

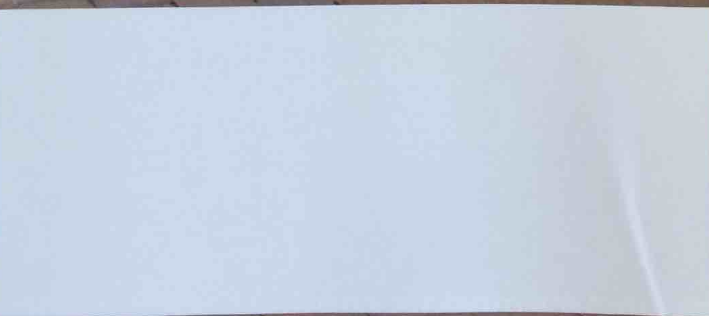
July 2015

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Camino  
del Sol

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# Profile


By Lisa Howard-Fusco

# Camino del Sol

Midwestern Values  
in the Sunset State

The ossuary, adjacent to the River of Life, at the Garden of Eternal Memory, a cremation-only cemetery. (Photos courtesy of Camino del Sol)





**T**he Darby family has been in the cemetery and funeral home business since 1960, beginning with its purchase of Sunset Memorial Park in Danville, Illinois, and expanding over the years to include five additional locations throughout East Central Illinois and West Central Indiana. But the reason that the Darbys decided that their next business location should be located over 1,700 miles away, in Sun City West, Arizona, happened by chance, and all because of a family member that originally had no plans to go into the family business.

“I originally moved to Peoria in 1983 to teach,” Karen Darby-Ritz, advance planning & community relations manager at Camino del Sol Funeral Chapel & Cremation Center and Garden of Eternal Memory Cemetery in Sun City West, explained. “My parents came to visit, and my dad just fell in love with the area. He decided to buy a vacation home and started looking around when Sun City West was just being opened up.”

When Darby-Ritz’s father, James Darby, discovered that the self-contained, self-governed, golf retirement community was offering exclusivity to businesses that would locate there, he decided he would open the family’s sixth funeral home, Camino del Sol. This meant that although other funeral homes might open in the surrounding areas, it would forevermore be the only funeral home located in Sun City West.

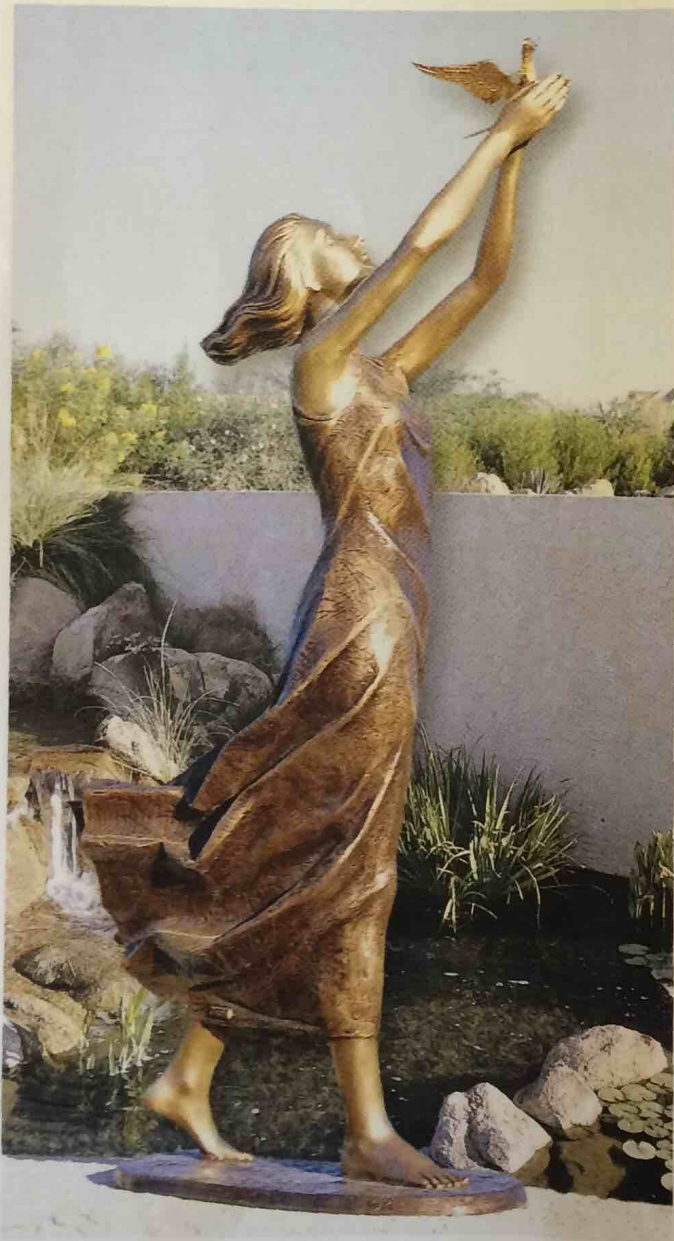
Since then, Darby-Ritz left teaching and joined the Camino del Sol staff in June 2012; James Darby is now semi-retired and co-owns the business with Darby-Ritz’s siblings: Donna Walthall, Linda Darby-Dowers and Richard Darby.

