

Downtrodden Cemetery May Regain it's Dignity

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DAYTONA BEACH -- As Dusty Smith strolls through the sandy, grassy remains of the Mount Arrarat cemetery, she becomes overwhelmed. She's overwhelmed by the history contained in the hilly cemetery where hundreds of Daytona Beach residents -- everyone from decorated war veterans to local ministers to freed slaves -- have been laid to rest during the past 100 years. She's overwhelmed by the stark contrast between Daytona Beach's first black cemetery now seemingly forgotten by time and nearby memorial gardens with lush lawns, bright flowers and constant attention.

But she's most moved by the destruction, both natural and man-made, that has plagued the historically black cemetery in the past several years. Headstones have been damaged, tombs have been broken into and remains have been stolen.

Now Smith, 41, and a small cadre of volunteers are planning to do whatever they can to change the situation. "When they started this it was exquisite," Smith said of the cemetery. "Benjamin Franklin said you can tell the morals of a culture by the way they treat their dead. What does this say?"

Smith, a self-described ghost hunter who owns the Daytona Beach Paranormal Research Group and Haunts of the World's Most Famous Beach ghost tours, said she can't really explain what has drawn her to Mount Arrarat. "It's a good question that I'm not sure I have an answer to," Smith said, fidgeting with a coffin-shaped watch on her wrist. "Maybe it's part of asking questions that there aren't answers to. It's not like I want to do this, it's like I have to."

Regardless of the reasons, she says she is dedicated to restoring as much of the cemetery as possible, with a particular interest on the numerous unattended veterans' graves at the aging site. To help clean up the place and extend a small tribute to those veterans, whose service may date back as far as the Civil War, Smith has also enlisted the help of a local veterans group.

Leon F. Parent III, commander of the Halifax Area Veterans Council, said he was disturbed to learn that at least one veteran's grave had been desecrated and headstones at others had been damaged.

"I want the governor here, period," Parent said.

In Parent's view, the destruction of any grave should be treated as the most serious of crimes, but when the resting place of a veteran is involved it is particularly disturbing.

"Honor. Pride. Respect. What happened to these?" Parent asked.

Parent and Smith both said they hoped for some help from local or state officials, though they have not yet approached any specific office-holders. And unfortunately, cemeteries such as Mount Arrarat -- it is overseen by a not-for-profit committee and cannot sell burial plots -- don't fall under the same regulations as larger, for-profit cemeteries.

Of the roughly 4,000 known cemeteries in Florida, only about 175 are regulated by the state, according to Timothy Wheaton, a financial analyst with the state's Bureau of Funeral and Cemetery Services.

"That's an exempt cemetery," Wheaton said.

"It doesn't have to be licensed or registered."

If Wheaton's agency receives complaints about Mount Arrarat, its only recourse is to suggest to its caretakers that problems be corrected. In the case of Mount Arrarat, there is little if any money to make repairs and keep the cemetery maintained.

That's where Smith and her helpers come in.

Rev. Gussie Sampson, a member of the group that owns Mount Arrarat, met Smith at the cemetery this week and thanked her for her work.

"I'm so grateful," 88-year-old Sampson said.

"This is what I believe in, prayer and God's help. It's a blessing."

Sampson's late husband, Alonzo White, was one of the original founders of the cemetery, which first opened sometime around the turn of the century. She said a group of 12 people originally invested in the property on Bellevue Road and interests in the cemetery have been passed to other relatives for decades. Today, only Sampson and Dr. Astrid Mack, a South Florida physician, remain among the relatives of the original investors. Mack could not be reached for comment.

Relatives of those buried in the cemetery are grateful that Smith and others have taken an interest.

June Henderson, whose father, grandparents and other relatives are interred at Mount Arrarat, said she was pleasantly surprised to see Smith and others surveying the cemetery during a recent visit.

"It's always been depressed," Henderson said.

"That's why in recent years other family members have bought plots elsewhere."

Now the Atlanta resident looks forward to telling relatives that Smith and her volunteers may make it possible to locate and visit some of the family plots that years of neglect and plant growth have made all but impossible to visit.

Smith plans to put up "no trespassing" signs and possibly a gate to secure the cemetery. She started working on the project, the third Volusia County cemetery she and her volunteers have adopted, a few weeks ago and plans to continue as long as she has local support.

But nothing will happen overnight.

"Two decades," she said of the amount of time it would take to restore Mount Arrarat.

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