



Philip G. Haddad Jr., president of Westland Services Corp., at one of the gravesites Westland cares for.

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➤ Haddad has been a licensed funeral director in Massachusetts since 1967. He is a minority owner of Nordgren Memorial Chapel, Worcester, Massachusetts.

➤ He began Westland Services Corp. in 1987, after researching the concept for 10 years. Westland clients sign 25-year contracts for maintenance and beautification of their gravesites, including monument cleaning, landscaping and planting or securing of flowers. There are four basic contracts offering increasing service levels.

➤ Haddad explains how the company got its name: "The sun rises in the east at the birth of the day and sets in the west lands. People are buried in the west land of their lives. Thus the name Westland Services Corp."

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REMEMBRANCE

Funeral director Philip Haddad Jr. runs a gravesite maintenance service and says he's not part of the "death-care industry." What he provides is "respectful remembrance," which he believes is an antidote to rising cremation rates and the key to a healthy future for the funeral service and cemetery profession.



Westland Services Corp. provides maintenance and beautification for consumer clients' cemetery property.

Funeral director sees his cemetery service as key to industry's future

What's a funeral director doing running a company dedicated to superior maintenance of gravesites? Philip Haddad Jr. says he's doing what his colleagues should be doing: meeting the deepest needs of families.

Too many people in the funeral service and cemetery profession are instead focused on reacting to trends, he says. He believes their behavior is accelerating the growth of cremation.

His company, Westland Services Corp., based in Westborough, Massachusetts, provides individualized, long-term maintenance of the gravesites, mausoleums or niches of clients, regardless of where in North America they are located. The company is on the brink of a planned rapid expansion.

Haddad says not only is he unconcerned about the increase in the cremation rate, if his business plan is successful, "Westland is going to be savior of the death care industry

as we know it today."

A bold claim Haddad backs with a strong belief that many people are choosing cremation not because they prefer it but because they feel they have no other choice. He believes many of those people would prefer a traditional burial and gravesite, but only if it will be lovingly cared for, and they have no family members willing or able to take on that traditional duty.

Thus the company's motto, "Respectful Remembrance." That, Haddad says, is what people want.

ICCFA Magazine talked to Haddad about how he got into the business of caring for graves, what exactly he does for clients that differs from what an endowed cemetery does, how he interacts with cemetery personnel and how he plans to transform what has up until now been a low-profile business into a nationally recognized brand.

Tell us a bit about your background in funeral service.

We are not part of the death-care industry; we're not about memorialization, which is associated with death. We created an entirely new industry, the remembrance industry.—*Philip G. Haddad Jr.*



The family who owns this mausoleum in Oak Grove Cemetery, Fall River, Massachusetts, no longer lives in the area. Their contract with Westland calls for the company to be there every day. Westland did the landscaping around the building. New artificial flowers are placed inside once a month. The mausoleum is ventilated for two hours once a month, and during that time the entire inside is cleaned, “even though it may not need much,” Westlands President Philip Haddad said. “It’s immaculate.”

REMEMBRANCE

I’ve been a licensed funeral director since 1967 in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I worked for several funeral homes and then bought interest in a couple. I am now a minority owner of Nordgren Memorial Chapel in Worcester.

How did you come to start a company focused on the cemetery side of the business?

In the late ’60s and early ’70s, I noticed that often the husband would get ill and die, with the wife taking care of him and then of the funeral arrangements and finally of the gravesite, going out on a regular basis to bring flowers and maintain the site.

Finally the day would come when the widow would decide to move closer to her children, or maybe she would start having health problems. In either case, she would no longer be able to take care of the gravesite, and it bothered her a great deal.

As a funeral director, I was the confidant to these widows, who would come to me and ask, “Phil, is there someone who can take care of my gravesite?” And since I had handled the husband’s funeral and had the prearrangement contract for her as well, I would say, “Don’t worry about it. You go ahead and move to be closer to your children. I’ll take care of it for you.”

When Memorial Day came, I would pick up some flowers and plant them at the gravesite. I didn’t charge the family; I did it as a courtesy. Well, one gravesite turned into three, and ultimately I was taking care of 23 of them.

That’s quite a hobby you had.

It’s a matter of being full service, of being there for your families. When it got to be 23 gravesites, I had flowers delivered to the funeral home and would spend three days going to all the graves, planting the flowers and taking photographs of what I’d done to send to the families.

