolbox for the twenty-first century.

Adapting and Engaging

I'm optimistic because in the history of business and America if you aren't willing to change and meet that consumer need or consumer preference, that's okay. Someone else will. And they will take the market. So I'm not overly concerned about what people are changing or how quickly they're changing. My real concern is how do I adapt my entrenched methodologies, restricted by my long, twenty-five year career? How do I get out of the box and reintegrate tools that I personally may not even use, like Facebook? I have to recognize that others use it so it makes sense.

The overhead of maintaining a cemetery is certainly difficult for an operator. But the value of a cemetery and its upkeep is really a reflection on the community. Your engagement with the community, especially now through social media, is really your only solution to keeping people engaged with the cemetery and keeping them open-minded about what you're doing and what you're offering.

At The Woodlawn, we've seen a gradual increase in memorialization, and, probably, a more dramatic increase in the average per sale. Because

cremation-minded families mostly do not go to the cemetery and choose a memorialization, that's even more reason to make sure that you have a wide range of offerings for the people who do come.



Mitch Rose is currently Chief Executive Officer & President of The Woodlawn Cemetery in Bronx, New York. During his 25-year career in death care he has actively managed medium to large cemeteries, funeral homes, and crematories in the South, Midwest, and Mid-Atlantic regions for Service Corporation International for 9 years and Carriage Services for 11 years. Mitch joined the executive team of The Woodlawn Cemetery, a National Historic Landmark, as Vice President

in 2010. He currently serves as Third Vice President of CANA, where he chairs the Statistics Committee & the Membership Committee. He also serves on the New York State Association of Cemeteries as a Board of Director. Mitch has earned the ICCFE accreditation of CCFE and CrCE, was a professor at the ICCFA University in Memphis for 8 years, and is also a proud member of the Historical Cemetery Alliance & the Cemetery Council.