

# The Noble Worker

**“The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.”** *Helen Keller*

The Woodlawn Cemetery is one of the most beautiful in the world. Greatly influenced by the Age of Romanticism, its landscape-lawn design emphasizes the emotional and the transcendental and deepens the visitor’s appreciation for nature. This sylvan beauty is not truly natural; it was never meant to be. It is a contrived beauty like an artful arrangement of flowers — beauty impossible without effort.

During the summer months, it takes a crew of twenty men two weeks to cut, trim, and rake the cemetery’s 400 acres. Its beautiful trees necessitate hundreds of man-hours raking leaves; harsh winters demand the plowing and sanding of roads.

In an age of transience, the longevity of grounds workers of The Woodlawn Cemetery and their love of their work is startling. Oral historians would be well served to interview the “men in the field” who have dedicated more than twenty years to the cemetery, or are second or third generation employees, or those who relish the prospect of a long career here.

Leading this unique team is Donald Williams, Superintendent of The Woodlawn Cemetery. Donald has worked here for thirty-six years and is himself a third generation Woodlawn employee. “I started working at the cemetery because I enjoyed the outdoors, but stayed because I came to realize and respect the importance of serving people,” Williams said. It is a sentiment shared throughout his department.

Barry Wyman, the foreman in charge of interments and entombments, agrees. He began his career at Woodlawn digging graves – by hand and in all weather. Today, he oversees all funeral services. “I went to a funeral at a nearby cemetery and at the end of the graveside service, I turned to thank the workers, and no one was there. That’s not the way it should be.”

Joseph Tripptree has worked for The Woodlawn Cemetery for twenty-six years and has been a foreman since 1987. Before coming to The Woodlawn Cemetery, Joseph worked in New York as a free-lance writer, but soon tired of wearing a tie. Today, he is in charge of the engineering needs of the cemetery and intimately knows the layout of each grave and foundation. “I appreciate the attention the management at Woodlawn pays to how the cemetery looks and how well it’s maintained. That’s very important.”

Frank Russo was first profiled in the pages of our newsletter in 1995. At that time, Frank, whose father worked at the cemetery for over twenty years, was known as ‘Dr. Fix It’ for his ability to repair all the machinery used at the cemetery. Today, Frank runs the crematory situated below the Woolworth Chapel.

“Working at the crematory lets me serve people in a very personal way. Families and cultures view death and cremation differently. Some families like to say goodbye in the chapel, while others are involved until the very end. It’s important to be sensitive to these issues.”

Following in the footsteps of his father, Charles “Chucky” Weikum began working at the cemetery in the late 1960s. “I was only going to work a year...” he shrugs. Chucky now serves as a mechanic in the machine shop. He services all of the lawn mowers, backhoes, trucks and other heavy equipment at the cemetery. A quiet man, he will admit to being a good mechanic, but his colleagues say he is worth his weight in gold.

Louis Berrios, once a seasonal employee, has now joined the grounds crew full-time. A Bronx native, Lou brushed aside the raised eyebrows of family and friends when he announced he would be working at a cemetery. Lou enjoys the camaraderie of the grounds crew and the variety of his work. “I’m very lucky. Not everyone finds a job they like. I like the cemetery because I enjoy working outside and doing something different every day. I like hard work and I like to put a smile on people’s faces.” Lou also hopes that one day, someone will enjoy caring for his grave at Woodlawn as much as he has enjoyed caring for others.



At work today, left to right: Barry Wyman, Charles “Chucky” Weikum, Donnie Williams, Joe Tripptree, Frank Russo



Donnie Williams, Superintendent, employee since 1969. Photo circa 1980.



Joe Tripptree, Foreman. Photo circa 1985.



Grounds Crew (left to right): Joseph Remo, Sal Remo, Barry Wyman, Henry DeAngelis, Chucky Weikum, Ricky Miele. Photo circa 1975.