



Evergreen Cemetery Association

By Julia Gillis and Karen Lentz

As executive director of Evergreen Cemetery Association in Brainerd, Karen Lentz is new to the cemetery business, but not new to property management. With a background in real estate, she is a perfect fit for her new role with Evergreen, which she began in May 2011. She's now responsible for program development, communications, staff, finance, and sales and marketing for the Association.

We asked Karen a few questions about her new job and also found out more about Evergreen Cemetery.

Q: What made you decide to take on this new position?

A: Evergreen's previous office secretary retired in June 2011 after 40 years of service. With this event, the Board chose to expand the job description to include more management responsibility. I was a great match because of my previous experience in real estate and property management. When I was interviewing, I felt that the cemetery board members expressed a strong sense of commitment to the cemetery, which gave me confidence that I would be supported. That made a difference for me.

Q: Tell us more about your background.

A: I'm a Baby Boomer born and raised in North Dakota, but I've lived in Brainerd for 35 years.

When I'm not at the cemetery helping families, you might find me antiquing, playing cards, cooking, sewing or participating in church activities.

Professionally, I've worked in real estate for more than 25 years – as a licensed broker and office/operations manager.

In those jobs, I gained experience in compliance and legal issues, property transfers, bookkeeping and accounting, managing trust accounts, property mapping, and working with property managers and customer service – all of which help me in my work today.

Q: What do you most like about working for Evergreen Cemetery so far?

A: It's a good feeling when we're able to provide assistance to families during the traumatic time of losing a loved one. Beyond that, I enjoy learning about all aspects of the cemetery from compliance and procedures to working with the public. I have the privilege of working with a Board that is dedicated and has the expertise to add to the success of the cemetery. There always is someone available to help find a solution to the new areas I've encountered. Whether it's a board member, superintendent, funeral director or a cemetery associate, everyone I've come in contact with in this job has been open, available and willing to help. Being a member of MAC provides this benefit, and being new to the cemetery business, I am very thankful for that connection. I've met a whole network of enthusiastic and personable people and I also enjoy the industry humor.

Q: What are some of the challenges you face?

A: Updating and automating forms and procedures has been one challenge. Another is learning about cemetery law. The assistance I've received from Ron Gjerde (Lakewood Cemetery) through MAC has been invaluable.

Q: Tell us about Evergreen Cemetery Association.

A: Evergreen Cemetery Association owns and manages two cemeteries. The original cemetery is located in Brainerd at 1105 Third Ave. NE, and the newer Memorial Gardens, acquired in the 1970s, is located north of Brainerd on County Road 3.

In 1870, the Northern Pacific Railway was building its railroad system westward from Duluth. A settlement called "The Crossing" sprung up where the railroad crossed the Mississippi River and was incorporated as the City of Brainerd in 1871. Early burials in the area were informal but within a few years a location northeast of Brainerd (now within the city limits) became the accepted public burial ground.

Nine years later, a group of citizens decided



The entrance to Memorial Gardens, north of Brainerd on County Road 3

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that a formal organization was needed to sell lots, record burials and properly maintain the grounds, and thus, the Evergreen Cemetery Association was born in May 1879. The nine-member Board of Trustees has been meeting for over 130 years to oversee the operation of the Association and to preserve the final resting places of the many people buried here.

Evergreen Cemetery has expanded several times and now occupies over 40 acres with more than 17,000 interments. Memorial Gardens Cemetery was founded in 1953 as "Knollwood Memorial Gardens," a privately owned cemetery selling lots to the public. In the 1960s, the owner absconded with the business assets leaving the cemetery bankrupt and the lot owners to fend for themselves. They banded together and formed the "Crow Wing Memorial Gardens Association" in 1967. And then, in the 1970s, the Evergreen Cemetery Association took over management and renamed the cemetery "Memorial Gardens." It currently occupies 15 acres with 2,200 burials.

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Entrance to Evergreen Cemetery, founded in 1879

Q: What options do you have for cremated remains?

A: We allow two cremation burials in a traditional gravesite. We also have a dedicated cremation section at Evergreen Cemetery and are looking into adding a columbarium.

Q: What is the percentage of traditional burial vs. cremation burial?

A: Between the two cemeteries, we average about 117 burials each year. Our 5-year average is 64 percent traditional and 36 percent cremation.

Q: Are there any famous people buried at either cemetery?

A: Former Governor of Minnesota, C. Elmer Anderson, is buried in Evergreen Cemetery. Also at Evergreen is a headstone dedicated to seven unknown people who were found on the shop ground at the Northern Pacific Railway in December 1944. Dr. Harold Dale Kletschka is buried in Memorial Gardens. He developed the Bio-Pump, an external pump that circulates blood during open-heart surgery.

Q: What are your goals for the Association?

A: As executive director, I'm focused on more office efficiency for now, and then educating the community on the importance of keeping our cemeteries' records current. Also, I will be getting more involved with the future planning of the cemeteries. The Board of Trustees is interested in how we can continue serving families in the future. Our Association president, John Boeder, said, "Our challenge now is to transition from a 140-year-old traditional cemetery, where there are very few lots available, to a newer location a couple of miles north of the city, where future growth can take place. We're in the long-range planning process."



The VFW owns several lots at Evergreen Cemetery; a statue of a soldier honors the veterans buried there

Q: How do you think you've influenced the Association?

A: I think it's too early to measure, but I feel with my background and work ethic, I am helping to make the right changes. Whether its implementing new procedures, or just simply staying late to help a distraught family, my mind and heart is open to doing this work for His Glory. As

cemeterians, we have an opportunity to make a difference for the family of the deceased person in their time of need.

Q: What do you most enjoy about working for a cemetery?

A: The way the grounds look in all the seasons. It is absolutely gorgeous in the fall. Strolling through the cemetery is peaceful, and I find myself reading the names on the headstones and offering a prayer. When entering Memorial Gardens, there's a feeling of serenity. When driving a vehicle through Evergreen, I prefer the Southwest drive-in gate as it provides a beautiful and calming entrance which then brings you to the grandeur of the trees, monuments and landscaping.

Q: How can people learn more?

A: People can visit our website at www.brainerd.net/~evergreencem. On the site, you'll find our cemetery locations and history. Also featured is a "Directory of the Dead" where people can look up burial locations of loved ones and add pictures and information to their loved ones' profile on the site.

Evergreen Cemetery is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday – Friday, and 9 a.m. to noon on Saturdays during the summer season. The gates are always open at Memorial Gardens. ☞



C. Elmer Anderson was the 28th Governor of Minnesota; he served from 1951-1953

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