



BY DON HARRISON

INSIDER

Seeds of Memory

The Alliance of Native Seedkeepers is growing food and sharing history



An edible plant species known as pigweed (amaranth) is gluten-free and packed with protein. Able to reseed itself, it was eaten for centuries by American Indians.

While wild strains grow freely in the forest, there is a rarer domesticated variety of amaranth that is highly sought after. “The leaves are eaten as a leafy green vegetable,” says Victoria Ferguson, the manager of the Monacan Village at Natural Bridge State Park.

To Ferguson, a member of a coalition of food activists called the Alliance of Native Seedkeepers, plants like pigweed are more than just food. They are living, growing history.

Formed by members of the Monacan, Nottoway and Tuscarora tribes, the Alliance of Native Seedkeepers works to save specific, sometimes disappearing, varieties

of indigenous crops and herbs important to their legacies, some with colorful names such as Skunk Pole Bean and Virginia Gourd Seed Corn. Members are currently growing rare corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, tobacco and more in fields and plots across Central Virginia — their largest is located at Epic Gardens in Bon Air.

“We try not to use words like ‘preservation’ or ‘preserving,’” explains alliance member and Nottoway Tribe historian Frank Cain. “Preservation indicates keeping something stuck in time, which isn’t something we traditionally do. Our history and culture is still living, and thus so is our agriculture.”

Cain says that the stories behind the crops, passed down by generations, are

important — and almost as old as the seeds. A specific red corn has a backstory that requires four long, epic chapters to explain.

The planting process is also pertinent, Ferguson adds. “The tribes and tribal members who are involved work to protect and pass down the ancient ways of planting and protecting the seeds.”

Ferguson and her husband, Dean, have been collecting heirloom seeds for more than 20 years.

The Fergusons are currently working with the indigenous ecology program at Virginia Tech to grow an extremely rare heirloom crop called Strawberry Corn. They also acquired rare *Nicotiana*

rustica tobacco seeds 22 years ago from the Shawnee tribe. Today, the duo is trying to keep those seeds alive.

The seeds they receive from other tribes, or through trades, occasionally come tagged with “last known sample” on the label. “No pressure,” Cain jokes.

This season, the alliance will attempt to revive an endangered corn called Seneca Pink Lady, a unique eastern variety that contains mostly white seeds with pink caps, stripes and highlights — the original source is a Seneca woman named Ongwehias. “We are the last two sources in the world where this seed has not been catastrophically crossed with another variety of corn,” Cain says.

“These crops were everything to us,” explains Beth Roach, a council leader of the Nottoway Tribe, an alliance member and Cain’s fiancée.

The food serves as a living link to >

“
Our seeds are
more than
just food.”

Frank Cain of the
Nottoway Tribe

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Cain teaching members of Wolf Creek Cherokee how to braid Cherokee flour corn.

past journeys. "These crops are part of what our people were cultivating for thousands of years and passing down," Roach says. It helps to explain our ancestry in a tangible way." She and Cain have plans to expand beyond the alliance's current half acre at Epic Gardens. "We have tons of seeds but only a tiny apartment in Manchester," says Roach, laughing.

