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Once-spindly tree flourishes at gravesite under a widow's care

By HILLARY DAVIS | MAR 30, 2018 | 5:45 PM



Latife Warshawsky stands under a ficus tree she planted 18 years ago near the grave of her husband, Erwin, at Pacific View Memorial Park & Mortuary in Corona del Mar. She sees the tree as a vessel for his spirit. (Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)



As surely as a ficus tree takes root, so does love.

A ficus at Pacific View Memorial Park & Mortuary in Corona del Mar towers 20 feet over the grave of Erwin Warshawsky, its canopy leaning slightly over the marker instead of the paved path.

Its sprawling roots underline the names of Erwin and his wife, Latife. Then the roots disappear into the dirt just past Latife's name, which is etched next to Erwin's in preparation for her to join him.

This tree was not planted by Pacific View to match the others that dot the cemetery's 10 acres of gently rolling greens. It came from the couple's Mission Viejo home, where it grew in a small pot

at Erwin's urging. Then, still rather small and spindly, it was transplanted to his final resting place through his widow's persistence.

It now stands robust as, Latife believes, a vessel for her husband's spirit.

"My darling," she tells him over the song of the wind chimes hanging from the tree's lowest bough. "You're not dead."



This is one of Latife Warshawsky's favorite photos of herself and her husband, Erwin, who died in 1999. (Courtesy of Latife Warshawsky)



The tree was a gift from husband to wife.

Erwin brought her flowers weekly. One day he brought her a tree.

It was a sad, twiggy ficus sapling, barely a tree at all, just a few inches tall, in a rusty can. He found it in a neighbor's trash and thought it would have a chance under Latife's green thumb.

He already had a name for it: Orphan.

She told him she wasn't so sure, but she re-potted Orphan. After a couple of weeks, it shed its few leaves, but she kept watering and fertilizing it.

"And then it started to get a little bigger and a little bigger," she said.

As Orphan grew to a few feet tall, it was moved into a new pot on rollers. This allowed it to provide shade to Erwin while he read the weekend comics and Latife prepared breakfast.

Erwin and Latife married in middle age and did not have children together. But they had the ficus named Orphan, and for a couple of years, they were a happy little family.

Then, on March 24, 1999, Erwin died of cancer a week shy of his 64th birthday.

He was the first to be buried in the Cedar Lawn section of Pacific View, on a sunny quarter-acre overlooking the Big Canyon Reservoir. When Latife made her weekly visits to tell Erwin about her days or to pray or meditate, she would stay for up to an hour.

The newly developed plot had no trees. The umbrella she brought wouldn't stay up. So she asked the front office if she could plant a tree.

At first she was told no, out of fairness to every other family that might want a tree. But she asked repeatedly. A new sales manager eventually told her she could because the Cedar Lawn area needed shade. But it would be at her expense, and cemetery staff would select the tree.

When Latife went home to Mission Viejo, she saw Orphan's leaves rustling. There was no wind. She checked for critters and didn't find any. The late-afternoon sun was behind the tree, but its leaves weren't in silhouette.

They were, she said, "sparkling."

"I said, 'Ahh, I understand what you're saying!'" she recalled.



Latife Warshawsky talks about a leaf from Orphan, the ficus tree she planted near the grave of her husband, Erwin, at Pacific View Memorial Park & Mortuary in Corona del Mar. (Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)



Latife now laughs and weeps and wraps her arms around the trunk, marveling at how it has grown and forked over the 18 years it has been at Erwin's side.

Latife, 79, is from Ankara, Turkey, and traveled widely as a flight attendant instructor for Turkish Airlines. She moved to the United States in 1979. She took up new careers in the U.S. — as an aesthetician and makeup artist, then an interior designer, then an aesthetician instructor, and then as a boutique and salon owner. She also is an accomplished artist who earned a master's degree from Laguna College of Art + Design in 2011.

One of her salon customers introduced her to Erwin, a physicist who worked on missiles during the space race. They had their first date at Five Crowns restaurant in Corona del Mar and married five years later, in 1991.

"Plants, animals and humans. We have so much energy and correlation between us because ourselves are alive," Latife said, twisting off a leaf. "And now I'm thinking he [Orphan] is going down and then feeding himself with Erwin's body's cells and then it's becoming every leaf for me, carrying Erwin's cells."



Latife Warshawsky's reflection is seen in the grave marker of her husband, Erwin, at Pacific View Memorial Park. (Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)



She said she's tried taking cuttings home to spawn a new tree, but they never take. She figures Orphan is showing its gratitude by staying where it is.

Marie Hess, location manager at Pacific View, has heard Orphan's story several times. It gets her every time.

She tours the grounds often, and when she does, "I give a little glance and smile at Orphan."