

ICCFTMA MAGAZINE

March - April 2007

CEMETERY

CREMATION

FUNERAL



Pets & people:
Wooing 'pet parents'
with funeral home,
crematory & cemetery



Welcoming nature, pets

**The future of funeral
service: Time of crisis
or time of opportunity?**



**Grounds up: Use your
water feature for a
floating lantern festival**

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Creating a cremation
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on gaining confidence as
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... and much more!

Formerly International Cemetery & Funeral Management: New name, same great content!

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ICCFA MAGAZINE
SUBJECT SPOTLIGHT



Tom Flynn with Derek the grief therapy dog.

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► Hillcrest-Flynn Pet Funeral Home & Crematory is in Hermitage, Pennsylvania, at Hillcrest Memorial Park, which now has a section where people can be buried with their pets. Across the street is John Flynn Funeral Home & Crematory.

► Hillcrest, started in 1935, now has 80 acres, 46 of which are developed for human burials. There are approximately 14,000 interments to date, with the current rate about 250 per year.

► The new new pet and people area is 8 acres, with room for expansion.

► The 2,605-square-foot pet funeral home and crematory was added to the cemetery office and chapel, more than doubling the building's size.

► John Flynn Funeral Home, built in 1995 across the street from the memorial park, is 9,260 square feet; in 2006, it handled 150 calls.

► Tom and John Flynn, Roberta Knauf, Derek and Roberta's Labrador Tara are expected at the ICCFA 2007 Convention.



PETS & PEOPLE COMBO

There are hundreds of pet cemeteries. There are pet crematories.

There are funeral homes that offer pet services.

Now Tom and John Flynn have put everything together at one site and opened a cemetery section where people can be buried with their pets.

Tom Flynn believes this isn't simply a "feel-good" service for pet lovers, it's one of the ways cemeteries and funeral homes will be able to ensure their viability in the future as cremation chips away at profits.

Flynns woo 'pet parents' to secure the future for funeral home, cemetery

Tom Flynn wasn't asking to bury people and pets together. He simply wanted to open a section for pets in his memorial park. He had bought land contiguous to the park long ago with the intention of starting a pet cemetery but had never gotten around to doing it.

For several years his son John, who runs the funeral home across the street from the cemetery, had been telling his father there was a market in pet service. When he had installed a crematory at the funeral home, he started getting calls from people asking if he could cremate their pets. (He couldn't.)

Two years ago, Flynn finally approached the city for permission to add that pet cemetery. Cemeteries are allowed in the residential zone where the park is located, but they are defined as being "for the burial of humans," so he had to go to the city for permission to bury animals.

Eventually the city came up with new language: "cemeteries are for the burial of humans and/or pets."

The "and pets" gave Hillcrest permission to bury people with their pets. "I didn't think of it," Flynn said. "The city of Hermitage thought of it." and once city officials started talking about burying people with their pets, "the light bulb went on," Flynn said. "I thought, *Oh my god—that's what I want!*"

In the meantime, he had started talking to people at conventions about the funeral side of pet services. He visited the Schoedingers in Ohio, who offer pet services through their funeral homes, and Coleen Ellis at her Pet Angel Memorial Center in Carmel, Indiana. He visited Bill Remkus' pet cemetery in Hinsdale, Illinois.

"We kept our eyes open, talked to the best and asked questions," Flynn said.

What had started out as a pet cemetery ended up, in the course of less than two years, becoming a pet



Funeral director John Flynn and cemeterian Tom Flynn, with Derek, stand behind Roberta Knauf, who manages the pet funeral home. By her side is Nika, trained to visit people in hospitals and nursing homes. Knauf also plans to bring her black Labrador retriever, Tara, to the office.

funeral home, crematory and cemetery added to an existing human funeral home, crematory and cemetery. A two-species combo, or perhaps a two-species trio? Hillcrest's new section does include an area for

In place of a sign, Hillcrest is marked by the Avenue of Flags

Today, Tom Flynn is widely known in his community and among professional colleagues as the man who goes around with Derek the golden retriever.

But years before he ever thought of getting a grief therapy dog, Flynn was in the national spotlight as the man whose cemetery entrance was lined with a growing number of American flags—one for each day Americans were held hostage in Iran after the 1979 embassy takeover.

The “Avenue of Flags” was featured on the cover of *Time*, *USA Today* and in many other newspapers, as well as on national television. “NBC alone came 18 times,” Flynn said. “When you turned on *The Today Show* in the morning, it would show the Avenue of Flags and it would say ‘Today is day 223 (or whatever) of America held hostage.’”

