



Episode 04

Pushing up turfgrass

January 6, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

cemetery, Woodlawn Memorial Park, monuments, families, graves, burial, piece, learning

Podcast Transcript

Music Intro

Sara: Welcome to this Episode of Canadian Turf Talks. I'm Dr. Sara Stricker from the Guelph Turfgrass Institute and I'm joined by my co-host, Reg Langen. Today we're going into the dark side of turf with Canadian Turf Talks. Our guest today is Rebecca Zinger from Woodlawn Memorial Park, which is a large cemetery located in Guelph, Ontario. Rebecca is going to tell us all the details about the history of this, but I think it's really interesting to think about cemeteries as a part of turf management.

Reg: Yeah, I think it was really such a great opportunity. I mean, turf is such a wide world, in Canada and all across the world. And it's great to learn about a bit of a different operation that maybe we don't put enough focus on in our industry and think about.

Sara: Yeah, I think we're too focused on the spookiness and the discomfort around dead bodies, and not thinking about supporting the emotional needs of someone who's just gone through something and losing a loved one. And that's just offering comfort instead of focusing on that downside.

Reg: And I think you can see the wide spectrum of skills, like for, you know, you need, in that kind of role. I mean, she's doing what operational stuff, she's doing a lot of planning, and budgeting, and financials. But then also, like, the one thing that you don't necessarily see, let's say, in the golf industry, or in lawn care and of those other ones is the empathic piece and that that you know, that need to be there. Yeah, the service that the emotional service that she needs to provide on a day to day, or her team needs to be. And you know, that can be a lot for people to handle. So, really interesting stuff from her.

Sara: When you first picture a cemetery, you're probably thinking about a grassy field filled with tombstones, headstones, monuments, mausoleums, those sorts of things. And you might not even consider that is a part of turfgrass management. So, let's get started. We're here with our guest, Rebecca Zinger, who is the General Manager of Woodlawn Memorial Park.

Rebecca: Hey, guys!

Reg: Hi, Rebecca. How are you?

Rebecca: Oh, you know, everybody's gone for the day. So, it's nice and quiet around here.

Sara: Isn't it always quiet around there?

Rebecca: Hah! I wish I could say that. You're pulling out all the jokes and all the 80-year old's pull out on us.

Sara: Honestly, you know, one of the things I've always kind of thought about the cemetery industry, like we have this misnomer of pushing up daisies. Like how many daisies are there in that property?

Rebecca: None. We have zero

Sara: No, it's pushing up turf. We need to change it.

Rebecca: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, well, and weeds. Lots of weeds.

Sara: Now, Rebecca, how did you get involved in turf grass?

Rebecca: It's so funny, because usually people are like, how did you end up in cemeteries? Haha! This is refreshing for a chance for me to talk about to turfgrass. But yeah, it I started as a student in cemeteries back when I was in high school and needed a summer job. And my mom had a friendship with the general manager of the cemetery in Waterloo, and she approached him and said, "Hey, do you guys hire summer students?" And I applied, got in, and I fell in love with it immediately. And if you talk to anybody in cemeteries, we'll say the same thing. It's typically we started as a student on the grounds or as a groundskeeper and we never left because we just fell in love with our jobs. And so yeah, it started from there. But if I wanted to move on in the profession, it was suggested to me by the manager at the time, that if I wanted to gain a full-time role at some point, maybe look into doing some landscaping courses, some turf management courses, you know, horticulture... maybe, you know, look into being an arborist. Something that would benefit the cemetery grounds maintenance piece. And of course, I grew up loving cutting grass. I grew up on a farm

Sara: There's something about the smell of fresh cut grass

Rebecca: It is!!! See? I can only – I am in the presence of the people who understand this. There is something about those perfect lines in the turf. And you're right, it's the smell of the fresh – I mean, obviously I don't have terrible allergies, otherwise, I would hate it. Yeah, I just I loved cutting grass. I loved playing in the mud. I used to cut my grandma's lawn as a youngster. And she was, like, watching with her beady eyes out the window. Like, if you left any "Mohawks", it was tragic. So yeah, just had a natural love for turf I thought, "You know, and I'm going to look into some courses." And that's when the Turf Managers' Short Course popped up and mum and dad were like, "Alright, we support that if you want to go and do that." So, I did. Obviously, it was appealing because it was only a month long. A very intense month.

Sara: Yeah!

Rebecca: But it was awesome. I loved it. And again, you're in a room with a bunch of turf nerds who understand why you love grass and why you get excited about, you know, different weeds and stolons, and rhizomes, and all that crazy stuff. So, yeah, that's where I kind of began my cemetery and turf career.

Sara: Did you have to go for any other kind of training to be, like, the manager and manage the business side of that?

