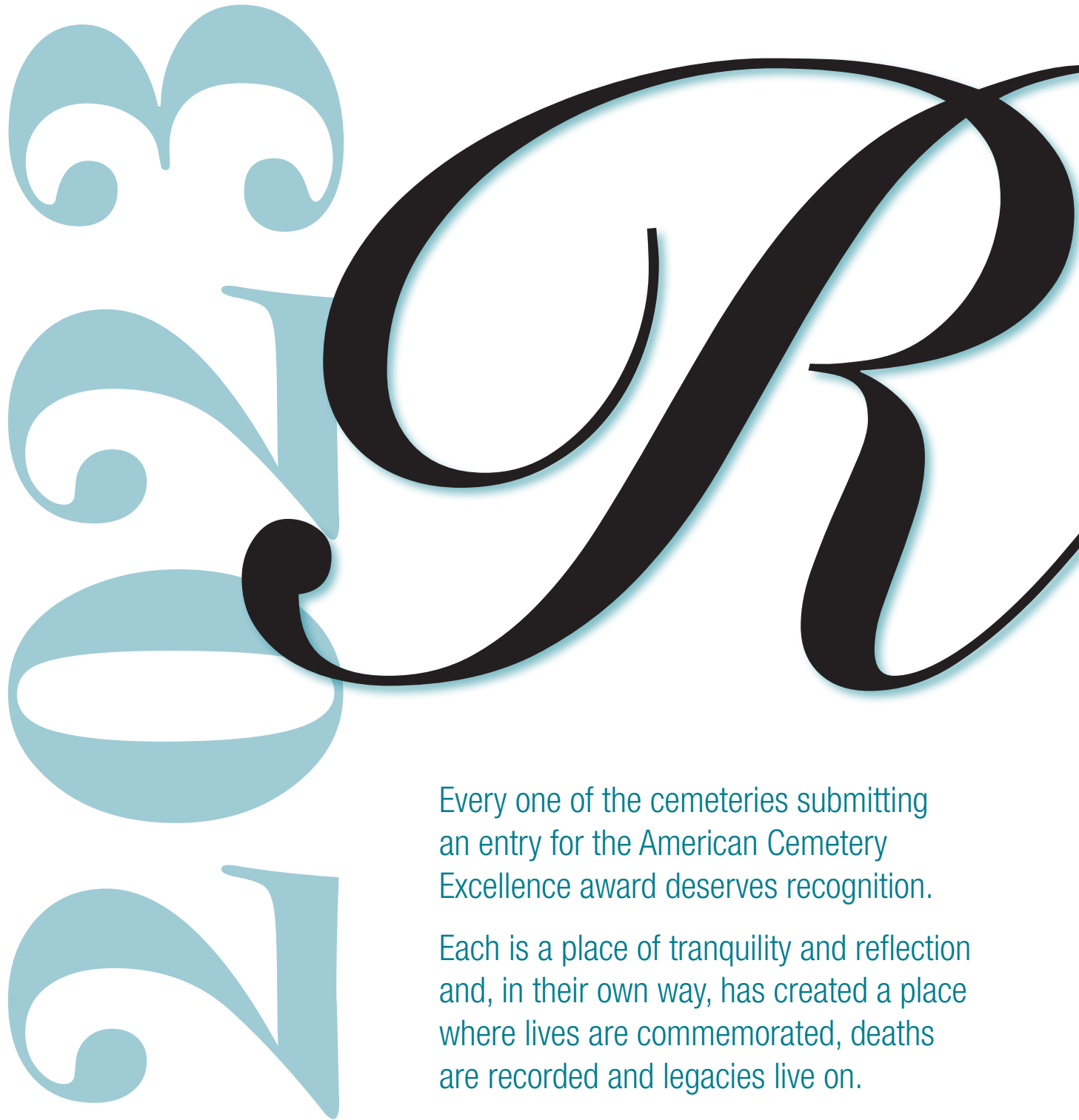


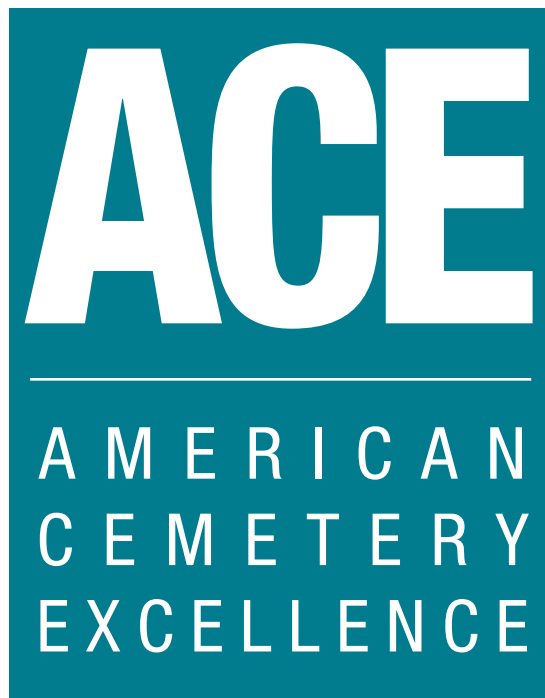
[ACE AWARDS]

By Stan Goldstein



Every one of the cemeteries submitting an entry for the American Cemetery Excellence award deserves recognition.

Each is a place of tranquility and reflection and, in their own way, has created a place where lives are commemorated, deaths are recorded and legacies live on.



runners-up

The three cemeteries stood out for a variety of reasons, including their beautiful grounds, a commitment to their local community and a sharing of history. One is more than 150 years old, while another was founded in 1976.

No matter how long they've been in operation, the top priority for these cemeteries is to be a place of comfort, tranquility and reflection.

They all connect with grieving families and have provided meaningful services for decades.

The cemeteries also welcome visitors for various events and activities throughout the year.

As they constantly look for new ways to improve day-to-day and long-term operations, each cemetery is also mindful of maintaining a consistently high level of service and commitment

to their families and communities. Each cemetery is proud of its maintenance team, who keep the grounds in top-notch shape.

We are proud to recognize who they are and what they do.

The winner of the 2023 American Cemetery Excellence award will be announced in the December issue of American Cemetery & Cremation.

2023 *Runner-up* American Cemetery Excellence

Calvary Cemetery

Dayton, Ohio

When Calvary Cemetery in Dayton, Ohio, was founded in 1872, it was specifically a religious cemetery that was open to the local Roman Catholic population. For the past 50-plus years, it has been available to all, regardless of religious affiliation.

