

Grave situation

Private funeral homes a dying breed owner says

By CHRISTINA OCCHIPINTI



Michael Rosenthal, pictured here at Mount Eden Cemetery in Valhalla, opened Rosenthal Memorial Chapel in Pleasantville because he felt there was a need for an alternative to corporate homes in Westchester.

Michael Rosenthal never enjoyed the corporate environment and worrying about bottom lines or brand recognition. So he struck out on his own and opened his own business, a private funeral home.

"Most of the Jewish funeral homes in the area are corporate-owned and conglomerate-run. They want corporate directors, corporate initiatives..." said Rosenthal, principal of Rosenthal Memorial Chapel in Pleasantville, which opened November 2006. "I would prefer to show customers how good I am rather than tell them. At the end of the day I have to respond to what the families, community and clergy needs, and not what Wall Street wants."

Before opening Rosenthal Memorial, Rosenthal was employed by Service Corporation International (SCI), which dubs itself as the largest provider of funeral, cremation and cemetery services in North America. As of Sept. 30, 2006, the Houston based company had a network of more than 1,300 funeral homes and cemeteries in 41 states and seven Canadian provinces.

A small percentage of funeral homes in Westchester are privately owned. Of the funeral homes in the county, 90 are corporate-owned and 10 are private. Rosenthal decided to go private because he felt there was a need for this alternative.

"The corporate giants aren't really Jewish-based," he said. "They don't know what is and what it takes to run (a) Jewish funeral home -- rapport building, community involvement and relationships."

Holding a funeral service at a privately owned venue has its benefits, which a corporate-owned facility may not be able to provide, he said.

"I can put the more personal touches on a funeral that I don't think corporate pays attention to. They are basing their services on volume and dollars," Rosenthal said. "I want the worst situation for the family to be as easy as possible for them. I can keep the cost factors down because I have a low overhead being an independent.

"I'm a Jewish funeral director, and I'm also Jewish. I have a little bit of an understanding of the terminology and nuances that are associated with a Jewish funeral. Many funeral directors are more comfortable having families come to a funeral home. I prefer to do in-house arrangements by going to their homes and meeting in a comfortable setting for them. My focus is on one family at a time.

The primary difference between privately owned facilities and their corporate counterparts is the person or people behind the decision making, said John J. Hogan Jr., president of the National Funeral Directors Association and manager of Fogarty Funeral Home in Queens, which has been with SCI since 1993.

"I think the biggest difference is that individually owned funeral homes make their own decisions, whereas people who work for corporate-owned conglomerates have to do what corporate culture dictates," Hogan said. "While that hasn't hampered us in any way, other people may not want to work that way. As long as the funeral director is successful, (corporate companies) usually let them do what they've always done.

"A funeral director that owns his own funeral home is very concerned with protecting reputation and the continuity of their service, whereas someone who is working for someone else may not have that same goal in mind."

Regardless of the type of ownership, Hogan said, the service should be a priority.

"I don't think there should be any major difference in using (a private or a corporate owned funeral home). The most important thing we do as funeral directors is we service people at one of the worst times of their lives," he said. "It's our sworn duty, guess you could say, to help them through that as best we can."