

Inmates clean city cemetery

Picnic thanks state prisoners for renewing neglected Riverview

By **TERRI SANGINITI**
Staff reporter

State inmates have been working at Riverview Cemetery the past 10 weeks, cutting, trimming and landscaping the grounds. The volunteers have transformed and revitalized the neglected cemetery.

Their efforts were acknowledged Thursday with a noontime picnic under a shady grove of century-old maple trees at the cemetery's Washington Street entrance.

"We wanted to thank them in a special way for restoring the dignity of the families buried here," said cemetery activist Grace Duffy, who collected money and food for the picnic from local businesses and families who have loved ones buried there.

"By doing such an excellent job, they restored their own dignity," she said of the inmates.

Nearly three dozen men and women from the Sussex Work Release Center and Plummer Community Corrections Center partici-



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Work release inmates enjoy a picnic held to thank them for their 10 weeks of work cleaning Riverview Cemetery.

pated, along with state Department of Correction officials.

Inmate Massina Miller, 28, a resident of the Plummer Center adjacent to the cemetery at 33rd and North Market streets, said she learned how to trim trees, use a chain saw and practice landscaping tech-

niques during her week at the cemetery.

"I learned how to do something for somebody else that makes me feel good about doing it," Miller said. "And it makes me feel real good that somebody appreciates what we did."

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Warden Bob George of the Sussex Community Correction Center said a crew of about 13 inmates have been shuttled to the cemetery at 6:30 a.m. three or four times a week. They return to the Sussex facility, a nearly two-hour drive away, about 5 p.m.

The inmates became involved in the project in July after the General Assembly passed a bond bill allowing the prison commissioner to direct offenders to assist in community restoration projects.

The 129-year-old cemetery fell into disrepair in early June after cemetery operators Delaware Lodge No. 1 and Eden Lodge No. 34 of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, and Knights of Pythias Grand Lodge in Pennsylvania, filed for bankruptcy, citing a lack of funds for maintenance.

When the inmates arrived July 3, the 67-acre cemetery was an eyesore, with tombstone-high grass and toppled markers.

Today the cemetery is in much better shape.

"The community notices and appreciates it," said construction worker Rock Brown, of Shelley Construction, who stopped by the cemetery Thursday. "This place looks better now than it did under the folks who used to take care of it."

State correctional Capt. Bill Oettel, who coordinates offenders' program activities, said he has received nothing but praise for the inmate's work.

He said about 100 offenders are out in the community every day helping civic groups, schools and state hospitals.

Last year, Delaware inmates performed more than 210,000 hours of community service, according to corrections spokeswoman Beth Welch.

Crest program after-care counselor Cheryl Smith interrupted a group of female inmates eating lunch to thank them.

Smith, who said she has family members buried in the cemetery, said it had been distressing visiting her loved ones amid the overgrown weeds.

"I feel [the inmates] did a major service to my family," Smith said. "To be able to pray without all the weeds has made a big difference."

Carl Kyles, who for several years had faithfully mowed the grass around his family's gravesites, said he did not mind letting the inmates take over the chore.

"I like the work," said inmate crew chief Jason Stafford. "It's a challenge to keep it looking nice. But I have a good time."

The inmates all agreed they have taken pride in the job they have done.

Work-release inmate Tina Elmore, 35, from the Plummer Center, said she picked up tons of trash around the cemetery, and even used a damp cloth to wipe off years of embedded dirt in the engraving on tombstones.

Fellow inmate Donna Davis, 42, who lives on 39th Street not far from the cemetery, said many families returned to the cemetery on just the second day of cleanup to place flowers on their loved ones' restored graves.

"It's been wonderful giving something back to the community," Davis said.

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