

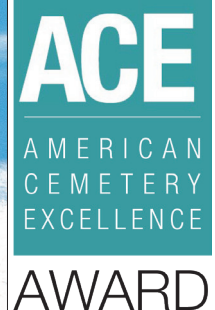
December 2025

AMERICAN **Cemetery & Cremation**

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Forest Lawn Cemetery

Buffalo, New York
American Cemetery Excellence
— 2025 Winner —



ACE

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AWARD

2025

The Winner

American Cemetery Excellence



Forest Lawn's 175th Anniversary Launch event, Aug. 10, 2024. (Photo by Tom Wolf)

ACE WINNER

By Tom Nondorf

When Everything Comes Together



Forest Lawn's historic chapel is used for memorial services. (Photo courtesy Forest Lawn)

Forest Lawn Cemetery, Buffalo, New York

Choosing the winner of the American Cemetery Excellence award is a great challenge for us every year. Great, because every cemetery that applies has something evocative and unique they want to share about themselves, and we get to see these things.

Challenging, because how do you separate so many skilled staffs, gorgeous locations, and creative operations and distill them down to one that represents the pinnacle of excellence? (Especially in a year where we received the most applicants in the history of the award.)

Ultimately, Forest Lawn Cemetery & Crematory in Buffalo, New York, rose to the occasion because it has been rising to occasions for the last year. So many things came together by fate and design that 2025 was simply their time. The historic, rurally designed cemetery – now in the heart of



Hills, ponds, streams, and especially trees make Forest Lawn a wonderful place for reflection. Certified resident arborist Andy Howard gives tours and has overseen the cemetery's status as a Level I arboretum. *(Photo courtesy Forest Lawn)*



The Forest Lawn Leadership Team (left to right): Craig Wolcott, VP of operations; Julie Snyder, CEO; Jamie Lotz, VP of finance; and Chris Converse, VP of administration.
(Photo by Tom Wolf)



Forest Lawn staff at the Legacy Mausoleum groundbreaking on March 21, 2025. "Our staff is amazing, and we all just really work well together. We want to be able to serve the families while also having this space available for people to come and learn about the city of Buffalo," Jennifer Kovach said. *(Photo by Victoria Iacchetta)*



JULIE SNYDER

the city – celebrated its 175th anniversary. In January, they honored the 225th birthday of one of their most renowned residents, President Millard Fillmore. In May, they dedicated a bronze statue to another hero who lies within, trailblazing African American politician Shirley Chisholm, whose 100th birthday was in

November 2024.

Anniversaries and birthdays are decided by calendars, but the Forest Lawn team met their moment and filled *their* calendar with complementary moments – a fully realized program that they launched in August of 2024, culminating in a July 2025 gala that coincided with a reenactment of

the very first burial on the grounds, 175 years ago to the day.

There was a designed buildup, a progression of events, and a deft use of the media that opened new eyes and set a standard for how any cemetery can transform a single celebration into a year of exposure. All this was done, it must be said, while managing active burial services and the highest-volume crematory in Western New York. Did I mention Forest Lawn is a Level I arboretum aiming for Level II and targeting an additional 6,000 trees by their bicentennial? Or that they are building a new garden mausoleum, expected to be open in 2026?

Before we overwhelm you with more from the year they've had, let's go back 175 years to the beginning. Charles E. Clarke



Forest Lawn's walking and trolley tours have been a city attraction for years. Here, visitors admire the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Blue Sky Mausoleum. (Photo courtesy Forest Lawn)

was the gentleman's name who purchased the original acreage (grown today to 269 acres and featuring 17 miles of roads). Clarke was inspired to create for Buffalo something akin to what he'd seen at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When his down-on-his-finance friend, local merchant John Lay Jr., passed away, Clarke donated a plot for Lay, an act of kindness that, coupled with the attractive surroundings, captured the imagination of locals who quickly began to reserve locations for their own future interments.

After the War of 1812, the nonsectarian Forest Lawn became a popular final resting place for veterans, something it remains to this day. A columbarium and crematory were completed in 1933; a community mausoleum opened in 1974, and the cemetery was added to the National and New York State Registers of Historic Places in 1991. In 2004, the Blue Sky Mausoleum was completed using a 1928 design by

Frank Lloyd Wright. It is now among numerous visual hallmarks of the property that include the Red Jacket sculpture, the Shepherdess statue, the carillon bells, and stunning monuments and private mausoleums of numerous area industrialists.

