


Cremation

By Patti Martin Bartsche



Striving for Cremation Excellence *in Philadelphia*

As the son of a funeral director, there was little question William Sucharski would find his way into the funeral profession. The only question was what would he do?

“I grew up in a row house funeral home in Philadelphia,” Sucharski said. “I got to know a lot of funeral directors too, and I knew that I wanted to go into funeral service.”

So Sucharski went to mortuary school and found a job as a funeral director. But after working at several area funeral homes in the Philadelphia area, Sucharski began looking for an opportunity to go into business for himself.

The year was 1991, and the cremation rate in the Philadelphia area was about 16 percent. “Cremation wasn’t a big thing back then, but I saw it as a growth area,” Sucharski said. “The only other crematory for funeral direc-

tors to use was far away ... and it wasn’t high quality.”

Philadelphia Crematories Inc. opened its doors as a trade crematory service in 1991. From the beginning, Sucharski wanted to make sure Philadelphia Crematories was not only different, but also better.

“I thought I knew a lot about cremation, but I quickly realized that I didn’t,” Sucharski said. “I started going to Cremation Association of North America meetings and conventions and got a broader view of what the rest of the country was doing.”

He also learned that CANA provided model standards for cremation, including cremation authorization forms. The problem, at least to

Sucharski’s thinking, was not everyone in the industry was taking those standards seriously.

Sucharski promised himself that he would do better, and he went to work implementing policies and procedures that are now nationally recognized. Just as importantly, he has provided the families he serves – and the funeral directors who use his services – peace of mind.

That peace of mind was never more important than in the days, weeks and years after authorities – acting on a tip – discovered more than 300 bodies, in various stages of decomposition, scattered at the Tri-State Crematory property in Noble, Georgia, in February 2002.

In a case that resulted in national headlines, 334 bodies were found at the crematory, stacked in vaults, tossed in buildings, thrown in holes and cast into woods. Some were still inside their caskets; some had been lying out in the open for nearly five years.

The findings would disgust local police, haunt families and spark a national debate about the worth of the dead.

Police charged Ray Brent Marsh, who ran the family crematory business, with hundreds of felonies. In 2004, Marsh pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 12 years in prison; he was released in June 2016.

More than \$100 million was paid out in federal class-action lawsuits against Marsh and the funeral homes that had sent bodies to the crematory. State and local government spent nearly \$10 million on cleanup and recovery.

The incident cast a dark cloud over funeral service ... and crematory operators. From Sucharski's point of view, it was a totally preventable case. Four years earlier, he had penned an article in a trade publication advising funeral directors who used a third-party crematory to stage and document surprise inspections of the crematories with which they did business because of potential liability.

He also encouraged funeral homes to develop their own standards and procedures for cremation and to ensure that the crematories they use have written standards, policies and procedures in place.

"It's not enough for a funeral home to say that there are things in place ... families need to see it written down, to know exactly what's going to happen, where and how," he said.

That's why Philadelphia Crematories early on created a state-of-the-art facility that is designed to provide peace of mind to families who choose cremation.



A family gathers in the witnessing room. (Photo courtesy of Philadelphia Crematories)

Located in an industrial area of the city, Philadelphia Crematories offers a chapel for families wishing to have an identification viewing or a committal service, a private attendance room for those who wish to be present when the cremation begins or even during the entire cremation process, and an urn selection room where those interested can see and choose from new and varied types of cremation memorialization products and services.

"We welcome and encourage families to inspect our operation at any time, and educate themselves as to what we do here," Sucharski said. That same invitation is open to funeral directors who use the firm's services. "They can drop in any time ... we don't have anything to hide."

This commitment to excellence does come with a slightly higher price tag, Sucharski acknowledged. And Sucharski has lost some business as a small number of funeral directors opted to go with direct cremation competitors offering cheaper services.

"It is a little disappointing," said Sucharski, "because I don't think they are concerned with the quality

of cremation practices. What they're looking for is the best direct cremation price so they can be competitive."

To Sucharski's way of thinking, that's missing the point.

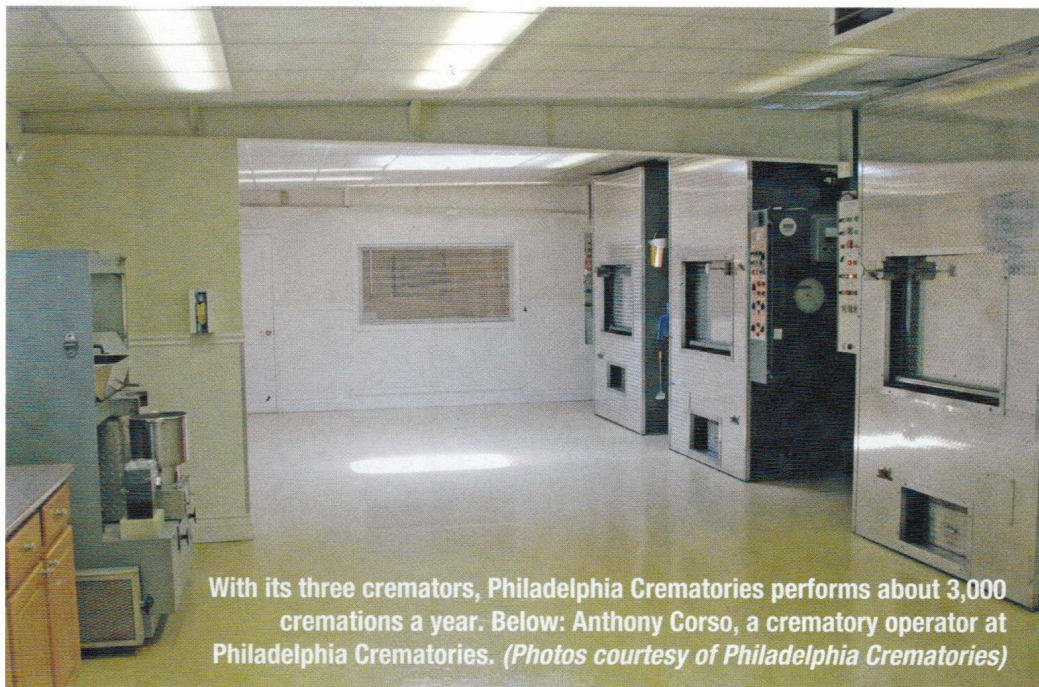
"There's no question that, for some people, price is the only thing to be considered," he said. "But in many cases, people don't know what they don't know about cremation. They need to be informed about their choices, they need to be educated about the process."

