



Gruesome Photos, Video Show Bodies Discarded in Woods Behind Cemetery

Thursday, December 20, 2001

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Attorneys suing a cemetery company accused of recycling graves showed grisly photos and video footage Thursday of crushed burial vaults and human remains discarded in the woods.

They also presented internal documents they say show Menorah Gardens & Funeral Chapels in West Palm Beach and its owner, Houston-based Service Corporation International, were aware of the grave desecrations. SCI is the world's largest cemetery company.

The attorneys represent 10 families who say their loved ones were dug up and dumped in the woods, buried in the wrong graves or buried in vaults on top of each other instead of side by side as the families had paid for. More than 1,000 people could become part of the class-action lawsuit, they said.

"That body that is placed to rest for eternity is now destroyed, maligned, abused," said attorney Ervin A. Gonzalez.

SCI officials did not immediately return a call Thursday but said Wednesday that they had no knowledge of any wrongdoing.

The state attorney general's office is investigating Menorah Gardens and four other South Florida cemeteries owned by SCI.

A videotape and photos taken by private investigators showed a leg bone beside chunks of a concrete vault, in which coffins are placed. They also show Jewish burial shrouds, and a Star of David next to finger bones.

A former cemetery worker led investigators to the remains, attorneys said.

Remarks in the burial book, obtained from former employees, included "no room for spouse," "move Mrs. Kolin" and "dig this grave double deep." Another handwritten note said: "Where are Lippitis and who are Haskells and are they both deceased? Move Haskell marker."

The pages show "there are several hundred people who have purchased graves, premium contracts purchased years ago, that do not have a place to be laid to rest," said co-counsel Neal Hirschfeld.

Myra Stone of Lake Worth said her parents bought side-by-side graves in 1982. Her father died in 1994, but another man allegedly was buried next to him in her mother's grave. When her mother died last year, the cemetery's operators dug up the man's vault and threw most of his remains in the woods, according to a former employee.

"I understand that some of his remains are still in her grave," Stone said. "I am just horrified."

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday, seeks unspecified damages.

"We've investigated allegations that we thought too heinous to be accurate, too horrible to be true, over the last several years," Hirschfeld said.

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