

Why not start a walking club in your cemetery? Michigan Memorial Park invites the public to keep on walking

The one thing all cemeteries – religious and secular, private and public, historic and new – have in common is that they're nice places for a walk. So why not start a walking club?

Drawing the community into your cemetery generally involves a lot of planning, organizing and follow-through: a Memorial Day program, a Christmas program, a Day of the Dead celebration. Michigan Memorial Park in Flat Rock certainly holds those types of events, but recently President Kelly Dwyer tried something more low-key and informal, a walking club she started almost on a whim and now enthusiastically promotes.

ICCFA Magazine talked to Dwyer about the MM Walking Club and why she thinks other cemeterians should consider starting one.

Where did you get the idea to start a club?

I was attending a professional seminar, and Gary Buss, a good friend who runs a cemetery in Philadelphia, mentioned a cool website called *mapmyrun.com*. You can go there and map your run or walk route and it tells you how many miles you ran or walked. I thought that was really interesting, because I like to walk.

When I got back from the conference, I got on *mapmyrun.com* and did the mapping around the cemetery. They emailed me a challenge: "We bet that you can't walk 30 miles in 30 days in January."



I love challenges, so I started walking, in January. I loved it so much that while I was walking I started wondering if other people would like to do it, if people would join a walking club.

I came up with some prizes and decided it would start April 1. I didn't really market it. I put a banner out on the board in front of the cemetery saying "New walking club, April 1 to October 31. See details inside."

I had people sign up on a form that my attorney reviewed. He included a "hold harmless" paragraph in case anyone is injured while walking. (see example next page)

We asked people to sign up and then let us know the miles they walked. Some people signed up but never reported any miles, and other just reported miles once or twice. But in signing up, they gave us their contact information, and they're on my email list, so I keep in touch with them.

I send an email out each week and we talk and encourage each other; it's a wonderful little networking thing.

interview by ICCFA Magazine
Managing Editor Susan Loving



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**ICCFA Magazine
subject spotlight**

► Kelly Dwyer, a fourth generation cemeterian and licensed funeral director, is president and public relations director of Michigan Memorial Park, Flat Rock, Michigan, and a partner in Michigan Specialty Funeral Carriages Inc.

www.michmempark.com

► The website Dwyer used to map walking routes is www.mapmyrun.com.

► The cemetery is owned by Dwyer and her sister, Heidi Umin.

► Michigan Memorial Park was founded in 1926 with 128 acres; it now encompasses 290 acres and has 13 community mausoleums.

► The cemetery handles about 1,500 interments per year. Total interments are more than 70,000.

► MMP won the ICCFA KIP Grand Prize Award in 2002 for its 9/11 remembrance service.

► MMP has been featured in ICCFA Magazine in a July 2008 story about its innovative combination mausoleum and maintenance building and an October 2009 story about its 35-foot granite lighthouse columbarium overlooking the Huron River.



**MICHIGAN MEMORIAL WALKING CLUB
APPLICATION
April 1st – November 1st, 2011**

Name: _____ Date: _____
Address: _____ City: _____
Zip: _____ Email address: _____
Beginning weight (optional): _____ Ending weight: _____

There is no fee. The Michigan Memorial Walking Club is open to everyone, including Michigan Memorial Employees that are over 18 years of age. The above information will be held confidential and the email provided will be used to inform all participants of any walking club news, events, challenges, announcements, incentives, awards, new mileage maps, etc.

RULES:

You must be 18 years or older to participate in this club. It will be based on the honor system and you must walk during the posted times the Park is open. After each walk, record your mileage with the receptionist who is located at the Family Service building in front of the Park. If you walk after 5:00 and the office is closed, please waive down the Security Guard and let him know your name and mileage so they will have it recorded in the office the next day. Roller blades, bikes, skates or skate boards cannot be used. Mileage walked must be on the Park grounds, out of the Park does not count.

