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City Room

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LOCAL HISTORY

# A Summer Internship at a Place Where Most People Stay for Good

By **Winnie Hu** July 29, 2013 5:56 pm

Even the best internships can require some degree of menial labor: answering phones, working copy machines, making Starbucks runs.

But perhaps only a historic cemetery could dispatch Ivy League students to the roof of a century-old mausoleum to clean out grime and debris trapped in the gutter.

Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx has gotten a makeover this summer from interns who crawled around mausoleum roofs, scrubbed bronze doors, pressure-washed limestone and granite monuments, and even put back the head on a statue of a woman who lost it in a windstorm. A lush 400-acre site, which dates to 1863 and is a national historic landmark, Woodlawn is the final resting place of generations of New Yorkers and celebrities, including Celia Cruz, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Herman Melville, LeRoy Neiman and Joseph Pulitzer.

“Cemeteries have limited resources and tremendous volume,” said Susan Olsen, Woodlawn’s director of historical services, estimating that more than three-quarters of its 1,316 mausoleums and 150,000 monuments and gravestones need conservation. “No matter how hard I work, I can’t take care of all of them.”

So Kevin Wohlgemuth and Irene Matteini, both graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania studying historic preservation, were put in charge of a 1910 mausoleum built for the suffragist Alva Belmont and her husband, Oliver. It is a replica of the Chapel of Saint-Hubert at the Château d’Amboise in France, with stained-glass windows and a spire decorated with copper deer antlers (Saint Hubert

is the patron saint of hunters).

Before the interns could set foot on the roof, they were required to attend a four-hour training class on climbing scaffolding. And when they finally ascended, they were confronted by a pair of furry squatters — raccoons — who left without a confrontation. Only then could they clean the gutter.

“It took two days of work, getting my hands dirty,” said Mr. Wohlgemuth, 31, recalling how he fished chunks of antlers and fleurs-de-lis from a foot of compacted dirt and decomposing leaves and branches. “It hadn’t been cleaned in decades.”

The internships, offered for the first time this year, are part of Woodlawn’s growing effort to promote itself as what Ms. Olsen calls a vast “outdoor laboratory” — brimming with works by noted period architects, artists and craftsmen, and luxurious materials and finishes rarely seen anymore.

“In today’s funerals, people mainly go to the church but not the cemetery,” Ms. Olsen said. “Back then, you went the whole distance with the bodies and then you came out regularly to visit.”

In recent years, dozens of Columbia University graduate students have adopted its mausoleums to study; on the first visit, each student is handed a key to one of them. The students have produced detailed reports on the conditions of 110 mausoleums, which Ms. Olsen is in the process of passing along to their owners. Some have already sent back money for suggested repairs and upkeep.

For the internships, Woodlawn partnered with two companies, Kreilick Conservation and Integrated Conservation Resources, to recruit and supervise the students. The first four interns were all graduate students from the University of Pennsylvania. They were paid \$12 to \$15 an hour, or a fraction of the fees commanded by professionals.

Johanna Sztokman, 27, said she had never been to a mausoleum until she was tasked with cleaning the doors of one, from the inside. That night, she dreamed of the experience. “I wouldn’t come here alone at night and go in there by myself,” she said.

By day, however, she found the cemetery quiet and soothing. She loved the view from the top of a mausoleum housing the remains of the businessman William E. Dodge Jr., where she painstakingly restored and weather-proofed mortar joints.

Heavy rains in recent weeks hampered the interns. They had to delay the repair of a headless statue at the gravesite of J. Edward Simmons, a former president of the New York Stock Exchange. The head was knocked off by a tree limb eight months ago and sat in a box in Ms. Olsen's office.

"It's like seeing a building fall apart, you want to fix it," said Sarah Cole, 23, who grew up in Louisiana, where New Orleans cemeteries often feature vampire and ghost tours. "When you work on it, you have a sense of pride."

Mr. Wohlgemuth spent more than 70 hours in the company of the Belmonts, whose bodies are preserved in marble-lined tombs sunk into the floor of the mausoleum. He started reading up on Ms. Belmont's life. "It's a very personal endeavor," he said, "being inside a mausoleum and working to restore what she built," he said.

He also forged a connection with the cemetery, which became his summer home. On his days off, he wandered the grounds, bumping into tourists and stopping to watch funeral processions (there are 1,000 burials and 2,500 cremations a year).

Still, there is an awkward moment when he tells friends about his internship.

"They say, 'It's creepy,'" Mr. Wohlgemuth said. "I say, 'It's not, really. I think it's beautiful.'"

***Correction: July 30, 2013***

*A picture caption with earlier versions of this post misstated the affiliation of one of the women shown working in Woodlawn Cemetery. Kelly Ciociola is on the staff of Kreilick Conservation, a company that helped supervise the Woodlawn interns; she was not a summer intern.*

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