Calvary has kept up with the times, whether it has been having more space for cremated remains or natural burial. It has more than 90,000 permanent residents.

“As an organization, we have arrived where we are because we are always strategically thinking about changes,” said Rick Meade, Calvary’s executive director. “Thirty years ago, cremation was hardly a heartbeat. Now we are more market-place-aware of it.

“We invest heavily in education and going to national conferences,” he continued. “I have a little saying when we do research and visit other cemeteries to see what they are doing, ‘Can we do this?’ That’s question No. 1. If the answer is ‘yes,’ the next question is, ‘Should we do this.’ That has been a guiding principle for us.”

In 2010, the Dayton region began to see a major uptick in the cremation rate, according to Scott Wright, Calvary’s community outreach director.

“Calvary recognized the need to expand its offering. For many years, our cremation rate was in the low 30%, but as of 2022 it sits closer to the Ohio state average of 50%,” Wright said. “Calvary conducts about 650 burials a year, and we saw the need to accommodate 300-plus cremation burials. That became a key to our changing business model for the future.”

In 2012, the cemetery’s board of trustees recognized the cremation trends, opening the Spirit of the Living Water gazebo for cremation inurnment. It features single, true companion, and side-by-side niches. Centered around a waterfall with a koi fishpond and a butterfly garden, it

utilized a previously unused traffic island.

The building features customizable bronze plates of different sizes and shapes. It has room for more than 1,300 cremation inurnments.

The cemetery expanded its traditional offerings by expanding its Garden of the Holy Cross area to include another 200 niche spaces in the exterior garden, while also opening new sections for traditional in-ground burials.