“The display evolved out of me trying to explain to my preteen children, around day 80, how long the hostages had been held,” Flynn said. “I’d see blank stares. What’s 80 days to an 11-year-old? It popped into my head that if there was a way to keep score—that was the accountant side of me, I guess—something visual, people would look at it and say, ‘Oh, my gosh, has it been *that* long?’”

Thus was born the idea of erecting a flag for each day the hostages were captive. Local manufacturers donated steel tubing, families Hillcrest had served donated casket flags and the local steelworkers union helped put up the poles.

Because Flynn didn’t want anyone to think he was trying to promote his park, he moved his sales force to a building across the street, banned them from speaking to the media and took down the cemetery sign so that it would not appear in any of the photos. “I’m the son of immigrants and an ex-paratrooper. I felt as if they’d taken one of my children hostage,” he said, “and I wanted to do something. It wasn’t commercial.”

Twenty-five years later, the flags are still there and the sign is still missing. About a year after the hostage crisis ended, Flynn erected permanent flagpoles. “I never wanted the American people to forget what Iran put us through,” he said. There is also a monument to the eight people who died in a rescue attempt.

And how do visitors and customers today know they’re at the right place? Well, it’s the only place around with 444 flags flying near the entrance, and the War on Terror Memorial.

For more about the flags and memorial, go to www.avenueofflags.com or www.waronterror.org. □

PETS & PEOPLE COMBO



The pet funeral home and crematory are attached to the cemetery office and chapel. The building is at the cemetery entrance, marked by the Avenue of Flags.

Derek and I will be together, with a bronze marker with both our pictures on it.

the burial of pets only. Closer to the existing cemetery, burials for people and pets are allowed, “and this is really where we feel the market is,” Flynn said.

The pet funeral home and crematory were added not to the existing funeral home but to the cemetery office and chapel. What’s the difference between designing a funeral home for people and one for pets? “Honestly, none,” Flynn said. “It’s just that the scale is smaller.”

The pet funeral home includes a reception room and arrangement room, both of which contain merchandising displays, and two viewing rooms with curtained windows that can be opened so people can, if they wish, view the animal going into the retort. It looks like something you’d see in any modern funeral home with a crematory.

ICCFA Magazine talked to Tom Flynn about the cemetery’s new section and the possibilities offered by expansion into pet services by funeral homes, crematories and cemeteries.

When did you open?

We had the grand opening in December.

Have you had any services or burials?

Yes, we had two or three dozen services in the first few weeks.

We’ve had some burials. We had people coming to us even before we opened

up. Our first interment was a disinterred cat. A local businessman was moving, and his family disinterred the cat they had buried in their yard and brought it here to bury properly. They’re ordering a marker for the grave.

We’re giving current cemetery property owners the option of exchanging, for a limited time, their space in the human section of the park for lots in the people and pet section.

Another thing we’ve done is approach the veterinary clinics and tell them we’ll handle all their cases. We will do individual cremations for people who request it.

In cases where people don’t want the remains returned and ask the vet to deal with the body, we will pick up those animals, do a community cremation and place the remains together in a fiberglass vault. When the vault is full, we’ll bury it and place a marker over it that says, “God’s loving creatures, January-June 2007 (or whatever the dates are),” with a vase.

When a pet dies, it’s such a shock, just as it is with a human death. But maybe later the pet’s owners start thinking about it and call the vet’s office to ask, “What happened to my dog?”

In some cases, pets are taken to what is essentially a landfill. I’ve even heard of dogs ending up at rendering plants,

The whole world is changing, and if you can't adapt to it, you will perish. ... When I make a decision, I think of my grandchildren. I think about whether I will have a viable business for them to become involved in, if they so choose.

like horses. But now, the vet can say, "Your dog is up at Hillcrest." They can come visit, see the marker. We'll keep track of the animals on our computer, and we'll send out cards that say, "At Dr. X's request, your (animal) was cremated and buried at Hillcrest Memorial Park."

I would think that would be huge to a family who walked away from the vet's office in tears.

A nurse I know who told her veterinarian she wanted her dog cremated found out that the dog had been taken to one of those places with the word "farm" in the name that actually is a landfill. She demanded that he get the dog back and cremate it as she'd requested. He did, then called us—even though we weren't open yet—and said, "You've got all our business." And they're about 15 miles away.

We want everything to be professional. Veterinarians care for animals in a professional way for years, and when the end comes, we want to provide a place where the animal is treated with respect.

What is the human and pet section like?

