



Cemeteries add mausoleums for a variety of reasons, but when they face running out of room for interments, making more efficient use of their remaining land tends to top the list. Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary added 20 years' of interment space with its Garden of the Matriarchs project, but it involved doing a lot of planning, making many appearances before city officials and dealing with neighbors who didn't want their view of the cemetery ruined!

# How a Forgotten Ravine Was Turned Into a Memorial Park's Showpiece

interview by Susan Loving

As the end of the 20th century neared, Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary appeared to be approaching the end of its active life. COO Barry Berlin calculated the Culver City, California, property had five to seven and a half years of interment or entombment space left, much of it not prime property. And families coming to Hillside were accustomed to being able to choose the best. The memorial park's list of "distinguished residents" includes people who made their mark in Hollywood, business, education and athletics (see "Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary's Distinguished Residents," page 36).



Barry Berlin

"When you get down near the end of the cemetery's life," said Berlin, "a lot of what you have left is odds and ends. Family estates or single spaces become scarce or unavailable."

There was a ravine behind the maintenance area that was overgrown and forgotten. Forty years ago, Hillside's owners were told the metropolitan water district had an easement on it that made it unusable for interments. But the only other contiguous parcel of land the memorial park owned, a former supermarket site, was tied up in a long-term lease. The cemetery would run out of space before the land was available, much less made usable, and no other contiguous land was available for sale.

So, Berlin took another look at the 2.25-acre ravine area, hidden and separated from the rest of the park by the maintenance build-

## HILLSIDE MEMORIAL PARK AND MORTUARY

- Property encompasses 46 acres in a fully developed residential and light industrial area of Culver City, West Los Angeles.

- Incorporated in 1941 by Harry Groman, owner of Groman Mortuary, his brother Robert Groman and Lazare Bernard as B'nai B'rith Memorial Park. The name was

changed to Hillside Memorial Park in 1942.

- In 1951, Hillside's first garden mausoleum, the Garden of Memories, was built. Several garden mausoleums have been added, including the first two-story garden mausoleum in the United States.

- Its biggest tourist draw, the Al Jolson memorial, also was added in 1951. The cemetery where Jolson was originally interred would not allow the family to build a memorial. The Gromans told Jolson's widow if the family would reinter him at Hillside and buy a sarcophagus and memorial, Hillside would build a waterfall and pay for perpetual care.

- Bought in 1954 by Temple Israel of Hollywood, one of the oldest Reform temples in Los Angeles and known as the Temple of the Stars because of the many members of the entertainment industry who worship there.

- In 1980, Hillside became a combo operation with the opening of its mortuary.

- As of 2004, there have been over 70,000 interments at Hillside.

- The memorial park offers ground spaces, garden estates, family estates, wall crypts, lawn crypts, family rooms, sarcophagi, cenotaph walls, niches and urn gardens.

- The California cremation rate is approaching 50 percent but is much lower among Jews. The cremation rate at Hillside was about 1 percent when COO Barry Berlin started there in 1986; now it is about 12 percent. "The Jewish religion frowns on it, but a lot of baby boomers are for it," Berlin said. "There are many people who buy tandem crypts in the mausoleum and one's a casket and one's an urn."



Hillside Mortuary's chapel. Hillside became a combo operation in 1980.



*Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary's new Court and Garden of the Matriarchs mausoleum and lawn crypt project takes up 40,000 square feet of a 2.6-acre site. The three-level mausoleum and the lawn gardens (see photos on pages 32-33), which are terraced, were designed to fit on a difficult site, basically a ravine. The project also was designed to be "neighborhood friendly," and to complement the existing buildings in the cemetery. At far right in the photo, to the right of the pavilion, is part of Sunland Gardens, an L-shaped garden mausoleum already present on the site and integrated into the plans for the new building. To the left is the Canaan garden crypt complex.*

(Photo courtesy of Mekus Studios, Chicago, Illinois.)

ing and a garden crypt complex as well as its topography. He found that yes, there was a drainage easement on the land, but it was held by Culver City, not the Los Angeles County Department of Water and Power, and was not as extensive as had been believed. "All of a sudden," Berlin said, "we found ourselves two and a quarter acres of usable land."

