

Cemetery volunteers looking for more hands, donations



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A group of volunteers who spend their Saturdays helping stabilize gravestones at the Holy Cross Cemetery in Halifax are looking for more hands and some additional dollars to help finish the next phase of their project.

Retired ophthalmologist Brian O'Brien is a member of the Holy Cross Cemetery Trust and one of many dedicated volunteers who devote their Saturday mornings to the restoration of the cemetery at the foot of Fenwick Tower in south-end Halifax.

From the beginning of May until the end of October, a core group of about 30 people gather to refurbish the historic cemetery's gravestones that have been toppled by age, weather and vandalism.

O'Brien became involved in the project about four years ago, in part due to his Irish ancestry and the fact many Irish descendants are buried in Holy Cross, the city's oldest Catholic Cemetery.

The group has so far stabilized about 1,600 stones, with another 450 to 460 to go.

"Some are so big we can't do them ... I pray that we will finish it in the next year or two," O'Brien said. "It's more substantial than I'd imagined."

The Holy Cross Cemetery Trust and its stable of volunteers are hoping to fundraise enough to finish the cemetery refurbishment and the preservation of the onsite chapel.

The chapel plays an important role in the city's history. It was constructed by 2,000 volunteers in a single day, on Aug. 31, 1843. They marched from St. Mary's Basilica on Barrington Street to the site under the direction of their Archbishop. According to the cemetery trust's literature, "work progressed rapidly, efficiently and cheerfully."

"We need between \$200,000 and \$300,000 for the chapel and repairs, fencing and educational signage and research," O'Brien said, noting work on the chapel alone will likely cost between \$150,000 and \$175,000.

The history of the cemetery and its onsite chapel harkens back to the 19th century. Many Irish immigrants who arrived in Halifax before Confederation and many of their descendants are buried in the cemetery, as is the fourth Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John Sparrow David Thompson.

Many decorated war heroes are also buried in Holy Cross Cemetery.

At the end of the day, O'Brien said it's all about people and their stories.

"A woman stopped her car the other day and said 'I have a baby buried here.' She lost a 10 month old child (many years ago) and is still visiting the graveyard," he said. "We run into that over and over again."

More than 250 donors raised enough to help the cemetery trust construct a fence at South Park Street last year. That barrier has helped to deter vandals.

"More people are visiting Holy Cross and there are more flowers and mementos on the gravestones since the refurbishments. It's all about history and honouring those who came before us," O'Brien said.

"There are people (buried) there who made major contributions to our society, through politics, medicine, social sciences, you name it. This is our way of saying thanks."

To volunteer or donate to the Holy Cross Cemetery Restoration Project, go to www.holycrosscemeteryhalifax.ca for more information.

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