Yet with Arizona’s cremation rate now above 60 percent, a funeral home and cemetery might find itself in dire straights if it went along strictly with the direct cremations that the majority of the public tends to request, no matter how exclusive their firm’s market is; however, Camino del Sol handles around 580 calls per year.

“I believe that Camino del Sol is distinguished by the fact it is family-owned in a sea of corporate-owned funeral homes,” Darby-Ritz explained. “We have Mid-western family values. We believe our main job is service to our families, and no request is too small or large for consideration. But we also spend a great deal of time educating our community about the importance of memorialization; we feel many grief issues can be lessened with healthy healing.”

One of the primary ways the Camino del Sol staff educate families about their options is subtle, and begins with the language used on the website to list the services offered. Under the heading of “Where to Start,” the first step listed is the designing of the service for the loved one, and “Caring for a Loved One’s Physical Remains” as the second step – not the other way around. Under the heading of “Cremation,” the site also advises “you’ll need to select an urn and choose







whether to bury, entomb, or scatter the cremated remains, as well as where you'd like to do so." There is little mention of the option of the family to bring the urn home with them, and there is also a statement that points out that the commonly held belief that cremation automatically means "no services" is a misconception.

"These are also the steps that we as a staff, either at-need or preneed, use to speak with our families. It is intentional, because it allows families to understand memorialization from the funeral service perspective and then the cemetery perspective," Darby-Ritz said. "So many families begin the funeral process with thoughts of direct cremation because

that's all they know. It's our job to present all the options and help them pick out the one that is right for their family. We need to make families aware that healthy healing requires closure and some form of memorialization. We have become such a throwaway society; I'm afraid we are throwing away our traditions and our ability to grieve."

In keeping with today's families' demand for more celebration of life themes in funeral service, the staff work at creating unique themes, often using technology such as live webcasting or software from Frazer Consulting that allows them to create life tribute DVDs, print materials and keepsakes in-house. Families can also access an online "Celebration Wall"

(also provided through Frazer) that allows them to connect with family and friends and provides a permanent virtual tribute to the deceased. And since Camino del Sol also houses its own crematory (complete with a family viewing area), which is used exclusively for the families they serve, the staff also reassure cremation families that their loved one never leaves their care.

"Working for the Darby family gives me the flexibility to be more attuned to the needs of the families that I serve," said funeral director Herb Roberts. "While meeting with the families, I try to determine what is important to them and then explain the options to memorialize their loved one in a way that expresses those things. It may be through a special item that the family brings in for the funeral or memorial service, a video played at the service, special music, engraving on an urn, a tribute on our website or maybe a special location in our cemetery that has significance to the family."

The funeral home contains facilities for services that include a non-denominational chapel, as well as two smaller rooms for viewings and services; however, all three of these rooms can be opened up to make one large room, creating the ability to accommodate services in a variety of sizes. The Fellowship Reception Center is also available for a family that desires to host a reception afterward; the room can accommodate 80 guests, and the funeral home will furnish cookies, coffee and punch for a simple gathering. However, the room also includes a functional caterer's kitchen if the family chooses to have a caterer provide a full meal instead.

But the major feature that sets the Darby family business apart and represents its dedication to its cremation families is the Garden of Eternal Memory, a cremation-only cemetery that it opened in 1996, which is adjacent to the funeral home and the only cemetery in Sun City West. It also holds another advantage over nearby church cemeteries (some of which might have niches available for its cremation families) in that it



Clockwise from the top: The Garden of Roses; The Pavilion of Honor for veterans; A bronze feature by The River of Life. (Photos courtesy of Camino del Sol)





The Memorial Wall, where names of loved ones whose remains were laid to rest in the ossuary or elsewhere, are memorialized in bronze. (Photos courtesy of Camino del Sol)

is required to have an endowment care fund, which allows Camino del Sol to assure its families of the cemetery's ongoing care and maintenance (church cemeteries are not required to have one under Arizona state law). Although its size is a mere half a city block, it offers an array of memorialization options for its cremation families.