In 1999, the first plans were drawn up for the project, which was completed in 2004. Berlin talked to ICFM about coming up with a plan that would make the neighbors and city happy while making the most out of Hillside's "found" land.

*What did you have to do to satisfy the city?*

Culver City said we could build on the land if our civil engineers could design a drain system to allow drainage through the park to continue. We had to resection the drains in the park so the water would flow under the park. Under the mausoleum, there is a spillway containing 1,500 cubic yards of solid concrete. In the unlikely event the drains overflow, the water will simply go under the building and out.

The whole approval process took three and a half years. We had to go through the Planning Department, which asked for numerous changes, and then of course we

had some contentious public hearings—the neighbors were concerned that the new building would block their beautiful view of Hillside's park-like setting—and the whole thing had to go before the Culver City Council.

*The neighbors didn't want their view of the cemetery blocked??*

Remember, we've been here since 1941, before any of the residences nearby were built. Their view, when they moved in, was of a park, since this is a memorial park without upright monuments. So they were afraid the building would be ugly, or would block their view.

*Obviously in the end Culver City approved the project.*

The City Council voted unanimously to allow us to build, but with 52 conditions. We had to do a lot of things that really had nothing to do with the project, but the city saw us as a vehicle for getting all kinds of things done.

We had to build bus shelters and benches. We had to beautify the entire exterior of the park, change some of the bushes and trees along Green Valley Circle, Doverwood Drive and Centinela Avenue, which is on the opposite end of the memorial park from

where the mausoleum was being built. They had us completely change the irrigation system, build retaining walls, make handicapped-accessible sidewalks, smooth out slopes and put in curbing. Fifty-two conditions of approval, let me tell you, is a lot of conditions! But all the work enhanced the area.

*Did you have a number in mind for how many interment spaces you wanted to get out of this property?*

We told the architects, Mekus Studios, we wanted to maximize every single inch of space, but we knew that we needed to include ground space as well as wall crypts. In the Jewish religion, most people still prefer ground burial, particularly in the case of Orthodox Jews. While we are owned by a Reform temple, we serve Orthodox, Conservative and Reform families as well as unaffiliated members of the community.

We also had to work with the topography. This was a very difficult engineering project, because the land was a disaster, in terms of its topography. It had deep valleys, high hills and wild trees. We couldn't just go in there with a bulldozer and level it out—the city would have had a hemorrhage, to say the least. And we had to design the building to be as unobtrusive as



Right, Court of the Matriarchs, seen from the side where the new mausoleum was tucked into one side of the L-shaped Sunland Gardens, a garden mausoleum built in the 1960s. Sunland Gardens was built of travertine, no longer used, but the new building was blended into the look of the old one by repainting the trim on Sunland Gardens the same color as Court of the Matriarchs.



Left, the L-shaped Sunland Gardens is almost completely visible from this angle, with Court of the Matriarchs behind it. The

dark rectangles in Court of the Matriarchs are crypt alcoves with balconies that bring extra light into the mausoleum. The mild Southern California winters make it possible to build an indoor mausoleum that brings in plenty of the outdoors.

Left, the second level of the mausoleum,

looking toward the Rotunda. Some of the marble crypt fronts in the Rotunda are visible behind the people standing by the railing. The open courtyard plan allows views to the first and third levels, as well. To the left in the photos is a crypt alcove/balcony like the one pictured below.



Left, from this crypt alcove/balcony, part of Sunland Gardens is visible, as is some of the landscaping between the memorial park and the condominium complex adjoining this section of the park.



Right, a crypt alcove on the inside of the garden mausoleum. The same type of alcove can be seen from above at far right (in Court of the Matriarchs).

Right, the first and second levels of one section of Court of the Matriarchs. Note the walkways in the background, which lead to an entrance directly onto the second level. The plantings on the second level bring the "garden mausoleum" concept to a new level. Since this photograph was taken, benches have been added in the curved sections cut into the planters to make it easier for people to sit and enjoy the scenery.

