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Unused burial plots are almost as hard to sell as single-family homes

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A dozen or so years ago, buying burial crypts seemed like a good idea to Thelma and Eugene Wolfe.

The Cape Coral couple - 81 and 85, respectively - paid \$7,500 for the two crypts, including opening, closing and name plates when the time came.

Years later the couple's son-in-law died and was cremated. "It was less traumatic. And we decided we wanted to be cremated," Eugene Wolfe said.

So he went back to Fort Myers Memorial Gardens Funeral Home and Cemetery to see whether they could trade in the crypts for cremation services.

The funeral home and cemetery quoted them a price Wolfe thought "was a little high," but he figured he would get full credit for the crypts. Instead, the credit he was offered was \$5,000 - \$2,500 less than he paid.

"Those sell for \$19,000," Wolfe said. He wasn't looking to make a profit, but he felt that given the price appreciation he should at least get back what he had put in - especially after all these years when the company had the money to earn interest.

"The money doesn't bother me," Wolfe said. "It's the fact of being ripped off."

Wolfe decided to try and sell the crypts.

This is one of the drawbacks of prepaying for any funeral needs, said Bill Swain, president of Florida Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Advocacy.

"Why not just give them the money back when (the cemetery) can sell it for three times as much?" Swain asked.

Because they don't have to. The laws in Florida are on the side of the funeral business, not on the consumers.

"People think this is the best deal, and you're going to spend a lot of money for this, but look what happened. You changed your mind," Swain said.

And now you're stuck.

The cemetery doesn't want the plot back because it would just increase the inventory that would need to be sold, Swain said. And selling it might not be so easy depending on what kind of a plot or crypt it is.

When I asked Donnell Sullivan, the general manager at Fort Myers Memorial, he concurred: "We're not required to refund money on the property."

Sullivan said he does offer a credit, but that credit may not be equal to the original price.

But why not take back the crypts and sell them for more money? Because he already has unsold crypts, he said. Why would he need more?

Sullivan said he works with customers who for various reasons need or want to sell their burial plots or mausoleum spaces, but the cemetery doesn't act as an agent or find buyers.

Selling a burial spot isn't easy, as some have found out.

Sigrid Stanley has been trying to sell one for months without any takers.

Stanley and her husband bought burial crypts at Fort Myers Memorial Gardens in 1975, paying \$1,000 for each. In 1979, her husband died. Stanley moved to Denver in 1999 and tried to sell the unused crypt next to her husband's before she left, but the cemetery wouldn't buy it back. Now she's advertising it on the Internet for \$1,950.

"When my time comes, I'm not going to get shipped to Florida. I'll be cremated and put to the four winds," Stanley said.

Unless the crypt next to her husband's doesn't sell. In that case she has another plan: "If push comes to shove, they can have me cremated here and take the ashes and put them in the other side."