Rebecca: No. So I mean, I've been very fortunate. So, I've only been at Woodlawn now for a little over a year. But previous to that, my former employer of 23 years, I was just really lucky to have a lot of wonderful leaders who believed in me, and, you know, saw that I wanted to make a career in cemeteries. And so, they fostered that. And they provided me with a lot of opportunities to grow my skills without actually having to go to school. So basically, learning on the job. So, I think that's really important, especially in my role as a leader now, to pass that along. You know, I'm so fortunate to have those mentors and leaders that helped me along so I'm super happy to pass that along as well. It's really – there is no, you know – if you look up anywhere, there is no cemetery 101. So, it's more of a

learn-on-the-job. And then we do have sector-specific seminars and training that you can attend. But it's more so, once you're working at a cemetery, that's when you get introduced to those specific training exercises. And the business side of it. Yeah, I mean, you know, budgeting and equipment utilization, and all that fun stuff. Again, it's just previous leadership just kind of took me under their wing and showed me the ropes. So... and I continue to do that. I mean, we have a wonderful team here at Woodlawn too that is daily, you know, teaching me new things and helping me along. So, it's never – I don't like the term boss, or manager – I'm not a boss, I'm just, I'm part of the team. I just happen to be the one that has to take the fall if I make a big mistake, or if there's mistakes made, or if somebody doesn't like the way we cut our grass. Of course, I'm going to take the heat for that, but... and I sign the checks, but I just, I just want to be viewed as being part of the team. I like, you know – I'll never forget where I started or where it came from. And I think that's really important.

Reg: Yeah, I tend to have the same mindset. And what you said hit home with the smell, right? The smell is the one that I think of all the things that I ended up missing. And it's ironic, because as you said that I was thinking about your role. And one of our questions here is, you know, "What is it a day in the life of a GM of a cemetery look like?" And I'm fairly confident you haven't seen you haven't sat on a zero turn or any kind of piece of equipment in a while.

Rebecca: Oh yeah...

Reg: So it's, you know, you do you miss it, you miss the smell, you miss the – you know, and you get into this stuff because you like to be outside and it's been a transition in my career that I'm sure many leaders could share is – once you get into those roles, the job is a very different set of skills, once you get up to that level. So why don't you tell us a little bit about what your kind of day looks like? And, like, you know, what do you like about it? And what do you what are the things you miss? I think is also really important.

Rebecca: Yeah. So, you know, it's funny. You say that, but – and you just completely described what happened to me at my former employer's... You know, who cares? It's the City of Waterloo, I worked for Waterloo. I would never, I have nothing bad to say about them. So, I was at Waterloo for 23 years. But they're, of course, it's a unionized environment. So, I put in, you know, my first 10 years on the grounds and unfortunately, I was young and foolish. And of course, being a female in the industry felt like I always had to prove myself. So, anything that boys could do, I could do better, and I could do it by myself. So, I never asked for help. Right? Lifting a gas pounder into the graves to the gas pounding. Or, you know, sludging out with a pickaxe to try and get a cremation grave dug. I can do it myself. So that led very quickly to a few MRIs telling me that, "Your back pain is actually fairly serious. You might want to start thinking about easing yourself into a less impactful role." So, yeah, I've got a couple of slightly bulged discs in my lower back and so it became apparent pretty quick that I better, you know, look at the office administrative side of things. And it was a tough decision because I really did love that. You know? I loved working with the families on the grounds and providing them with services graveside. I loved – you know – edging and mulching a fresh edge. Mulch. Beautiful! Like, I miss that. Looking at something at the end of the day and being like, "Man, that looks good. I'm so proud of myself." Now, I'm like, "I moved paper from this side to the other side of my desk." And I don't know, I guess things are going along just fine. But there's not that like, physical... umm... you know, I just... I don't get that satisfaction.

Reg: So, I think for me – I'm going to interrupt – is like that I've struggled that same thing. It's like I'm used to the day-to-day satisfaction, and I would call it a dopamine hit for lack of a better term. Just the enjoyment of completing a task. Whereas now you're stretched, and you have to look, you know, way out. So, the one thing I will share that I've found that's really great, is when I help someone get to where they want to go. Right? Those are the hits that I'm like, "Yes!" Like, watching someone else succeed and watching someone else get something accomplished. But I completely get what you're saying. It's so long, you're not getting that day-to-day satisfaction, right? So, it's...

Rebecca: Yeah, you're right. It's – I mean – again, once I made that decision at Waterloo, with the outdoor stuff being unionized, indoor was not unionized. I, you know, one day I'm driving the backhoe, the next day I can't touch the backhoe because I'm not a unionized employee anymore. And that was a struggle for me because I really did, you know, I really enjoyed that side of my job and I wish...

Sara: You had to quit cold turkey.

Rebecca: I did! I really did. And you know, I really looking back I wish I would have had a little more time to say goodbye to all that equipment and... but fast forward, a little secret- secret: on my last day there, I went out in my high heels and my skirt, and I drove that backhoe. Haha!

Sara: Haha!

Rebecca: One of my mentors there, Brian, he trained me from when I was a student, and he was he was still there when I left. We were like the two originals left from you know, 20 years ago. And I said, "Brian, would you mind if I took the backhoe for a spin?" He's like, "Absolutely not." So, he jumped in there with me and I took it for a spin. And so, it was a little bit of that full circle moment of – you know – he trained me on it, and he let me, kind of, ride it into my retirement. So... but here at Woodlawn, this is the beauty of it! I have been on the mowers for a few days at a time. I've grabbed the trimmer. We're not a unionized environment. And so, if the team is slammed outside with interments, you know? Opening and closing grapes. That's obviously top priority; is serving our families. Turf still has to get cut, and I happen to love cutting turf. So, I head down there, put on my tunes, and I am on the zero turn, and I am just killing it out there. So those are the days where I'm like – and they know it too – they can see how happy I am. Haha! So, it's really this role is very well-rounded here. And again, it's not going to be like that at every cemetery, but I'm fortunate enough that I get to dabble in a little bit of everything here. You know? Whether it's assisting the team with high level issues that need addressing right away, or it's working on budgets, you know, signing payments, you know, consulting suppliers for cemetery-specific supplies or equipment – which has been real great during COVID, trying to just buy a mower – and then there's days where, yeah, I throw my admin hat on and I answer phones or serve families at the front counter if we're short staffed in here, or I jump on a mower and I help the team outside

Sara: What's an example of cemetery-specific equipment that people who are not in the industry might not know what that is?

