

**interview by
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ICFM SUBJECT SPOTLIGHT

Brian Killelea

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► Killelea is general manager of Worcester County Memorial Park, Paxton, Massachusetts. The park was founded in 1961 by his great uncle. His father, Kevin Killelea, is president.



Christ as the Shepherd is the feature for the Garden of the Good Shepherd, one of the first gardens to be developed at Worcester County Memorial Park.

► Worcester County Memorial Park encompasses approximately 95 acres, about half developed. It is a private, non-sectarian cemetery that handles 600-650 interments annually and has almost 18,000 total interments.

www.wcmp.org

T E C H N O L O G Y



Brian Killelea is able to show families on this large screen what their loved one's Web page will look like. Every person interred at the cemetery gets a Web page.

Do you know what MySpace.com is? Brian Killelea does, and he wanted to bring the sense of connectedness and community created by MySpace and other online journals to the Web site for Worcester County Memorial Park. Think of it as MyEternalSpace.com.

Online memorialization for all, including 'scattering' families

Worcester County Memorial Park is on the Web in a big way. All of its interments (around 18,000) are available online in a searchable database. Everyone interred at the park has his or her own Web page, even if all that's on it is name, burial date and grave site location.

For some people, Killelea has the obituary, photo and information about services that many funeral homes post on their Web sites. That information will stay on the site, and material more commonly associated with a video tribute can be added days or years later, as the family gets around to doing it.

Obituaries, tributes and photos can be uploaded to create permanent virtual memorials. Visitors to the site can order flowers as well as sign guest books and get maps to the grave site. There's even a Webcam transmitting real-time images of the cemetery.

A few weeks after the site was up and running, the cemetery's Web presence was profiled in two local newspapers, and traffic to the site shot up dramatically. ICFM talked to General Manager Brian Killelea about the cemetery's Web site, the work involved and the reaction from families so far.

What kind of time and costs were involved in

I see it as a benefit for the funeral homes, but I'm surprised more cemeteries aren't posting obituaries. Cemeteries, from my point of view, are the perpetual resting places; we're supposed to be seen as the place where this information is going to stay.

The screenshot shows the memorial page for Agnes M. Killelea. At the top, it says "Worcester County Memorial Park". Below that, there's a navigation bar with "Home Page", "Remembrances", "Obituaries", "Frequently Asked Questions", "Home Page", and "Special Dates". The main content area has a photo of Agnes and her name "AGNES M. KILLELEA". To the right of the photo, it lists "Burial Date: June 8, 2001", "Birth at Death Date: 06/08/2001", "Funeral Home: [blank]", and "Services: St. George's Church (deceased)". Below this, there's a paragraph of text about her life. At the bottom, there are sections for "Affiliations" and "Burial Location".

Brian Killelea's memorial for his grandmother, Agnes Killelea, showed early visitors to the Web site the possibilities. The main page includes:

- the obituary, date of burial and birth and death dates,
- the name of the funeral home and church where services were held (click for a map and directions),
- the mausoleum location (click for a map and directions),
- a list of the organizations she belonged to,
- a link to online flower ordering,
- a link to the photo album (above),

The screenshot shows a "Photo Album Categories" section. There are four thumbnails: "General Album" with 2 photos, "Holidays Album" with 1 photo, "Childhood Album" with 1 photo, and "Fortunate Memory Album".

The screenshot shows a prayer card for Agnes Killelea. It features a photo of her and the text: "The soul of Agnes Killelea, who died on June 8, 2001, is at rest. Her family requests that you pray for her soul. Her funeral services will be held on June 11, 2001, at 10:00 AM at St. George's Church, 1000 Main St., Worcester, MA 01602. Interment will be in the Mausoleum at Worcester State College. A memorial service will be held on June 11, 2001, at 7:00 PM at the Worcester State College. The family requests that you pray for her soul. Her funeral services will be held on June 11, 2001, at 10:00 AM at St. George's Church, 1000 Main St., Worcester, MA 01602. Interment will be in the Mausoleum at Worcester State College. A memorial service will be held on June 11, 2001, at 7:00 PM at the Worcester State College. The family requests that you pray for her soul." Below the text is the name "AGNES KILLELEA" and the dates "06/08/2001 - 06/08/2001".

- a link to the prayer card (left),
- a link to the memorial book and
- a link to the tribute.

TECHNOLOGY

getting all the information into a database that could be searchable online?

Because we're relatively new for a cemetery, all of our records had already been computerized. It wasn't that hard to get all the interments on the site because they were already in a searchable database.

I'm sure genealogists are excited about having this information online, but have any families expressed concerns about privacy?

We really haven't had any concern expressed, because anything we're putting online is public information. And the information the families upload, the obituaries, is printed in the newspapers.