Calvary also undertook an aggressive building campaign. The Garden Mausoleum was reaching capacity, and two new structures were built. The St. Mark’s Mausoleum was constructed to add 60 single, 50 true companion crypts and 140 cremation niches. The building features all exterior crypts and niches that allow for family visitation at any time the grounds are open.

What Wright calls “the new crown jewel of Calvary Cemetery” is the Garden of Peace, an indoor columbarium featuring glass-front niches. It was built entirely for the cremation customer, without inclu-

sion of full casket crypts.

The most striking feature of the Garden of Peace is a 30-foot back wall constructed entirely of glass. It not only invites the natural sunlight into the building but also allows families to experience the beautiful natural setting, with Lake Serenity, a man-made pond that anchors the back of the property, as a focal point.

“Glass niches are not new, but what makes our columbarium unique is that it’s a stand-alone overlooking the prairie,” Meade said. “There’s a window to the lake and the prairie and the scenery changes with the seasons. In the winter, it’s like standing in time in a snow globe. It’s one-of-a-kind experience.”

In 2021, Calvary undertook the renovation of its historic St. Henry’s Memorial Chapel. The chapel, dedicated in 1902, was described by the Dayton Daily News at the time as “one of the handsomest chapels in our state.”

By 2020, time and environmental pressure had taken its toll on the Indiana limestone. Calvary contracted with The Tradesmen Group for the exterior restoration, tuckpointing and sealing. The project cost \$800,000 and preserved the chapel so that it will continue to serve many more generations.



NATURAL BURIAL

A few years ago, cemetery master planner Jack Goodnoe met with Meade at Calvary.

"We looked over 90 acres of woods here," Meade said. "It helped us get a vision of the topography, stay natural and use what God and Mother Nature has given us. Jack is not a fan of the bulldozer."

"We have a master plan for those 90 of the 200 acres we have," he added. "We have a designed-plan natural burial area. We thought it would be well received in western Ohio. We have plenty of forest area and lakes. It really took off to the degree that we have built a phase two of it. We are one of the cemeteries that is natural burial specific. We have this natural area inside of an urban area."

The natural burial preserve is centered around Lake Serenity. Families may memorialize their loved ones with natural boulders.

"It's the Saint Kateri Preserve for Natural Burial and it's a dedicated 8 acres with over 1,000 graves for both full body and cremation burial," Wright said. "Opened in 2014, the preserve was expanded last year to double in size and represented about 15% of Calvary's revenue in 2022."

"The Saint Kateri Preserve offers the opportunity to use elegantly hand-crafted urns and boxes made of biodegradable materials, keeping the liturgical promise while also rendering the immediate release back to the Earth many desire," Meade added.

Mitch Ward, Calvary's field operation manager, takes care of the cemetery's maintenance.

"When the natural burial preserve opened, we wanted to go as low maintenance as possible," he said. "We wanted low-growing grass and after a burial we would plant the grave with natural wildflowers. We then brought in someone to plant native grasses and that grew into a natural prairie. The public really likes it."

"We have also partnered with MEEC (Marianist Environmental Education Center) in Dayton," Ward continued. "I work with them yearly and we review the grounds and see if we need to overseed."



OPPOSITE PAGE: THE ST. HENRY'S MEMORIAL CHAPEL WAS DEDICATED IN 1902 AT CALVARY CEMETERY. ABOVE: ST. KATERI TEKAKWITHA, THE PATRON SAINT OF THE ENVIRONMENT, OVERLOOKS CALVARY CEMETERY'S NATURAL BURIAL PRESERVE. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF CALVARY CEMETERY)

COMMUNITY EVENTS

The cemetery is also dedicated to community-based events. The main event is its annual "Angel Night" that attracts over 3,000 individuals every year to drive through and view Victorian Angel sculptures at night. This year's event takes place Nov. 30.

"We illuminate about 20 angels in different sections of the cemetery. They are all unique and tell a story," Wright said. "We have local bands and performance groups to come in and sing. Plus we have arts and crafts. It's controlled chaos."

