

NEW YORK

Everlasting love showcased on Woodlawn Cemetery's 'Stories of Love' trolley tour

By CHELSIA ROSE MARCIUS

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Woodlawn Cemetery offers a trolley tour highlighting the final resting place for thousands of famous sweethearts. (Shawn Inglima/for New York Daily News)

When the husband of salsa sensation Celia Cruz laid her to rest at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, he envisioned honoring the Cuban icon in a private ceremony. Instead, thousands of New Yorkers showed up outside of her stately white mausoleum in July 2003— and Cruz's partner, Pedro Knight, watched as they danced, wept and sang her melodies as he said his final goodbye.



Celia Cruz's mausoleum is part of the "Love Stories of Woodlawn Trolley Tour" at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. (Shawn Ingle/for New York Daily News)

“Theirs is one of the greatest love stories here at Woodlawn,” Woodlawn Cemetery and Conservancy historian Susan Olsen said of Knight’s devotion to Cruz — one of over a dozen tales Olsen tells during the cemetery’s Valentine’s Day trolley tour.

“The man never had a private moment,” she said. “If he would be out here visiting her, he would give tours. He was absolutely fantastic (when it came to) sharing the pride he had in her, his love for her and the love they had for each other.”

The 150-year-old cemetery will welcome visitors this Sunday to hop on board the Love Stories of Woodlawn Trolley Tour as it rolls through the 400-acre burial ground, the final resting place for thousands of famous sweethearts.

“There’s a whole lotta love in Woodlawn,” Olsen explained during a preview of the tour, as the trolley passed the mausoleum of American railroad magnate Collis Potter Huntington, who built the monument after the death of his first wife.



The mausoleum of American railroad magnate Collis Potter Huntington. (Shawn Inglima/for New York Daily News)

Huntington’s second wife wound up marrying his nephew after the tycoon died, Olsen said, stirring up a family drama for the ages. “God knows what was going on at Thanksgiving at the Huntingtons,” she said.

Olsen’s own love affair with cemeteries began in the early 1980s when she was curator of the historic Magevney House in Memphis. Her work in genealogy, art and architecture eventually led her to head the Bureau of Historical Museums in Florida, and ultimately to Woodlawn.



Historian and tour guide Susan Olsen at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. (Shawn Inghima/for New York Daily News)

“My old boss had called me and said, ‘You love cemeteries more than you love anything else, and the two here, Greenwood and Woodlawn, just finalized their (nonprofit paperwork),’” said Olsen, who has worked at the the cemetery for 19 years. “The next thing I knew, I was moving to the Bronx.”

That’s when she began to read up on those interred at the national historic landmark. There was Macy’s co-owner Isidor Straus, who died holding the hand of his beloved wife Rosalie Ida aboard the Titanic in 1912, as well as explorer George W. De Long, who perished at sea in 1881 and was honored by his wife Emma with a monument of a man trying to find his way home.



The grave of Macy's co-owner Isidor Straus, who died with his beloved wife Rosalie Ida Straus aboard the Titanic in 1912 (Shawn Inghima/for New York Daily News)

Then there was Fiorello La Guardia, the 99th mayor of New York whose wife Thea and young daughter Fioretta died as he was rising the political ranks. Olsen said La Guardia's second wife, Marie Fisher, had the politician's original Carrara marble monument for Thea and Fioretta cast in bronze to preserve their legacy.



Patricia Cronin's "Memorial to a Marriage" sculpture, part of the "Love Stories of Woodlawn Trolley Tour" at Woodlawn Cemetery. (Shawn Inglima/for New York Daily News)

“A lot of our love stories are revealed through heirship affidavits —people’s paperwork (regarding) who can be put in the family lot,” said Olsen, noting that the cemetery has over one million documents in its archives. “Their stories are a very personal way to remember folks, and to remember the love they had for one another.”

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