

Skill-building Internships



WORKING IN A CEMETERY is not the first summer job most teens aspire to do—unless they live in Arlington, VA. That’s where Columbia Gardens Cemetery has built a team of high school and college students that work during their school holidays. Known as the Dew Crew, this cadre of local teenagers has become indispensable in maintaining the cemetery grounds.

The idea for the Dew Crew started in 2018 when a neighbor’s high school son applied to work at the cemetery. Without hesitation, Daun Thomas Frankland, president of Columbia Gardens Cemetery, hired him on the spot. She envisioned that this could be a great opportunity to help teens gain practical job experience in their community, while also providing additional support for the cemetery’s landscaping staff.

Columbia Gardens Cemetery in Arlington was founded in 1917 by Daun’s great-grandfather, and it has been in the family ever since. After becoming president in 2015, Daun continued to evolve and enhance the cemetery’s grounds and services.

The next year there were 10 members of the Dew Crew, which grew to 19 by 2023. Previously, some of the teens had never held a rake, pushed a lawnmower, pulled weeds, maintained a rose garden, watered sod, or harvested honey—all skills they learn and perfect by the end of the summer. They are

also taught how to level a flat marker, excavate a cremation grave, pre-set a casket, and about the importance of proper conduct during a funeral.

Daun explains that working on the Dew Crew is not glamorous because it can be sweltering in the summer heat, mosquitoes are all around, and you get dirty. But there is personal satisfaction in performing important work that is so meaningful to the families that come to Columbia Gardens to reflect and spend time with a lost loved one.

Hands-On Learning

The Dew Crew emerged as an innovative way for the cemetery to have a steady source of summer labor, but it’s become more than that. The teens, many of whom earn their first paycheck from this opportunity, come from different schools, backgrounds, and cultures. During their time here, they develop a great camaraderie.

And it goes both ways. The cemetery staff loves having the Dew Crew around.



Not only do they get lots of work done, they also bring energy to Columbia Gardens every summer.

“These are exceptional kids—we get attached to them,” Daun said. “We’re sad to see them go.”

for Teens

Columbia Gardens Cemetery and Its Dew Crew

Courtesy of Columbia Gardens Cemetery



Spring at the Columbia Gardens Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia.



Daun Thomas Frankland,
President, Columbia
Gardens Cemetery.



The Dew Crew hard at work.



At the end of each summer, Columbia Gardens is never sure what impact this unique experience will have on the talented, inquisitive Dew Crew members. But it's obvious the teens find the work rewarding, as evidenced by their desire to return to Columbia Gardens, year after year, and often recruiting their friends to join them on the Dew Crew.

Gravedigging and College Apps

In 2021, Sarah Bolles, then a student at Arlington's Washington-Liberty High School, was looking for an outdoor job because of COVID. Her friend Lilly was planning to work with the Columbia Gardens Cemetery Dew Crew that summer and suggested Sarah apply. Hired immediately, Sarah quickly excelled in the variety of outdoor tasks involved with maintaining a cemetery.

"Every day was different on the Dew Crew. I learned so much about plants and how to take care of the land," Sarah said. "I especially loved learning about the roses. Daun wants us to be exposed to so many different aspects of cemetery operations. For instance, I had never seen a beehive up close until I worked on the Dew Crew. The knowledge I gained will last forever."

When it came time to apply for college, Sarah thought of the unique opportunity she had while working at Columbia Gardens for the past three

summers. She chose to write about her experience digging a grave for her college application essay, which she shared with the Columbia Gardens team:

"Looking back at this experience at Columbia Gardens Cemetery, I marvel at how much I learned about myself from the seemingly simple task of digging a grave."

—Sarah Bolles

What I Learned from Digging a Grave

"I never expected to dig a grave. But here I was on a hot July afternoon, surrounded by tombstones and hacking away at the ground. My entire body was dripping with sweat, my back ached, and my hands were stained red with clay. Over the next two days, I worked with two other teenagers to dig a grave exactly two feet square and three feet deep. This grave was to become the eternal resting spot for an urn of cremated [remains], honoring a human's spirit and their life.

I worked as a gardener for the past two summers at Columbia Gardens, a local cemetery and arboretum with 40 acres of lush green grass, tall trees, and thousands of tombstones. Each day, from eight to four, I helped maintain the cemetery with a handful



Sarah Bolles, Dew Crew Member and University of Virginia student

of seasonal teenage gardeners known as the ‘Dew Crew.’ This past summer, there was an opportunity to dig a grave, so I volunteered because I wanted to break the monotony of weeding and take on a new challenge. How hard could it be to dig a hole?

The grave was atop a gentle hill, beside an oak tree. I used my flat spade to pierce through the thick grass and peel it off the earth. The next few inches were easy to dig since the dirt was loose and crumbly. Digging soon became strenuous after the topsoil gave way to dense, orange clay. My two coworkers and I worked rhythmically using three different tools. One person used the steel digging bar to stab and break the hard clay. The other used a shovel to move the loosened clay out of the hole. Finally, I used a flat spade to chisel the edges of the hole into perfectly square walls to fit the urn vault. Stab, scoop, chisel. Stab, scoop, chisel. I sang this rhythm in my head, gaining momentum with my coworkers.

Digging became more awkward and tiring as the hole deepened. There was only room for two people to work, so we took turns resting. To relieve the repetition, we frequently traded tools. Nevertheless, my hands burned with the friction of the wooden handles. I felt like the hole was staying the same depth, and our pile of dirt was not growing. Yet I did not give up. I had committed to completing this task with my teammates, and I wanted to finish the job.

After three hours, we had dug 22 inches deep. Reaching 30 inches took us another three hours. At that point, large rocks impeded our digging, making our tools less effective. One of the full-time gravediggers peered into our grave and complimented us


on the precision of its edges. When he saw the rocks, he retrieved a handheld jackhammer from the shed and began chiseling away. After a few minutes of screeching, grating noise, we could shovel out the last of the rock-filled clay. At last, the grave was complete, perfectly square, and ready for the funeral come Monday morning. As I stood beside the grave, catching my breath, I felt fulfilled.

Although gravedigging was challenging, I was proud that I helped create the forever home for someone to rest.

I imagined the person who would be laid to rest in the grave I dug. I wondered about their passions, their interests, their experiences. I felt connected to this unknown person, as if the dirt we both touched linked us together. They inspired me to take advantage of every year, every week, every day. They inspired me to savor life and to explore my interests and the world around me. Looking back at this experience at Columbia Gardens Cemetery, I marvel at how much I learned about myself from the seemingly simple task of digging a grave.”

—Sarah Bolles, *University of Virginia Class of 2027*

In 2021, Columbia Gardens opened an event center for indoor and outdoor gatherings, and in 2022, the ArbNet Accreditation Program and The Morton Arboretum awarded the cemetery with Level II Arboretum status for its care of more than 100 species of trees and woody plants.

On the horizon for 2024 is converting a barn to a conservatory, a unique space for events that will feature trees and French sculpture. 



The new Indoor/outdoor Event Center for family gatherings.