The graves are 10 feet long, 3 feet 4 inches wide. If two pets are buried, the lot will be cut in half. If a pet and a person are buried, the pet will go in the ground below where the headstone for the person will be.

Derek and I will be together, with a bronze marker with both our pictures on it. I realize bronze sounds expensive for animals, but we're going to have "good, better, best" available, and people also will be allowed to use flat granite markers.

Why did you attach the pet funeral home to the cemetery office?

We were going to build it where the pet cemetery is, but then we realized we'd need two staffs. We did hire people for the pet funeral home, but if they're out picking up an animal, it's easier for the cemetery staff to cover for them.

When we started building it, we brought Coleen out here and she looked through

PETS & PEOPLE COMBO



Tom Flynn calls pet funeral home manager Roberta Knauf the "soul" of the operation. At her feet is Nika.

the drawings. She would say, "No, you don't want to put that there, you want to put it here." She was wonderful. My son understands the funeral home business, and I understand the cemetery business, but neither one of us knew anything about pet services.

Then I approached Roberta Knauf, a local woman I knew because she's a puppy raiser for the organization that Derek came from. She had been in the kennel business, in retail and was a renowned dog trainer.

I talked to her and asked for advice. She said, "Tom, they're not pets, they're companions."

She and Coleen are "pet parents." In the era I grew up in, pets were looked at differently. Derek has opened my eyes; I'm a convert to the pet parent group, though I'd never heard that terminology until Coleen used it.

I asked Roberta if she knew anyone I could hire to run the pet funeral home, and she said, "What's wrong with me? I'd love to do it." We've also hired another person to handle at-need and preneed.

Roberta brings her therapy dog, Nika, to work, and she and Derek get along great. It's wonderful; they play together. Nika has filled in when Derek was traveling with me and someone wanted him at a funeral service. Everything's come together so well; it's been a blessed project.

Is your son involved in the pet funeral home as well as the human one?

My son oversees the pet funeral home. He's the one who's been pushing me to keep moving forward on everything. Yesterday he and Roberta made presentations to five veterinary clinics.

You know, I thought he was going to go into the cemetery business with me, but he announced 15 years ago he was going to be a funeral director, and he went off to mortuary school.

When we built the funeral home in 1995, we were coming into a market where some of our competition had been there more than 100 years. He is now the second busiest funeral director out of 10 in the area.

You've come a long way in a short time.

You mean from the cemetery business to the human funeral home and now into pet services? You're really driven to do this if you want to stay in business.

When I make a decision, I think of my grandchildren. I think about whether I will have a viable business for them to become involved in, if they so choose after they get a world-class education.

That thought drives me. Even though we're moving up in market share, the funeral home could be a struggle over time, and unless we did something, the cemetery would likewise struggle.

Our cemetery dominates in our market—we have 25 percent of the market in a county that used to have 140 cemeteries. Forty are still operating; three have backhoes. The market is so fractionized that even if you're the king, you're struggling.

All these changes are being driven by cremation, as well as the fact that the margins of funeral homes and cemeteries are decreasing, and decreasing rapidly. If when I bought my cemetery 30 years ago I had been able to see today's numbers, I wouldn't have gotten into the business.

Funeral directors are worried about cremation too, but I've had funeral directors tell me, "At least I don't own a cemetery."

True, very true. I've been at conventions where I've heard speakers say maybe one out of four cremations ends up buried in a cemetery.

I'm a first-generation cemetarian; I came from public accounting, so I look at everything a different way. With our cemetery in Hermitage, it takes 200 burials plus the



A viewing room next to the crematory. Window treatments have been added, Flynn said, so that the window can be covered when families don't wish to see the retort area.



Nika in a room set up for viewing. Knauf's late black Labrador, McKenzie, is the model for many of the paintings of black Labs in the pet funeral home.



Above, a sitting area in the pet funeral home. Left, caskets, urns, picture frames, mementos, blankets—anything you can get for a human you can pretty much expect to find available for your pet.

resulting fees and sales for us to break even, to pay our employees, utilities and other costs. We get 250 now. As that starts to go down, as we get closer to 200, we're marginal. If we drop below it, we're losing money.

That's what cemeteries are facing, the same with funeral homes. If a funeral home has to have X funerals per year to break even, as full funerals turn into direct cremation at a quarter or a third of the price, depending on services and merchandise, profits drop. I've read that 10 years ago funeral directors were taking between 10 and 14 percent of the gross to the bottom line and now they're at 4 percent. Just wait another 10 years.