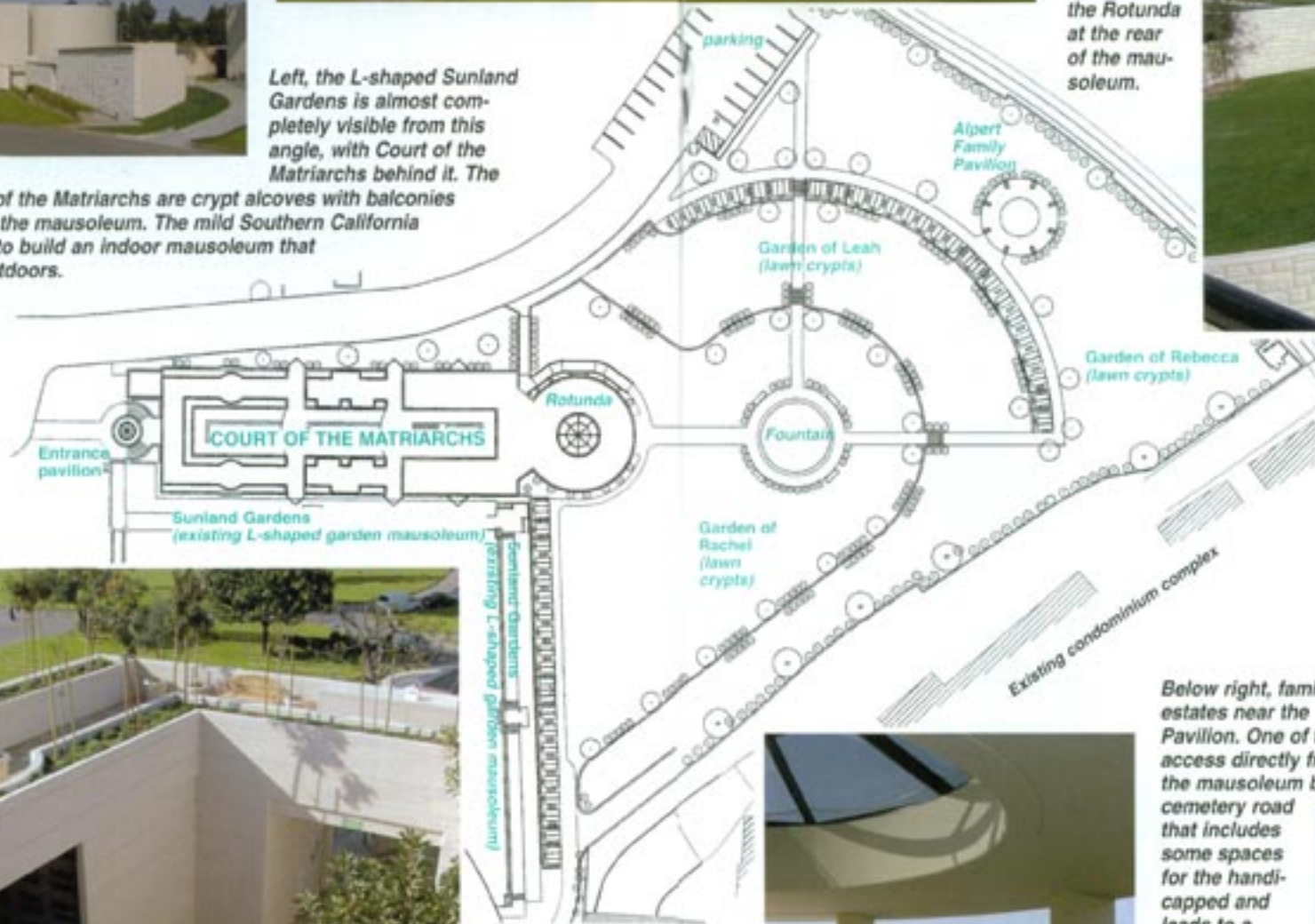
Photos courtesy of Mekus Studios, Chicago, Illinois, project architects



Right (on the facing page), the Rotunda, which is at the opposite end of the mausoleum from the entrance pavilion, can be seen in the background. Its open-ended design continues the theme of bringing in light and air.