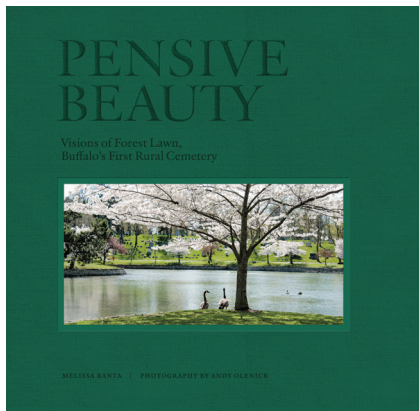
Aside from Chisholm, Fillmore and his wives, and numerous Buffalo mayors, "Superfreak" singer Rick James, explorers Frederick Cook and Thomas A. Budd, novelist Anna Katherine Green, Buffalo Sabres founder Northrup Knox, radio/film comedy writer Al Boasberg, Irving Berlin's first wife, Aretha Franklin's mother, and Kristen Pfaff of rock band Hole are among the 152,000 people who rest eternally in Forest Lawn's grounds.

The non-profit, board-run cemetery is overseen today by CEO Julie Snyder, who immediately deferred credit for the year of success to everyone else connected with Forest Lawn. "I have such great VPs on my leadership team; there are three of them, and I feel like when I arrived two

years ago, I became the fourth leg of the stool, and each of them really perform to the top of their license, if you would, and I was able to fill in blanks so they could keep doing what they were doing. It's definitely a team, and we all rely on each other here."

Of the ACE Award she says, "It's exciting for so many reasons, mostly because it's really a shared recognition that is owned and earned by our lot holders, past and present, our board of trustees, and really the staff that makes it happen. But I'd even say it's our community, Western New York, and Buffalo as a city. The response from the community to the sort of 'reintroduction' of the cemetery has been warmly welcomed and embraced. In Buffalo, we love history and we love Buffalo, and this cemetery embodies that."

Snyder explained that balancing active deathcare for families with the need to drive engagement with the historic landscape is a challenge her team has met head on. "Some of my colleagues, other historic



"Pensive Beauty," the new book chronicling the history and charm of Forest Lawn.

cemeteries that have less capacity, less inventory, they're really pivoting into being park lands on public space very aggressively. All of it is bringing out so much healthy conversation. These are the conversations that need to be had because, guess what, in perpetual care, even with a huge trust or endowment or whatever your respective municipality or state requires, you still need to generate revenue."

Snyder came from years of working in corporate boardrooms in the health insurance field, parsing financial statements



Images from the Cocktails, Condolences, & Conclusions event, a period reenactment of John Lay's service and burial mixed with commemorative cocktails. (Photos by Molly Sheehan)



Charles F. Kreiner Jr., Chair of the Forest Lawn Heritage Foundation; Julie Snyder; and John Edens, Forest Lawn's renowned archivist. (Photo by Tom Wolf)

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Forest Lawn is the flagship of the not-for-profit Forest Lawn Cemetery Group that operates 14 cemeteries in Western New York. James Wadsworth is chair of the board of trustees. (Photo courtesy Forest Lawn)

and consumer surveys, but early on in her time at Forest Lawn she realized, “When you walk around a 175-year-old cemetery, you get perspective pretty quickly.” It was that perspective that led her to tell the staff, “Off to the races,” as the anniversary year loomed. The team forged ahead on projects like the next-level arboretum designation and the founding of the John Lay Society, a giving society named for that historic first interment, that inducts legacy donors whose gifts are used to preserve the Forest Lawn grounds. It’s a reflection of founder Clarke’s donation of that first plot for his friend. “Honestly, all of what we have done has driven even more interments,” she said.

Jennifer Kovach, the person who organized the ACE application materials, serves as executive administrative assistant/assistant corporate secretary. She is responsible for helping lead multiple initiatives including marketing, donor relations, and the anniversary project, and she believes Snyder elevated anniversary planning to the whirlwind of creativity it

became, beginning with the idea that it didn’t have to wait to begin in 2025.

