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Stewards of a Sacred Place

BY MATT COSENTINO | PHOTOS BY ALISON DUNLAP

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES
ENABLE **LAUREL HILL** TO
HONOR ITS RICH HISTORY
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TO COME.

property serves the needs of local families for generations to come. By adopting a litany of sustainable practices, they are ensuring that visitors can take advantage of everything that its two beautiful campuses have to offer long after they are gone.

In short, they take the responsibility of preserving Laurel Hill's 265 acres very seriously.

"Stewardship is one of my favorite words because I think it really captures the feelings that everybody here has for Laurel Hill, from our board of directors to our employees to the families that we serve," says CEO Nancy Goldenberg. "We are all stewards of this land, whether it's our built infrastructure or the natural environment. It's a very special place, and

Laurel Hill was built to endure. Since its founding in 1836, Laurel Hill has become known as one of the region's most distinctive places of eternal rest. It also serves the community by opening up its scenic grounds to visitors looking to exercise, immerse themselves in history, and otherwise bask in the natural beauty of a truly sacred place.

Laurel Hill's current leadership team and staff wants to make sure the picturesque

keeping it that way and doing everything we can to make sure it's preserved is the legacy that we should leave."

Consisting of two cemeteries, Laurel Hill East in Philadelphia and Laurel Hill West in Bala Cynwyd, the property has long been a popular choice as the final resting place for both well-known figures and everyday citizens. Unlike most cemeteries, it has its own funeral home catering to people of all faiths, backgrounds, and cultures. It is also home to an accredited arboretum, spectacular views, and breathtaking natural scenery.

Given the connection to its surroundings, sustainability is an essential piece to every aspect of Laurel Hill's operation.

"Sustainability is really important to our mission and our core values," says Aaron Greenberg, Laurel Hill's arboretum manager. "Part of managing a cemetery and an arboretum like this is you want the landscape to be viable and be available to the public in perpetuity. We have a strong sustainability ethic as an organization."

Both Goldenberg and Greenberg point to Laurel Hill's "Sustainability Squad," a committee of volunteer employees that oversees initiatives such as a recently overhauled recycling program and the transition from gas-powered equipment and vehicles to electric options. Greenberg's staff recycles organic material like soil, leaves, and branches into topsoil and mulch, and uses chemicals only sparingly while focusing on native plantings.

One current project involves the restoration of Laurel Hill's original 1836 gatehouse, the last remaining original building on the East campus, while another is centered on the removal of invasive species on a steep hillside along Kelly Drive. Add in measures like the switch to all LED lighting, the creation of an on-site apiary, and the recycling of flower bulbs left on graves, and it is easy to see why Laurel Hill is considered a leader in sustainability. For further proof, consider Laurel Hill's partnerships with likeminded groups such as the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia, Friends of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail, and the Lower Merion Conservancy.

"When we think of sustainability as an organization, we think very holistically," Goldenberg says. "We also are proponents of sustainability as it pertains to our own staff and their health and well-being. We're in a stressful business dealing with death, and working with grieving families is very draining on people. So we are very cognizant of keeping people healthy, making sure they take walks through the beautiful cemetery, and take breaks when they need breaks, because we have a very hardworking staff."

Going hand in hand with those efforts is Laurel Hill's status as a pioneer in green burial options, which are more environmentally friendly than traditional burials. Nature's Sanctuary, Laurel Hill's original



Nancy Goldenberg, CEO of Laurel Hill



Tom Cavanaugh, a representative from Laurel Hill's Family Services department



Aaron Greenberg, Laurel Hill's arboretum manager

green burial area, opened in 2007. It was the first cemetery in the world to receive the renowned SITES Gold designation, a comprehensive ratings system for sustainable landscapes.

Tom Cavanaugh, a representative in Laurel Hill's Family Services department, helps families plan services for the dearly departed. He sees increasing interest in green burial.

"With more and more focus on the environment, living green, and reducing the carbon footprint, people are focusing on being green with their death, too," he says. "When Nature's Sanctuary opened, I believe it had 545 grave spaces, and we had to do an expansion to create more grave spaces, to the point where we opened a new green section called Valley View Green at our Laurel Hill East campus back in the fall. A third one, Bala Green, will soon open at West, so it's something that's becoming increasingly popular."

Green burial requires that everything must be biodegradable and 100 percent friendly to the environment, from the way people are buried to the clothes they wear at burial. For example, a casket must be made of all wood—with no metal, varnish, or ornamentation of any kind—or they can be buried in a linen shroud or a seagrass wicker basket. Clothing must be linen or cotton with no zippers, buttons, or bows. Rather than headstones, a ledger wall made of natural stone contains the names of those buried in the section. Graves are dug by hand.

Most who choose a green burial opt for a simple graveside service, though traditional services with clergy are perfectly fine. Laurel Hill's three green areas vary in terms of the surroundings, but all welcome visitors to commune with nature and honor the loved ones buried there.

"It is a very unique experience in comparison to a traditional cemetery,"



Laurel Hill opened its original green burial area, Nature's Sanctuary, in 2007. It was the first cemetery in the world to receive the renowned SITES Gold designation.

Cavanaugh says. "Nature's Sanctuary in particular is in a part of the cemetery that is off the beaten track. It's very much a peaceful, serene part of Laurel Hill."

Of course, Laurel Hill isn't just a place to hold a funeral service or visit a gravesite. Guests are welcome to tour the grounds or learn more about the arboretum, which is Greenberg's domain. He is always willing to share his knowledge with visitors.

"We're a landscape for the dead, but we also have a living collection of trees, shrubs, and gardens," he says. "We have over 6,000 trees and shrubs in our collection that represent over 850 different species and cultivars. We have five state-champion trees, which means they're the largest trees of their type in the state, and another 30 trees that are on the Pennsylvania Big Tree Register, meaning they might not be the biggest but they're very large for their species."

"To have the opportunity to do what we

do here is huge," he continues. "We plant on average 200 trees and 400 shrubs each year, and we're planting for the future. We're thinking about climate change and trying to plant species that are going to survive not only in our present climate but our future climate. That's all very rewarding." ■



Laurel Hill West and Laurel Hill Funeral Home

225 Belmont Ave.
Bala Cynwyd, PA 19004
(610) 668-9900

Laurel Hill East

3822 Ridge Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19132
(215) 228-8200

laurelhillphl.com