Eventually I said to myself, “I need to come up with a way to solve this problem for families.”

I spent 10 years, from 1977 to 1987, doing research and coming up with how to take care of gravesites for families, regardless of where those sites were. (The 23 graves I’d been taking care of were all within a 20-mile radius of the funeral home.)

I took my family with me and we traveled, going to every state except Washington, Alaska and Hawaii. I visited cemeteries and funeral homes all over the

country. Eventually I came up with what I thought was a wonderful plan to personally take care of the gravesites for the families, no matter where they were in the country. Westland opened its doors in February 1987.

So when you say you did research, you’re not talking about hiring a marketing firm?

Not for that portion of it, because I knew the need was there, I knew it wasn’t something that only people in the Northeast wanted. I had been a funeral director since 1967, and I just knew the need was there.

But I wanted to get a sense of how families all over the country were handling this; I had to get out there and find out firsthand.

Still, when we started out, we pretty much stayed local with our service, though if a family had one or two gravesites across the country, say in Denver or San Diego, they wanted taken care of, we could handle that.

Exactly how do you take care of graves outside your immediate area?

How we accomplish the work is our trade secret. After being in business for 20 years, we still don’t have any competition because no one knows how we do it, how we provide customized plantings and maintenance schedules at gravesites anywhere in North America.

There are a couple of companies that will take care of a gravesite in a particular site, on an annual basis. Our contracts cover 25 years of service, and can be for a site anywhere in North America.

We wanted the contracts to be even longer, but the government agencies we worked with in putting together our program (the IRS, the FTC and the Department of Commerce) said the contracts had to be for a reasonable period of time, so we settled on 25 years.

We spent many years in putting together a program. We use technology, and we have a nationwide network of craftsmen who take care of each and every gravesite the way the family wants. (The families choose the flowers and plantings we use.)

Families often will say, “What happens after 25 years?” We have options for additional 25-year periods that are factored into every one of our contracts.

What exactly does Westland do?

We have several different contracts. All cover 25 years, but prices range from



In a cemetery where plantings are allowed, Westland provides extensive landscaping for a client at Willow Cemetery in Lynnfield, Massachusetts.

\$3,900 to \$13,900 for the 25 years, depending on the frequency of maintenance the family wants. I tell people that our least expensive plan costs \$3 a week, so for the price of a cup of coffee and a donut once a week a family can have a gravesite taken care of for the next 25 years.

For our minimum contract, which we call the Tribute, 30 to 60 days before Memorial Day we clean up the gravesite and fertilize the flower beds, assuming the cemetery allows plantings. A week before Memorial Day, we plant flowers of the family's choice. At the end of the season, around October, we clean up the site again, make sure it's fertilized and put in a winter basket or wreath.

We take color photographs of all the plantings and baskets and send them to the family. I have roughly 10,000 sets of color photographs of the plantings we've done for our clients.

We also offer the Legacy, the Executive and the Trustee plans. As the levels go up, we visit the gravesite more often, cleaning and maintaining the site and the monument. At the Trustee level, we're there once a week, and we do an additional planting the first week of September.

Of course we have to abide by cemetery regulations. Many cemeteries don't allow planting; we are only allowed to put out trays of flowers. If the cemetery limits the plantings we can do, we'll supplement the plan with a couple of services from the plan above it.

Do you think cemeteries overregulate gravesite decoration?

Right now cemeteries throughout the country are putting too much emphasis on telling families what they *can't* do instead of reinforcing what they *can* do, and this creates a negative perception, not only of

cemeterians but of funeral directors.

In some instances the changes are warranted, because families have taken liberties to an extreme, but in other cases cemeteries change their rules and regulations to make maintenance easier and less costly by eliminating shrubbery and flowers except for special dates.

Families who have taken care of their gravesites, who are at the cemetery on a regular basis, are not terribly pleased with the rules and regulation changes that do not allow them to respectfully care for their love ones' gravesites.

The public's perception is that cemeteries are restricting personalized, respectful remembrance, though costs continue to increase. Could all of this contribute to the increased interest in cremation?

You cannot do business today the way you did business in the 20th century, back in the 1950s and the 1960s. The client we're all dealing with today is an entirely new, well educated, sophisticated client who's looking for value in every expenditure of money.