Right, the three-tiered lawn crypts comprising Garden of the Matriarchs (Rachel, Leah and Rebecca), seen from the back of the Rotunda at the rear of the mausoleum.



Left, feature centerpiece of the Garden of the Matriarchs is this fountain. (The path from the fountain to Leah, the second tier of lawn crypts, is visible at bottom right in the photo above.) Behind the Pavilion the neighboring condominium complex can be seen. These neighbors are thrilled with their new view, Hillside COO Barry Berlin said.

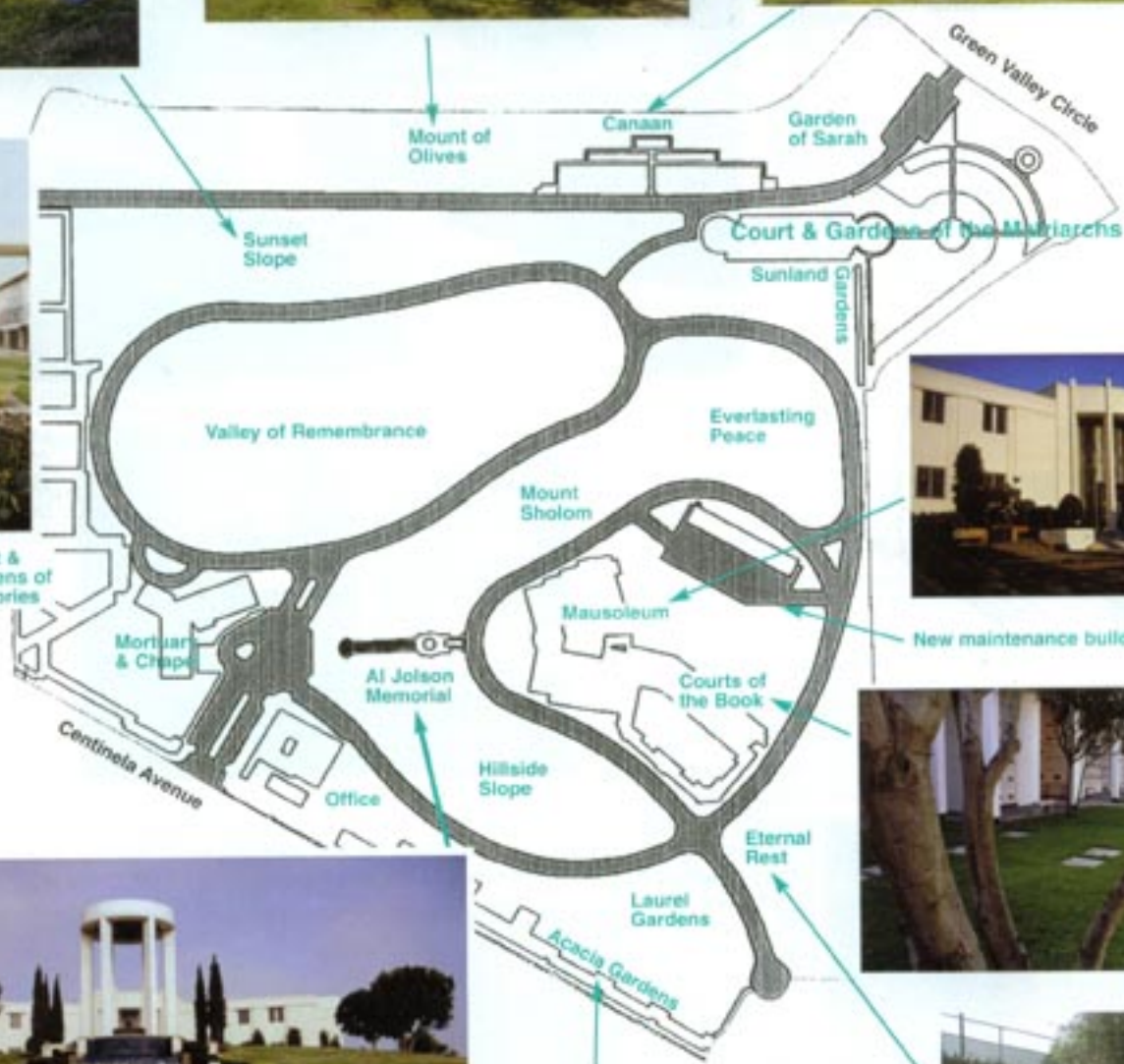


Below right, family estates near the Pavilion. One of the entrances to the mausoleum and lawn crypt complex is here, providing access directly from the cemetery road. People also can enter directly onto the top level of the mausoleum by coming in next to the small entrance pavilion. There is a parking lot off the cemetery road that includes some spaces for the handicapped and leads to a ramp entrance directly onto the second level of the mausoleum. Farther along, there is another ramp providing access to both the first and second levels of the mausoleum.



Above, the Pavilion, looking back toward the Rotunda. The Pavilion was in the original plans but was "value-engineered out," Berlin said. "Then all of a sudden somebody came along and said 'I want something different.'" That somebody was musician Herb Alpert, of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. Showed an artist's rendering of the Pavilion, Alpert said, "That's it," Berlin recalled, and the Pavilion was back, with room for eight lawn crypts in the center, a skylight above and The Herb and Lani Alpert Family Pavilion inscribed on the inside.

**HILLSIDE  
MEMORIAL PARK  
AND MORTUARY**



Above, the Al Jolson Memorial, with the mausoleum behind it and a waterfall in front of it. Right, the memorial's ceiling.



A virtual tour of Hillside's grounds (from which these photos are taken) can be viewed at [www.hillside memorial.org](http://www.hillside memorial.org)

## Planning a Mausoleum Project? Some Advice From Barry Berlin

- Do your homework. Get to know the rules and regulations of the municipality you'll be building in so there are no surprises. Find out what their codes are. You'd be surprised how many people plan something and don't even think about what the codes are and then they take it to the city and the planning department says "You can't do that."
- Try to establish a good rapport with your neighbors. Find out if any neighborhood groups exist and make them aware