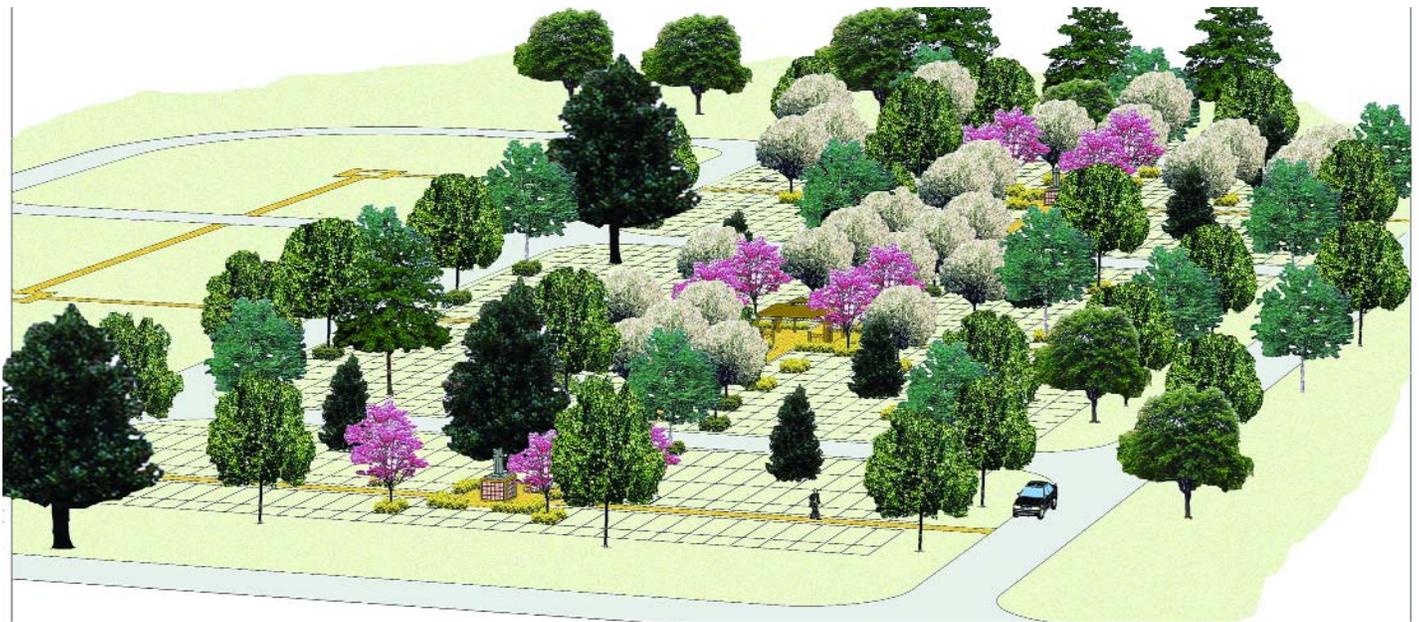
This is dead men walking. In the decade our funeral home has been open, the number of funeral homes in the area has gone from 14 to 10. Of those, three are making money. If you're doing 20 funerals a year,



The crematory area at the Hillcrest-Flynn Pet Funeral Home & Crematory.

how can you make any money? The only thing you can do is increase prices, and that's one of the reasons cremation is becoming so popular, because funerals are so darn expensive.

So funeral directors who are increasing prices to compensate for the loss of revenue from people choosing cremation are basi-



An aerial view of the cemetery section designed by Grever & Ward for Hillcrest Memorial Park. Where the land abuts the existing cemetery, people can be buried with their pets. At the front of the photo, along the street, are spaces for pet-only burials.

cally driving themselves out of business.

How does the pet business help?

If we do a good job with Trixie, her owners know we'll do a good job with them.

I was going to use the slogan, "We treat pets like people." Roberta and John changed it to "We treat pets like family." And that's it. If we treat pets like family, a certain percentage of their owners will think about our human funeral home and cemetery when the time comes.

And one thing about pets is that the average person has seven or eight pets over a lifetime, so they'll be exposed to our services more often.

Children have pets, so some people will be exposed to funeral service at a younger age, also.

You're absolutely right. For most children, that's their first experience with death. Roberta's talked about being in the pet store business and getting frantic phone calls from parents because the gerbil died and they wanted a white gerbil with a brown paw so they could substitute it and the kid wouldn't know the difference. Here you can bring the animal in, we'll help you get through it. We have books for children on dealing with grief, and we're offering grief therapy for people who have lost pets.

Will you be adding a pet business at the cemetery you own in Illinois?

