

# A LASTING LEGACY

Providing full-service funeral services is a hallmark of Downs Funeral Home. As end-of-life preparations are made, the caring, compassionate staff at Downs handle all the details for grieving families in their immediate time of need, including the design, ordering and placement of grave markers, headstones and memorials.

Throughout the history of mankind, from the ancient Egyptians with their pyramids to the simplest granite marker or bronze plaque in a local cemetery, memorials are built to outlast the lifespan of the person(s) they pay tribute to.

"Memorials are designed to remember and honor their loved ones," said Jeff Cushman, owner of Downs Funeral Home and its subsidiary, Lakehead Monument Company. "Our goal is to offer full services. When people come to us for funerals and memorial services, another thing they will eventually want is a monument or a marker at the cemetery. That's what we do through Lakehead Monument."

## IT STARTS WITH DESIGN

It starts with design. As a retailer, Lakehead Monument works with the family to create a basic sketch. At this point, as they say, "nothing is set in stone."

Shortly before his death, John Lennon prophetically wrote, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." It's a truism that we don't often think of the afterlife in terms of our own part in it, or express our wishes or desires, leaving it to family and friends to choose for us. Sometimes it takes a while to process everything on life's menu when it's in front of us, and when it comes to markers and gravestones, it's a huge menu.

Cushman says the process usually begins with a simple design idea. "When you come in and you have an idea, we start jotting things down. We do a simple sketch on a piece of paper showing how you want the





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wording, how you want the names. We try to narrow down the color; some people are matching what's already out there, some people don't know what they want. We do have books that you can look through, but some people will tell us they just want the name and the dates."

He says you can do whatever you want on a stone, if you have space. For instance, if somebody wants a monument with 15 carvings on it, they can give them a solid estimate on what those additions will cost.

The initial sketch is sent to a manufacturer who creates a more precise rendering. Cushman explains how Lakehead Monument has long-standing relationships with monument companies that allow them to be flexible and keep costs down in the design process.

"Some companies will require 50 percent down just to get a drawing. We don't do that. We get you a drawing with everything on it before we move forward. We have a pretty good idea of what things are going to cost, so with our prices we can give them a good ballpark," Cushman said.

For the physical monument, the sky is the limit in terms of shape, size, material (granite, marble, bronze), color, text and custom embellishments. Lakehead has a small display room and some samples of granite. The quality and color of granite is the biggest factor when it comes to determining the cost of a monument, said the owner of the funeral home. If you're struggling for a starting place, or are uncertain about a particular style or color of stone, Cushman said the best showroom is a walk through the cemetery.

"I always tell them to drive out there on a sunny day and drive out there on a rainy day. You'll be amazed at what you can't read in the rain. For some people, that matters to them, for some people it doesn't, but the best showroom is to actually go out into the



cemetery and walk around and see what colors you like, what they look like in the sun, what the lettering looks like.” He even suggests taking a few snapshots of markers and designs to bring in. The final, approved design helps determine the costs for the monument or marker, plus the setting and installation at the cemetery.

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For the majority of monuments, polished granite, marble and bronze are the preferred materials. “They used to use a lot of marble, but marble wears over time with the water. If you go look at the old veteran graves, the marble ones upright in Greenwood, you can see that eventually you can’t read the writing on them anymore.” Cushman notes that granite is the most durable and holds up well with the seasonal changes we experience in the Northland.

Most granite is sourced regionally, cut from one of the largest commercial quarries near Cold Spring, Minnesota. Lakehead works with Rex Granite, a St. Cloud-area manufacturer who shapes and polishes the monuments in addition to etching the names, dates and embellishments. Alternately, if an existing stone simply needs to have a name and date updated, Lakehead monument has a local engraver who engraves the details. Cushman said laser etching has become very popular, but he notes that laser etching can only be done on black granite, which is imported from suppliers in India. Black granite is the only granite with the contrast and fine grain required for laser etching.


The final step is the placement of the monument. While it seems obvious, in the Northland, this is done on a three-season calendar to work around the winter months. The placement is done old-school, using a two-wheel or four-wheel dolly. “Yes, it’s all done with a dolly,” Cushman said, for stones or markers and the bases they rest on. On average, they can weigh upwards of 1,000 pounds. “We have our own truck trailer to move everything around, to dig the places.” Cushman notes that most of the cemeteries in Superior will set all the flat markers, but Lakehead sets the monuments. “So, the cemetery will put the foundation and we put the monuments. Outside of town, we do everything; we do the foundation, the monument or the flat markers.”



## FULL-SERVICE PROVIDER

Lakehead Monument, founded in 1982 as a subsidiary of Downs Funeral Home, services all of Douglas County, as well as portions of Washburn County and Duluth. Cushman said a frequently asked question is, 'Do I have to use your funeral home to be able to use your monument company?' "No," he said, "People are welcome from all over. We get calls from all over Northwest Wisconsin and in Duluth and up the North Shore. We do monuments, markers, columbariums for urns, benches, and military memorials."

"The reason why the company started was just to offer the full service, so people can go to one place to get everything," Cushman said. "It's really grown over the years and we've been trying to grow with it, offering as much as we can. It's not our main business; it was created so people can have one place to go to. Our prices are very reasonable and very competitive."

Whether it's a flat marker, a family headstone or a columbarium, when it comes to planning your legacy, or that of a loved one, the staff at Lakehead Monument are available to help you design and create a memorial for your loved one. 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.



Left to right: Steve Elsmore, Jeff Cushman, Al Butterworth

