

American Cemetery

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November 2012



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2012 American Cemetery Excellence Runner-up

tom Flynn, owner and president of Hillcrest Memorial Park in Hermitage, Pa., is acutely aware that cemeteries throughout the United States are facing a difficult future. As beautifully maintained as the grounds are or how well the cemetery is marketed, there is no escaping the reality of a rapidly shrinking market – the result of the ever-increasing trend toward cremation.

Cemeteries must find unique, creative ways to increase market share,

acres in 1935, Flynn has purchased an additional 36 acres in 13 separate transactions during his 35 years of ownership.

He initiated the principle a year after purchasing Hillcrest, dedicating a section of the cemetery to veterans on Veterans Day in 1978, the 60th anniversary of the end of World War I.

It was carried forward again in 1980 when Iranian militants took over the American Embassy in Tehran, holding 52 Americans hostage. Raising public awareness of the hostage situation was

the right thing to do, Flynn said. On Feb. 11, the cemetery raised 100 American flags

along the avenue leading to Hillcrest to mark the 100 days the crisis had lasted to that point. Each day thereafter, one more flag was raised until the hostages were released – a total of 444 flags. All 444 flags still fly from flagpoles along the Avenue, which – thanks to coverage from Time, Life and Newsweek magazines – has emerged as a symbol of patriotic spirit.

Establishing itself as a cemetery that solidly honors its nation and its defenders, Hillcrest erected a Vietnam

Memorial in 1991 and brought the Moving Vietnam Wall to Hermitage in 1992, 1994 and 1996. When the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks occurred, it once again seemed obvious what to do. Hillcrest established the War on Terror Foundation, which allowed the cemetery to create a national War on Terror Veterans Memorial within the Avenue of 444 Flags. It lists the name of every American killed in the ongoing war and is continuously updated with the names of those sacrificing their lives in the name of freedom in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. In August, the Moving Vietnam Wall once again returned to Hermitage, this time with an added emphasis on providing information and education. As part of that effort, the cemetery created a 124-page book that told the story of 100 Mercer County veterans, including 44 whose names appear on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; more than 20,000 books were given away.

That “right thing” came in a different way in November 2000 when Flynn brought home a then 23-month old golden retriever named Derek who started his career as the first service dog working in grief therapy. His spontaneous, uplifting effect on

Hillcrest Memorial Park

Flynn insists. How does a cemetery do that? The quick answer, according to Hillcrest’s president and owner, is to think outside the box.

“At Hillcrest Memorial Park, we rely on a simple principle: Do the right thing for the right reasons and then diligently follow the direction in which it leads, as far as it leads, as long as it leads,” Flynn said.

It’s a strategy that’s worked well for Flynn since he purchased the cemetery in 1977. Originally established on 46

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The Avenue of 444 Flags at Hillcrest Memorial Park. (Photo courtesy of Hillcrest Memorial Park)

grieving families was remarkable.

Derek's impact on families helped Flynn understand the personal relationship between people and their pets. That realization led Flynn to partner with his son, John, the owner of John Flynn Funeral Home and Crematory to develop the Hillcrest-Flynn Pet Funeral Home and Crematory, along with Hillcrest Memorial Park People and Pet Gardens. The cemetery formed a registered nonprofit group committed to caring for the well being of domestic pets, particularly the care and feeding of dogs and cats in animal shelters or in need of veterinary care. The cemetery also constructed the Hillcrest Dog Park and Wellness Center on a fenced-in quarter-acre lot in front of the pet funeral home that features custom playground equipment for dogs. Dog wellness and educational programs are also held on the premises



throughout the year.

"Doing the right thing for the right reasons has led us into providing unparalleled services in two arenas," Flynn wrote in his nominating letter. "Hillcrest Memorial Park has become attractive to veterans and pet owners regardless of their religion, ethnicity,

fraternal affiliations, heritage and location (and) by fully integrating our databases among the John Flynn Funeral Home, The Hillcrest-Flynn Pet Funeral Home and Hillcrest Memorial Park, we have developed the ability to market efficiently to this broad range of clients." •

Cast Aluminum

SECTION D

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