Sucharski, whose firm does about 3,000 cremations a year, knows from experience families are concerned about the quality of cremation processes. Families, he says, need to trust the funeral director and the cremation facility.

Transparency, he insists, is the key.

"In what we do, there should be nothing hidden from the family," Sucharski said. Unfortunately that is not always the case ... as the Tri-State Crematory case and others since then have shown.

"Every time there's a story in the news about the wrong body being cremated or cremated remains being lost, it calls into question



With its three cremators, Philadelphia Crematories performs about 3,000 cremations a year. Below: Anthony Corso, a crematory operator at Philadelphia Crematories. (Photos courtesy of Philadelphia Crematories)



how a loved one is being cared for,” he said.

What is important for cremation families to understand is that selecting a crematory is just as important as selecting a funeral home, Sucharski believes. In many cases, though, families don’t take an active role in choosing a crematory; they allow the funeral home to make that decision for them.

“In reality, consumers have the right and responsibility to actively select where and how the actual cremation of their loved one is performed,” he said. “One of the most important and irreversible decisions you will be making is where and how the actual cremation will take place.”

Sucharski is proud of Philadelphia Crematories’ open-door policy of transparency regarding the cremation process. “Our ultimate goal is to help a family achieve a confident feeling of satisfaction and validation regarding its selection of cremation and the multitude of options that go along with it,” he said.

Increasingly that means having families come to the crematory for a final goodbye, to push the button to start the cremation or to sit and read a book during the cremation process and then take the cremated remains home. “I think families want to be close to that loved one,” Sucharski said. “They want that final goodbye.”

Families that don’t want to tour the facility or come to say goodbye have the option of going to Philadelphia Crematories’ robust website, which provides a bounty of information for consumers. Whether it’s providing a brief history of cremation, answering frequently asked questions, showing pictures of the crematory or providing a link to download a cremation authorization form, families can get a sense of where their loved one will be taken care of.

“More than anything else, it gives them peace of mind,” Sucharski said. “And for many families, that peace of mind is priceless.”

The standards to which Philadelphia Crematories holds itself can also benefit funeral homes. “I think if a funeral director can say, ‘We use

Philadelphia Crematories and this is why' and send them to the website or let them know they can witness the cremation, it goes a long way for a family," he said. "The standards are right there for them to see."

But as the cremation rate continues to rise to 50 percent and above nationally, funeral directors are trying to figure out how to price cremation. More times than not, that means pricing it low trying to compete with direct-disposal companies, and using a low-budget, low-quality trade crematory. "I think what happens is that some families may come in and say

they're looking for the lowest price, and the funeral director has a hard time losing any business so they immediately quote a low price and use a low-budget trade crematory assuming the family doesn't care about quality," Sucharski said. "What they don't do is talk about creating peace of mind and a memorable service, celebrating a life lived. They don't talk about options ... and that's a shame."

Sucharski believes that if given options, many families will want more – from understanding the value of proper policies and procedures to the different types of cremation

memorialization options that are available.

That's why the Philadelphia Crematories' website features a variety of memorialization objects – from traditional memorial urns to garden urns to cremation jewelry. "It's just a way to keep families informed," Sucharski said. "They can get an idea of what's available for their loved one."

As cremation continues to become the preferred method of disposition, Sucharski continues to be an advocate for higher cremation standards in Pennsylvania and throughout the country. "If you do a cremation wrong," he points out, "you don't get a second chance. Why not do everything right from the beginning? It may take a little more time and money, but it is well worth it."

Sucharski doesn't just talk the talk; he's walking the walk. The firm is set to roll out a new database enhancement that will track each and every contact point during the cremation process. "It starts when the funeral director calls in, faxes or contacts us online," Sucharski said. "It then tracks everything ... who identified the body, when the decedent arrives at our building, when the family comes in, when the cremation process starts, when it concludes, when the cremated remains are packaged, when they are returned to the funeral home."

By assigning each case a barcode that is scanned at every stage and for every action – and which goes directly into the database – the possibility of human error is eliminated. Funeral directors will also receive an email at certain stages to let them keep track of the process as well, Sucharski noted. A touchpad will also provide a signed chain of custody, eliminating any potential errors.

"What we're trying to do is make operations more streamlined while also making it more protective for the family and funeral director," Sucharski said. "We always want to be better ... our industry should demand it because that is what the families we serve deserve." •

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