

# MEMORIALIZATION

By Patti Martin Bartsche

## INNOVATION in the Cemetery

### *What do families want?*

It's a question Jeanne Clark has asked herself numerous times since becoming general manager of Ivy Lawn Memorial Park in Ventura, California, in 2010.

For Clark, the decision to take the job was an easy one. Although she didn't come from a death-care background, she was impressed with the 60-acre cemetery's operations.

"Ivy Lawn is a nonprofit and what I immediately noticed and appreciated was how it interacted with families," she said. "You can spend a lot of money here or

spend almost nothing, and everyone is treated equally. There's something to be said for respecting every person, no matter how they died or how much they spent. The respect for the dead and their families has always been what's important at Ivy Lawn."

#### THE EARLY YEARS

In the spring of 1913 prominent community leaders gathered to bring a "modern, endowed, and perpetually cared for" cemetery to Ventura County that would welcome families of all races

and denominations.

A year later, the leaders acquired the necessary land, and in 1917 created a nonprofit corporation to operate and maintain the cemetery so families would be assured their loved ones were forever respected and safeguarded.

As the first lawn park cemetery in Ventura County, Ivy Lawn was specifically designed to serve the needs of both Ventura and Oxnard. The large expansive grassy areas, the circulation patterns of winding roads, the landscape, the monuments and family mausoleums are







elements of the character of the cemetery.

Ivy Lawn combines history and tradition with an ongoing commitment to provide comfort for families in their time of need. Unlike other cemeteries in the county that operate for profit or require family members to maintain graves, Ivy Lawn was envisioned by its founders as a public service rather than a business venture, to ensure its perpetual care.

### **A HISTORIC DESIGNATION**

In 2012, Ivy Lawn was designated the only historic district cemetery in Ventura

**THE BEAUTIFUL TREE OF LIFE MOSAIC NICHE FRONT COLUMBARIUM IS A RECENT ADDITION TO IVY LAWN MEMORIAL PARK IN VENTURA, CALIFORNIA.  
(PHOTO COURTESY OF KMI COLUMBARIA)**

County because of its rich heritage that “derives its primary significance from graves of persons of transcendent importance, from age, from distinctive design features, and from association with historic events.”

The cemetery is the final resting place of some of the region’s most important individuals, military veterans and families

of the 19th- and 20th-century, including U.S. Sen. Thomas R. Bard, who built Port Hueneme and sponsored a young George Patton for West Point; actress Ethel Clayton, who began her film career in 1909 with the movie “Justified” and would go to appear in 146 additional movies; NFL Hall of Famer and sports commentator Frank Gifford; and





Alexander Sarantos Tremulis, who held automotive design positions at Cord Automobile, Duesenberg, General Motors, Tucker Car Corp. and Ford Motor Co. He was inducted into the Automotive Hall of Fame in 1982.

Ivy Lawn is also the final resting place for victims of the second greatest loss of life in one event in California history. It was in the early morning hours of March 13, 1928, that the recently constructed St. Francis Dam failed. Floodwater swept through the Santa Clara River Valley of

Los Angeles and Ventura counties, with close to 400 people (although some estimates have the death toll closer to 500) losing their lives. Many of those killed that day are buried in a mass grave on the grounds of the cemetery.

### MEETING NEEDS

Since its founding, Ivy Lawn has made it its mission to combine history and tradition with an ongoing commitment to comfort families in their time of need. Increasingly, meeting families' needs has

meant focusing on cremation options.

"When I first came to Ivy Lawn, one of the first things I learned was this industry is slow to change," Clark said. "It was very traditional, and the approach to development was very standard."

But as Clark started talking to the public, she quickly realized that "if you listen to what they're telling you, you'll understand what you need to do, because they'll tell you what they want."

The message Clark heard was a simple one: We want more cremation options.

Over the last 12-plus years, that's exactly what she has strived to do.

"I think because I came from outside the industry, it has been a little easier for me," she said. "What's important with everything we do is to make sure that what we design is creative, attractive and meets the needs of families."

And even within a family, those needs may differ.

"Maybe you have a set of parents and one child and they all want to be together in same area but one wants to be buried, one wants to be cremated and one wants something else," Clark said. "How are you going to meet their needs?"

With a cremation rate hovering around 65%, Clark knew she needed to do something ... and fast.