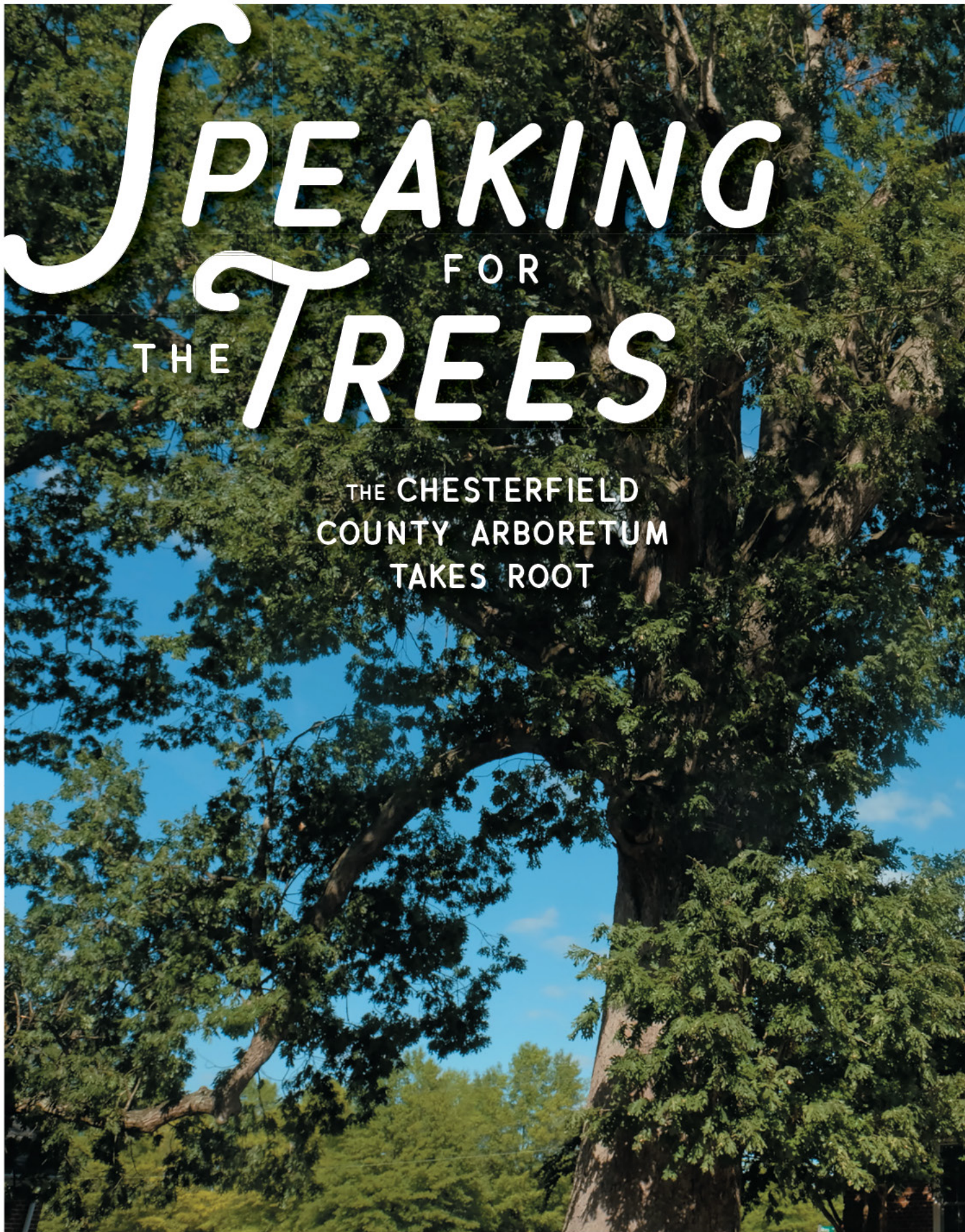
With a rotating cast of 10 to 15 volunteers, the alliance holds work days at Epic Gardens that feature a subsequent potluck picnic. The nonprofit is actively recruiting green-thumbed assistants. The hope is that through the sale of future crops and seeds, they can turn their "seed sanctuary" into a self-sustaining full-time project.

Beyond Epic Gardens, there are heirloom plots planned for the Nottoway Community House in Capron — complete with signage that tells the story of each crop — and at the Monacan Village, where current fundraising efforts hope to revitalize depleted soil. The Wolf Creek Cherokee tribe and museum is also offering land and support, and the alliance is reaching out to members of other tribes including the Chickahominy, Pamunkey, Haliwa-Saponi, Skaroreh Katenuaka and Coharie.

"Our seeds are more than just food," Cain says. "Certain varieties of corn, beans and squash are utilized for very specific ceremonies and dances, even making peace, weddings and [blessing] political agreements."

He notes that entire civilizations developed based on these seeds. "For my people and for most of the native people of the Eastern seaboard, agriculture is absolutely central to our culture." ■

COURTESY SEEDKEEPERS



SPEAKING FOR THE TREES

THE CHESTERFIELD
COUNTY ARBORETUM
TAKES ROOT

Lisa Ferrel is an arborist and a driving force behind the creation of the Chesterfield County government complex arboretum.

BY DON HARRISON
PHOTOS BY JAY PAUL



A

fter the campus of the Chesterfield County government complex was accredited as a certified arboretum in May 2019, Lisa Ferrel got photos of the Lorax, the Dr. Seuss eco-warrior, in her inbox.

