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Long journey to aid eternal rest; [FINAL Edition]

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Abstract (Summary)

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As they travel across the country, Wiggins said, he will be remembering the people for whom he is doing this: his parents, Winston and Theresa Wiggins, and FitzHugh's son, Albert FitzHugh III. Wiggins, who has a bachelor's degree from Coppin State University and a master's degree from the Johns Hopkins University, has never married and has no children. He does have the support of several brothers, however, who are going to meet him at various points along the route.

Photo(s); 1. [Warren Wiggins] stands at his mother's grave with Patricia FitzHugh. Wiggins is hoping to generate support for the care of Mount Auburn Cemetery through a cross-country run. FitzHugh, whose son is buried at the cemetery, is to drive a support vehicle. 2. Mount Auburn Cemetery was founded in 1871 without a fund established to keep maintenance costs paid in perpetuity.; Credit: 1. and 2. JED KIRSCHBAUM : SUN STAFF PHOTOS

Full Text (1231 words)

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For more than 20 years, Warren Wiggins has pushed a lawn mower over his mother's grave at Mount Auburn Cemetery, carefully tending that patch of ground while all around the grass grew knee-deep and headstones stood crooked and broken.

Over the years, others decried the deplorable condition of Mount Auburn, believed to be the oldest African-American cemetery in Baltimore and the resting place of many renowned blacks. But with the exception of some regular volunteer cleanups, nothing much has improved.

Wiggins hopes to change the face of the cemetery permanently when he sets off tomorrow on a cross-country fund-raising run.

A Baltimore native, Wiggins has run thousands of miles in the city's parks and streets since he trained on the Forest Park High School cross country team some three decades ago.

So, the 49-year-old science teacher thinks, it should be no problem to run from Los Angeles to New York in 254 days, averaging about 14 or 15 miles a day. "It's just another day in the neighborhood," he said.

But it won't be. Because Wiggins wants to begin the run in Los Angeles on Jan. 1 and end it at the World Trade Center site on Sept. 11, he will have to run through weather ranging from bitter cold to scorching heat. He is to pass through Flagstaff, Ariz., in February, when temperature and wind chill can be in the negative numbers. And he is to run up the East Coast in August.

10 pairs of shoes

Planning for the trip began in 1997, but a number of things happened, he said, to delay him. He began preparations in earnest a year ago, after taking a leave from the Baltimore schools, where he has worked for 20 years.

Now he is ready.

He has his 10 pairs of New Balance shoes. He has maps. He has a U.S. flag and a Web site.

A secondhand motor home he bought and renovated with his own mechanic skills sits on the corner of a residential neighborhood in East Baltimore, nearly ready to go.

Best of all, he has Patricia FitzHugh. A former truck driver whose son is buried at Mount Auburn, FitzHugh has volunteered to drive the motor home while Wiggins runs.

When the two met, FitzHugh said, she was planning to have the remains of her son, who died in a fire in 1983 when he was 14 years old, exhumed and moved to another cemetery. Since then, she has discovered she can no longer locate her son's grave because the stone is missing.

When she heard about Wiggins' plan to raise money for the cemetery she decided to put off her course work toward her bachelor's degree at Morgan State University and help him.

She will cook, clean, shop and act as a public relations consultant, contacting churches, schools and the news media in advance of stops. Wiggins hopes that in addition to residents interested in seeing the cemetery renovated, people he meets along his route will donate money for the cause. Friends and supporters have given him the estimated \$7,500 he needs for trip expenses, including about \$2,000 for gasoline for the motor home.

Stop in Oklahoma

He is carrying his "run for rest" theme through his travels by stopping at a number of memorials along the way, including the site of the Oklahoma City bombing on the 10th anniversary of the event.

"This is an adventure I would not miss," said FitzHugh, as she sat in the vehicle where she and Wiggins will spend nearly every night through September.

The two have raised almost \$1,000 for the cemetery through donations and pledges, but at least \$3 million is estimated to be needed to renovate the cemetery and keep it in good repair, according to the Rev. Dellyne I. Hinton, the new pastor of Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church.

The historic church founded the 33-acre cemetery in 1871 but cannot afford the costs of upkeep. Unlike other cemeteries, there was no fund established to keep maintenance costs paid in perpetuity.

As a result, the cemetery deteriorated badly, and in 1997, visitors found human bones and caskets coming up through the ground among the weeds.

In addition to the freed slaves buried there in the late 1800s, the headstones of some of the city's elite can be found, including Dr. Louise Young, Baltimore's first black woman doctor; Jerome B. Young, the first African-American promoted to sergeant during World War I; and John Henry Murphy, the editor and founder of the Afro-American, the city's black newspaper.

The landmark is on the National Register of Historic Places, and there is renewed determination to restore it and perhaps make it a tourist attraction. "Many of the people who have found their final resting place there are people who had great impact on Baltimore City and the nation. We want to not just do reconstruction of burial sites, but an uplifting of the history and legacy here," Hinton said.

The church and the cemetery board are developing a master plan for how they will establish perpetual care for the cemetery with help from a \$15,000 grant from the Baltimore City Heritage Area.

Wiggins' efforts are separate from those plans, but he has asked a member of the Mount Auburn board to sit on a committee that will help decide how the money he raises is spent.

In the past, Hinton said, questions have been raised about how money was spent on the cemetery, but this effort will be transparent.

Send-off with prayers

On Dec. 19, Sharp Street church presented Wiggins with a black- and-white aerial map of the cemetery to take with him on his route. And Hinton said she plans "on being at their house and having a prayer with them as they get on their way" tomorrow.

Wiggins, who has been running nearly every day for the past 35 years, seems completely confident that he will make it.

For years he has run at least six or seven miles a day, often through Druid Hill Park and Herring Run Park. He said he began to think, "I am running in a circle; maybe if I ran in a straight line I can get across the country." In the past year, he has beefed up his training, running 15 miles a day, and occasionally doing 25 or 30 miles a day.

As they travel across the country, Wiggins said, he will be remembering the people for whom he is doing this: his parents, Winston and Theresa Wiggins, and FitzHugh's son, Albert FitzHugh III. Wiggins, who has a bachelor's degree from Coppin State University and a master's degree from the Johns Hopkins University, has never married and has no children. He does have the support of several brothers, however, who are going to meet him at various points along the route.

To follow Wiggins' progress or help with the renovation of the cemetery, go to www.runforrest.org.

[Illustration]

Photo(s); Caption: 1. Warren Wiggins stands at his mother's grave with Patricia FitzHugh. Wiggins is hoping to generate support for the care of Mount Auburn Cemetery through a cross-country run. FitzHugh, whose son is buried at the cemetery, is to drive a support vehicle. 2. Mount Auburn Cemetery was founded in 1871 without a fund established to keep maintenance costs paid in perpetuity.; Credit: 1. and 2. JED KIRSCHBAUM : SUN STAFF PHOTOS

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