

The end-of-life discount

Grave marker maker slashes prices by one-third

by Richard Greenberg

Associate Editor

A “monumental” face-off is looming in local Jewish burial circles over who can best serve the bereaved by most economically memorializing their loved ones.

On one side is a would-be newcomer to Greater Washington, Fram Monument Co. of Baltimore, which promises significantly lower prices for grave markers than those offered by the area’s Jewish cemeteries. On the other side are those four cemeteries.

Fram plans to open an outlet in Rockville next month (complete with a showroom) — marking the company’s first attempt to establish a beachhead outside Baltimore in its 88-year existence.

Approached in late 2008 by the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington, Fram signed a contract with JFPCGW in April 2009, pledging to supply bronze grave marker plaques “at prices generally 30 percent below” those charged by the area’s four main Jewish cemeteries.

Those cemeteries are Judean Memorial Gardens in Olney, King David Memorial Gardens in Falls Church, Mount Lebanon Cemetery in Adelphi and Garden of Remembrance in Clarksburg.

According to the agreement, the discounted prices offered by Fram for a single bronze marker (including installation) range from \$1,495 at Judean Memorial Gardens to \$1,635 at Garden of Remembrance. (Prices differ because Fram’s discount is based on each cemetery’s price structure.)

“They have every right to do what they want,” Randy Vlahos, director of

Judean Memorial Gardens, said of Fram when contacted last week. “This is not the first time I’ve heard of it; I thought it was old news.”

Under both Maryland and Virginia state law, consumers generally are not obligated to purchase a memorial through a cemetery rather than directly from an independent vendor — the latter sometimes being able to offer more affordable prices due to lower overhead costs and high-volume buying.

“However, most people I’ve encountered are not aware that they’re permitted to shop around,” said JFPCGW board member Marc Barinbaum, who also chairs the bereavement committee at Conservative B’nai Israel Congregation in Rockville.

Like others associated with JFPCGW, Barinbaum emphasized that he has no reason to believe that the cemeteries’ prices are excessive. “They charge what the market will bear,” he added.

Vlahos said his cemetery purchases its memorials wholesale from Matthews International, a Pittsburgh-based company that produces “high-quality” funerary products. Still, it is not uncommon, he added, for his clients to deal directly with outside vendors.

Attempts to reach spokespersons for the other local Jewish cemeteries were not successful.

The agreement between Fram and JFPCGW stems from the committee’s efforts to reduce funeral-related prices by drumming up greater competition among monument and marker vendors, according to Barinbaum and other JFPCGW spokespersons.

The committee solicited price quotes from various providers last year, “but Fram gave us the best bids and the best

service,” said Barinbaum.

Fram’s client base has always included some Washington-area residents. But since the contract was signed and word-of-mouth began to spread, that segment of the company’s business has picked up significantly, said Fram’s owner Steven Venick.

“The response has been very favorable,” he added, emphasizing that he too does not begrudge the cemeteries for their rate structure. “It’s been nothing but pleasant dealing with the cemeteries,” Venick said.

The contract between Fram and JFPCGW outlines what committee president Bob Hausman characterized as a “pilot program” that could eventually expand to include upright granite markers and other memorials.

Fram already has agreements to provide reduced-cost headstones for congregants at B’nai Israel and Conservative Tifereth Israel Congregation in the District; the discounted prices for those memorials run from \$1,250 to \$2,600 for a single

headstone.

JFPCGW has contracted with Washington-area mortuaries since the mid-1970s to provide funeral packages that, according to the committee, “have saved the Jewish community over \$10 million.”



Niv Fishbein, of Fram Monument Co. in Baltimore, inspects a bronze grave marker. The 88-year-old company is slated to open a Rockville branch next month.

Photo courtesy Niv Fishbein

'Fram gave us the best bids and the best service'