“One friend called me the Lisax,” says the slender, bandana-wearing arborist who led the effort to turn the county’s civic heart into a place that “speaks for the trees.”

If you live in Chesterfield, you likely have visited the government campus along Courthouse Road at Iron Bridge Road; it’s where you go to court, pay taxes, find a dog or receive assistance. County law agencies and fire services, utilities, mental health services, and the parks and recreation department are some of the agencies headquartered here.

It’s a one-stop-shop for most county services, but you’ll have to do a bit of a search to find the arboretum. There are no directional signs for it on campus, and no regular tours are offered of the fledgling fruit trees. Most of the specimens can be found growing in medians, between service roads, and along flag circles and loops. Many have yet to grow 3 feet tall. “Our mantra here is ‘right tree, right place,’” Ferrel says, pointing out where, in various stages of growth, visitors will find 21 varieties of fruit trees, four varieties of nut trees and two fruiting shrubs. There also are beech trees, oaks, pawpaws and hickories. “We plant them and water them,” she says. “And then we let the trees be the trees.”

Ferrel works in the buildings and grounds department’s horticultural shop. With her supervisor, Tom Tuttle, and horticulturalist Doug White, she takes care of the greenery on this 65-acre campus, part of a 580-acre swath that also includes hiking trails and woodlands. The shop

employees water the grounds, maintain the turf, and oversee snow removal and storm damage repairs. The trio also maintains the health of the tree canopy and campus plant life. In December 2018, they were confident that their work in planting and cultivating trees around the grounds qualified them to declare the complex a certified arboretum. The judges agreed.

“We attended a few tree conferences and heard from other municipalities and parks around the country,” Tuttle says. “Most of this we were doing already. So making this an arboretum was only to help spotlight what we’ve been doing, and to expand it. Lisa looked into it, and we liked what we saw.”

There are nine accredited arboretums — botanical gardens of trees — listed in the official Morton Registry for Virginia. Chesterfield’s arboretum is a Level I garden, as is Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond. Depending on size and criteria, arboretum certification can range up to Level IV (Arlington National Cemetery is

a Level III). But making the Chesterfield campus a certified arboretum wasn’t just about showing off, Ferrel says, “it was also to have some protection of the trees here from future construction.”

Tuttle agrees. “We’re looking at what we can do to take the outdoor setting of this office park to the next level and be greener and more self-sustaining.”

PAST AND FUTURE

Ferrel has led the arboretum effort, managing to do it while recovering from ovarian cancer. “I’m fine now,” says the woman who answers to “LiLi.” She gets a checkup every two months and takes a chemotherapy drug. “Before I was diagnosed, I had the idea of an arboretum, but I got sick before I could pursue it.”

Once she was back at work in November 2018, the arborist researched the arboretum accreditation program, which is run through Arb-Net, a company that sets the standards. “To qualify, you have to feature at least 25 labeled species, there has to be





THE ARBORETUM AT A GLANCE...

THE NUNNALLY OAK WAS
PLANTED IN 1814, MAKING IT
OVER 200 YEARS OLD.



21

VARIETIES OF
FRUIT TREES

4

VARIETIES OF
NUT TREES

2

FRUITING
SHRUBS



THE 65-ACRE
CAMPUS IS PART OF
A 580-ACRE AREA
THAT INCLUDES
HIKING TRAILS
AND WOODLANDS.



THE
PAWPAW
TREE



(ASIMINA TRILOBA)

PRODUCES THE LARGEST
EDIBLE FRUIT NATIVE
TO NORTH AMERICA.

a governance group — and that's us, the horticultural shop — and hold one public event a year highlighting the trees."

"The response was fantastic," White says of the arboretum's first public event, a guided tree walk in June that brought out two dozen people. "People walked in the intense heat and were really interested in what we were doing. Very inquisitive, asking lots of questions, soaking up all of the knowledge. Lisa's full of information and made it entertaining."

The tour started at the Historic Chesterfield Courthouse, which dates from 1917 and stands on the site of the original 1749 structure. The government complex was built around this spot, which holds historic buildings that survive from the original county courthouse, which was also the site of a Revolutionary War prison and a training camp for the Continental Army.

