

— by Len Finegold, board member of the [Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Philadelphia](#). Adapted from an article in the FCAGP newsletter.

At a party, someone recently asked me, “Have you done anything out of the ordinary since we last met?” I was about to mutter my usual “nothing much”, and then remembered I’d visited a crematorium. My friend admitted this was unusual and worth hearing. So, I told the story of my penultimate visit to a crematorium—I feel fortunate since most people visit *only once*. It came about because the board of the Funeral Consumer Alliance of Greater Philadelphia regularly visits the funeral homes they recommend to members. I had never been on one of these visits, and I volunteered—with some trepidation—for the next one. . .

The crematory is in its own building in the [Ivy Hill Cemetery](#) ; there is also a chapel on the site. We were met by superintendent Dave Drysdale, in a rectangular reception hall with seats for perhaps a hundred. He explained the laws and procedures which control how a body is brought to the crematorium, and that some of these can vary within different states and even counties. I suspect that these evolved to make it awkward for someone (Mafiosi?) to bring a body for cremation, “forgetting” to inform the authorities. Mr. Drysdale listed the protocols the crematory used to identify the body from entrance to exit to make sure staff knew they had the right one. Our group asked a lot of very direct questions, and he answered them straightforwardly.

Mr. Drysdale then took us in to see the crematorium itself. I had expected to go outside to another part of the building. Instead, behind where a speaker might hold a memorial service, he drew back a curtain revealing—to my surprise—the crematorium proper. The oven looked so familiar and ordinary that one of the group asked if pizzas were ever cooked in there! There were a number of controls and gauges measuring temperature and other parameters. The crematory is powered by natural gas, and everyone in the group agreed that the sight of the afterburner (which reduces particulate pollution) was the most visually arresting of the trip.

Most bodies destined for the crematorium get there in what are called “alternative containers,” reinforced cardboard boxes about seven feet long, two feet wide, and one foot deep. One of our naturally curious group wanted to try one on “for size,” so we took a snapshot!

When the cremation is finished, Mr. Drysdale explained, what’s left is mainly bone, which crumbles. The crematory pulverizes what’s left into a coarse powder, which is then placed in a sturdy plastic container.

The staff and facilities at Ivy Hill were sedate, respectful and comforting. The surroundings were also pleasant—not at all dismal. The overall cleanliness and tidiness of the behind-the-scenes operation were close to that of a restaurant. We had free access to the facilities; nothing was kept secret. All of us were impressed with the professionalism and competence we saw. And, we all came away with the most unusual cocktail party story you could hope for.