

TWO LONG-TIME CREST LAWN EMPLOYEES **REFLECT ON THE YEARS**

By Laura Militana
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A lot of history lies with “Ms. Jo,” the familiar face who greets people at the door of Crest Lawn Funeral Home.



And at 86 years of age, she has no intention of retiring anytime soon, celebrating more than 55 years in the business.

“Everybody has respect for Ms. Jo,” Arlis Phillips, maintenance supervisor who has worked with Crest Lawn for 40 years, said.

(Mary Jo Rogers, left, fondly referred by everyone as “Ms. Jo,” hugs Arlis Dwayne Phillips in the

chapel of Crest Lawn Funeral Home. Rogers celebrates more than 50 years of service at the funeral home, while Phillips, maintenance supervisor, celebrates more than 40 years).

In fact, Miss Jo is the last remaining connection to the original owners of the cemetery.

“We were in the funeral business before purchasing Crest Lawn Cemetery in 1957,” “Ms. Jo,” whose full name is Mary Jo Rogers, said. “We owned Whitson Funeral Home and were there for 20 and half years before we sold it.”

Miss Jo’s husband, Gene, began as manager of Whitson Funeral Home in 1945 before they purchased it.

In those years, she’s seen a number of changes.

“At the time we were at Whitson, we were the only ambulances here,” she recalled. “That was a tremendous change. Funerals are so different now. And of course there was no cremation back then, either.”

She said funerals today are geared more toward celebrations, which are “wonderful.”

Each family that has utilized Crest Lawn’s services has meant a lot to Ms. Jo.

“There are so many families I’ve met through the years,” she said. “They all mean a lot to me through the years. And it has changed a lot of things for me, helped me get through an awful lot of things.”

Whitson Funeral Home was sold in 1972, but Gene and Ms. Jo bought Crest Lawn Cemetery in 1957, two years after it was established, from Mary Lou Reeves.

“Gene always wanted a funeral home and a cemetery, but we didn’t make it that far,” she said. “When Gene started this cemetery, we were partners with the Hubert and Martha Bennett families. Gene was president and Martha Bennett had been secretary and treasurer all these years until she died.”

The funeral home wasn’t built until much later, opening in February of 2003.

Property to establish Oak Lawn Cemetery in Sparta was purchased in 1958.

Over the years, the funeral home and cemetery experienced many changes – mainly seeing an increase in the number of people buried there, along with ownership.

“When we sold to SCI (Service Corp. International in 1995), the man who bought this was our regional sales manager for SCI,” she said. “He was familiar with the cemetery and staff and the area. He came into my little office one day and said ‘Ms Jo, I have a letter of intent to buy Crest Lawn provide...’ I said, ‘Provided what, Vinne?’ And he said that you stay with me. I said, ‘Vinnie, I don’t know, I’ve been around her a long time.’ Then he said that’s why he wanted me to stay.”

The cemetery has grown immensely over the years, both Ms Jo and Arlis noted.

“Arlis is like a son to me,” Ms. Jo said.

As the cemetery’s maintenance supervisor, Phillips has certainly seen it grow over the years.

“When I started in July of 1973, there were about 600 graves,” Phillips said. “Now we have nearly 6,000 people buried there.”

Oak Lawn, at the time, they had about 200 graves. Now there are about 1,300.

He also noted that they had the first gravedigger in the state.

“It had done a good job, but you couldn’t get into some of these places,” he noted. “In muddy times, you couldn’t use it. We had to hand-dig.”

Working in this field is not for everyone.

“You try to do good for people,” he said. “This is the time they’re at their lowest in life. Something has been taken from them. Maybe you can help or say something- even though it may not be the right thing – but you try to support them.”

The weather plays a factor in his job, but, as Ms Jo said, they never complain.

“This is not a five-day a week job,” he noted. “Not everyone can do this job.”

Working in the maintenance department at Crest Lawn has become somewhat of a family affair. Two of his brothers have worked there, along with his uncle, and now his son works with him.

Ms. Jo said even though working in the funeral business can be sad, but overall rewarding.

“Death is something none of us really look forward to, but it’s making that time as easy for people as possible,” she said. “It helps so much, I think, to have someone that families know and feel close to.”

*Read Crest Lawn Obts. at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>