What kind of feedback have you gotten so far from families?

The feedback has been incredible, very positive. Obviously, no matter what you do, you're always going to have somebody who finds fault, and I had one woman who said her husband was a very conservative guy who probably would not want the fuss created over him. What we're able to do in those cases is make all the additional information on the site not sharable, so the only thing the public can see is his lot information, which is public information.

If all the family wants to do is have the location map on there, that's fine. We're trying to do everything in the family's best interests.

I thought it was interesting that you're running obituaries, because I think more in terms of funeral homes doing that. Do you have cases where the family submits the obituary both to the funeral home and your cemetery?

Yes; people do it all the time. And you know what? I see it as a benefit for the funeral homes to do it, but I'm surprised more cemeteries aren't posting obituaries. Cemeteries, from my point of view, are the perpetual resting places; we're supposed to be seen as the place where this information is going to stay.

We're not the first people to ever come up with the idea of guest book entries and photos. But 40 years from now the comments that people make today are still going to be there and readable. People can put pictures up and the Web site's backed up daily, so those pictures they upload today are still going to be there 40 years from now.

Some of the funeral homes take down

the obituaries after two or three years, but I want someone 40 years from now to be able to see the information about their grandparents.

Is it expensive to host the site? Do you see it as a big expense down the line?

The only big expense was putting together the actual software for the site. We started the site from scratch; we didn't buy any software from anyone else or use any existing applications.

Do you have a computer background?

I have a computer background as far as basically knowing what can work and what's possible, and I hired a Web developer who's a friend of mine (David Lapierre of DLG Web Development). I came up with an idea and he put it into a source code in order for it to function as a Web site.

Did this cost a lot of money, or was it more your time that was involved?

It cost us a substantial amount of money for a Web site, but the value of the time spent on it was probably more.

Do you think the expenditure has been worth it?

I think it has. From the response we've been getting, I think it's a great tool for the park to have. And to be honest with you, I've always envisioned once we got to this point being able to sell the licensing agreement for this type of program to other cemeteries, so I figure the time invested in developing the software will pay off.

Plus, the amount of publicity we've gotten is beyond anything we'd be able to get by taking out an ad in the newspaper, a radio spot or even a television ad. Just the word of mouth advertising we're getting from the site is incredible.

The site has been live since March, but we only made it live in order to work all the bugs out before we started publicizing it. A few people were finding it, but the day before the first newspaper story came out, only about 10 people had registered their information with us so we could send them an e-mail about site updates. A few days after the story, we had more than 500 people registered. I would never have been able to get that kind of response from an ad.

Have you notified the current lot owners about being able to upload photos and memorials?

We haven't done anything yet other than send out press releases. For families who

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The view from the Webcam

on Friday, Sept. 8, at 11:27:15 a.m.

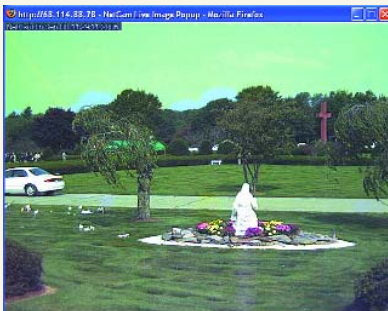
The cemetery cam

Worcester County Memorial Park's Webcam is focused on one spot in the park. General Manager Brian Killelea says he installed it so people could check weather conditions at the park before driving out, since it's on a hill outside the city.

At the bottom of the memorial park's home page, www.wcmp.org, there is a photo from the Webcam under the heading, "Webcam: View our grounds live!" Click where indicated and the Webcam screen pops up.

Though the basic scene is always the same, viewers can see more than the weather as the camera uploads a new picture every few seconds. A clock in the upper left corner tells you when the picture you're seeing was snapped.

Usually the only way it's obvious that fresh pictures are being continually uploaded is the movement of the tree branches as they sway gently in the breeze, but now and then vehicles drive by or a visitor walks through the area. □



The Webcam view

a few minutes later, at 11:29:11 a.m.

come in to the cemetery, I've installed a couple of large flat screen TVs in the office so I can show them what they can do. We're also working on putting some print material together to hand out.

To me, the reaction has been incredible. I anticipated that some people would get a kick out of it, but I've had people coming in just completely shaken, saying "I can't believe we're able to do this." I have people e-mail me every day, saying this is the most wonderful thing they've ever been able to do to memorialize a relative. They just really appreciate the opportunity.

I love the Webcam (like the traffic cams many news sites offer), but what's the purpose of having it?

We're located in a town just outside a larger city, and we're literally in a different climate zone because we're on a hill. It can be sunny 10 minutes away and snowing here. I put the Webcam in so that people could check out the weather before making the trek up here.