The green is still shaded by a majestic oak that was planted in 1814 by a young boy named Lawson Nunnally. The so-named Nunnally Oak is in fine shape,

Ferrel says, patting the icon. "We had a tree specialist from Canada come in and access its health a few years ago," she says. The old boy looks feisty looming over the restful lawn. On this September day, it appears to be branch-punching the circa-1828 clerk's office, the oldest public building in Chesterfield County.

Nearby, on a wide median, Ferrel approaches a sapling tagged with a tiny ground flag adorned with a scannable code that leads to information on the species at the website *plant.net*. "It's like a barcode," she says. More than 50 of the trees, large and small, have these tags. "That's an American beech tree that, one day, will

be a heritage tree. Right now it's only 4 feet tall, but one day it will be big. Maybe it will become the next Nunnally Oak."

She looks at the little fella and laughs. "Obviously, it's going to be awhile."

AN IDEA, AN ORCHARD

This all started with tree diapers.

In 2013, Ashland engineers Wei Zhang and his wife, Hailing Yang, Chinese immigrants who attended Virginia Tech, were testing a system they'd developed for tree fertilization. "We knew that Chesterfield wanted to plant an orchard," Zhang says. They donated 10 fruit trees to the effort, and area nurseries provided 10 more. "And we asked if we could use the trees as a testing ground."

Their invention was a collar-shaped apparatus that could absorb and retain water to hydrate plants and trees over long periods of time. The device was made of recycled diapers.

"Being parents of two, we hate to see disposable diapers go into waste and pile >

OUR MANTRA HERE
IS "RIGHT TREE,
RIGHT PLACE."



Clockwise from top left: Horticulture Shop Supervisor Tom Tuttle, Lisa Ferrel, and horticulturist Doug White; an oak leaf; arboretum trees are identified on small markers; the original bell from 1750 hangs in the tower on the old courthouse building (built in 1917).

up in landfills,” Yang says. The new orchard at the Chesterfield complex was where they first tested their then-named Weed Control and Moisture Conservation Tree Mat. Later, it got a catchier name, TreeDiaper.

The testing was successfully completed in 2015, and the couple’s company, Zynnovation, manufactures TreeDiapers for commercial use. All the while, the couple has watched the former testing ground grow into an arboretum, and they’re delighted. “It’s a great honor for Chesterfield,” Zhang says. “Lisa has really been a

pioneer. And what’s she’s done has kind of been a secret up to now.”

But it’s no longer a secret at the complex. Word about the fruit has gotten around, and employees, visitors and wildlife pick at will. “The utility guys have to walk past the orchard to get to the vehicles,” Ferrel says. “They always get the fruit first.”

As she surveys the median, Ferrel points out that none of this costs the county a dime. “There’s no expense. Our trees have been donated, and the cost of looking after them isn’t separate from what we do, anyway, maintaining the complex.”

The shop received a \$5,509.42 grant in 2015 from the Richmond Urban Tree Canopy Initiative, which allowed them to

plant more trees: shagbark hickory, mockernut hickory, American plum, pawpaw and persimmon trees, as well as the Allegheny chinquapin, which is related to the chestnut.

Walking along Government Center Parkway, a main artery of the campus, Ferrel points out what she calls inherited trees. “We didn’t plant them, but we take care of them ... crepe myrtles, Japanese zelkovas.” Right now, she says, “we’re responding to places that need trees around the complex.” The shop doesn’t use insecticides — it would harm pollinating bees — so they have to monitor things: Japanese beetles defoliated some trees last year.

“The upshot is that we’ve attracted a >

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lot of bluebirds. We even have goldfinches now that situate near the administration building. It's nice."

It's hard to grow trees in enclosed spaces that are surrounded by concrete and asphalt. One problem, Tuttle says, is tree decline.

"It happens in these kinds of settings," he says. "The main culprit is soil compaction around the tree. It produces stress on the roots. A tree can be hurt by people parking near it, or working next to it. So we need to implement barriers around the tree, and institute fines if a contractor breaks the set rules."