Rebecca: Yeah, so, things like lowering devices – so the contraption that the casket sits on over the grave so that we can lower it into the grave, things like monument clamps. So, if we have to move a monument out of the way we need specific equipment to be able to pick up that stone and move it out of the way. Artificial turf to cover the grave site to make it look pretty for families when they show up, stuff like that. So, there is some cemetery-specific supplies that we look for. But, I mean, general maintenance – you know- mowers, tractors, front-end loaders, excavators, all that kind of stuff.

Reg: I want to loop back because it's interesting to me – because one of the things that I found is like, you know – when you are willing to get dirty and jump on the mower, and people see that, the buy-in from your staff is almost always so much better. Right? Like it's, they see that you're willing to roll your sleeves up and it matters – I think it makes a significant difference to, you know, improved collaboration. But tell me, would you say that that's the case? Your staff definitely see that?

Rebecca: Definitely, yeah. I mean, it's been really well received. It's certainly appreciated when they're behind on things. They're much appreciative. Yeah, I mean, this management position is full, like, there's definitely a full plate. But at the end of the day, our goal here at the cemetery is to serve our families and to serve them beyond when they've left their loved one with us. We want to provide the best maintenance possible so that they have an enjoyable environment to visit. And so, I've never forgotten my roots, I will never forget where I started, where I came from, and why I love this. And that is ultimately to serve the families. And so, you know, I hope that if the team can see that I'm willing to

do whatever it takes, I'll pitch in wherever it's necessary. I haven't reached that level in my career where I'm like, "Okay, you guys need to do the dirty work and I'm just going to stay in the office here." You know? Yeah, I get my nails done once in a while. But, I mean, who am I kidding? I still much prefer throwing on my steel toes or rain suit, like, put me out in the pouring rain. I don't care. I love it. It's therapy for me. So, yeah, I think it's been great, you know? Because I can tell them all I want about where I came from and what I used to do and how I got my start, but I think until they actually see it, they're like, "Oh, she's the real deal. Okay." And it just kind of gains you a little bit more of that respect and helps to build that relationship. So yeah.

Sara: And you're working pretty closely with some of these families, and like you're seeing them on one their – possibly one of their worst days. Right?

Rebecca: Yeah.

Sara: And, you know, there's going to be a lot of emotions happening there. How do you and your team like, separate yourself from that kind of pain? You know, I'm an empath. And if I see someone crying, I'm crying too, you know?

Rebecca: Oh, it's bad. Yeah. I mean, when I first started out, it was – that was one of my biggest hurdles, my biggest challenges. But again, going back to, you know, I grew up on a farm. And if there was like, a dead bird. Every dead bird, it got a proper burial.

Sara: Oh, my goodness,

Rebecca: I was destined to be in cemetery. So, I'm not surprised this is where my career has ended up. So, much like yourself, Sara, I'm a very emotional person. I see someone cry, I cry. So, it did take me a while to separate myself from their emotions in order for me to provide the service that I was there to provide. Because the last thing they need to see is, you know, the cemetery groundskeeper falling apart. They're like, "Oh, you're not supposed to be crying." But hey, I'm human, and certainly not afraid to shed tears once in a while. And, you know, I don't want to use the term "desensitized", because I feel like that's just – that's not what it is. You get better at holding those emotions. And certainly, our families do take the brunt of it much like, you know, first responders – on a completely different level. But we know that when we've had a particularly difficult day, we've got to talk about it, and get it out, and use that coping mechanism. Because, you know, we're just constantly absorbing the grief. If we don't expel it at some point, it's going to burst. So, you know, again, we have a lot of sector-specific opportunities for training and guidance on how to cope properly with these situations. Certainly, as a team, we are always... especially when there's a particularly tragic situation with any of our families, it definitely impacts, certainly... babies, children... Those are really difficult. And so, it's really important, especially now in a leadership role to make sure I'm checking in with my team and seeing if they're okay, if they need any additional resources. Certainly, I'm always available. So very supportive of always, always – you know – making sure that you're taking care of yourself. If we're not taking care of ourselves, we're not going to be here to take care of others. So, it's so important.

Sara: Yeah, you've got to be the rock for someone else.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Reg: I mean, that's some heavy stuff.

Rebecca: Yeah, let's lighten it up

Reg: I mean, I don't want to dismiss the effort, you know? Because, because that is, that's a lot. I'm empathic as well, and it would just be a lot for me to handle every day. But let's, let's move on to something a little bit lighter. So, tell us a little bit more about the grounds at Woodlawn and, kind of, what's going on there. Like what do you have like, what's the facility like? What are some of the highlights?

