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BEGINS AFTER PAGE 26

# VARIETY

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NOVEMBER 8, 1999

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## DREAM UNDERTAKEN

### Cemetery sees future in vid biopics

By CHARLES LYONS

Two twentysomethings sit in front of editing bays in a large, loft-like room on the second floor of an old Masonic lodge on a seedy part of Santa Monica Boulevard. They work quickly, under deadline. One



Brent and Tyler Cassity

digitizes, the other edits using SGI 3-D modeling equipment to create effects. The activity is not unusual for a post-production facility — but how about for a cemetery?

For a little more than \$4,000, you, too, may buy yourself or a loved one a Forever Biography at a Forever Theater near you.

You supply the video or film images, favorite songs, letters, certificates and other memorabilia, and Forever will assemble them into an interactive scrapbook that will be permanently

stored on the Forever Network, accessible at Forever Theaters in cemeteries around the country and on the Web at [www.forevernetwork.com](http://www.forevernetwork.com).

If it sounds like a good sales pitch, it is. Business is brisk at For-

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## H'w'd cemetery sees future on vid, online

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ever, located near Paramount Studios in Hollywood.

Under the leadership of brothers Tyler and Brent Cassity — who 18 months ago bought the Hollywood Forever Cemetery out of bankruptcy — the death-care industry has truly gone Hollywood. In addition to the biography programs, the Cassitys have initiated tributes to such Hollywood legends as Hattie McDaniel, who could not be buried in Hollywood when she died 47 years ago — the result of racism.

The Cassitys are tall, clean-cut, soft-spoken and mannerly men in their 30s. They come from St. Louis and a long line of undertakers. When they were teenagers, they conceived the idea of a visual cemetery, a place where families could come to pay tribute to their loved ones while watching testimonials.

But for some years, the brothers put their dream to rest: Brent studied acting and political science in his home town, while Tyler ventured off to New York City, where he took a lit degree from Columbia U.

Years later, the Cassitys found themselves entering the family business with a determination to change it.

"This business is a very staid business. It wasn't changing," recalls Brent.

### A new life

Brent and Tyler began making video biographies some 15 years ago, but only 18 months ago, since they acquired Forever, have they begun to see their vision realized. At Forever, they have assembled some 2,000 biographies; add those to the more than 10,000 they have made over the past decade, and the Cassitys are two of the most prolific producers working in Hollywood.

But isn't this all a bit too hip for cemeteries?

Not according to the Cassitys.

"I think cemeteries throughout history are places where people celebrate lives," explains Tyler. "We erect memorials so we can remember those who came before us. In the 20th century, the best way to remember someone is by seeing not their body but their body of work — in photographs, film and video clips, etc."

Brent added, "We think the cemetery of the future is going to be a library of lives that's not just for the famous, but for the famous to family and friends."

A few years ago, when the Cassity team began putting touchscreens in cemeteries and talking about Web sites from which families all over the world could access visual biographies, people in the cemetery business laughed at them.

But, like true pioneers, the Cassitys have stayed the course and are quietly transforming the business.

Today, Forever is a clean, quiet oasis where you can feel far away from true deal-making. But if you miss the flickering images, you can always enter one of the Forever Theaters and take in a movie or two.

"At traditional cemeteries, all you have is something carved in cold stone. There's nothing alive," says Tyler, 30. "This way, you can hear that person, see them as they were in life," says Brent, 33. The Cassitys have stored about 3,000 of their 10,000 biographies on the Web at [forevernetwork.com](http://forevernetwork.com) (the others will be digitized from videotape soon). But theirs isn't primarily a dotcom firm. Instead, it is focused on changing the cemetery by making the biography, rather than the remains, the focus of a visit. Eventually they hope to even insert touchscreens into tombstones.

The Cassitys learned the death business from their father, who ran funeral homes when they were kids. But the biography idea was their own. In 1986, three years after their grandmother died, they found an audiotape of her. The sweet voice made them happy and sad at the same time. "Why don't we have more than this?" they wondered. It's schmaltzy and, as they discovered, good business; Forever is set to earn \$11 million in revenues this year, up from just \$700,000 in 1998. The three-cemetery firm plans to acquire 10 more by year's end.

Forever is doing well because the Cassitys realized before anyone else in their glacially changing industry that many Americans would love to have their own A&E Biography. And not just "the terminally trendy," as a reporter described Forever's clients. Earl Essman, 72, a retired real estate manager and American Legion member, and his wife Marian, 71, decided in the fall of 1998 that they should make arrangements for their passing. Earl worked with Forever's head biographer, Cindy Stafos, to compile pictures and stories. He recalled going to summer camp and meeting Marian. He notes on their bio that their favorite song even before they met was *Where or When*, which Dion & the Belmonts made a hit in 1960.

"I'm going to give you a quote,"

Essman says, explaining why Forever will succeed. "It's from Andy Warhol, and it goes something like this: 'Everybody is entitled to 15 minutes of fame.' That biography is going to be ours." What Warhol actually wrote was, "In the future, everyone will be world famous for 15 minutes." Essman got the quote wrong, but he got the sociology right. Many of us believe we have a right to be famous. None of Forever's clients, folks who were dishwashers or lawyers, actors or plumbers, has ever asked that a biography remain private.

