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Jurasky takes honors as top California cemeterian

By Denise Goolsby
The Desert Sun

CATHEDRAL CITY—Kathleen Jurasky, district manager of the Palm Springs Cemetery District, was named the state's top cemeterian by the California Association of Public Cemeteries during its annual convention in March.

As district manager, Jurasky oversees the day-to-day operations of Desert Memorial Park in Cathedral City and Welwood Murray Cemetery in Palm Springs, including staff, outside contractors, building projects, budget and finance.

"She's one of the most knowledgeable managers, and she's working all of the time to do what she can to help other cemeteries in the district," said Dewey Ausmus, the association's executive director.

Jurasky has served as Palm Springs Cemetery District manager since 2000, and has been on the association's board for the past six years. She was recently elected to serve as the organization's vice president for the 2012-13 term.

"It totally blind-sided me," Jurasky said of the award. "I was pleased and thrilled and honored—but it was a shocker."

"You just do your job," she said. "My

goal has always been to improve the district and the association."

How they work

Public cemetery districts are individual special districts overseen by a governing board, appointed by the county.

In contrast, other districts, including water and hospital districts, are governed by an elected board of directors.

There are 252 cemetery districts across the state.

Two are in the valley. The other is the Coachella Cemetery District.

"The origin of all special districts began with a need for a service—and no one to fill it," Ausmus said.

Many of these cemeteries are small, burial grounds planted in churchyards in the 1800s.

"In these small communities, they only had volunteers and no real funds. They couldn't make enough money to maintain the cemeteries," he said.

An enabling act creating public cemeteries was adopted by the state in 1909.

Like other districts, public cemetery districts are funded by a percentage of property taxes. The amount varies by district, he said.

The Palm Springs Cemetery District receives about .00001 percent of property tax revenue generated by the cities

within its district: Palm Springs, Cathedral City, Desert Hot Springs, Thousand Palms, Sky Valley, and most of Rancho Mirage.

The district's budget was \$871,794 in 2011. It received \$226,663 from property taxes. Sales of burial plots, cremation niches, and other services are used to close the gap.

Early cemetery

Dr. Welwood Murray, a prominent Palm Springs developer, established a two-acre private cemetery in 1894 after his son George passed away.

At the time, there were no cemeteries in the area.

"He bought this parcel of land to bury his son," Jurasky said.

It's on West Chino Road, near the O'Donnell Golf Course.

Prominent civic and community leaders, as well as many famous desert pioneers, including Earl C. Coffman, Nellie Coffman, Frank Shannon, Florian Boyd, Virginia Valli Farrell, and Katherine Finchy are buried here.

As time went by, a larger cemetery was needed to accommodate the growing valley. Desert Memorial Park, at the corner of Ramon Road and Da Vall Drive, opened—ironically—on Halloween day

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in 1956.

It's the final resting place for celebrities including Busby Berkeley, Sonny Bono, Betty Hutton, Magda Gabor, Frederick Lowe, Cameron Mitchell, William Powell and Frank Sinatra.

There are 13,000 people interred across a 60-acre expanse of land at Desert Memorial Park. Those number includes buried remains and those interred in cremation niches.

The cemetery has another 40 acres that have not been built out.

The demand for burials has slowed in the past couple of years, Jurasky said, as people opted for less expensive ways to deal with death in the wake of the economic downturn.

But by late January, the cemetery business, down about 10 percent at the time,

started coming back to life.

Since then, there's been an increase in cremated burials, traditional burials, burial site sales, and pre-planning services. Business is up as much as 15 percent, year-over-year, she said.

People who've been holding on to cremated remains are starting to look for a more permanent residence for their loved ones.

"Now all of a sudden, they've decided to take the ashes they've kept on the mantel, on the piano, and in the closet and bury the remains," she said.

Jurasky is overseeing the development and construction of a new 3,200 square-foot administration building.

The original office, built in the mid-50s, has been expanded during the ensuing decades.

"They just kept adding on in the 60s and 70s," Jurasky said, laughing.

Famous names

Fresh white carnations are placed twice a week, on Thursdays and Saturdays, at Frank Sinatra's grave site on the grounds of Desert Memorial Park.

Jurasky said a man from Chicago, who'd been going through a rough time physically, was inspired by Sinatra during the crooner's own health struggles with dementia, heart and kidney disease, and bladder cancer.

Although he'd never met Sinatra, "as a way to give back" to the singer, he set up a trust fund to continue the gesture in perpetuity.

Like Sinatra, the burial site of former congressman and Palm Springs Mayor Sonny Bono is a popular stop for visitors touring the area.

But the burial ceremony for the popular entertainers differed dramatically.

Jurasky, who was at both, said, "The cemetery was on lock down for Sinatra," who died May 14, 1998 at the age

ACROSS THE VALLEY



The Desert Memorial Park burial site of former California congressman and Palm Springs Mayor Sonny Bono is a popular stop for visitors touring the area.

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of 82.

Police swept the bushes on the perimeter of the cemetery to make sure fans didn't sneak in.

"The whole thing was tented over," she said. "The family wanted to keep it private."

Hundreds of fans stood outside the cemetery during

the service.

The burial ceremony for Bono, who died Jan. 5, 1998 in a skiing accident, at the age of 62, was open to the public.