Early on, Clark enlisted the expertise of KMI Columbaria.

The cemetery needed cremation inventory, and while typical niche walls would be part of the mix, Clark also wanted something different, something unique.

Over the years, KMI has delivered just that, including:

- A niche wall with window cut out and inlay plaques. The wall has a window cut out and stone plaques that are inlay flush in the niche front.
- A lighthouse columbarium, representing a coastal community with a storied history.
- A mission-themed niche wall to honor the legacy of the California missions, features arches and a bell.
- A Tree of Life mosaic niche, which represents a tree of life and the history and legacy of Ivy Lawn Memorial Park.
- A pet-themed columbarium that provides options for families of pets.

Each of the projects, Clark said, has been in response to what she has garnered from feedback and what she





**OPPOSITE PAGE: LOCATED IN VENTURA, CALIFORNIA, IVY LAWN MEMORIAL PARK'S LIGHTHOUSE-THEMED COLUMBARIUM REPRESENTS A COASTAL COMMUNITY WITH A STORIED HISTORY. ABOVE: THIS NICHE WALL HAS A WINDOW CUT OUT AND STONE PLAQUES THAT ARE INLAY FLUSH IN THE NICHE FRONT. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF KMI COLUMBARIA)**

sees as innovative projects that meet the needs of cremation families.

While a lighthouse columbarium might seem more at home in a cemetery on the East Coast, Clark knew immediately that it belonged at Ivy Lawn.

"It's a focus point in the cemetery ... you may not find many lighthouses on the West Coast, but it really connects to our community," she said.

Mark Heddy, sales manager for KMI Columbaria, acknowledged that the lighthouse was originally designed for a more East Coast application. "But Jeanne comes from the East Coast, and Ventura is a coastal town, and when I showed the design to her, she loved it. I think her words were 'I want it, build it.'"

It's that type of forward thinking that resonates with families.

"I think we have to get out of our own way sometimes," Clark said. "We must find ways to get families, especially cremation

families, into our cemetery. If we do not have anything special to offer or a reason to come, they are just not going to come."

"Something special" might just be the perfect descriptor for Ivy Lawn's Tree of Life mosaic front niche.

"It's meant to be a piece of art, something beautiful to look at," Clark explained. "People tracing their genealogy, learning their family history, often say they're creating a tree of life ... so that became the inspiration."

And while the niches are built into the mosaic, they're not the first thing people see, Clark added. "What they see is a piece of artwork that they connect to, that has meaning to them," she said.

Near the mosaic is an area reserved for ground burials. "For people who want a traditional burial, this option is acknowledgment that the tree of life extends to the grounds, and those roots are important, too."

Not being constrained by a "this is the way we're always done things" mentality has allowed Clark to think out-of-the-box and reimagine cremation offerings.

A case in point is the recently completed themed niche in the pet memorial garden.

When Clark learned that there were only seven pet cemeteries in California, she couldn't believe it. "That's when I told our board that we needed to take care of the pet parents," she said. "Not everybody has traditional families, and why are we not giving them (pet parents) the respect and the connection that they need. So here we are ... and that's exactly what we're doing."

The columbaria, which features a doghouse image on the front niches, feels warm and welcoming, and it is not something Clark has seen before.

"Our focus for the next five years is to pay attention to the pets equally as the





**THEMED TO HONOR THE LEGACY OF THE CALIFORNIA MISSIONS, THIS MISSION-THEME NICHE WALL FEATURES ARCHES AND A BELL. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF KMI COLUMBARIA)**

humans,” she said. “Hopefully it makes you smile and helps pet parents have that connection they want – and need.”

Working with KMI, Ivy Lawn now also offers niche pedestals and benches throughout its grounds. The difference, Heddy pointed out, is a new take on an old design.

“The old style of pedestal was a solid piece of granite with core holes for cremated remains with a granite sculptured top that needed to be removed to access,” he explained. “This new design is niches with a typical front niche opening which means the top sculpture never needs to be removed.”

In an industry that doesn’t always embrace change, Clark is proud that Ivy Lawn is a disrupter.

“I’m proud we’ve listened to families, have been able to provide them with what they want and need and have been innovative in our choices,” she said. “We’ve been able to help families memorialize loved ones in a way that makes sense for them.” •

