

Our Lady of the Rosary: Resurrecting the Cemetery

by Ben Trollinger

Last Thursday morning, a woman sat silent and alone on a wooden bench at Our Lady of the Rosary Cemetery in Georgetown.

Her head was lowered, resting heavily on her right hand. She had come to visit her husband, who she recently lost to a motorcycle accident.

The day before she had brought her two young daughters to the cemetery. Shortly after they arrived, peacocks, which are held on the cemetery's 20 acres, escaped from their coop. The grieving family happily joined the cemetery staff in the hunt, chasing the festive birds through sweeping meadows of wildflowers and sacred art. The woman's daughters even named one of the peacocks after their father and fed it kettle corn.

"We wanted to make this a place for children to come," said cemetery owner Ellen Brumder. "It's a place where they find enchantment and peace and connection."

Things happen at Our Lady of the Rosary Cemetery that would be unheard of in most cemeteries, which are places of rigid morbidity and spooky sobriety. At an Our Lady of the Rosary burial a few days ago, a family got on their hands and knees to look for Monarch butterfly larvae on the underside of milkweed.

Butterflies, gentle reminders of rebirth, are everywhere at Our Lady, as are more than 20 varieties of wildflowers.

"The theology of the cemetery is what you see in nature: nothing really dies," she said. "We're great believers in resurrection. We think there is a very thin veil between the living and the dead. Your love for a person doesn't die when they do, that connection doesn't die, that longing for the other person never goes away."

Hidden away just to the east of the intersection of state highway 29 and 130, Our Lady of the Rosary Cemetery, which opened three years ago, is a quiet place for reflection, prayer and healing, a place between life and death, Ms. Brumder said. The cemetery has a pond, a prayer path dedicated to the prayer of St. Francis, picnic tables and the Garden of Precious Love, which is a small graveyard for infants.

"There's such a lack of beauty in our modern, economic, monotonous cemeteries," she said. "That's part of what we're doing – reviving the importance of the cemetery as a place for beauty and contemplation and comfort."

In 2005, Our Lady – which was designed by Holly Kincannon and Ms. Brumder's husband Nick – was the only American cemetery recognized by the prestigious Stoneguard Phoenix Awards, an international cemetery design competition. Our Lady is populated with Ms. Kincannon's stone carvings, Mr. Brumder's ironwork and the handiwork of several other artisans, including June Doerr of Georgetown, and Father Andrew John, who was Mother Teresa's confessor.

Though the cemetery is full of sacred Catholic art, it is ecumenical. "It's open to all faiths," she said. "We believe all people are sacred, unique and exquisitely loved by God."

It is also open to all visitors, she said. "It's open to everyone to pray, walk and picnic."

The cemetery has also received glowing attention from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center and the local public television program, Central Texas Gardener, for its uncommonly diverse plant life, which is maintained by naturalist and landscaper Alex Grubbs, the Brumder's son-in-law.

Every other Saturday during the spring Mr. Grubbs leads a nature walk through the paths and fields at Our Lady. "If you get down on your hands and knees you'd be amazed at what you find here," Mr. Grubbs said. "Friends ask me how I can work at a cemetery and not be sad all the time. I just tell them it's a very spiritually uplifting place."