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Cedar Park Is a Place People Go for Fun; Also, It's a Cemetery

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Lawrence Anspach Believes That Serving the Living Is Good for His Business

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CHICAGO—At the Cedar Park Cemetery and Funeral Home, death isn't taken too seriously.

Owner Lawrence C. Anspach's approach to running Cedar Park includes Easter-egg hunts, free burials for victims of drunken drivers, pumpkin-decorating contests, tram rides through the graveyard, a cemetery photo contest and an October special—buy one plot, get one for a penny.

"You really expect to walk in there one day and see a Ferris wheel," says Diane Morehouse, whose aunt and uncle are buried in Cedar Park.

Such remarks don't surprise, or particularly bother, Mr. Anspach, the tan, talkative 35-year-old who has upset the death business in Chicago. Mr. Anspach, who doesn't even wear somber, funereal suits (yellow shirts and bright ties are more his style), believes that cemeteries are for the living. He also believes that, given the cut-throat competition existing in the funeral and cemetery business, a funeral director who wants to do well must do his best to attract attention. So he has courted his neighbors, turned his graveyard into a local gathering place and dreamed up many a scheme to make Chicago take notice.

Garden Plots

"IBM does the same things when it moves into a town," Mr. Anspach says. "Just because we're a cemetery doesn't mean we should hide in a corner."

Mr. Anspach is neither the first nor the only cemetery owner to try unconventional promotions. At California's Forest Lawn cemeteries, children enter Valentine-designing contests and, in December, visit Santa Claus. Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati makes garden plots available to city people who want to grow vegetables, and Boy Scouts use 420 undeveloped acres for survival trips. Wisconsin Memorial Park in Milwaukee celebrated last Mother's Day with a swing band and a barbershop quartet performing in its chapel.

But Mr. Anspach, whose family has owned the 93-acre Cedar Park for 63 years,



Lawrence C. Anspach

seems to have carried promotions further than anybody else. He sponsors a "Heaven Can Wait" six-mile run through the cemetery each summer. He offered a "\$200-off" coupon, to be applied to "complete funeral arrangements at the time of death." But you had better hurry; the offer expires Dec. 31. To community groups, he offers a slide show called "Grave Happenings." A brochure says the presentation will explain "the ins and outs of 'life' in a unique cemetery and funeral home." Cedar Park promises that the show will be done "in a light and humorous way."

Mr. Anspach hands out to customers sponges on which are printed the cemetery's address and a little poem: "Wipe out emotional overspend. Have a sensible final end. Don't leave your loved ones in

the dark. Tell them you bought at Cedar Park."

Says Joel Lowenstein, who owns a cemetery in nearby Elmhurst, Ill.: "Larry Anspach is one of the most outstanding marketers in the country. What he has done has brought competition to the funeral industry."

Needless to say, not everybody in the business agrees.

"He kind of fools around with people at the wrong time," says Donald B. Jarka, who owns the Lawn funeral home on Chicago's South Side. "If he wants a circus, he should start a circus."

Mr. Anspach says he is just reacting to changes in the cemetery business. Cremations today account for 10% of body disposals in Chicago, twice the rate prevailing 10 years ago. And Cedar Park doesn't operate a crematory. So cemetery owners such as Mr. Anspach must come up with new ways to make money. Some cemeteries also operate their own funeral homes; some are pushing burial arrangements made before death and some, as Mr. Anspach has done, are putting on the glitz. "The funeral industry is progressing," he says. "It's much more consumer-oriented."

Not all of Mr. Anspach's promotions have worked out, of course. Would-be winners of a Cedar Park contest were supposed to grab one of 1,000 helium balloons released near Lake Michigan, then come to Cedar Park to collect a prize. But an east wind blew most of the balloons into the lake.

Offers of free burial to victims of drunken drivers—a Cedar Park press release and mailing last May described it as the Cedar Park "Digs Drunk Drivers" program—haven't had any takers, either. Mr. Anspach figures most people didn't ever hear of the offer.

Mr. Anspach says his promotions have attracted business from as far away as Iowa and Michigan. That is a big change from 1973, he says, when he took over from his father, an accountant who hadn't taken much interest in the cemetery. Mr. Anspach repaired the marble fountains, imported delicate Italian statuary, and added swans, peacocks, deer, waterfalls and gazebos. He built the funeral home in 1983, complete with skylights, a lush rock garden and a fruit-bearing banana tree. Mr. Anspach says the business is earning 20% more than it did under his father. The cemetery's revenue now exceeds \$1 million a year, according to Mr. Anspach.

For the most part, he is popular with his neighbors on Chicago's South Side. Lot owner Maria Rask says her granddaughter asked to visit Cedar Park for her ninth birthday. A cross-country team holds foot-races there every fall, with loudspeakers blaring the theme song from the movie "Rocky." Day campers visit the cemetery on field trips, and Mr. Anspach gives the children peanuts to feed his deer. The youngsters seem to enjoy the visit, though some of their elders are a bit put off. Says Tracy McLemor, a 19-year-old camp counselor: "I'm afraid of dead people."

Marian Stegenga and Paul Wenskunas were recently married at the cemetery, on the bridge over the duck pond. The middle-aged couple met feeding the reindeer at Cedar Park and courted there, too. Now they claim to stop by every day. "We park at favorite places and kiss in front of the duck pond," Mrs. Wenskunas laughs.

Oddly, Mr. Anspach himself doesn't plan to spend eternity in Cedar Park. He hopes that by the time he dies, a space-burial service will be able to launch his ashes into orbit.