Rebecca: Um, gosh, you know, it's funny because again, I came from a cemetery that opened in 1967. So, fairly new. Coming to Woodlawn, which opened in 1853. Well, enter in every challenge possible. You know, we are kind of Guelph's little mini arboretum out here. We have a ridiculous amount of amazing tree species; a very aging tree canopy in much of the older part. You know, you've got your aging infrastructure, we've got a mausoleum on site that was built in 1930 that's starting to show its age. But the history of Woodlawn is just – it's been so fascinating to me, you know, from its beginnings... But it is truly a park. So, it's funny that you know, originally it was Guelph Cemetery than it went Woodlawn Cemetery, now we're Woodlawn Memorial Park. Because you drive in here, and take away all the monuments, and it really is just a park. You know, it's got all of the components that a park has, maybe not the jungle gyms and the play structures. But yeah, it's just a really beautiful environment. It's so picturesque. Every season has something beautiful to offer. And so, I just – I fell in love with it right away. It takes one walk through here and you're hooked.

Sara: Yeah, well, and on that note – when you have aging infrastructure, like a mausoleum or older tombstones like that, is it your job to you know, upright, a tombstone? Or if something falls down, do you have to fix these things? Because I've seen this on TikTok, there's someone that goes in and does like tombstone restorations. And if you can't contact family, then how do you get permission for this kind of thing? Like, what do you do with that kind of thing?

Rebecca: Yes, yes. So, all monuments and markers are the property of the internment rights holders. When you buy cemetery property, you're not buying the property, you're buying the rights to bury in that piece of property. Misconception among a lot of people. And so, any internment right holder that purchases a monument to be placed on that property, that's their property, that's not my property. So, I can't just go ahead and do anything to it without their permission. Problem is, a lot of times we don't have up to date contact information, or they're deceased, so there is nobody to contact. So, we are heavily legislated by the funeral burial and cremation services act. And in that it states that it's our duty to ensure the safety of our grounds. And so, you know, being a not-for-profit, I would love to say that we have oodles of money to be able to restore all of these monuments. It's just not realistic. So, we're at a point now where, you know, you have to make a decision that when a monument comes down, are we going to – is this going to be a big task? Or is this just a quick, our staff can just quickly do it? But for the most part, we are laying down those monuments, and they become more of a flat stone as opposed to an upright. The problem too, is with many of the trades nowadays – it's a specific talent, some of these monument masons are very, very skilled at what they do. And you can't just let anybody do it. But they're becoming few and far between now. So, it's hard to find the talent to come and fix these older stones. It's unfortunate, because that's history. That's Guelph's history in here. And so, you know, certainly in the near future I have on my running list of wish list is to start doing some fundraising to start restoring some of these historical monuments and get them back in their upright position for the historical aspect.

Sara: And they're beautiful. Some of them. Like, they don't make them like they used to. Like, they're gorgeous.

Rebecca: Exactly. Yeah, some of them are art pieces.

Reg: So, tell me a funny story. Without it being well, I don't know. Like, how do I phrase it? Like, funny without it being morbid or disrespectful? Too – of things you're like, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe that just happened."

Rebecca: We have no humor. Cemeterians – we are not fun people. Hahah. Yeah, I mean...

Sara: Someone, like, buried someone be like, "Oh, darn it, I need that ring back."

Rebecca: Oh, gosh, thank God, I've never had that happen. I mean, I think as a team – as employees – I have always – we've had a lot of fun. Like, you know, maybe people think that we're somber and, kind of, sad all the time. But I think cemeterians are probably one of the craziest bunch. Because we

use humor to combat you know, all of the grief and the sadness that we see. So, some of the practical jokes over the year have just been ridiculous. I remember when I was first training on the grounds to open graves – so I'm learning how to run the backhoe and how to do all the setup, because you have to be perfect. Like, you have to set it up perfectly. You're digging a very specific hole. You don't want to hit the neighbors. And I remember going back to the fill pile to dump the load of fill, I drive back to the backhoe and in the meantime one of the other guys had shown u. He had this thing up in the most precarious position and he was – it on the downriggers, he had it up on the hole and the bucket – like the thing was off its wheels! And I'm like, "How the hell do I get this thing back down?" So, they thought that was pretty funny. Or, you know, if somebody leaves their truck abandoned to go do the job in one of the sections -big mistake! Because you get back in there, your wipers are on at full blast, your music is up at full blast, your air conditioning in the middle of winter is on full blast.

Sara: But is that actually a practical joke? Or is that just haunting?

Rebecca: Ahah! I mean, typically, you're pretty proud of yourself if you do that one. So, you always drive by to laugh at them and point, right?

Reg: So, what I got to ask, I gotta ask this one. What is Halloween like? I just – I was thinking – I' thinking cemeteries. I'm thinking like, do you guys dress up?

Rebecca: See... I've always wanted to, but obviously it's completely inappropriate. But would it not – I mean, just once – be kinda funny to dress up as like a zombie or something and walk around the cemetery? Just to see how long it would take for someone to notice.

Sara: I was thinking more like people, like, coming to the cemetery on Halloween for spooky vibes or something.

Rebecca: No, no... Unfortunately, Devils Night is always – it's unfortunate but there was some targets of vandalism for Devils Night.

Sara: Oh yeah...

Rebecca: But no, nothing crazy. I mean, oh my gosh. So, I mean, indecent exposure. I mean, that's been kind of the highlight. Hahah!

