

DESIGN

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Making A Difference

In a world where so many columbaria and niches looked alike, KMI Columbaria has prided itself on being different.

“There was a time where there wasn’t much as far as creativity or options,” KMI Columbaria sales manager Mark Heddy said. “A columbarium was a double-sided rectangle or octagon, or a structure that had niches along a wall.”

Most often, Heddy added, a cemetery would purchase a columbarium and just place it somewhere – anywhere – on the grounds. “There just wasn’t much thought given to it,” he said.

In an industry slow to change, KMI Columbaria would make a big impact.

THE EARLY YEARS

KMI Columbaria traces its roots back to 1999, when the Canadian-based company began looking for a better columbarium product. As the

company’s owner had discovered, there weren’t many options available.

So, the company designed and developed their own concept, using aluminum instead of the precast concrete or all granite.

This new technology would prove to be a game-changer.

The marine-grade aluminum used to support the internal structure is engineered to support 1,700 pounds per square foot, allowing it to hold the weight of the granite roof as well as a statue or decorative piece mounted on top of it.

In addition, one of the main differences with using the aluminum is that the walls between each niche are thinner than the precast or granite alternatives.

Why is this important? Heddy explains: “What that means is a lot of times you can get more niches in an area because you’re gaining inches. Let’s say you’re doing a long wall ... you’ll definitely get more niches in, which means more revenue.”

Although based in Canada, KMI’s concept quickly caught on in the United States, and the company grew quickly.

The rapid growth was also met with some growing pains, and KMI turned to California-based Honor Life, a high-volume wholesale monument company in Southern California in 2015 for help.

“They were looking for someone who could do their manufacturing in the state so they didn’t have to ship from Canada,” said Heddy, who was with Honor Life at the time. “So, we started doing their



manufacturing here in the U.S., and for about five years that's what we did ... the fabrications and installations."

In 2019, the then-owner of KMI indicated that she was interested in retiring. For Honor Life, the acquisition of KMI Columbaria made perfect sense.

"It was kind of a natural fit for us to take the company and run with it," Heddy said. "So, in 2020, Honor Life became the new owner of KMI Columbaria."

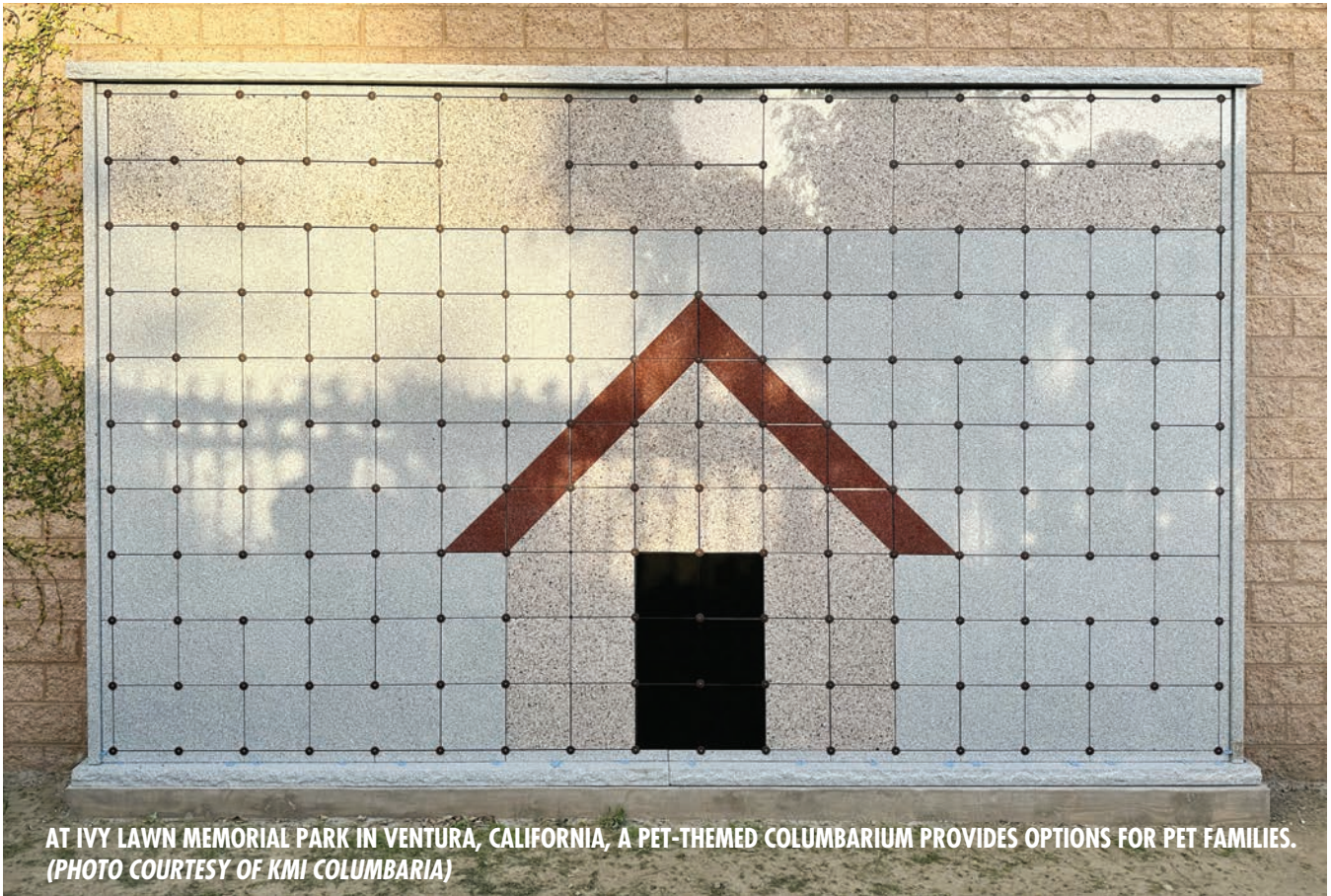
Even before taking ownership, Honor Life began changing and improving on the structural manufacturing of the KMI niches, Heddy explained. Many of those changes were internal, and not visible to cemeteries or families.