of what you have in mind so that your plans don't come as a surprise to them.

■ I differ from some of my colleagues in that I believe in hiring a general contractor and having that company sub out the different portions of the job, including the mausoleum. Very often cemeterians hire a design/build contractor, which I did not do.

I went to an architect (Mekus Studios, Chicago, Illinois) to have the project designed and we went through the per-

mitting process with the architect. Once we got the city's permission to go ahead, I sent out an RFP to a group of general contractors and got bids. The general contractor (Pepper Construction, Irvine, California) then got bids from mausoleum companies and hired one (Milne Mausoleums, Portland, Oregon).

This was a very difficult project and without the right architect and contractor and good engineers, it could have been a disaster, but it turned out gorgeous. □

possible as far as the neighbors were concerned.

We tore down the maintenance building on the edge of the "found" land after we built a new one elsewhere, in a wooded area, but we needed to coordinate the new mausoleum with the existing garden crypt complex, Sunland Gardens.

Our original plan was to have a building of one height, within the city's height

restriction, but that turned out to be too massive. It was back to the drawing board, and what emerged was a three-tiered mausoleum with gardens atop the first two levels and a skylight on the third level, as well as lawn crypts divided into three gardens.

The gardens are beautiful and the neighbors love it. They've called us, they've come over to walk through the gardens and tell us that they are very, very pleased. The

ones who were our antagonists at one time have admitted that it's beautiful and very different from what they had envisioned.

We started construction in 2002 and Court of the Matriarchs mausoleum and Garden of the Matriarchs lawn crypts were dedicated in January of this year.

### *How much space did you end up with?*

We added 5,356 crypts, including 2,687

### Successful Sales Tactic #271:

# The Clincher

When you join the International Cemetery and Funeral Association's Service Bureau, you're guaranteeing your customers dollar-for-dollar credit for preneed purchases and assuring them credit on their paid purchase price into any one of over 600 participating cemeteries throughout the United States and Canada.