Reg: So, what goals do you guys have for the park upcoming? And what are you considering getting them... Like, what's on your to-do list? I know you mentioned the fundraising. But is there anything else?

Rebecca: Huge! We have a huge expansion planned. So, there's -the railway goes right through, kind of, the middle of our property. So, we have to cross the train tracks to get over to the other side. So, we have a huge expansion breaking ground in 2023, which is going to include a green burial section. Green burial's getting quite popular as a disposition choice. So green burial is, you know, a segregated section where you don't necessarily have to have any type of casket, you could have just a simple shroud, no embalming of the body, maintenance practices are very different. It's just, typically – you know, let some tall fescues grow, no cutting of the grass, certainly no chemicals, no monuments, there would just be one communal memorial where you could choose to have your name added to it. So, it's just a kind of a greener option for disposition. As opposed to, you know, having a shellacked oak casket with lots of metal pieces in it with a body full of embalming chemicals and a massive upright stone with, you know, typical turf maintenance practices. Yeah, it's just a greener option. And certainly, the community of Guelph has been very vocal in wanting that. So, we're super excited to be able to provide that.

Sara: Could you also spread ashes there or would you bury ashes?

Rebecca: Yeah! We'll have some cremation options in that. I mean, there's debate as to whether or not cremation is really a green option. But, yeah, and scattering, we'll have a scattering option as well in

that area. So, lots of good stuff coming over there. That is a massive, massive undertaking. I mean, you still can't forget this side of the tracks, which is huge maintenance. We do – like I mentioned – it's probably our aging tree canopy that has me the most worried right now because that's a huge liability. I would rather, you know, take these trees down as necessary. Rather than have it fall over in a storm and end up, you know, God forbid, injuring someone, or, you know, knocking over tons of monuments. So that's definitely a challenge right now, too. Especially with limited resources.

Sara: Yeah, I would never have thought about having to cut down trees in a cemetery because you just think of it as like, "Oh, it's such a nice little shady area." And then I don't know, if you feel this, and I've experienced this working with the University and at the Arboretum, when public has access to your property, they feel ownership of it. And so, any changes you make, they get very emotional about it. So, can you imagine, like, going to your loved one's grave site, and they took down your favorite tree?

Rebecca: Yeah, oh yeah. You hear about it all the time. That's where, you know, our lovely little bylaw book. One of the first things is basically, we have the right to alter and change anything we want. It's our property, you don't own it. So, we maintain it how we see fit. So, it's sad. I don't like taking down trees I don't like you know, altering things. But it's no different than any other piece of property. You maintain your house, you maintain – you know – your landscape at your property at your home. This is no different. Just because it's a more sensitive environment. You know, emotions are definitely heightened. Anything we do in here typically comes with some kind of a backlash. It's challenging for sure. But the bylaws is one of my most difficult... umm... As a leader, that is my most difficult challenge is enforcing those bylaws. A lot of it is people want to be able to leave all sorts of tokens of remembrance on their loved ones grave, you know? Whether it's, you know, little ceramic, or glass statues of some kind, or 50 floral arrangements, like, you know? Some people really go all out and like decorate. We have a lot of bylaws that prohibit things like that, because it just, it doesn't help with our maintenance practices. We need to be able to maintain, you know, a large amount of space very quickly, with a very small team. We can't be getting on and off the mower to move things out of the way every 10 feet. So, it's really – it's difficult for me to tell people how they're allowed to grieve, basically. How they're allowed to remember their loved ones. So that's been the biggest challenge

Reg: Throughout your career. Let's get more about you than it is about Woodlawn. Like, what would you say has been your biggest consistent struggle getting to where you are today and working your way through Waterloo and doing all the things you've done?

Rebecca: Yeah, um, I think everybody in the cemetery industry would say the same thing that finances are a consistent struggle. I think people just think that we have money trees growing on the property, and we just magically produce all this money. But you know, we have a property that dates back to the 1850s. And it wasn't made mandatory until the 1950s, so 100 years later, that cemeteries had to collect a perpetual care amount every time they sold the grave. So, we struggle financially to be able to provide a high level of maintenance with very little money. And that is across the board. I think you would find, you know, with the exception, again, of some of the larger corporate cemeteries who do quite well, most of us struggle to, you know, to make ends meet and provide enough for the future. We have to make sure we're putting enough away for the future maintenance of the cemetery.

Sara: Yeah, well, and when you have a cemetery that's over 100 years old, at a certain point, you will get full Right?

Rebecca: Exactly. So, you better make sure your Perpetual Care Fund is full.

Sara: Yeah, where's the rest of the income? You know, you just said that you can expand and you're going across the tracks, but like, if you're fenced in, and there's nowhere to expand... I guess you would have to buy property elsewhere.

Rebecca: I know! So many cemeteries have that problem. And unfortunately, if you don't have an opportunity to purchase, or the funds, to purchase more land to develop, and if your care and

maintenance fund is not healthy enough, you're in a real bad position. So, every cemetery has a care and maintenance fund. Like I said, that came into effect in the 1950s. However, you could have millions of dollars in that Care and Maintenance Fund, but you can't touch it. You're only allowed to draw the interest out. So the principle always stays put, you only get to take out the interest that it's earning. So, depending on what the markets are doing, you're either drawing a lot or a little. And it's certainly not enough to cover your expenses. It's a very small portion to cover your expenses. So yeah, it's very challenging. Very, very challenging.

