

# Philadelphia

## Owner seeks to educate about crematories

*Bodies found at a Ga. site have drawn attention to cremation. Many facilities encourage visits before making arrangements.*

By Joseph A. Gambardello

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Just off Cottman Avenue in Northeast Philadelphia, in a building on a block of small factories, ashes return to ashes and dust to dust, all in about 2.5 hours.

This is the home of Philadelphia Crematories Inc., and it is, by all measures, a model operation in an industry under new scrutiny since hundreds of bodies were found at the Noble, Ga., property where they had been taken for cremation.

But even with more and more people choosing cremation, few actually check out the facility where they- or a loved one - will be taken to have their human remains reduced to ashes.

Bill Sucharski, the owner of Philadelphia Crematories, wishes it were otherwise.

"People should educate themselves," he said. "We want people to be aware where this all takes place."

An informal survey of five other major crematories in the area - most of them members of the Cremation Association of North America - found that, like Sucharski, the ywelcome visits from people considering cremation or planning final arrangements for a loved one.

The growth in cremation reflects a range of social factors, including Americans' rootlessness, environmental considerations and even changing religious views. For example, Catholics, who were barred from cremation until Canon Law was changed in 1983, now make up a quarter of those cremated in the nation annually.

Cremations are performed by different providers in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Some deal directly with the public, such as funeral homes and cremation societies. Others are sub-contractors who provide the services for funeral directors. Some cemeteries, such as Ivy Hill in such as Ivy Hill in Philadelphia and Harleigh in Camden, also operate crematories.

Tri-State, the crematorium at the center of the still unfolding nightmare in Georgia, was a subcontractor that was supposed to handle cremations for funeral directors.

Among the major subcontractors in the Philadelphia area is Sucharski, who published an article in an industry magazine in

1998 aimed at preventing a Tri-State disaster.

In it, he advised funeral directors to stage and document surprise inspections of the crematories with which they did business because of potential liability.

Funeral directors "need to insure to their families that they're doing right by them," said Sucharski, whose firm does about 2,000 cremations annually.

And, he said, "People should take it upon themselves, if they are considering cremation, to investigate, to talk to the funeral director, to ask if they can come and see the crematory he uses. If there is any hesitation, then there is something that's not right."

Not everyone goes to the trouble, but William Eastburn said his mother, Jean, did when his father, William R., died in January 2000.

She visited Philadelphia Crematories on a recommendation and chose the facility, William Eastburn said.

The next year, William Eastburn found himself in the same role when Jean Eastburn died.

He said Sucharski explained the cremation process and made his family feel at ease.

"Everything was tastefully done," he said.

Roberta Bash of Downingtown also did some research before her husband, Brian, 54, died of brain cancer Feb. 9.

"Our feeling was ashes to ashes, dust to dust," Bash said of their decision for cremation.

After reading brochures and talking to their minister, Bash and her husband pre-arranged his funeral through the Pennsylvania Cremation Society, which has a facility in King of Prussia.

She did not visit the crematory, but she said her dealings with the society were professional and reassuring.

"I think people do need to plan ahead," she said.

Still, Bash said, the Georgia case had unnerved her a bit and that she now planned to do something she had not considered doing before when she picks up her husband's ashes.

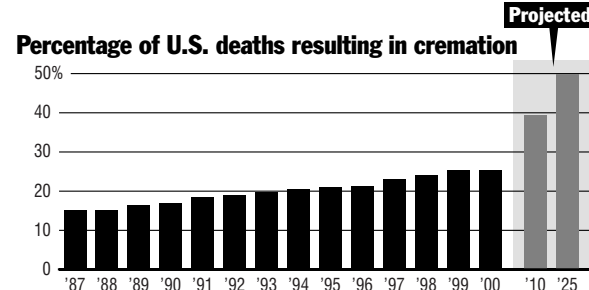
"Now I have to look in the container, because I want to be sure," she said.

Joseph Gambardello's e-mail is [jgambardello@phillynews.com](mailto:jgambardello@phillynews.com).

### Cremation Trends

#### Top 10 states by number of cremations in 2000

State	Percent of deaths resulting in cremations	Total cremations
California	43.6%	108,617
Florida	44.1%	72,477
New York	19.0%	31,998
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	<b>19.1%</b>	<b>25,511</b>
Washington	55.3%	24,731
Michigan	27.7%	24,202
Arizona	53.8%	22,299
Texas	14.9%	21,859
Ohio	19.0%	21,248
<b>New Jersey</b>	<b>23.9%</b>	<b>18,802</b>



### Inside a Crematory

#### Cremation process



■ The body arrives in a combustible casket or is placed into a suitable container after pacemakers, prostheses or other noncombustible materials are removed.

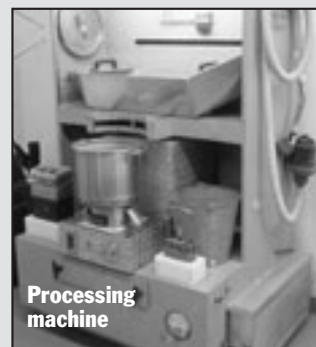
#### Observation room



■ Interested parties may view from a windowed room as the casket or container is placed into the cremation chamber.



■ The container is exposed to 1,800-degree heat over a 1.5- to 3-hour period, depending on size and weight of the contents. Generally, all substances are consumed except bone fragments.



■ After a cooling period, the ash remains are separated from any previously undetected, noncombustible materials.

■ Bone fragments are processed to create smaller, uniform fragments and then are combined with the ashes. The final remains weigh between 3 to 9 pounds and are usually white in color.

#### After cremation



■ Remains are placed in a receptacle or urn. They may be kept, buried in a cemetery plot or scattered. Remains may be scattered at least three miles out at sea, on private property or at a cemetery with permission.

SOURCES: The Cremation Association of North America; Philadelphia Crematories Inc.



APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer  
**Jay McGee packages remains at Phila. Crematories Inc.** Bodies are burned to ashes and dust in less than 3 hours.