Others changes, though, were made for aesthetic reasons.

"One of the main aesthetic things is the spacing of the niche doors," Heddy explained. "With any niche or columbarium structure there's hardware that holds the niche door in place and there's an adjustment that happens over time with movement taking them (the niche door) on and off a lot of times. Those lines in-between each niche door gets a little off center and you can see it.



TOP: KMI COLUMBARIA IS THE PIONEER OF THE MAINTENANCE-FREE ALUMINUM COLUMBARIA. BY USING ALUMINUM, THE WALLS BETWEEN EACH NICHE ARE THINNER, ALLOWING MORE INVENTORY TO BE DESIGNED WITH THE WALL. ABOVE: KMI COLUMBARIA'S FRONT NICHE-OPENING PEDESTALS AND BENCHES REMOVES THE NECESSITY FOR THE TOP TO BE REMOVED. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF KMI COLUMBARIA)



AT IVY LAWN MEMORIAL PARK IN VENTURA, CALIFORNIA, A PET-THEMED COLUMBARIUM PROVIDES OPTIONS FOR PET FAMILIES. (PHOTO COURTESY OF KMI COLUMBARIA)

“We fixed that problem by putting in spacers into the structure itself so now there’s a spacer in-between each niche on the top and bottom and both sides so now that niche door is going to be perfectly precisely in place forever,” he added. “You’re going to have straight lines in between each niche, and that’s a big deal aesthetically because if you go to any cemetery and look at a niche wall or columbarium the lines are all over the place, and this solves that problem.”

MOVING FORWARD

In today’s cremation landscape, there is almost nothing more important than meeting the needs of families.

KMI’s patented technology is based on modularization, which allows for high quality customization – with a focus on appearance, longevity, security and ease of operation, as well as providing a clean and dry niche environment for the long term.

It’s important to note, Heddy said, that a KMI columbarium is built from non-deteriorating materials – no concrete, concrete materials, plastics or corrosive material. Whatever the climate and weather, the

product minimizes maintenance costs.

“KMI provides a 25-year guarantee, but I like to say that our columbaria will last for generations,” Heddy said. For cemeteries who are looking to provide families with a quality product but also be conscious of their bottom line, this is a plus, he added.

While granite is still a popular choice for columbaria, it may not work for everyone’s design, tastes or geography. “Because our structure does not require the facings for strength or support, clients can choose other types of materials,” Heddy said. “In the past, we have used brick, fieldstone, marble and even wood.”

RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING

It wasn’t all that many years that if a cemetery was to install a columbarium, that it was placed wherever there was space.

“It wasn’t intentional design; it was more, ‘I got some space over there I’ll put it there’ kind of thing,” Heddy said. “Now, with cremation getting so big, and the percentage of people choosing cremation, some cemeteries are actually serving more cremation families and they don’t want to be put in a back corner.”

And responding to those needs – both

from families and cemeteries – is what sets KMI apart from the competition.

With a design team on staff, KMI can create a structure in almost any configuration a cemetery can imagine. In addition, the company’s design team can work with a cemetery to design one-of-a-kind projects that will resonate with families.

“And that’s really what it’s all about, understanding what cremation families want and coming up with attractive options to meet those needs,” Heddy said. “Cremation families are not one-size-fits-all, so it’s really important for a cemetery to listen to the wants of their customers and be innovative to meet those needs.”

That’s exactly the situation where Jeanne Clark, general manager of Ivy Lawn Memorial Park in Ventura, California, found herself in.

With only seven pet cemeteries in the state, Clark saw an opportunity to take care of pet families. “Not everybody has traditional families. Why not give them the respect that they need and the connection that they need?” she said.

In talking with the design team at KMI, the idea of a niche wall was talked about. “When the team showed me the idea, my



A CUSTOMIZED GARDEN NICHE PEDESTAL PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO CELEBRATE THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF A LOVED ONE. (PHOTO COURTESY OF KMI COLUMBARIA)

first thought was how creative it was, how unique it is,” Clark said.

Located in Ivy Lawn’s pet memorial garden, the niche wall project incorporates the image of a dog house in the design. “I feel warm and welcoming and it’s not something that I’ve seen before,” Clark said. “I can only imagine as a pet parent, going out there and seeing that design and saying, ‘they get it.’”

“Getting it” is where KMI excels.

“We’re not just the columbarium company, we design and build,” Heddy said. “We can design an entire cremation garden with multiple options, we can do columbaria niches to ground burials to private estates for cremation families. We’re meeting the needs of today ... and the future.”

THE POWER OF PERMANENT MEMORIALIZATION

In 2022, the Cremation Association of North America engaged The Harris Poll to survey U.S. and Canadian consumers directly about their preference for cremation, how many cremated remains are in households, what they plan to do with the remains, and more.

Highlighting the results of the research, CANA found that 26% of U.S. households and 20% of Canadian households have cremated remains of their human loved ones at home. On average, these households have held on to them for more than 6.5 years, and many do not have firm plans on what to do with them next.

This information, Heddy said, provides cemeteries to have open and honest

discussions with cremation families about permanent memorialization ... something that might not have happened in the past.

“When cremation first started, it was considered a cheap option,” Heddy said, “and cemeteries were more focused on ground burial families. But as cremation gained in popularity, cemeteries realized they were losing revenue and needed to somehow connect with cremation families to explain the value of permanent placement.”

For many families, it’s just too easy to take the urn with cremated remains home,

and put it on a mantel or a closet. The problem with that, Heddy pointed out, is that beyond any revenue a cemetery may be losing, there is no place for friends or family of the deceased to visit and see the memorialization of that person.

“There’s no really no memory of that person anywhere,” he said. “I mean, if you think about it with a ground burial you have the headstone, and I would argue that headstone is the most important part of the whole process because once the burial’s done, once the funeral is over and three years from now the only thing you have left, other than your personal memories, is that headstone to mark the place where the person is but also tell something about who they were.

“People who have been cremated deserve the same thing. They need to be memorialized and remembered; their memory needs to be celebrated,” Heddy added.

While some cemeteries are doing well with communicating the need for permanent placement or memorialization, there is still a long way to go.

“Just by the sheer volume of columbaria and niches we are producing we know the message is getting out,” Heddy said. “But that conversation isn’t happening everywhere ... and as an industry we need to do better in communicating the value that permanent memorialization – whether it’s in a niche, scattering garden or something else – provides.” •



THIS NICHE PEDESTAL BY KMI COLUMBARIA FEATURES INTERTWINED LOVE BIRDS. (PHOTO COURTESY OF KMI COLUMBARIA)