Reg: Is there government subsidies? Nothing there?

Rebecca: No, so the only – so the rule is, again, going back to legislation. So, you know, say Woodlawn Memorial Park decides they need to abandon; I have no land left to develop and sell, I am all out a property to sell, and I don't have enough money to maintain it anymore. I can go through a process to declare abandonment, and then whatever municipality the cemetery resides in, that municipality has to take it over. So, the city of Guelph would have to take it on. So, I mean, that's certainly not what anybody wants to do. Nobody wants to admit defeat, or that they have to close their doors. But the stipulation is there that then the municipality would have to step in and start maintaining it. So...

Sara: Closing a cemetery is also going to be a lot of work. I know, in downtown Guelph, they had the Baker Street Church, and for a long time, that was a parking lot. I mean, it was a graveyard, and then it was a parking lot. And then they were doing some renovations, and they found some more...

Rebecca: Yeah, so the Baker Street lot is a really cool, really cool piece of history. So, the original town of Guelph – of course, whenever a town is developed, where are we going to bury our dead? So, they had the town burying ground for the public – it was the public burial ground – and then the Anglican Church. They had their burying ground at the church. Well, the town grew so quickly, it became apparent that these cemeteries are just – they're not going to cut it. This is not enough space, and the city created a bylaw that burials couldn't take place within city limits anymore. So then enter in Woodlawn in the 1850s, which was at one point way on the outskirts of town. And so that's how Woodlawn began is, you know, they exhumed as many bodies as they could, brought them over here to the new location at Woodlawn. But as we all know, from the newspaper, not everybody made the trip to Woodlawn. And so, they spent extensive time last year – the archaeologists – removing additional remains. Quite a few. Myself and the former General Manager here, we had the opportunity to visit the site to witness some of the disinterments and it was just, it was absolutely mind blowing. It was phenomenal. It was one of those, you know, we talked about as being turf nerds, but I am a cemetery nerd through and through. So, to be witness to something that cool was definitely...

Reg: So, you just described something that I would never describe the way you described... it as an opportunity, as fantastic, and as phenomenal. I don't think any of those words would come into to my language. But I can appreciate that that's where your passion lies.

Rebecca: I know, we just – we got really in, like, ingrained in, “Who was? Who are you? What were you a male, a female? What was your story? How did you die? You know, what was life like back then when you were living in the town of Guelph?” And then of course, all of those remains are going to make it over here to Woodlawn at some point for reinterment. And so that's so special to just have that historical piece coming to Woodlawn. Very cool to be a part of.

Sara: That is really cool. It's like that TV show, Bones.

Rebecca: Yeah, totally is.

Sara: Do you watch that, you know?

Rebecca: You would think I would but... no, but I definitely watched Six Feet Under. Yeah.

Reg: She likes to leave work at work.

Rebecca: Yeah! Haha. No. My husband hates when we're watching a movie or something and there's, you know, a burial scene or a crematorium scene, and I'm like, "That's not how you do it. They're doing it wrong." That's just, you know...

Sara: That's another question that we have like, what kind of myths do you want to debunk? Anything about cemetery operations?

Rebecca: Yeah, it's not six feet. It is not six feet under, it's not a six-foot grave.

Sara: Really?!

Rebecca: No, it's – the rule is two feet of coverage. So, for a casket burial, a full body burial. the rule is two feet of soil coverage on top. So, depending on – you know – what size the casket is, or if you're having an outer container, a burial vault, you just have to calculate that into the depth of your grave. So, it's not a true foot grave as people think.

Sara: My mind is blown. That's -

Rebecca: See?

Sara: Where did that six feet come from? Is that, like, historically that they did that?

Rebecca: Yeah, once upon a time. Yeah. Prior to – I think it's '92 – regulations changed. And at that point, it was three feet of coverage. So, you're probably getting closer to six feet prior to 1992. But not anymore. No. Two feet of coverage, I guess, is enough to make somebody safe under there. I don't know...

Sara: No, this might be – a little bit trending back into the morbid – when you bury like a full casket and all these trimmings, and like there's some hollow space in there. Like, what's the process happening? Do you see some changes in the turf above ground? You know, one of the diseases that we talk about in the turf pathology part is fairy ring and fairy ring occurs from buried wood... and wood is a casket... like, what are you seeing above ground after you've buried a casket?

Rebecca: So certainly not – Because the soil depth is so far away from the turf roots that we're not seeing things like that. However, we do, of course, we do have a gas pounder (a compactor) that gets run through the fill layer. So, before we put that final topsoil layer on, we are compacting that grave to get rid of as much of those air pockets as we can. And the settling, yeah, but you're not going to always get all of that. So, the worst – whenever you're walking through a cemetery – And I mean, this happened to me all the time, obviously working in a cemetery, but you'll be walking along and then all of a sudden, "BOOM!", and you're down. And it can be like, you know, up to your knee, which is – it gets the heart going a little bit, right? You're waiting for a hand to grab you.

Reg: That is really creepy!

Rebecca: Yeah, exactly. It's a little bit discerning, but it's really just those air pockets. Usually at the head or foot end, or along the edges, in the corners, where it just hasn't been compacted properly. So, you get that settling. So, we do a lot of turf renovations. A ton of turf renovations here. A lot of, we call it spring graves or grave repairs. Because again, if there's no outer case, and it's just a wood casket, that wood's going to break down, you're gonna get that settling on top. So again, that translates up to the top layer. We've got to fix it. So, we are constantly renovating turf. It's a never-ending battle.