"Different organizations help out, and we take up a collection for a domestic violence shelter in town. It's a dynamic event," he added.

Another program is the collaboration between the cemetery and the Dayton Society of Natural History. Calvary is home to an ancient Native American mound that was built for ritual or burial purposes. The DSNH and the cemetery offer joint tours as a community collaboration. The cemetery is also a benefactor to local hospice, University of Dayton, ROTC Cadets, and parishes.

In addition, the cemetery offers a service-based scholarship each year to local high school students. Calvary also hosts a sacred music series in conjunction with Dayton Vespers, a group who leads chanted evening prayer (vespers) in English using melodies and chants that are centuries old and simplified to make them accessible to everyday people.

"We host different religious services, and our Memorial Day services attract about 500 people," Wright said. "We have history tours. We keep plugged into our community well."

On its website, Calvary has walking tours of the graves of its "many fascinating individuals." There are maps pointing out the locations of the final resting places of notable brewers, business leaders, Dayton athletes, clergy, religious leaders and more.

Wright also points out Calvary's dedicated staff.

"Calvary Cemetery is about more than just its physical grounds; it is the dedicated staff who help bring the cemetery to life every day for our families," he said. "We have a small staff of around 20 that care for this gem of the Dayton region."

Highland Memorial Park Ocala, Florida

Mike Sills, the market sales manager for Highland Memorial Park in Ocala, Florida, likes to show the cemetery's different burial options.

"People will tell us they will put their loved one's cremated remains on a mantel, but when they pass away, who will take care of the urn from there?" he said. "We have a lot to offer for cremation burials that our families sometimes have a hard time deciding.

"We have some pretty places to inter those urns," Sills added. "We have a selection for everybody – glass-front niches, granite niches, a serenity oaks wall, ground burial, cremation estates, benches and pedestals."

Ground burial is still the most popular option at Highland Memorial Park. There are three community mausoleums, including Heritage Faith Mausoleum Complex and Seasons of Life Garden Mausoleum. The cemetery also boasts the new Tranquility Oaks Mausoleum, private estates and the Ocala area's first cremation-only garden. An interactive map and video posted on the cemetery's website provides families with an overview of the options.

"We're coming up with different ideas all the time," Sills said. "I designed Serenity Oaks, it's a little grass area with above ground niches, cremation graves and estates under a canopy of majestic oaks. There's a columbarium for multiple urns to be placed."

Highland Memorial Park was established in 1936 by J. Miles Hiers, one of Florida's pioneer funeral home operators. Eulogized in 1993 as "a great American, who was very civic minded," Hiers believed that funeral homes and cemeteries should not be competitors but rather work together for the betterment of the community.

It was this vision that led him to purchase the cemetery and make it part of his family of Hiers Funeral Homes. He also believed that cemeteries should take on a park-like setting to beckon the local community to visit the grounds often as a peaceful escape for an afternoon of reading or walking. True to its founder's vision, Highland Memorial Park maintains a walking course that is popular with local fitness walkers.

"Our gates are open seven days a week so walkers can come in," Sills said. "We have people who ride their bikes through. It's a safe place for someone to come and exercise."

Decades after the original Hiers Funeral Home Group merged with funeral homes owned by the Baxley family, Highland Memorial Park remains part of Hiers-Baxley Funeral Services and is owned by Florida-based Foundation Partners Group.

The 55-acre cemetery is about 60% developed. There are close to 11,000 permanent residents.

"The oak trees on our grounds were planted by Mr. Hiers in 1936," Sills said. "Now they are pushing 100 years old. They are really majestic oak trees. We have a tree service come in once a quarter and they will spend three days and work on the oaks.

"I pride myself that I treat this cemetery like its mine. I ride around and check on things and we have a good cemetery staff," he added. "The team takes great pride in the maintenance of the cemetery grounds ensuring it is a place that families can be proud of – from the manicured grass, trimmed and shaped hedges to the beautiful plantings and landscaping throughout."

According to the cemetery's website, "Today, Mr. Hiers' vision is still alive in the trees and pathways where tranquility and peace of mind come naturally."