So when your customer asks, "What if I move?", be ready with the right answer.

**The ICFA Credit Exchange Plan: A Flexible Alternative for a Mobile Society.**



For more information, call the ICFA at 1-800-645-7700; in VA, (703) 391-8400

## HILLSIDE MEMORIAL PARK &amp; MORTUARY'S DISTINGUISHED RESIDENTS

To mark the 350th anniversary of Jews in America and celebrate the contributions of Jews to the greater Los Angeles community, Hillside published a book highlighting the achievements of 250 individuals who have been laid to rest at Hillside, including:

■ Entertainers Al Jolson (featured on the cover, left), Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Eddie Cantor, Neil Carter, Lorne Greene, David Janssen and Michael Landon.

■ Entrepreneurs Max Factor (cosmetics), Charles Groman (co-founder of the first licensed Jewish mortuary west of Chicago), Ruth Handler (Mattel Toy Co. co-founder and inventor of the Barbie doll) and Bernard Schwab (founder of Schwab's Pharmacy on Sunset Boulevard).

■ Musician Percy Faith, football coach Sid Gillman, baseball player Hank Greenberg, anti-war radical turned businessman Jerry Rubin, Allan Sherman (writer of "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh"), singer Dinah Shore and author Irving Wallace.

The book pinpoints where each is interred or entombed and includes a glossary of funeral and cemetery terms, including those specific to the Jewish tradition, such as *Kaddish*, the mourner's prayer.



double-depth crypts. In the mausoleum, we have 2,854 casket spaces. We have five family rooms with a capacity of 12 to 18 caskets. All five have been sold, were sold

while the building was still under construction. We couldn't include more because that would have decreased total capacity too much.

## IT'S ABOUT TRUST!

The Ensure-A-Seal Casket Protector program is built on trust. Your customers expect it, your mausoleum needs it, and Ensure-A-Seal can provide it. Casket Protectors are a quality product that control the changes in the crypt chamber. Exceptional on-site service is available from experienced professionals. Trust your mausoleum with the Company who specializes in casket protection, Ensure-A-Seal.

1-800-864-4174

[www.ensure-a-seal.com](http://www.ensure-a-seal.com)



**ENSURE-A-SEAL**

### Ensure-A-Seal Products

*Proudly made in the USA*

Original Casket Protector  
Econo-Krypt Liner  
Trays  
Incident Kits  
Body Bags

© 2004 Ensure-A-Seal

We estimate this project gives us an additional 15 to 20 years of interment or entombment space. It also gives us a nice array of different types of inventory so no matter what a family is looking for, we have something to show them.

#### *When did you start selling?*

We started preconstruction sales in 2002, using artist's renderings, and we've done very well. The early sales helped pay for the project.

#### *What sort of marketing have you done?*

A massive amount. We've contacted all the temples and other Jewish organizations. We've worked out arrangements so that if they, or a congregant, purchase property, we will make a donation to the synagogue. We've sent direct mail to the client lists our sales counselors have. We've advertised extensively in the Jewish weekly newspaper in Los Angeles, both with regular ads and inserts.

We've done everything we could to get the word out to the Jewish population of Los Angeles, which is extensive, that we have something new and unique, and it seems to have worked.

#### *What will you do with the land now under lease when it becomes available?*

Our master plan shows us tearing down the administration building and mortuary, replacing them with new buildings on that property, which is at the intersection of Green Valley Circle and Centinela Avenue, which is where we'll move the main entrance.

We'll keep the chapel now located by the current mortuary, and include a chapel with the new mortuary. That will give us the ability to handle two services at the same time.

The administration building and mortuary take up about 9,000 square feet, so moving them will free up some land, which we'll use for mausoleum space. Since we'll have a new main entrance, we can close some of the current roadway and develop it, as well.

I won't be here to do all this, but in the cemetery business you have to think long-term.

*Barry Berlin is COO of Hillside Memorial Park & Mortuary. He can be reached at [bberlin@hillsidememorial.org](mailto:bberlin@hillsidememorial.org) or (310) 641-0707.*