

Gina Trzepacz-Timpano of Yorkville Memorials

Written by Sherry Mitchell...

Have you ever wondered why we chose the line of business we are in? What in our personalities makes us most suited for the business? What drives us every day to do the best we can? And go to bed wanting to do better tomorrow? Well, I thought wouldn't it be fun to explore that in our organization!

I was fortunate enough to sit down recently with Gina Trzepacz-Timpano of Yorkville Memorials, a long time member of the MVWBN for an enlightening, humorous and empathetic interview.

How did you get into this business?

This business was established 65 years ago by my grandfather, and then passed on to my uncle with whom I worked for many years. Five years ago I was given the opportunity to take on the challenge of this business – and I did. I remember as a child going to work with my grandfather and watching him put his life into it. His love for helping people and his passion for doing it right were most decidedly the most influential factors for me. As the years wore on, and I had an opportunity to participate in the business, I realized that this was something I could do. I decided that it would be an honor to put my name behind all I do and drive his legacy forward.

And how would you describe what it is that you do?

Well, when a person comes into my office, they can either be in need of a Memorial – which means a death has occurred and they want to now commemorate the loved one. Or they can be in “pre-need” for a Memorial – which means they are planning ahead.

Having gone through hundreds of situations I can tell you that no two situations are the same. Each situation is as different as each individual. But what I really want to emphasize is that - although you can't rule out the sudden need events - if are you prepared for the need and an unexpected and tragic event occurs, moving forward will be less traumatic and less costly!

When I sit down with a person in need it is most definitely a time of crisis management. I've seen everything from total grief to denial. I don't care how old the person who passed is – 5 years or 105 years – or the cause of death – natural or accidental – it is still a loss and everyone handles loss differently. It is critical to listen, hear and understand where they are, what they are going through and not only give them all the time they need to adjust to what has happened, but also to commemorate a loved one in a way that meets the needs of all involved.

I navigate every individual through all the requirements – personal, religious, financial and regulatory. On the pre-need visits, of course, we are not dealing with the emotional aspects of the event which make the visit much less traumatic.

1. I find out where the loved one will get buried because the rules and regulations of the cemetery will drive what they can or can not do; i.e., a rural cemetery will have less restriction than a Catholic cemetery.
2. I have an extensive display of monuments and catalogs, allowing the person to see a variety of colors, shapes and lettering styles that are available. A person in need may have a more difficult time deciding how the commemoration should read, so I give them blank sheet of paper with the shapes of memorials along with catalogs to take home and doodle a design that will encompass every ones desires.

3. After they decide what they would like to see on a monument, and I've cross referenced it with the requirements of the cemetery, we work on the price. The price varies based on what they want, but we work within a price range that is consistent not only with their budget but also with their monument design. I also offer a payment plan so that I meet the financial needs of everyone.
4. I utilize the best, most experience engraver in Vermont to transfer the design from paper to granite. All my monuments are made of the highest quality granite for the money invested. I don't want anyone coming back to me years later dissatisfied with what they have purchased.
5. I see the project through to make sure the installation of the memorial is done correctly and the client is satisfied.

Do you advertise?

Yes, on the radio, newsprint and church bulletins. Today my grandfather and uncle want to know why I advertise, they didn't and they did fine! Well, back in their day different ethnic groups had greater loyalties to different establishments; for example, we had the Polish community. The business is different today, people shop price and they are more willing to try different memorial retailers to get it.

Even though I've lost customers to lower price competition, I know that the only way to reduce cost is to move away from genuine granite and into composites. Because composites are created like pressed wood, they will deteriorate faster, and like I said, I don't want people coming back to me when their monument is falling apart! I do quality! By definition, a monument should last a long time. So no matter what the financial need, I can give a product that will last!

How prepared are people?

90% of the people I see are not prepared and suddenly find themselves in need. Only 10% come in on a pre-need basis. I really want to emphasize the need to be prepared because by choosing to purchase your own monument before the need arrives, you can personalize your own design. You can help to create a design that reflects your beliefs, values or whatever is meaningful to you. It's your opportunity to tell future generations about yourself and your family - your opportunity to make your personal statement for history – everyone should have one.

In our society we talk about the importance of estate planning but rarely do we emphasize the need to complete the task by defining the memorial. Many times, because it is hard to confront, we leave this step to our loved ones to handle. Upon passing not only are our loved ones dealing with the grief of the loss but now have to decide how you might have wanted to be remembered! Plus, you can save money. The value of money today is less than tomorrow.

What is your competition like?

There are about 4 companies in the area. We all know each other and are cordial to each other. But there is one out of town competitor that is peculiar. One day I came back from the cemetery and there was a truck parked in my horseshoe-shaped drive and there was a guy walking around in my display lot. I thought what the ... who is this guy? I drove in, I saw his name on his truck, parked and decided to walk over and introduce myself, because competition is competition I don't have to hate you because you're my competition. But as soon as he saw me walking toward him, he RAN full sprint to his truck and drove away. (*Laughter*). It was the funniest thing I've ever seen and I thought to myself - buddy your name is in the side of your truck, I don't know what you were doing here but I know who you are! (*Laughter*). I have a huge picture window and I still find him driving up and down Champlin Avenue sometimes going very slowly as he passes my place of business.