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Community engagement is very important to the Highland Memorial team. Their efforts to keep the local area informed includes a Facebook page and ongoing community outreach.

The cemetery hosts many events, including its 9/11 flag event as well as Easter sunrise and Mother's Day services. They also conduct monthly educational seminars across the area to educate families about the importance of and options for permanent memorialization.

"We partner with the American Legion for the Wreaths Across America program," Sills said. "We have about 1,800 veterans buried here and we have been doing that for years, 200-300 volunteers come out that day to help."

Highland has Veterans Day and Memorial Day services annually. Memorial Day weekend is highlighted by a free veterans' tribute car show that draws veterans and car enthusiasts throughout Florida. This past year, special guest speaker Howard Mautner, a 99-year-old World War II veteran, kicked off the weekend's festivities. Representatives from the American Legion, Daughters of the American Revolution and Veterans of Foreign Wars were in attendance with booths to share information.

"We have our Memorial Day event on the Saturday before the holiday," Sills said. "We get many people who come out. There's food trucks and we had 86 cars this year. The car people love it. We had the sheriff's department and fire department honor guard and a bagpipes player."

Among the notables buried at Highland Memorial Park is Angela Santos, the first woman in the U.S. Navy killed in an act of terrorism. On April 14, 1988, the 21-year-old Santos was killed in a car bomb blast in Naples, Italy.

Also buried there is artist Joyce Balantyne Brand who is best known for her drawing of the Coppertone baby advertisement, in which a little girl is having her bathing suit tugged down by a puppy.



ABOVE: THE HERITAGE OF FAITH MAUSOLEUM COMPLEX OFFERS A WIDE ARRAY OF INTERMENT OPTIONS INCLUDING INDOOR, OUTDOOR AND PRIVATE ESTATES. LEFT: HIGHLAND MEMORIAL PARK OFFERS A PRIVATE ESTATES SECTION. BELOW: A MIXED USE AREA OFFERS BURIAL AND CREMATION OPTIONS AT HIGHLAND MEMORIAL PARK. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF HIGHLAND MEMORIAL PARK)



The staff at Highland Memorial Park is constantly listening to families about what they want and remains on the cutting edge of the latest permanent placement options according to Sills.

“The cemetery speaks for itself. Mr. J. Miles Hiers designed it as a park, no upright memorials,” Sills said. “We do have two areas with upright memorials but if you look out over the grounds, all you see is flowers for the most part. We have flat bronze markers and a little pond with a fountain in the center.

“We also have our resident ducks, I call them ‘mooches.’ They always want to mooch food,” Sills laughed.

2023 *Runner-up* American Cemetery Excellence

Meadowbrook Memory Gardens

Villa Rica, Georgia

Ellen McBrayer remembers sitting with her father, Charles Wynn, while waiting for the school bus and looking out at Meadowbrook Memory Gardens in Villa Rica, Georgia.

“We used to live beside it,” said McBrayer, the cemetery’s president. “My dad would tell me stories and the meanings behind the loved ones buried there. To have that moment and now as an adult, looking back, to see the love that he put into those grounds. It’s more than a cemetery; it’s a sacred place.”

“So much hard work went into the cemetery, and my dad took the time to explain why it’s so important,” she added. “I remember him talking to me about his friends and loved ones buried here.”

Wynn, the owner and manager when McBrayer was growing up, died suddenly of a heart attack in 2001. His wife and McBrayer’s mother, Dana, remains the cemetery’s CEO. Meadowbrook Memory Garden is an extension of its sister company, Jones-Wynn Funeral Home,

which has two locations in Georgia.

McBrayer is the third generation of her family to operate the cemetery.

In 1976, Clyde and Shirley Jones, McBrayer’s grandparents, along with Charles and Dana Wynn, saw a need in the area for a new cemetery. The city cemetery was nearing capacity, and they felt the community needed a new location to offer families in the area a beautiful resting place for their loved ones.

After searching for land, talking to people in the community, exploring options, and much planning, Meadowbrook Memory Gardens opened in 1977.