Located to the east of the funeral home entrance, the Columbarium of Eternal Peace provides a mostly traditional setting with niches set into walls in a sheltered and shaded area, which includes features such as a statue of children at a wishing well and a small fountain.

A simpler option is the ossuary, where cremated remains are comingled in an underground burial chamber, on top of which stands a striking bronze statue of a girl releasing a

dove. The names of deceased loved ones laid to rest there can be memorialized in bronze on the adjacent Memorial Wall, as well as others whose remains may have been laid to rest elsewhere.

Next to the ossuary is the River of Life, at the center of which is a waterfall and pond with features such as a bronze water bird; memorialization options located in the space include memorial rocks, column niches, estate monuments and private estates.

The Garden of Roses is worthy of its name, a partially sheltered area with blooming flowers and additional fountains, a column niche, memorial rocks, and additional private estates and estate monuments.

Additionally, The Veterans Pavilion of Honor is an option to honor those whose loved ones served in the armed forces. Army, Navy, Air

Force, Marines and Coast Guard are all represented with individual column niches and flags. Both standard honor (a military chaplain, flag presentation and final salute) and full honor (a 16-gun salute for general officers and flag officers depending on their rank, a United States flag draped over the casket and given to the next of kin, and the playing of taps) military services are available to families of veterans. Around its perimeter, the Circle of Honor offers in-ground burial of cremated remains for both veterans and civilians alike.

Currently, about 25 percent of its families choose memorialization. "It's too low of a figure for me," Darby-Ritz said. "We as an industry must continue to show families the importance of memorializing as a step in the grieving process."

Another opportunity the Camino del Sol staff has to educate families is when someone decides to preplan their services. Because of this, it was decided that the advance planning office would be located in a separate building directly across from the funeral home, and used exclusively for preneed families. Although the staff used to meet with preplanning families in the funeral home, Darby-Ritz said, she and the staff began to hear about people who wanted to come in and get information but chose not to because of all the cars in the parking lot due to a service in progress.

"Many people don't want to go to a funeral home to get information in

## Get an exclusive look at Camino del Sol

You've just read about how Camino del Sol Funeral Chapel & Cremation center is reaching out to families in Sun City West, Arizona. Now, American Cemetery & Cremation would like to invite you to see it firsthand.

Register for the upcoming 5th Annual Cremation Strategies Conference on Nov. 20, and take advantage of a free tour and reception at the property, which is owned by the Darby family.

Learn more at [www.katesboylston.com/strategies](http://www.katesboylston.com/strategies).



advance of a death; it just creeps them out,” Darby-Ritz explained. “Having our preneed office across the street has made such a difference in our walk-in traffic. We have plenty of room to meet with people, and we can have a lighter demeanor on that side of the street. In this way, we can effectively continue our education track to help families understand that preplanning will eliminate much of the last-minute stress, and show them all the options available to them. We can also have a little more fun with things when we don’t have to worry about a grieving family across the hall. And there are many folks who just stop by to say hi after we’ve met with them.”

The Darby family pride themselves on having a close relationship with their community and not just through its advance planning office. The family and staff host community events throughout the year, such as a Valentine’s remembrance program in February (families of all the individuals who have died the year before served by Camino del Sol are remembered); an antique car show in March (the Sun City West Auto Restoration Club brings cars to show on site, with Camino del Sol providing hot dogs and soft drinks); an old fashioned ice cream social in August; a Marine Corps birthday party/Veterans Day program in November; and a Christmas concert and tree lighting ceremony in December (complete with a visit from Santa, Christmas cookies and hot chocolate). Each event often sees a large turnout, often attended by anywhere from 50 to 200 people.

“We want to get people into our facility *before* their death – it’s important to cultivate our relationships,” Darby-Ritz explained. “We have a very active community with many, many resources. As a funeral home, we work closely with these community resources, and we help refer individuals to the service we feel will help them. We do not want to compete with our community resources; we’d prefer to partner with them.”

Although Camino del Sol can boast the facilities to host its community events and serve families, provide their staff convenient tools to create unique services for loved ones and is located in an exclusive market, when Roberts was asked what he thinks makes the business so successful, his reply was that it

was none of those things.

“It’s listening to the families that we serve and meeting their needs,” Roberts said. “I have often been told by the families that we serve that they could tell that we cared about them, and how much they appreciate the personal care that we give.” •

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