Sara: Wow.

Rebecca: Yeah, huge challenge in here. And of course, usually, if you're the lucky one that gets to do the first round of mowing in the springtime – because of the weight of the snow and the moisture – you get, you know, you'll be going along, and it looks like it's flat. But then boom. You know?

Sara: Bumpy ride!

Rebecca: Yeah, real bumpy ride. Haha! But umm... lots of topdressing and overseeding. Haha.

Reg: So, in your in your section, in cemetery operations, what's the current biggest challenge going forward? For the next five to 10 years?

Rebecca: Yeah, I hate to say it, but it's gonna be the finance piece. I can see a lot of cemeteries having to abandon because they don't have the funds to maintain. And, you know, as expenses keep growing... I mean, our expenses this year, unbelievable! You know, fuel alone! You know? All of our equipment takes fuel, that cost went up. Well,

Sara: Yeah.

Rebecca: You know, the trucks that deliver our topsoil, their fuel went up. So now our topsoil is more expensive. It just – everything trickles down the line. So, the more expensive it gets for cemeteries to maintain... We're just gonna see cemeteries having to say, "You know what? We don't have the money to do it anymore." So, the municipalities are gonna have to take over. Is this

Sara: Woof. Is this... Sorry.... oh, okay. Well...

Rebecca: Yeah, it's depressing! No, no, it's interesting.

Reg: On the plus side, on the plus side, you're the first person not to say people. Like we – almost everybody's been like, "The challenge is going to be finding great people."

Rebecca: It is. Actually, staffing is difficult. You know, it's funny, I feel like – maybe from now on we leave cemetery out of our job postings, because I feel like there's so much talent out there in the horticulture world, the turf management world. We're missing out on a lot of that as candidates, because people have this misconception about cemeteries, it's not... And I get it, it's not for everybody, because part of everybody's role on the grounds is to service the families, provide services graveside. And so, you are interacting with grieving families and some people just are not comfortable with that. And that's fine. But you know, I think that people are missing out on a really great opportunity too because there's so much purpose in what we do here. You're not just, you know, cutting a field of grass. You're cutting grass, providing services to, you know, people's loved ones that they've left with us here. And they trust us to do a fantastic job and do a beautiful job. And so, there's that satisfaction. There is a lot of job satisfaction. You know, like I said, maybe not pushing paper from one side of the desk to the other but our grounds team for sure, should be so proud of themselves. And I try to tell them on a regular basis that they just do an outstanding job. And, you know, the families are certainly pleased with everything that they do here.

Sara: Now, is this where you saw yourself being – maybe not 10 years ago, because now you said you were in the more on the bulldozers and all the equipment and maybe that's not where you saw yourself – But like, thinking back to maybe when you had that job when you were in high school, did you see yourself being in cemeteries forever?

Rebecca: You know what? I did. It was an instant – that summer as a student working on the grounds, I really – maybe not management. I never thought that my body would fail so quickly and fall apart. Haha! But certainly, a blessing to you know, to learn every single position in cemetery operations. You know, from grounds into the admin side, working my way from general customer service role into administrative coordinator, sales coordinator, up to management, so... I really, I saw myself staying in cemeteries, but I never thought I would come this far.

Reg: You were just dying to be in cemeteries

Rebecca: I was dying to be in cemeteries. People are dying to get in here. Haha!

Reg: People are dying, laughing too, I'm sure.

Sara: I think someone just rolled over in their grave from that joke.

Reg: Oh, that's yeah, that's a better one.

Rebecca: Hahaha! So, who do you look back at the years and be like, "Wow, am I glad they came into my life and supported my career?"

Rebecca: Yeah. Oh, gosh, yeah. The leaders, the leaders, for sure. I mean, starting at Bob, to Steve to Bryce. Bryce was very instrumental. He was actually my lead hand when I was on the grounds. And then he went from lead hand to management. He just he really supported me and foster this career and took me under his wing and believed in, you know, what I was trying to accomplish and where I wanted to go, and I'm so grateful for that. You know, to have a mentor like that, that really believes in you and gives you the opportunities to move forward. It was just- yeah, it was instrumental and then of course, on the grounds you know, having you know, those folks like Brian who taught you everything and Mike, our backhoe operator, I learned so much from him. And then I was fortunate to sit on the board of directors for the Ontario Association of Cemetery and Funeral Professionals. And that was a turning point in my career, for sure. It was that moment where I'm sitting around a table with this board of directors with these people who I, you know, admire and look up to and like, "I don't belong here. Why am I? What am I doing here? What? What could I possibly add or give, that they don't already know?" And, you know, fast forward six or seven years later now, and yeah, I'm just I feel so blessed to be a part of that association.

Sara: Well, now you're probably one of those people that are a role model for someone else, right?

Rebecca: Yeah. And I love that. I love being able to help other people and like, there's just not a lot of resources for cemetery and so for me to be a resource is mind blowing.

Sara: What do you do on that board?