What was a major obstacle that you were to overcome in the past year?

My mother falling and breaking both of her femur bones. My husband and I were out to dinner, when I spoke to my mom who had just gotten home from the hospital from a congestive heart episode. She wanted to join us and I convinced her to wait until she felt a little stronger. She agreed and said she was going to take a nap because she was tired. That night around 11:30pm I got a call from ResponseLink (health alert bracelet for the elderly) telling me that my mother had called them because she had fallen out of bed and she thinks she broke both of her legs. It was April Fool's day and I'll never forget it! I really thought it was a joke! Who is calling me 1:30 at night telling me my mother broke both of her legs!!! (*Laughter*). So I put on my clothes and ran to her apartment and sure enough she was totally out of it – she was in shock. My mother told me both of her legs were facing the wrong way behind her head and she had to straighten both of them back out. She said “I gave birth to 3 kids and I'll tell you what, this was the most excruciating pain I've ever been in my entire life.”

I took her Albany with two broken knees, two broken femurs and still in congestive heart failure. She was totally out of it. We go to Albany and she is hooked up to machines and her vitals are dropping but the doctor kept telling me to keep her awake and she wanted to go to sleep. So my job became to keep her awake! I've been doing yoga for years and am big on breathing. So, I just kept saying “Mom – breathe! Mom – breathe! Mom – breathe!” After hours and hours of this the drugs began to take affect, she started to stabilize and she became semi-conscious. I said “Mom, give me a sign if you can hear me.” I saw her hand move and I was so happy - she gave me the finger!! (*Laughter*). When she finally opened her eyes and was able to talk she said “The only thing I could hear was your voice telling me to breathe. Oh my God, if you say that one more time...” (*Laughter*). Now both legs are in casts and the casts will be coming off in November. I've been dealing with this since April and it's still not over but we are praying for a miracle! That is definitely my biggest obstacle for the year!

Do they bury people with their braces on?

Yes, unless you've donated your whole body to science, then they take it out.

Where do they put the toe tag on a dead person if they don't have toes?

If you don't have toes, it will go on the ankle. If your leg has been amputated then I guess they will put it on your pinkie.

If a person dies and then springs back to life do they get their money back on the coffin?

(*Laughter*) I would assume so! I had a lady who came in and told me that she had died five times. She went to the other side five times, swear to God! She was in a horrible car accident over seas and in a coma for months. The doctors don't know how she is still alive. During that time she was pronounced dead five times. She told me many stories but the only one I remember most vividly is: God doesn't get mad for things you would think. God was the most mad at her because years earlier a very good friend of hers had confided in her and asked her to promise not to tell anyone and she promised. Sometime later she broke her promise and told another what the friend had confided in her. As a result her friend was very, very hurt. She said God was more mad about that than all the other bad things she had done – and she had done a lot of other bad things! God was more mad at her for betraying her friend than anything else. Now this is the truth she told me herself.

So did she see God?

She said it was just a bright light, but I don't know if she actually saw God. She is fine now, walking around as if nothing ever happened. She bought her monument though! (*Laughter*) Just in case it happens for the 6th time and she doesn't make it. She said “I don't know if I'm like a cat, I don't know how many more chances I'll have!!” (*Laughter*) “I better get this taken care of now.”

How does she know that God got mad?

Because he told her.

Oh so there was actual communication?

Yeah, yeah, she said “God told me that he was more mad at this betrayal than anything else I had done!” She said “God does not care about you breaking the commandments; God is more concerned about you hurting other people!” How about that! I was like WOW – Really? Now I went to a Catholic school and that’s not what I was taught. But she met him so she must know him better than I do! I’m only going on hearsay! (*Laughter*).

What is your favorite spice?

I would have to say cayenne pepper, although garlic is truly my favorite. My husband and I went to a Doctor Oz show in NYC and I was asked “What is your favorite spice?” Without thinking I said “cayenne pepper” my husband just looked at me like what the ... are you saying. Because we love garlic and use it on everything!! I don’t know why but garlic did not even come to my mind! I was nervous and my hands were sweating and the first thing that came to my mind was cayenne pepper. So there you have it!

Closing thoughts...

Through this interview I got a glimpse into Gina’s life for which I am grateful and found a huge personality driving this Entrepreneur – as many of you will attest!

As I wrote this piece, I began to realize the full scope of Gina’s reach. Not only is an entrepreneur, but she is also a grief counselor, a crisis counselor, and a guidance counselor. Through her work, she is providing a safe bridge between what we have and what we have lost. This bridge is lit with compassion, understanding, and hope that everything will be alright during our darkest time!

I began to understand that we are asking too much of our loved ones when we chose to neglect our responsibility to define ourselves in our memorial. If each one of us took the responsibility for our final act – designing our memorial – imagine how much easier our passing will be for our loved ones – one less thing for them to handle!

I also calculated that an investment of \$550 for a monument 30 years ago when one is 55 years old would cost one’s family \$1371 today! This inflationary pressure is sure to grow in the next 30 years, so not only does it make sense financially, but also emotionally for all involved if we plan ahead!

Gina was born to be an entrepreneur – enriching every life she touches!

Thank you – Gina!