People want us to solve their problems for them, not tell them what they aren't allowed to do. The future of the funeral service and cemetery business is based on listening to clients, learning what is important to them and then solving their problems. You can't prejudge families the way so many funeral directors and cemetery folks are doing today.

When families can't see value for their investment of money, when they feel they cannot respectfully remember their loved ones, the death-care industry implodes.

Are most of your contracts for taking care of traditional burial gravesites? I understand you have one \$125,000 contract for daily mausoleum maintenance.

We'll do whatever the family wants, within the rules and regulations of the cemetery. We take care of individual family mausoleums, community mausoleums, traditional upright gravesites, memorial park gravesites, niches.

We even handle several names at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., for families who can't get there to do what they'd like. Usually we place something at the wall twice a year and send a photo to the family.

What do you do for niches?

There's a little partial vase that fits in the

niche, and we will put live or artificial flowers in it on whatever days the family selects.

You said you will customize what you do according to what the family wants. Do you have any examples beyond allowing the family to choose the flowers?

We have a Polish family who specified that all flowers must be red and white, the colors of the Polish flag.

In another case, I met with a woman whose husband used to sit on the deck every morning, drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. He'd watch the cardinals and listen to them sing, and sing back to them. She asked if it would be possible to include a photo of a cardinal with the flowers at his gravesite.

I found a Beanie Baby cardinal and put it in the tray of flowers. When I met her at the cemetery, she started crying when she saw it. She told me I couldn't have found anything better. I provided Beanie Baby cardinals for each of her six children, as well as the photo we always take of the decorated gravesite. A new cardinal is placed in each tray of flowers on Memorial Day and in the winter basket.

This past Memorial Day, we sent 983 color photos to people in nursing homes, the majority of them widows who can't wait to receive the photograph of the family gravesite she can no longer care for personally but which is still cared for and will continue to be cared for after she is interred there as well. It's such positive, respectful remembrance.

We have built our reputations on our service. In almost 20 years, we've never had a complaint, no one's ever defaulted on a contract—and we're talking many, many thousands of contracts.

I say this to everyone in the funeral and cemetery industry: "A life worth living is a life worth remembering." When my dad died of a heart attack, I was 19. We were very, very close. Every day when he left to go to work, he always said to me, "Phil, make me proud." Every day for the last 41 years, I look up and I say, "Dad, I hope I'm making you proud." And that is what is called respectful remembrance.

I don't have time to maintain my own family gravesite the way I want personally, but I have a Westland contract for it. It's a 14-lot gravesite in Hope Cemetery, Worcester. I get out there as often as I can,



Above and below, summer and winter decorations at a gravesite maintained by Westlands in Hope Cemetery, Worcester, Massachusetts.



We found that the third major concern of seniors is, “Who will care for my final resting place when I’m gone?” If we can take care of the gravesite, many families opting for cremation will choose a traditional funeral instead. The trickle-down economics of what Westland can do for the death-care industry is unbelievable. The funeral home gets the full service charge. The casket manufacturer sells a casket. The vault company sells a vault. The cemetery sells a lot. The monument company sells a monument.

—Philip G. Haddad Jr.

but I travel 26 weeks a year and I want to make sure it’s taken care of.

Did you give yourself a discount?

Well, I did, but the funds go into trust and are taken out at a rate of 3 or 4 percent a year over the 25-year period. So I discounted the sales cost, but otherwise the funds needed to be there to pay for the work.

It’s worth noting that our program qualifies as an acceptable spend-down for those planning to make application for Medicaid, the same as irrevocable funeral contracts.

Are you concerned about what effect the increasing cremation rate will have on your business?

Excellent question. I’ve done tremendous research about this, and found that people are cremated today for three reasons. Industry professionals will tell you there are 30 reasons, but there are only three:

1. Religious and spiritual reasons—they believe in it.
2. Financial reasons.
3. Practical reasons. They don’t feel they have an alternative. Their peers have passed away; their children are scattered all over the country, or they don’t have children. They don’t want to be cremated, but they think there’s no one to take care of their gravesite. They don’t want their gravesite to lay barren while the one next to it is lovingly tended. So they’re opting for a means of disposition they don’t really want.

Our research says tells us 38 to 42 percent of those who intend to be cremated today do not want to be. We’re not foolish enough to think all those people are going to change their minds and sign a contract with us, but we think more than 20 percent of the people who are choosing cremation because they don’t think they have an alternative would opt for a traditional funeral and a gravesite taken care of the way they want it taken care of.

