

Time to Remember... they are children



Russ Allison

By Russ Allison, CEO of The Necropolis Springvale

The loss of a life is rarely easy for a family. This situation is even more traumatic when a child dies before the parents.

The children's area of the cemetery often elicits the greatest emotional response from community group tours and other visitors to the cemetery. Confronted by windmills, ornaments and the sight of a mother sitting at a baby's grave, visitors are reminded how lucky they have been and at times of a loss they may have experienced.

Highly emotional reactions amongst both general cemetery visitors and the actual friends and relatives of those interred were far more likely before we re-established our children's area. In the past they were often aghast seeing the variety of ornaments, weathered soft toys, irregular fences and trinkets placed on and around graves. As in all things, what appeals to one family can be quite disturbing for another. These feelings were often reflected in comments made and confrontations with our staff.

This placed our employees who regularly interacted with the young mothers and fathers, siblings and the grandparents of the baby in a precarious position. Staff are expected to enforce policy in relation to what can and cannot be left at a grave yet they also feel the full brunt of emotional outbursts. This occurs when something arguably is not quite right, has gone missing, has been removed or where trinkets on a neighbouring grave spill onto an adjoining site.



Maintenance was difficult in early 2003



Work in Progress April 2003

Understandably, staff were reluctant to strictly enforce memorialisation policy in these circumstances, despite its clarity.

At The Necropolis Springvale the lawn grave, interment fee and plaque were all provided at a significantly subsidised fee. The lawn grave ornamentation policy clearly stated that only fresh flowers and a plaque flush with lawn was acceptable.

Staff increasingly turned a blind eye, over the last decade, allowing recent interments to be commemorated during the initial months of visitation with a variety of miscellaneous ornaments,

windmills, wind chimes etc. This compassionate response to a family's perceived needs in turn created a more serious problem.

It appeared families started trying to out do each other. Picket fences were erected (often encroaching onto neighbouring graves), pebble mix and concrete was poured as grave markers, sunflowers and bumblebees on wooden posts were inserted next to plaques and teddy bears were attached to adjoining trees. Maintenance of the graves and plaques became impossible for staff and we had created 'a catch 22'.

Some families wanted the area cleaned up. Others indicated they had chosen it because they liked what they saw. Like all cemeteries, we also faced a myriad of public liability and occupational health and safety issues and had no choice but to confront the situation.

With strategic guidance from professional counsellors, we communicated directly with families. We surveyed and listened to their needs, held focus groups and explained our situation. Anticipating it would be easier to implement change if families had a visual impression of what we were trying to achieve, we engaged Paul Laycock and Florence Jaquet Landscape Architects to assist with the design. They created artists' impressions of what the area would look like if we stripped everything then completely re-established the site.

Some families and sections of the media were opposed to the redevelopment. Fortunately, the bulk of the community acknowledged that our identification of the risks was realistic. They also appreciated the expense, time and effort involved in our consultative process.

It became clear that families had very straight forward needs. They wanted:

- to feel secure and safe when visiting their own space
- areas in which to leave personalised memorabilia
- the surrounds to be colourful
- us to implement rules clarifying exactly what was permitted
- consistent enforcement to avoid this situation happening again

Implementing the agreed solution involved:

- temporarily removing plaques and granite bases
- disposing of memorabilia that families had not collected
- installing memorial beds and edging at the head of the graves to provide an area for plaques and mementoes
- completely freeing the lawn grave surface area of any memorabilia
- providing plantings of annuals within the bed, effectively providing soft demarcation between graves



Above: a much tidier outlook. Inset: sign, policy side, the policy is detailed below

- repositioning the plaques in new positions within the bed
- permanently displaying the ornamentation rules in the area
- management empowering staff to enforce the new rules fairly and consistently
- consistently adopting the approach that if deposited memorabilia is outside the rules, it goes straight in the bin.

The feedback from families and funeral directors alike has been outstanding. The area looks better, is easier to maintain and creates a more appropriate environment for remembering and moving forward. ■

Should you require further information please contact Russ Allison, C.E.O. The Necropolis Springvale directly by email: russa@necropolis.com.au

The Necropolis Springvale – Children's Lawn Areas Ornamentation Policy	
Acceptable Items within the memorial garden bed	Unacceptable Items
Items provided by the cemetery.	Any grave memorial not supplied by The Necropolis for which a permit has not been issued
Durable toys (weather proof)	All grave borders
Solid concrete (or other non-breakable material) ornaments	Pebbles, stones, stone slabs, pavers or any other form of building materials
Fresh flowers	Artificial and dried flowers
Wind chimes, windmills and ornaments on wooden or plastic sticks (maximum 4 per grave)	Glass items
Solar or battery powered candles	Lanterns and candles
Freestanding weatherproof receptacle (toy box) maximum 400L x 280W x 300Hmm	Perishable items
Plantings by The Necropolis	Any plants planted into the ground
	Any items likely to rust
	Any items that are broken or in poor condition
	Any items with hooks, spikes or sharp edges