

Charise's ashes find rest at Forest Home



by Tom Holmes July 12, 2022



Attendees drop in roses on Wednesday, July 6, 2022, during a burial service for Charisse Kotowski at Forest Home Cemetery on Des Plaines Avenue in Forest Park, Ill. | ALEX ROGALS/Staff Photographer

Charise Kotkoski died alone at the age of 61 in a house fire in Will County in 2012, and no one showed up to take care of her remains. Alone in life and alone in death, her ashes remained on a shelf in the Will County Sheriff's office for the last 10 years.

What transformed this story from tragedy into redemption is a series of serendipitous connections. When Bill and Sue Kushnerik of Oak Lawn learned about Charise's ashes from a friend who recognized Charise's name in an article in an obscure magazine, they realized that Charise was actually Bill's stepsister.

As a result of an acrimonious divorce, Bill's stepfather, Art Kotkoski had been barred from any contact with his daughter; therefore Bill had never met Charise. Nevertheless, the Kushneriks wanted her to have a Christian burial, and contacted their parish church, St. Linus in Oak Lawn, for advice on how to proceed.

They did all of the necessary paperwork at the Will County Coroner's Office to obtain Charise's remains. Then someone at St. Linus learned that two graves at Forest Home Cemetery here in Forest Park had recently been donated, so Bill and Sue went through the St. Vincent de Paul Society to find a contact in Forest Park, which turned out to be longtime Forest Parker Jim Murray, to help set up a graveside committal service. According to its website, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul "is a worldwide organization of lay Catholics, following Christ's call to serve the poor, the suffering, and the deprived."

Jim contacted John Walters, a permanent deacon at St. Bernardine Catholic Church on Harrison Street, who agreed to preside at the committal.

So on July 6 at 11 a.m. under overcast skies, the Kushneriks, Jim and his wife Ann Murray, Deacon Walters, this reporter and a photographer from the Review gathered at a grave site near the entrance to Forest Home.

Since no one present had even met Charise, what amounted to a eulogy by the Kushneriks focused on Charise's father and Bill's stepfather whom Sue said was a "good guy." Regarding Charise's life, Sue said, "I don't think it was a very happy one."

Deacon Walters picked up on that thought and wondered if Charise had ever felt abandoned, even by God. He said that even though it may feel that way sometimes, God is always with us, that even though the chain of events leading up to the graveside committal might be viewed by some as serendipitous, he saw them through the lens of faith as evidence of God's hand at work.

The Kushneriks seemed to feel a sense of closure at the end of the 15-minute service and thanked the other five people present for being there. The prayers Deacon Walters read included the words, “Charise has gone to her rest,” to which everyone present responded with a heartfelt “amen.”

After the service, Jim Murray noted Forest Home’s history of accepting people who didn’t fit in mainstream society, like the Haymarket Square rioters, Gypsies and now Charise Kotkoski.