

PROFILE

By Cole Waybright

Selling Serenity

Floridians Find Endless Options at Venice Memorial Gardens

If you're old enough to remember the 1980s Maytag repairman commercials featuring the "loneliest man in town," you'll know how Coral Gonzalez, family service adviser for Farley Funeral Homes and Venice Memorial Gardens, feels every time she attends a community event in the Venice, Florida area.

"Many times, when I staff our Venice Memorial table at a community expo, I find people who give me a strange look and walk to the opposite side of the path to avoid a conversation," Gonzalez said. "They say things like, 'No thanks, I don't want to talk to you' or 'I don't need you right now.' In response I say, 'You never know when you're going to need me,' and 'It's better to be prepared.'"

From internationally celebrated animal trainer Gunther Gebel-Williams to Sir Francis, the English Bulldog of Kibbles 'N Bits commercial fame, more than 10,000 families have selected Venice Memorial Gardens as the final resting place for both

family members and beloved pets.

Located in South Sarasota County, Venice Memorial Gardens currently occupies 25 acres of its 50-acre site. Graced with native palms and large oak trees draped in Spanish moss, the beauty of the sprawling property is undeniable and the cemetery's biggest selling point. It was opened in 1975 by the Farley family, founders of Farley Funeral Homes and Crematory in Venice and North Port.

"Our cemetery is a living place," Gonzalez said. "We have no gates and the public is always welcome. Residents from throughout the area visit the cemetery to walk and bike its miles of pathways and to fish in the stream that runs through a pond on the property."

And, because continuity of care matters, Farley Funeral Homes and Venice Memorial Gardens owns and operates an on-site, state-of-the-art crematory, staffed by certified operators.

ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Home to snowbirds, retirees, and families who love the Gulf of Mexico beach life, South Sarasota County has long been a hub of religious and ethnic diversity. North Port has one of the state's largest Ukrainian populations, and Catholics make up the largest religious group in Venice. The area also is home to a sizable Jewish community. Gonzalez and her team work closely with religious leaders of all faiths to develop special programs and pricing packages to serve the distinct end-of-life traditions and needs of their congregations.

The cemetery's Peace Mausoleum and several gardens are dedicated to Ukrainian Americans, while Catholic and Jewish families are memorialized in customized gardens and mausoleums that reflect their distinctive preferences and traditional beliefs. Special sections of the cemetery also honor the memory of the area's many

THE FOUNTAIN AT TRANQUILITY CREMATION GARDEN IN VENICE MEMORIAL GARDENS IN VENICE, FLORIDA. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOUNDATION PARTNERS GROUP)



KALCHBRENNER WALDRON

KALCHBRENNER
EDWARD A.
1938 - 2021
DOTTY M.
1938 - 2021

KALCHBRENNER
DAVID
1965 - 2003

WALDRON
ROBERT L.
1960 - 2021
DEBRA A.
1962 -

WIERSMA



ABOVE: A VIEW OF THE NEWEST MAUSOLEUM, BUILT IN 2021, AT VENICE MEMORIAL GARDENS. PLANS FOR ANOTHER ARE ALREADY UNDERWAY. LEFT: THE ANNUAL CANDLELIGHT REMEMBRANCE SERVICE HELD IN DECEMBER FEATURES THE NAMING OF EACH PERSON ENTRUSTED TO THE PERPETUAL CARE OF VENICE MEMORIAL GARDENS DURING THE PRIOR YEAR.



Holocaust survivors. Area residents also can choose from several beautiful non-denominational gardens designed for both burial and cremation families.

THE PERFECT FINAL RESTING PLACE

Venice Memorial Gardens offers families a wide variety of affordable and customized options. Cremation continues to be an increasingly popular choice; however, the cemetery currently has an equal number of traditional casket burials and memorials. Options include memorial parks marked with flat bronze or granite memorials, cemeteries with traditional upright granite monuments, a collection of striking above-ground columbaria, and an eco-cemetery

where natural burial plots are marked by bushes, rocks, and trees.

A ring of eight mausoleums forms the centerpiece of the cemetery, including large community structures and distinctive private family estates.

“Our community mausoleums are open but adequately shaded and rise only five levels to create comfortable eye-level access to families who visit and reflect,” Gonzalez said. “Natural barriers separate the mausoleums, and the area is accented by a series of fountains adding to the tranquil environment. The newest mausoleum was constructed in 2021, but plans are already underway for another to be added later this year.”

Veterans are given special places of honor in Venice Memorial Gardens’ “Corner of Courage” Mausoleum and the “Garden of Honor.” The cemetery also is the final resting place of many local dignitaries and celebrities.

“Sarasota County is home to Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, and when animal trainer Gunther Gebel-Williams was interred here in 2001, it had to be handled very carefully,” Gonzalez said. “Although he was well-known for his kindness and love of big cats and elephants, his burial had to take place after dark to avoid protests by animal activists. People often come here to see where he is buried and to leave touching tributes to his long career.”

ANNUAL CANDLELIGHT REMEMBRANCE SERVICE

In addition to Gonzalez, the Venice Memorial Gardens team includes four groundskeepers, two administrative assistants, and a second family service adviser. A highlight of their year is the annual Candlelight Remembrance Service, held the second



THE LUMINARIES ARE PLACED WITH THE HELP OF AN ARMY OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERS.

Saturday of December to honor and remember loved ones lost each year. Against the backdrop of more than 4,000 luminaries, the names of those who have been entrusted to the perpetual care of Venice Memorial Gardens since December of the previous year are read aloud, while the names of those served by Farley Funeral Homes and Crematory are displayed on a continuously scrolling screen.

“This event would not be possible without the army of volunteers who join us to place the luminaries along our paths and roadways, set up nearly 400 chairs, and help serve snacks and beverages during the very emotional service,” Gonzalez said. “Our local Girl Scout troops help us year after year as do members of the ROTC from the middle school next to the cemetery, and local clergy. In addition to those who join us for the program, some 300 to 350 vehicles drive through the property to observe the beautiful candlelit scene before the service begins.”

PETS ARE FAMILY AT SUNSHINE PET MEADOWS

Venice Memorial Gardens Pet Cemetery and Crematory offers a full range of funeral care services for dogs, cats, and other pets, as well as the unique option of burying a pet next to a human loved one. Called Sunshine Meadows and located adjacent to the larger cemetery, nearly 150 pets have been interred, entombed, and inurned since the beautifully landscaped area opened five years ago.

Like the larger cemetery, Venice Memorial Gardens Pet Cemetery owns and operates an on-site crematory staffed by certified crematory operators, which means pets never leave their care. Pets are transferred from animal hospitals, veterinarians, and homes, and families are invited to witness any or all aspects of the cremation process.

“Families are very devoted to their pets, and some want to plan elaborate ceremonies in their honor,” Gonzalez said. “One of our most elaborate ceremonies was conducted for a terrier named Snow White. She was dressed in a Disney Snow White dress and placed in a child’s casket. More than 50 mourners attended the ceremony, which included prayer cards and a balloon release. Another family has purchased plots in which their headstones will be placed back-to-back with their dog and cat.” •

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