“The reason the events went from August ’24 to July ’25 was very intentional,” Kovach said. “We talked about doing it as a calendar-year celebration because that’s what everyone expects.” But Aug. 10, 1849, was when Charles Clarke and his wife Mariana purchased the land for the cemetery, so the idea was to begin the celebration on the 175th anniversary of that event, and end on July 12, 2025, the date of the John Lay burial.

What took place over the course of the year:

- “August 2024, we had our opening gala for the 175th anniversary,” Kovach said. “We’d never done a gala before. Everybody absolutely loved it. We had fireworks; it was a whole evening on the lawn, right by our historic chapel.”

- Two days later, the official release of “Pensive Beauty: Visions of Forest Lawn, Buffalo’s First Rural Cemetery,” a stunning 200-page hardcover book written by Melissa Banta with photography by Andy

Olenick and edited by Forest Lawn archivist John A. Edens. Edens was given special recognition for his work on behalf of Forest Lawn over the years.

- A week later, the Forest Lawn Rollaround, a relaxed biking event in tandem with the Slow Roll Buffalo organization, brought the local community in for self-guided or guided bike tours of the roads and key historic locations.

- Sept. 26, 2024, the Shirley Chisholm statue was unveiled, sponsored by New York State Sen. Sean Ryan.

- October featured the Fall in the Forest event and release of another book, “The Phantom of Forest Lawn: Romance and Redemption in the City of the Dead,” a mystery by “future permanent Forest Lawn resident” Robert Brighton.

- Jan. 7, 2025, was the celebration of the 225th birthday of the 13th American President, Millard Fillmore.

- May 10 featured “Exploring the Grave: Forest Lawn’s 175 Year Legacy,” a keynote speech by cemetery historian and “Grave” author Allison Meier.

• Finally, “Cocktails, Condolences, & Conclusions.” “My absolute favorite event we ended up doing for the 175th anniversary was that John Lay closing event,” Kovach said. “We had a commemorative cocktail party, and we encouraged everybody to wear funeral black. It was a Saturday in July, and it was so hot that I was like, ‘Why did we tell everybody to wear black?’”

“We had everybody at the bottom of the hill near where John Lay is buried, so you couldn’t look up the hill, and we had a couple of our actors, including our chaplain here, dressed up as the chaplain from John Lay’s burial. They performed remarks as if we were at the burial of John Lay.

“Then we got a couple of our grounds-men, and they all walked up the hill to John Lay’s burial site. I thought everyone was going to think this was weird and hokey, and instead it was so touching and moving. It recreated a Victorian burial.

“Then we inducted members into the planned giving society, and we had some cocktails. It was a beautiful night. I was really nervous about it, but everyone thought it was so cool. We pulled it off, and it was a good feeling, it really was.”

The good feelings were contagious as, in May, Buffalo’s WIVB-TV won an Edward R. Murrow Excellence in Video Award for “Buffalo Behind the Scenes: Forest Lawn Cemetery,” a 10-minute feature commemorating the Buffalo institution. If you get a chance to view the video on YouTube, you’ll long for someone to love you as much as the producers of that video love Forest Lawn.

But then, it’s like Snyder and Kovach said, Forest Lawn embodies the spirit of Buffalo. It’s a city famous for its winters, but people don’t hesitate to come out in the snow to bask in the beauty of the cemetery’s winter landscape. And the festivities that took place in 2024-25 were as much a tribute to the whole city as to the cemetery itself.

“We’re never going to have another year like this,” Snyder said. In terms of the robustness of the calendar, a focused series of public events, community involvement, and a local media willing to amplify the celebration, it will indeed be difficult to repeat. But then maybe it will only be 25 years until the stars align again. This year’s “build it and they will come” approach will serve as a nice blueprint for the planners of the 200th. **KB**



The Shepherdess sculpture and carillon bells (above) are local favorites. Below, left: A map of the cemetery dating from 1900. Across the street from the cemetery, Forest Lawn runs the oldest continuously operated crematory in the United States. “We’ve really done a lot of investment in our crematory and our staff, they’re phenomenal,” said Jennifer Kovach. (Photos courtesy Forest Lawn)



Dignitaries and members of the steering committee pose around the new Shirley Chisholm sculpture.

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