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Young New Yorkers Carve Out a Career—From a Graveyard

Interns at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx learn masonry skills, leading some to well-paying jobs

Rob Cappiello, instructor for the Woodlawn Cemetery Preservation Training Program, right, watched as interns, Destiny Stubbs, left, and Michael Neilis repointed the mortar joints of the Henry Clews mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.



By [Anne Kadet](#) / Photographs by [Desiree Rios](#) for *The Wall Street Journal*

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New York City is known for its glamorous summer internship programs with big names like Vogue and [Morgan Stanley](#). And then there is the crew scrubbing tombstones and repairing mausoleums at a Bronx graveyard.

Last week, intern Stacy Delgado sat patiently applying mortar between the limestone blocks of a 12-foot high mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery. She also has learned the ins-and-outs of monument documentation, scaffolding, power washing and stone-cleaning agents. Her first project involved restoring the marble tombstone of one John Daniel Finn.

“My mom said I’m buggin’ out,” says Ms. Delgado, who is 22 years old and lives in Harlem. “I think it’s because I’m in the cemetery, scrubbing the headstone of a dead person. She wouldn’t do it.

“But I think I’m doing a good deed, honestly,” she continued. “I’d like my headstone to be clean if I were 6 feet down. I’d want mine spotless!”

Ms. Delgado, whose previous gigs have included dog walking and food delivery, is one of 12 interns learning the masonry trade at Woodlawn Cemetery, a 400-acre National Historic Landmark known for its 1,300 mausoleums and 150,000 monuments—many designed by noted architects such as McKim, Mead & White.



Dylan Smith is a 20-year-old intern at Woodlawn Cemetery.

Parts of the bucolic cemetery are so packed with mausoleums—some several stories high and outfitted with stained glass, sofas and curtains—it looks like a housing development.

The setting is ideal for people starting in the trade, says Frank Sanchis, program director with the World Monuments Fund, who, along with Susan Olsen, Woodlawn’s director of historical services, helped design the Bridge to Crafts Careers program to fill the need for masons skilled in historic preservation.

“Cemeteries are a great training ground,” he said. They boast a variety of architectural styles and the miniature structures are perfectly sized for budding craftspeople.

Interns are paid \$15 an hour to participate in the program, which typically runs six hours each weekday for 10 weeks, says Woodlawn’s resident craftsman Rob Capiello. A brawny man with a pack of Marlboros rolled up in his T-shirt sleeve, he spent more than three decades with Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers Local 1 New York before agreeing to train students at the cemetery.



Left, intern Danayris Ramirez, 19, repointed the mortar joints of the Henry Clews mausoleum. Right, intern Stacy Delgado, 22, hammered and chiseled the mortar joints of the Capt. Robert Band mausoleum. PHOTOS: DESIREE RIOS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The program targets young people who might otherwise take low-paying service jobs, and typically recruits from Bronx high schools. But any New York City resident ages 18-to-24 with a high-school diploma can apply.

The trade isn't for everyone, Mr. Cappiello says. You have to enjoy the outdoors and be good with your hands. One slip of a grinder and you'll cut into the stone. Which has happened "a million times," he laments.

"Sometimes it can be frustrating, but once that last week comes and you see them all getting jobs, you feel proud, just like when you finish a mausoleum," Mr. Cappiello says.

The program, which partners with the Door, a social-services agency for young people, has an 80% job-placement rate. Roughly 20% make it into the bricklayers union.



Woodlawn Cemetery is a 400-acre National Historic Landmark in the Bronx known for its 1,300 mausoleums and 150,000 monuments.
PHOTO: DESIREE RIOS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Alejandro Soto-Lora, who is 22 and lives in the Bronx, joined the program in 2015, its first year. “I was scared at first,” he recalled. “Dead bodies. Wouldn’t you be scared working at a cemetery? They could come out and scare the [expletive] out of you.”

But the scariest thing Mr. Soto-Lora encountered was a menacing wild turkey. Upon graduating, he continued with the program’s 19-month paid apprenticeship program, also under Mr. Cappiello’s supervision.

He soon joined the bricklayer’s union and got a job with a restoration firm where he has worked on buildings, ranging from the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side to the Woolworth Building in lower Manhattan.

The best part of the job?

“I like the money, I can’t lie about that,” Mr. Soto-Lora says.



A hard hat used by the interns at Woodlawn Cemetery.

He's earning \$29 an hour, plus benefits, as a third-year union apprentice. When he completes his training, his pay will top \$50 an hour.

The program also helps the nonprofit cemetery, says Woodlawn President and CEO Mitch Rose.

When Woodlawn sells a plot, it promises to take care of everything forever. "And as we know, that's a very long time," Mr. Rose says.

Monument maintenance is expensive. A contractor might charge \$15,000 to \$100,000 to restore a mausoleum depending on its size and condition. With the help of interns and apprentices, the cemetery has found a more affordable way to maintain its collection of "funerary art."

The program, which is largely supported by private donations, boasts an unusually high job-placement rate, says Roderick Jenkins, senior program officer of youth and workforce development at the New York Community Trust, which kicks in about \$75,000 of the program's \$600,000 annual budget. It also opens more union jobs to women and people of color in a trade that is expected to grow twice as fast as the average occupation through 2028.

It is also on the pricey side. Factoring in the year-round apprentice component, the program costs about \$30,000 for each student. But it has been so successful, it is serving as a model for a new landscape-preservation program at the cemetery, which is expected to launch this fall.

"It's not a cheap program," Mr. Jenkins says, "but when you're preparing people for good jobs, it's never cheap."



Rob Cappiello speaking with interns enrolled in the Woodlawn Cemetery Preservation Training Program. He spent more than three decades with Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers Local 1 New York before agreeing to train students at the cemetery.