What kind of relationship do you have with the cemeteries where you care for gravesites? Do you go in and introduce yourself?

Cemeteries perform what is called perpetual care, which is turf maintenance. They cut the grass, plow and maintain the roads, whatever is needed in that area. Westland provides personalized, long-term beautification and maintenance based on what the family wants (and is prepared to pay for), as long as it falls within the rules and regula-

tions of the cemetery.

We do let the cemetery know that we’re maintaining that gravesite on behalf of the family. If the cemetery allows it, we place a little plate on the back of the monument—like the ones monument companies often use—that says “maintained by Westland Services Corp.” This helps our people confirm that they’re at the correct gravesite.

Do you find that cemeteries consider you to be some sort of competition?

When we first started, the answer was “yes.” Once they see that all we’re going to do is beautify a particular gravesite, they see that we are not a threat to them. In fact, once they realize that, they generally welcome us, and a lot of the business we’ve gotten is from being recommended by cemetery superintendents.

How many offices do you have?

Right now we have 22 throughout the country, in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Colorado, Vermont, Maine, Connecticut, Rhode Island, upstate New York and Michigan. I have two offices in Canada, in Niagara Falls and Belleville, both in Ontario.

We have 22 full-time people, and many part-time people and people with whom we contract to do the work at the gravesite. The most important thing is that local craftsmen do the maintenance. Who they are and how I accomplish this is our trade secret at this point.

We’re in the process of opening up 389 offices that will cover the entire country. We will have somewhere between 1,200 and 1,300 plan counselors who will meet with families to design programs for them.

Once we have a major portion of the country up and running, I will go public with how we do the work, and when I do that I’ll be on the front page of every newspaper in the country.

That’s an ambitious expansion plan. Is this a long-term plan? How are you going to go about hiring that many employees—or will they be contractors?

They will be our representatives, independent entities who will be in business for themselves, but not by themselves. They will meet with the families, many of whom will be referred (as they are now) by elder law and estate attorneys, financial planners, by funeral directors, Hospice workers—anyone who might have been dealing with seniors as they navigate

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through the aging process.

It's a pretty aggressive three-year plan. But we've been in business for years. I've got a plan to get the right representatives in place, people who will be well educated in the issues that seniors deal with.

In order to educate myself to become full service for our client families, I became certified as a senior advisor through the Society of Certified Senior Advisors in Denver, Colorado. They train people in the more than 20 areas that deal with the issues seniors have questions about.

The Society of Certified Senior Advisors is setting up a network of 1,200 teams throughout the country with a representative on each of those teams for each of those disciplines, and Westland will have representatives on those teams.

We need to have representatives educated in the various disciplines of concern to seniors because families ask us where to go for financial planning, for long-term care insurance, for a durable power of attorney, for what cemetery to use.

They might ask us to recommend a

funeral director. We always advise them to go back to the funeral director they've dealt with before. If they don't have a funeral director, we recommend one with whom we have a strategic alliance and who has the same approach to solving families' problems that we have.

What we do is personal; Westland has no clients, it has Westland family members. Our plan counselors meet with the family and that family becomes part of our family for 25 years.

Within the next two or three years, there are going to be 10,000 people turning 65 on a daily basis. There are lots of people out there now trying to position themselves to capitalize on the senior market. We're very, very selective about making referrals.

We only want to deal with funeral directors and cemeteries that are on the court and playing in the game today. Many of the folks who are trying to do business the same way they did 30 or 40 years ago aren't going to be in business in 10 or 15 years. Their business is going to

dry up unless they become progressive and proactive.

Times have changed, the client has changed and is more sophisticated, but families are still vulnerable. The most important thing a funeral director does is not preplan or execute the funeral, it's answer the questions the family has and be there for that family, not only at the time of death but after the death.

That's what Westland is doing and why it will continue to be successful as we branch out.

I couldn't care less about money; Westland is there to solve the problem. If you solve the problem seniors have, provide them with the respectful remembrance and peace of mind they deserve, the business will come and everybody will be successful. Respectful remembrance allows people to live their remaining years knowing that the gravesite of their loved one is being maintained today, and when they pass they're going to be respectfully remembered in the future. □