ACCREDITED VIRGINIA ARBORETAS

- Arlington National Cemetery Memorial Arboretum, *Level III*
- Blue Ridge School, *St. George, Level I*
- Chesterfield County Arboretum, *Level I*
- Colonial Williamsburg Arboretum, *Level II*
- Columbia Gardens Cemetery, *Arlington, Level I*
- Edith J. Carrler Arboretum at James Madison University, *Harrisonburg, Level I*
- Evergreen Burial Park and Arboretum, *Roanoke, Level I*
- Hollywood Cemetery, *Richmond, Level I*
- Rady Park Arboretum, *Warrenton, Level I*



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Ferrel points to a bald patch near a blossoming pear tree. "Grass and trees don't always get along. We have places near trees where grass and plants just won't grow because the tree root has just taken over their area. They emit poisons for protection. I mean ... that's their home."

"This is an office park," Tuttle says. "Whatever we can do to help keep this place as green as possible should be the goal."

In the meantime, the Lisax is thinking ahead.

"We want to do more as an arboretum," she says, "My goal is to reach Level II. Colonial Williamsburg is a Level II. And that means more labeled tree species, a public education program, a collections policy and so on. But that is down the road."

She smiles. "This is an ongoing project, and it's going to grow and grow and grow." ■



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'A Sacred Public Space'

During a cleanup day in honor of Martin Luther King Jr., officials announce a conservation easement to protect historic Evergreen Cemetery

by Don Harrison

January 21, 2019 6:46 PM

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"Today, we work to restore history together," Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney told a crowd of 250-plus volunteers at a special ceremony held at Evergreen Cemetery on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. "Today, we celebrate the permanent protection of Evergreen as a sacred public space that represents our shared values of freedom, service and opportunity."

Armed with a proclamation from the City of Richmond, Stoney gave his governmental blessing to a conservation easement limiting development on

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these hallowed grounds. The easement has been in the works since 2016 when the Virginia Outdoors Foundation set aside \$400,000 from its Preservation Trust Fund to give to the Enrichmond Foundation — the 60-acre site's caretakers — for the graveyard's complete restoration, said to be one of .the nation's largest overhauls of a historic African-American cemetery.

"Since its founding in 1891 by Richmond's African-American community, historic Evergreen has served as a powerful monument to black achievement, community life and family bonds," Stoney told the crowd at the event, a celebratory affair that concluded a cold morning of cleanup efforts by local student organizations, church groups, family members and neighborhood volunteers.

1 of 4



Many of the area's most towering historical figures, such as Maggie Walker and newspaper editor John Mitchell Jr., are buried at Evergreen, but this sprawling gravesite in the East End was allowed to fall into disrepair and neglect in the 1970s, and efforts to help it had stalled. Now, with help from an advisory team that recently concluded its first round of meetings to solicit input from the greater public, Enrichmond has started formulating strategies for a complete restoration. "The idea is to have a plan ready by the fall," says retired IT specialist John Shuck, a longtime volunteer. "One idea that emerged is to do something for the many military veterans that are interred here. But we don't know exactly what that will be yet."

1 of 4



Morgan Jackson, a Virginia Commonwealth University student, was among those who spent the morning pulling weeds and clearing brush at Evergreen. She came with five other students who are part of a health care support group called Sisters and Stethoscopes. "Martin Luther King Jr. Day is a day of service," she says. "I think it's especially important on this day for black students, and everyone, to help the community with this, especially given the history."

"Martin Luther King Jr. said that anyone can be great because everyone can serve," says Enrichmond's Ted Maris-Wolf, Evergreen's caretaker. "We are keeping Dr. King's dream alive through a living mission. And it's inspiring to see 250 volunteers come out on a chilly day to be a part of something bigger than they are, to be a part of something great. I think it's what many of us need at this particular moment in our history and community life."

Afterward, Stoney talked about why it was important to hold this event on Dr. King's birthday.

"Dr. King had a dream for us to reconcile the differences between the races, and that also means to bring equity to what I think has been an injustice of not doing what was necessary to keep up a place like Evergreen. You've got Hollywood Cemetery across town that has found the support of many, this unfortunately has not. So the partnership created through the Virginia Outdoor Foundation, Enrichmond, and those who have worked here at historic Evergreen Cemetery will allow for this sacred ground to be protected for generations to come."



Some of the older graves at Evergreen Cemetery (Photo by Jay Paul)

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