McBrayer’s Grandfather Jones sat under a pecan tree and watched as the bulldozers and developers worked diligently to create the peaceful and beautiful gardens. Later, Jones was buried under the very same pecan tree where it all began.

“My father and grandmother are buried there too, under the same tree,” McBrayer said.

The 30-acre cemetery has 1,400

permanent residents. It features beautiful landscapes with sculpted and designed gardens set apart by unique marble, wood and granite features that illustrate each garden’s name.

“We offer traditional ground burial, mausoleum entombment, cremation ground burial and niche interment for cremations,” McBrayer said. “We are the only cemetery in Western Georgia with our own indoor chapel mausoleum equipped with keyless entry.”

“The chapel mausoleum is a beautiful, enclosed lot,” she continued. “The keyless entry is one where a family gets a private code, and that provides peace of mind. You can visit 24 hours.”

CANDLELIGHT SERVICE

One of the highlights each year at Meadowbrook is the Candlelight Remembrance Service. Throughout the evening, thousands of candles are placed across the cemetery in memory of loved ones.

“We partner with a local school group, and we talk to them about the sacred reverence of what we do,” McBrayer said. “We donate back to the group for helping us by volunteering. To watch the young adults with the candles is a revered moment. They understand the meaning of the loved ones who are here.”

“Just to have that moment with the community to explain the why of what we do is special,” she added. “Why we take such care. It means so much.”

Taking care of veterans is a priority at Meadowbrook.

“We thank all veterans for their service to our country. To honor the sacrifices made by those who serve in our armed forces, we offer a free burial space to all veterans. The only charge is the perpetual care fee,” McBrayer said.

The cemetery features a U.S. military veteran section with double-depth graves and military upright tablet markers. There



are 275 veterans buried at Meadowbrook.

“Meadowbrook opened our veteran section with a large dedication service with local veterans and their families as well as ministers in attendance,” McBrayer said. “The dedication service was an incredible success as families of veterans came and honored our military men and women and then were provided with a meal afterward, compliments of Meadowbrook Memory Gardens.”

The cemetery also gives out challenge coins to the veterans. Challenge coins are presented by unit commanders in recognition of a special achievement by a member of the unit. They are also exchanged in recognition of visits to an organization.

“A veteran on our staff knew the meaning of challenge coins. It caught me off guard, how meaningful they were,” McBrayer said. “We had a ceremony when we broke ground for a flagpole that was donated by veterans.

“We went through the crowd and gave the veterans a funeral and cemetery challenge coin,” she added. “It was so meaningful to see the meaning behind the challenge coin for the veterans. One of them had tears in his eyes. It was a powerful moment.”

Last year, Meadowbrook partnered with Wreaths Across America and had a group come out to place wreaths on the veterans’ graves.

Another section of Meadowbrook recognizes mothers who had miscarriages.

“We honor each of those babies in our care during a candlelight ceremony. We light a lantern for each of these children who have no names,” McBrayer said. “We invite local chaplains and nurses. It’s a private ceremony.

“Every life matters, it gives us peace of mind to come together. It helps everyone start a healthy grieving process,” she added. “To have a community who loves and cares to honor them; our cemetery is a safe and peaceful resting place that is meaningful to our community and the families we serve.”

As Meadowbrook Memory Gardens continues to grow, McBrayer gives credit to the staff for all they do.



OPPOSITE PAGE: THE MAUSOLEUM AT MEADOWBROOK MEMORY GARDENS IS ENHANCED BY GLORIOUS STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS. ABOVE: MEADOWBROOK MEMORY GARDENS OPENED IN VILLA RICA, GEORGIA. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEADOWBROOK MEMORY GARDENS)

“It truly does take an amazing team. The team that we have in the office and the team that digs the graves, it’s so much more than digging a grave,” she said. “As I have said, ‘funeral service is not what I do, it’s who I am.’ Our team, it’s not a job to

them, it is their calling and passion.

“Our gardens are really nice. When someone stops and walks in our office to say that their family appreciates the attention given to the detail of our grounds, it’s great to get that feedback,” McBrayer added. •

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