

Crematorium holds open house to demystify process

November 13, 2012 | By Barbara Brotman, Chicago Tribune reporter

Vicki Grantham of the Cremation Society of Illinois slid open a gray metal door. "This is where everything starts," she said. Visitors peered into a huge room chilled to 35 degrees and fitted with stacks of long metal shelves on each side. Homewood Mayor Richard Hofeld backed away a few steps.

He supports cremation and intends at some point to be a consumer. He carries a Cremation Society membership card in his wallet. Still, he found the sight of the cooler where bodies are kept slightly discomfiting. "We know it's going to happen, but we don't want to think about it," he said.

On Monday, Gerald Sullivan, president of the Cremation Society of Illinois, welcomed visitors to not just think about the cremation process, but tour the premises of the family-owned company's new crematory in Homewood.



Blue balloons marked the turnoff into the complex. Hofeld cut a ceremonial ribbon. A white tent in the parking lot served hot dogs, potato salad and cookies. Staffers like Grantham, the company's comptroller, gave tours.

"We want this whole thing to be transparent," said Sullivan, whose company has 10 locations in northern Illinois. "We like people to have information to make good decisions."

He took some ribbing over the open house. Several people he invited asked him, "Who wants to see a crematorium?" he said.

But Sullivan, a gregarious man with a sense of humor — there is an urn labeled "Ashes of Obnoxious Teenagers" in his office — thinks a lot of people do.

"Wouldn't you be interested in seeing something you haven't seen before and has a little taboo attached?" he said.

Bob and Charlotte Sommerfeld were very interested. The retirees from Orland Park are members of the Cremation Society and have prepaid cremation plans.

"We wanted to see what we would be going through individually," said Charlotte Sommerfeld as she and her husband had lunch in the tent.

They were not squeamish at addressing the matter of death.

"It's part of life, really," Bob Sommerfeld said.

Crematory open houses are unusual, but more operators are starting to offer them, said Barbara Kemmis, executive director of the Cremation Association of North America, a Wheeling-based trade group, who attended Monday's event.

"They see it as a way to demystify the process ... and show families that you can trust the people you're working with," she said.

The idea elicits varying reactions. "There are different levels of the 'ick' factor," she said. "Some people are really curious about what happens. Some people don't want to know."

When Eberhardt-Stevenson Funeral Home and Crematory in Clintonville, Wis. held an open house in July, "we asked if they wanted to see us fire it up," said President Scott Stevenson.

They did.

"So we actually fired it up and showed what happened," he said. Through the open doors, people "could actually see the flames within the chamber."

At the Cremation Society of Illinois' open house, visitors stood in the viewing area and looked through a glass wall at the auto loader, a raised track that pushes a container holding a body into the cremation chamber.

During a cremation, families can look through this glass to watch their loved one enter the chamber, Sullivan said; they can even turn a key to start the process if they want or if their religious tradition requires it.

The natural gas-powered crematory is a "state-of-the-art facility," he said, fuel-efficient and run by computer technology from Europe, where cremation has long been more common than in the U.S. It is operated by a slide-out keyboard beneath a computer screen that displays the temperatures inside. During a cremation, the main chamber reaches 1,600 to 1,700 degrees.

Staffers took small groups through a door into the brightly lit area with a roll-up door for company vans bringing in bodies. The cooler was on one side. On the other was the cremulator, a machine that pulverizes the bones of the grainy initial remains into a fine powder. Next to that was an open-front station where an operator can pour the cremains into an urn, with a special air system that keeps them from inhaling the dust.

The crematory keeps track of each body with a bar code, Sullivan said, so families can be sure they are getting the actual cremains of their loved one.

Cremation is increasingly popular; according to the Cremation Association of North America, last year 42 percent of Americans who died — 37 percent in Illinois — were cremated.

But "people know the cemetery," Sullivan said. "No one says, 'Hey, let's go down and go to the crematory.' "

But the end of the day in Homewood, several dozen had.

blbrotman@tribune.com