But the response I've been getting ... I've had people who, no joke, tell me, "I will pay any amount of money if you get a Webcam set up on my loved one's grave." I never anticipated that people would want that. A woman whose child is buried near where the camera is set up e-mailed me and said she leaves the Webcam on her computer every day at work. She's comforted by being able to see that everything's peaceful and tranquil up here. I never envisioned putting the Webcam to that type of use.

Are you planning to install more Webcams?

Yes. I think at some point as technology advances we'll probably be able to give people their own user-code password and a Webcam only they and the people they give the password to can view. I envision that probably in the near future. Until now, I would have said, "Not possible," but until now, I didn't think it was something people wanted.

The security benefits of having a lot of Webcams would be pretty good, too.

Can you see anything on the Webcams at night?

Not on this one right now, but it is possible to get night vision ones.

Back to the topic of the Web site, do you think a cemetery that has been around a long time or has a huge number of inter-

ments should wait to get all of that information into a database before trying to offer something like this?

I wouldn't say the older records need to be included. I think the younger generation appreciates this sort of service more. If someone does come in and say, "I've got an ancestor buried there and I'd love to have this information online," you can add those on a case-by-case basis.

It's funny; the families are the ones who provide all the extra material and do the work, and they're thanking *me*. They post the pictures, they send the obituaries. All I have to do on this end is read over it to make sure there's nothing objectionable such as vulgarity, click "approve" and that's it. I don't have to do any photo editing or anything like that.

So you are the person approving postings?

I am, just because it's so new and the whole thing has kind of been my baby; I have a hard time letting go.

How soon do you usually get the obituary up?

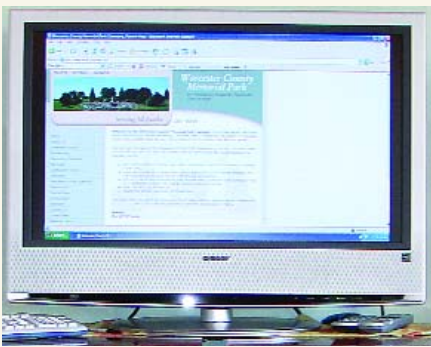
As quickly as I can. I try to get them up before the burial, because I want to be a source for people to check. I can post calling hours at the funeral home and the time for the Mass at the church. And people can click and get directions to the funeral home and church.

Is there any restriction in terms of who's allowed to post information?

Right now, we don't have any restrictions on what's posted, as long as it doesn't include vulgarity or profanity. But when someone says, "I'm the widow, I'd like to post a memorial," we verify that she is the wife. You have to start looking at next-of-kin issues. You wouldn't let anyone but the next-of-kin or the property owner put a marker up.

Other people can still post pictures and contribute guest book entries—unless the next-of-kin wants them locked out, which we have the ability to do.

I do see a lot of people making comments and posting obituaries for their grandparents. They're probably next-of-kin down. If their parents are not computer literate and don't mind, why stop people who are going to use the feature and appreciate it? I've got pictures up there of my grandmother; she was one of the test pilots for the program. My father checked the site to



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money in an endowment fund to keep the Web site up and running.

But if you're not charging very much for the obituary, how is that going to help the cemetery financially with those cremation people who scatter?

Even though we've got the site up and working now, it's still a work in progress. I've got a lot of ideas, so we'll be adding new features to the site. I think the different

features will be available à la carte, so that people can pick and choose. Maybe if you just want one thing it will be \$50; if you want everything, it will be \$500.

So you'd rather people who scatter at least have a virtual memorial with the cemetery, even if they don't do anything else?

Yes, I think the cemetery would be better off having \$100 instead of \$0. □

see what I'd done and he'd never seen one of the pictures I'd included.

And maybe my grandfather's buddies from the highway department have pictures of him we've never seen, and they can share them with us.

I read the comments people send in, and whether or not we make a dime on this, it makes me happy that we're allowing people to share memories. Cemeteries are so often associated with death, and it's nice to read about the lives. I think it's a whole new realm of memorialization we could be going after.

So you don't think online memorials are a fad?

I really don't. I think this is going to be the way we start tracking some of those cremation people who scatter. I think once we start getting more into the memories business instead of just the interment business, we're going to become more important. If we don't do it, other people will. There are already memorial Web sites out there that aren't owned by cemeteries or funeral homes going after this market.

Right now you're not charging for this service. Is that because you're trying to get it going?

Right, because we want to get it going. And even when we start charging, the charges are going to be minimal. I won't charge for photo-sharing, guest-book entries. The charge will be for setting up the initial obituary. We're going to put some of the