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BURIAL PLACES

Broker matches buyers and sellers of cemetery lots



REX C. CURRY/Special Contributor

Joan Muser, owner of Lots for Less, helps grieving families quickly find burial plots at reduced prices. She matches them with sellers who no longer want theirs because they have moved or plan to be interred elsewhere.

Making permanent arrangements

By **BOB MOOS**

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Joan Muser is known as Dallas' grande dame of gravesites – a real estate agent of sorts.

She's built a successful business helping grieving families find final resting places in North Texas cemeteries at a moment's notice and usually at half of the market price.

In a typical year, Lots for Less coordinates about 100 transactions, introducing people needing cemetery plots or crypts to people wanting to sell their unused burial rights.

And just as in real estate, the most important things buyers look for in a graves-

ite are location and location, Ms. Muser said. In the case of her clients, though, that means a convenient drive for survivors and an idyllic setting.

"Cemeteries aren't for the dearly departed as much as they are for the living," she said. "When families come to pay their respects, they want something by water and with a bench or a few trees."

Margaret Hastings of Dallas said Ms. Muser treated her "like a sister" when her husband died.

"Thanks to her, I got through a very traumatic time," she said.

Ms. Muser visited with the widow about her wishes and then drove her to a cemetery where she showed her a lot underneath a big shade tree.

Resources

Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery

214-467-3374; www.cem.va.gov

Funeral Consumers Alliance of North Texas

972-509-5686;

www.texasfuneralconsumers.org

International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association

1-800-645-7700; www.icfa.org

Lots for Less

972-488-2836; www.lots-for-less.com

SOURCE: *Dallas Morning News* Research

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Broker finds niche in cemetery lots

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"It was absolutely perfect," Ms. Hastings said.

Ms. Muser opened her business after working in sales at large funeral home companies for 25 years and growing weary of the corporate grind.

"I was looking for something more hands-on, and I was fortunate to find it," she said. "There's a lot of hand-holding with what I do now."

When Delores Burch's husband died, she turned to Lots for Less for help in buying two side-by-side plots near other family members at Restland Cemetery. A casket salesman had told her about Ms. Muser.

The two women met at the cemetery, where Ms. Muser gave her a tour of several lots she was helping individuals sell privately. Ms. Burch picked out two adjacent plots – one for her husband and another for herself.

"Joan was a miracle worker," the Dallas woman said. "She was able to locate plots in the section of the cemetery I wanted, and the lots cost less than half of what they would have otherwise."

Unburied expenses

Jim Bates, president of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of North Texas, said the market price for gravesites surprises many families.

"People focus on the funeral and treat the burial almost as an afterthought," he said. "Then some of them discover the

cemetery expenses are almost as much as the funeral costs."

A cemetery's charge for the right to use a burial space ranges from \$1,000 on the fringes of the Dallas-Fort Worth area to \$15,000 in the heart of North Dallas, Ms. Muser said.

Then there are charges for the grave marker, the burial vault, and the opening and closing of the grave. Those can add several thousand dollars more to the total, she said.

Ms. Muser said many of her buyers are referred to her by clergy, funeral directors and others trying to save families money.

"Joan has carved out a nice niche for herself because families usually don't know where to look for more affordable plots," Mr. Bates said. "With Joan, you make one call to her, and she does the rest."

Lots lined up

Ms. Muser can often meet buyer requests for a cemetery lot within hours because she's already lined up and screened more than 300 private sellers at two dozen area cemeteries.

People put their plots on the market usually because they have moved away or made other arrangements, such as cremation.

Others have inherited gravesites they know they won't use.

A seller pays Lots for Less a negotiated fee, based on the plot's value, to handle the transfer of ownership.

Jean McCloud and her husband had

bought burial rights at Grove Hill Cemetery and had planned to be interred there until they found a more appealing, less costly alternative.

Because he was a veteran, the two are entitled to be laid to rest at Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery. His remains are there now, and she will follow when her time comes.

A buyer's market

Ms. Cloud sold her burial rights through Lots for Less. Though she received less than the cemetery's sales price at the time, she was still satisfied.

"It's hard to sell a gravesite," she said. "I was just happy to find someone who wanted it."

It's a buyers' market, said Bob Fells, an executive with the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association, a trade group.

Many cemeteries have little interest in buying back lots, or they offer little for them, he said.

Some people try to sell their gravesites themselves on the Internet but discover it can take months or even years to find buyers, Mr. Fells said.

"Most seniors aren't Internet-savvy, so few think to go on the Web and shop for cemetery plots," he said. "Maybe the boomers will be more inclined to buy lots online when more become old enough to worry about such things," he said.

Until then, Ms. Muser says she'll wait patiently by her phone for the next caller.



Lots For Less

Joan Muser, M.S., founder of **Lots For Less**, recently celebrated 30 years of consulting with families about funeral alternatives and mentoring others to follow in her footsteps. Other than 3 years in the Los Angeles area, the Dallas Metroplex has been her home for 35 years.

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