

Eighth-Graders' Cemetery Restoration Project Shows Promise

Students to Get State Recognition

By Lan Nguyen, Staff Writer

A project began last year by Patapsco Middle School eighth-graders, who wanted to restore a historic cemetery, has turned into a continuing quest to preserve cemeteries - not only in Howard County, but across Maryland.

"I never expected this project to go this far," said Kathryn Potocki, a social studies teacher who led the venture, "I thought this would be a simple school project."

It began as just that - a modest plan to restore and preserve St. Paul's Cemetery in Ellicott City. Now Mrs. Potocki and this year's class are well into the project's second phase - discovering the history of people buried there.

Some students also plan to recruit county businesses for an "adopt-a-stone" program, to which companies would donate money to restore crumbling headstones and grave markers.

Others are carefully watching the law and talking to state legislators about bills that could preserve cemeteries statewide.

"I'm impressed and I work with a lot of kids," said Del. Virginia Thomas, D-13th. "They're very articulate. Once they care about an issue, they go after it."

One bill that 13-year old Jon Bae is eyeing is a proposal to make cemeteries open space to prohibit developers from building on them.

The bill would raise the density level and allow developers to build more homes.

"There should be some kind of law against desecration," said Jon who plans to watch the General Assembly in action this winter. "I just think it's wrong. It's a cemetery and it's history."

The project has garnered one of nine

Maryland Council for the Social Studies Excellence Awards, which will be given at the council's fall conference Friday in Columbia. And the County Council last month presented the school with a resolution praising the students for their work.

The school won the social studies award because the project involved students in civic responsibilities and promoted critical understanding of history, geography and economics, among other requisites.

"Everything they did seemed to reflect these basic criteria," said John Popenfus, who chaired the selections committee. "It really is an outstanding project. When we looked at their project and saw that they met with state legislators, this certainly was preparing young people for civic responsibilities.

"Their project is the kind of thing that helps me train teachers," said Mr. Popenfus who teaches elementary education at Mount St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg.

Mrs. Potocki's gifted and talented class this year is taking over the project with zeal.

"If they were my family I wouldn't want them to be digging them up," said Jessica Siltanen.

"I think it's morally wrong," said Clarissa Bruce, 12, who saw workers bulldozing gravesites at a cemetery near her house at Turf Valley Overlook. "It's like taking away a home."

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