Rebecca: So, I stepped down from the board after my two terms were up because I had my son and I was like, "Life's about to get real busy." So, I knew I couldn't devote myself to the board as much as I previously had. But I still sit on several of the committees. You know, Government Relations Committee, the Municipal and Small Cemetery Committee, which the purpose of that committee is helping the volunteer cemetery boards, the not for profits, you know? The ones that are basically sitting at their kitchen table making arrangements with families on a volunteer basis. So, helping out with those folks is really rewarding for me. And then again, like, I'm still a sponge. I love sitting around the table with people and learning from other people. And, you know, we just got back from the conference a couple of weeks ago, and I always come back from that rejuvenated.

Sara: What conference is that?

Rebecca: So, it's the OCFP conference, the Ontario Cemetery and Funeral Professional conference. Which again, people are probably like, oh, that must be boring. No, it's – we get a little crazy, right? You gotta get out of your – get away from work and the sadness and the grief and let loose a little bit. So...

Sara: And learn from each other, too.

Rebecca: Yeah. And sometimes it's nice to sit around the table and hear everybody's challenges and be like, "Oh, good. It's not just me." Sometimes, it's just nice to know that you're not the only one struggling.

Reg: But like, I learned more at the bar, talking to other professionals in my field, and just picking their brains at the conferences, not to take anything away from the educational components of them, because those are critical, too. But that is the value of networking. That is the value of relationships. And that's the value of going attending these events. Just, "Oh, wow. Oh, that you did that? And that worked? Oh, that's amazing. That's a great idea." Like the ideas come out. And that's – and you come back, just like you said, you know, rejuvenated, to ready to go.

Rebecca: Yeah, I really do feel like you know, me personally, I feel like my most valuable asset is my peers and my team. I learn every day from the team here. It's very much a collaborative effort. It's not me deciding what mower you're going to use. It's me getting a bunch of demo units in here, everybody taking a spin, and let's talk about what do we think is the best machine for our operations? You don't get here by yourself. I had a lot of help along the way. So, I'm paying that forward. And I'm certainly still learning from my peers. And I'm learning from the team here at Woodlawn.

Reg: That said, what kind of advice would you give anyone thinking about – or wanting to – come into the cemetery operations? Like what do you, what kind of advice would you pass along to them?

Rebecca: First of all, don't be afraid of us.

Reg: Hahaha!

Rebecca: Yeah, I would say, "Be open. Be open to learning and listening." You know? It's so humbling. I mean, I was your typical, you know, teenager, "I know everything, you know nothing." And, you know, it's such a – probably a vindicating – moment when I finally you know, in my 30s said to my parents, "You know what? You guys were right. Now I understand." That's probably the best moment for a parent. But I would say, you know, just be open, be open to learning, be open to new experiences. Be a sponge. I feel like there's so much opportunity for growth and for learning all around us. You just have to be open to it. I don't have – I have my turf managers certificate from University of Guelph, and I have a college diploma in photography, which I got in, like, my late 20s. So, I don't have a finance certificate or a management certificate or, you know, any fancy education. I was just open to learning. I was open to learning from anybody who would teach me things and... Just being humble, to sit back and absorb without jumping to conclusions that you already know everything about everything. Because that's not going to get you anywhere.

Sara: Yeah, what's next for you? And maybe, I mean, we already talked what's next for woodland, but what's next for you in your career?

Rebecca: You know what? I am quite happy where I am. I think management will catch up with me one day and I just hope that I have enough smarts to step out of the role before it makes me angry. Like, do you what I mean? Like, I feel like it has a shelf life.

Sara: Yeah.

Rebecca: I feel like there comes a point where it's time to pass the baton on. And at that point, I don't see myself being able to sit idle too well. So honestly, I would love to retire, go back out on the grounds, and sit on a mower. Isn't that ridiculous? I just want to cut grass. Hahah!

Reg: It's full circle!

Rebecca: Yeah!

Sara: Yeah. No, not at all. I can totally see you being that, like, old groundskeeper. Like, walking around with the cane and just like fixing that little divot and like, just, you know, fine tooth combing it while the other people are ripping around and doing the hard work.

Rebecca: I would love to do that. I would love to just go back to because I truly am so happy just sitting on a mower cutting grass, listening to my music. I find it so therapeutic. I do my best thinking on the more. It's funny. I've always said that. I've made some of my best life decisions sitting on a mower.

Sara: We get it, we talked turf all the time.

Rebecca: Yeah, it's just it's so therapeutic. But again, we're turf nerds. So, you guys get it. Hahaha!

Sara: But anyways, this has been great. This has been great. Thank you so much, Rebecca for answering all of our questions. Even if they were – some of them a little bit weird. And, you know, cemetery something that we don't know enough about.

Rebecca: Yeah, we're an open book. We're an open book here. And everybody's always welcome for tours and information. Like we're just – we're happy to share any information we can. We certainly want to, you know, take the myth out of what we do, and maybe provide some clarity to some folks that have a discomfort with cemeteries and... Yeah, happy to happy to help out.

Sara: That's awesome. Thanks so much, Rebecca.

Reg: Thank you so much for coming. It was a pleasure to chat with you and meet with you. Looking forward to connecting some other time.

Sara: Yeah. Well, thank you to everyone who's listened to this episode of Canadian Turf Talks. We hope you enjoyed this and learn something new today about cemetery operations with Rebecca Zinger.

Music Outro

Sara: This podcast is brought to you by the University of Guelph and the Guelph Turfgrass Institute.