I don't have the land, but maybe someday my son will.

What I'm anticipating right now is that other funeral directors in our community will be getting into pet services. I predict it will happen within two years. We had the first crematory, and then three years later the guy who's No. 1 in the market got into the cremation business.

I'm sure they're making fun of us right now. "Oh, you don't want to go to Hillcrest; they might be cooking pets while you're up there," the usual derogatory stuff. But it will be like the crematory—you have to face it.

So we're working on branding, and we're not sticking to our local market of roughly 100,000 people. We're equidistant from Pittsburgh and Erie, Pennsylvania; and Cleveland, Ohio. Each is about 75 miles away, and Roberta said she drew from all three in her kennel business. The first person who came in to the pet funeral home was from Pittsburgh.

We were going to call it the Flynn Pet Funeral Home & Crematory. Then Roberta said, no, it should be Hillcrest-Flynn, because we're on Hillcrest property and because of the flags more people know about the cemetery than the funeral home.

The other funeral directors can cremate, but that's as far as they can go. How fancy an urn can you sell somebody? We have a cemetery.

I'm also going to have the pet equivalent of CelebrateALife.com, our company's online memorial site, established 10 years ago. You'll be able to memorialize your pet at CelebrateAPet.com.

Two-thirds of homes have a pet. So instead of dealing with 25 percent of the market (our cemetery's share) or 20 percent of the market (our funeral home's share), we're dealing with 66 percent of the market, because we're the only ones doing it. That's a huge door-opener.

One day during a staff meeting, Roberta kept leaving every time she heard the front door open. She was expecting someone to drop off a pet. Finally a 9-year-old girl brought in a shoebox; inside were a guinea pig and a carnation.

She came back after school with her mom and they had a little wake. Her mom commented that they would probably be going through this again soon for their 14-year-old dog, and Roberta told her they could get a grave for the dog, and the guinea pig could go in there, too, and later other animals.

The woman bought the dog's grave preneed and we buried the guinea pig. She prepaid the dog's casket-vault combination and opening and closing fees.

So a guinea pig brought in by a 9-year-old turned out to be a sale worth several hundred dollars, and that's before any markers they might get.

We are businesspeople, after all, or we're supposed to be. I hear funeral directors say, "These are my families," and then they bury dad, and a week later mom's made her arrangements with us.

So many people whose families have been in the business for generations are

afraid to try something new. Now all of a sudden everybody's afraid of losing money, and they're waking up. It's almost panic mode.

But anything you get into, you'd better bring a passion to it. When John and I started into the pet area, we weren't true believers; we were like everybody else. Coleen and Roberta are kindred spirits. When I saw what Coleen had, I started becoming a true believer, but Roberta is the soul of our pet services.

Funeral homes and cemeteries that want to get in on this and do it on the cheap or without a passion for animals are going to fail.

We expect it to take two or three years for the pet funeral home to break even, but where it's really going to pay off is in how it reflects back on our human funeral home and on the cemetery. That's how we're going to make it, in the long term. And that's what this business is about, positioning yourself long-term. □

Pet cemetery plans to accept people, too

When Rolling Acres Memorial Gardens in Kansas City, Missouri, joined the ICCFA, it had to join as a supplier member, said owner and president Nancy Piper, because it didn't fit in any other category.

Why? Because it's an endowment care cemetery for cats, dogs, gerbils, snakes and anything else someone might keep as a pet. The ICCFA bylaws specify that regular members are companies providing services and products relating to "human remains."

Now, Piper wants to get back into the business of burying people. In the pet cemetery. She started out in the human side of the business, but decades ago this animal lover bought a pet cemetery in her hometown and never looked back.

She has 13 acres, which may be on the small side for a human cemetery, "but when you're burying pets, that's a lot," Piper said.

She has a special-use permit to run the pet cemetery and has applied for one to allow human burials. Why? For the same reason people who run human cemeteries are getting into the business of accepting pets: consumer demand. □



Rolling Acres Memorial Gardens, a pet cemetery in Kansas City, Missouri, that plans to allow people to be buried there with their pets.

"People who have pets here have asked if they can be buried next to their pets, so I thought, why not?" Piper said. "I want to be here with *my* kids. It's pretty and peaceful."

She and husband Gary include photos of themselves, the entire cemetery staff and the "pet staff" on their Web site. "We have six cats and three dogs in the office," she said.

For more about her cemetery, go to www.visitrollingacres.com. Piper can be reached at 816.891.8888 or via e-mail at nancy.piper@birch.net. □