And they will pay a tidy sum for the broadcast. A bare-bones Forever package, including 10 photos and as much as 20 minutes of audio recordings to explain the pictures, with no music or video, costs \$600. Those who buy a Platinum Biography can include 115 photos, three songs of their choice, an in-home interview with the subject of the bio (if he isn't dead) and those close to him, and a videotaped reminiscing party with family and friends. A Forever editor then puts it all together into a movie—for \$4,195.

But the Cassitys say their product means more than traditional funeral fare—the coffins and flowers and sermons—that will be lost to history. The typical funeral costs something like \$7,000. The Cassitys don't want you to spend less overall, but they would rather

you devote less to a coffin, say, and more to your life story. That approach has made them outcasts in their own business. Many traditional cemetery owners think the brothers have found a new way to perpetuate a hoary tradition of mortuary science: gouging customers by pushing them to purchase needless fluffery when they are low. The Forever biography "sounds to me like an effort to turn an existential event into a retail one," says Thomas Lynch, a noted poet and essayist who runs the Milford, Mich., funeral company that his father started. (He knows something about turning memory into a retail event: his memoir, *The Undertaking*, was published in 1997 and is in paperback, available at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) for \$10.36.)

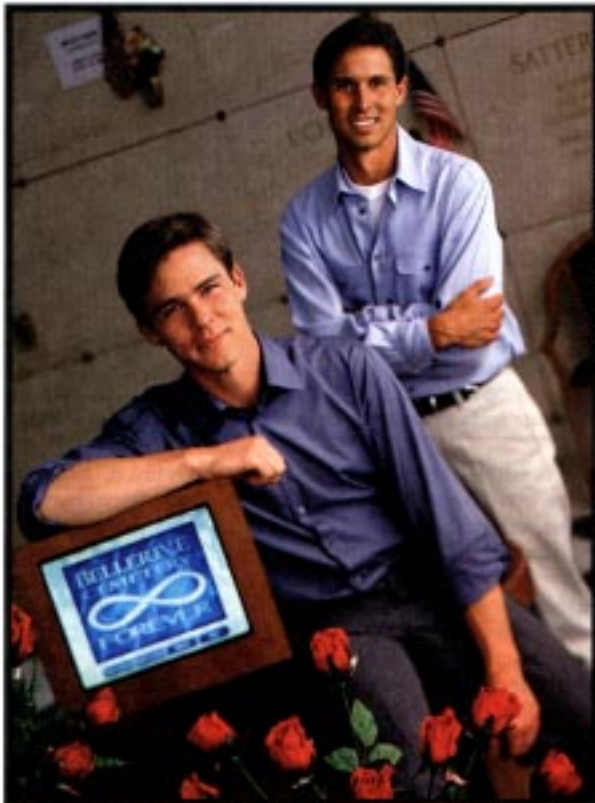
Lynch fears that the cemetery trend toward providing bio-kiosks, celebrity tours or even bird-watching sessions will turn these sacred places into amusement parks. "Once you say a cemetery has to be a place other than the place we put our dead, you open it up to the ridiculous," he says. When told that the Cassitys' Creve Coeur cemetery has a fitness walk, Lynch goes even further: "If we have a fitness walk, why not a concert, and if you have a concert, why not a rap concert? Why not have a chicken barbecue for the Rotary Club?"

Well, as it turns out, "we do have rap concerts," says Tyler Cassidy defiantly. Or at least one, at the service of DJ Rob One (a.k.a. Robert Cory), a prominent fixture in the Los Angeles hip-hop world who died in March. "The people who come to us define who we are," says Tyler. "For us to define for them how they can remember someone, well, we're just not going to do that." The debate comes down to a central question: What is a cemetery for? Traditionalists think it is a place for rituals of closure, a place we go to for a funeral and return to only on birthdays. The Cassitys allow us to keep our dead loved

ones—or ourselves—open to new interpretations and new (if virtual) relationships with great-grandkids they (or we) will never meet. Instead of finality, the Cassitys' cemeteries offer a kind of manufactured immortality, a heavily edited performance of someone's life that shunts aside what was a cemetery's focus: the end.

And is there anything wrong with turning a cemetery into a theme park for memories? Not in the abstract, though the reality can be a little ... unreal. Few people tell the whole truth in their biographies. The Essmans, for instance, don't mention their previous marriages. Another client forced Forever's editors to remove all references to a deceased mother's mental illness.

But biographer Stafos says people are often unintentionally honest about themselves. One man, who prepared his biography with his wife, even though both are only in their 30s, described his wife's best quality this way: "She's a very hard worker." Other clients send regretful messages via their bios: they wish they had been better parents; they apologize to friends for a betrayal. "In the memoir culture right now, there's so much confession," says Tyler. "We're just a part of that." Maybe. But the Cassitys are also poised to extend that memoir culture, for better or worse, into all our deaths. ■



**HIGH-TECH DEATH MOGULS** Tyler and Brent in the marble mausoleum where they store ashes and digitized memories

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATHY HARRIS FOR TIME