

Ashes to ashes: cemeteries see rising demand

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The Kelly family has been in Bedford since 1680, the maternal side of Ed Kelly's family since the 1640s. Cemeteries and their upkeep have been a family endeavor longer than he can recall, though Kelly does know that his grandfather served as president of the Bedford Union Cemetery Association before he did.

Kelly is president of William A. Kelly & Co. in Katonah, a general construction business started by his father in 1933. While the company has built schools, churches, industrial buildings, condos and townhouses, it recently enhanced its broad portfolio with the completion of a 3,000-crypt mausoleum addition at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

The building, concrete with a granite veneer, was designed with skylights, fountains, reflecting pools and sculptures. The mausoleum expansion is tied to a surge in demand for cremation, especially in this area.

"Demand is rising fast," said David Ison, sales and marketing director at Woodlawn Cemetery. "It's up 60 to 70 percent in the New York City area, and 30 percent in the U.S." Of the 3000 new crypts at Woodlawn, half were presales, Ison said, sold over the past seven years before and during the \$7 million construction project.

Kelly's company finished the mausoleum addition in January after two years of work. The expanded mausoleum has space for 5,000 crypts. Those prime spaces for eternal rest sell for \$8,000 and up.

"There is an interesting envelope of light and space in here," Kelly said, gazing up through a skylight in the mausoleum. "It's so much more attractive than outdoor burial and

environmentally friendly too."

The economy has played a part too in the jump in cremations. In-ground burial plots in Westchester cost between \$2,500 and \$4,500. Then there's \$2,000 more to excavate the grave, and the purchase of a concrete vault in which to put the casket, for \$900 to \$3,000.

For cremated remains, a private wall niche in a mausoleum is priced at \$2,400 to \$5,000.

For clients choosing cremation, there are options. At Woodlawn, cremated remains can be placed inside rocks that flank a hillside brook. Cylindrical spaces are cut out of the rocks and identifying plaques cover the insert-



ed remains. A nearby stone wall on the hill also holds cremated remains.

Woodlawn also has a community mausoleum, where remains are left in a large stone receptacle and plaques identifying the deceased hang on a wall behind it. That option costs \$500.

"That brook thing," said Kelly, "I might think about that for Bedford. My cemetery is running out of space, but probably not for 30 to 40 years. We're just a little rural

cemetery, maybe 15 burials a year. This business doesn't stop, though, regardless of recession."

What can happen in a recession, he said, "is that cemeteries that didn't save money, and can't maintain all their gravesites, are taken over by the state. When you buy a gravesite, half of the money goes into a fund for maintenance."

Gravesites must be maintained forever, "and forever is a long, long time," said Chet Day, president of Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, which, at 460 acres, is larger than Woodlawn. "Cemetery plots must be maintained, so the cemetery must make sure it is getting enough for each plot."

Cemeteries are not money-making enterprises, said Day. "People who buy the lots own the cemeteries. We're membership corporations. That applies to all non-sectarian cemeteries."

Westchester still has land available for full-casket burials in several large cemeteries, although New York and other urban areas are running short of space. "At Kensico we have enough property for another 100 years," Day said, "but our community mausoleum, in which a space for a full casket was \$5,000, sold out 25 years ago."

Day said cemetery land is recession-proof for a very fundamental reason – supply and demand. "As supply dwindles, demand rises, and prices go up," he said.

Mausoleums extend the lives of cemeteries. "For every one or two people buried in the ground," Kelly said, "about three and a half times the number of graves can be placed in a mausoleum."



Ed Kelly, president of William A. Kelly & Co. in Katonah, built the 3,000-crypt addition to the mausoleum.