HOLD HARMLESS:

I _____, its successors and assigns, hereby agree to save and hold harmless Michigan Memorial Park, Inc. and Michigan Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. and any of its employees from all cost, injury and damage incurred by walking/jogging in the Park, and from any other injury or damage to any person or property whatsoever, any of which is caused by an activity, condition or event arising out of performance, preparation for performance or nonperformance of any provision of this agreement by Michigan Memorial Park or Michigan Memorial Funeral Home.

The above cost, injury, damage or other injury or damage occurred by or to by the above shall include, in the event of an action, court costs, expenses of litigation and reasonable attorney's fees. This saves harmless clause is not intended to indemnify against any cost or damage, or portion thereof, caused by Michigan Memorial Park or Michigan Memorial Funeral Home.

Signature: _____
Date: _____

Are all the people who signed up either lot owners or people who have loved ones interred at Michigan Memorial Park? I don't know; we didn't ask them that. I guess I assumed they would have some relationship with the park to have come by and noticed the banner.

I do know that one of the women who signed up for the Walking Club came in after walking a lot of miles and bought more than \$10,000 in mausoleum space.

I imagine that helped cover the cost of t-shirts, socks and other items you list as give-aways.

Yes, though you don't have to spend a lot on prizes, if you do your research. I went online and got t-shirts for \$2.82, and the paid \$5 apiece for silk screening, so they cost basically \$8 each. The water bottles, which you get when you reach 50 miles, were only \$2.50 each. The lip balm was a dollar. The socks cost me \$7.

What were your goals for this project?

I didn't have any other than to get people into the park and show them how beautiful it is. I created three mapped routes, two miles, tow-and-a-half miles

and three miles, and sometimes in my emails I would call people's attention to something different in the park.

For example, when we added a butterfly garden, I said, "I just want to let you know we've just constructed a new butterfly garden. So when you walk by Woodside 1 and 2, look to your left, and you'll see the new garden. Let me know what you think."

Some of the emails let them know about work going on. "Don't go on the east side of the cemetery today and tomorrow. We just got new paved roads. Tell me what you think after the work is done. "I wanted them to feel like they had some kind of inside connection with Michigan Memorial. I wanted them to feel comfortable with the park and our staff.

If you wanted to try for the rewards, you had to report your mileage. Everyone was on the honor system, but you had to let us know how far you'd walked so we could keep track.

During working hours you had to go into our family service office and tell them how many miles you had walked. After 5 o'clock, we have security personnel on duty until the gates are closed, so you had to report to them.

And our security guards got to know the walking club people and the routes they would take. They would stop and call out, "Hey, Jane, how are you doing? How many miles did you walk today?"

So our staff members are becoming friends with the people in the club, and the people in the club are getting to know each other. Some of them started walking together.

How did you decide on the routes? Do you have hills that would make some routes more strenuous than others?

No, everything's pretty flat here. So I developed routes that would highlight certain park features. The three-mile route, for example, goes through the woods and around some of our mausoleums.

I could have drawn up 10 different maps, but I just did three for the first year. This year I'll do more. I mapped them at that site I mentioned, *mapmyrun.com*.

It's possible some people wore a pedometer and just did their own thing. The woman who ended up being our champion walker walked six or miles a day.



Prizes to which the walking club members can aspire include socks, t-shirts, water bottles and a book about Michigan Memorial Park.

To reward MM Walking Club participants, Dwyer came up with a list of incentives tied to number of miles walked. Walking had to be done inside the park:

- **25 miles**—custom Michigan Memorial Walking Club t-shirt
- **35 miles**—custom SPF15 Michigan Memorial lip balm
- **50 miles**—custom Michigan Memorial hands-free water bottle carrier
- **75 miles**—custom Michigan Memorial jogging socks
- **100 miles**—Michigan Memorial Park book
- **150 miles**—additional Walking Club t-shirt (you will need it if you went this far!)
- **200 miles**—additional jogging socks
- **Grand Prize**—the person with the most miles by the end of the day October 31 will win the first Walking Club title.

But I wanted to give them maps to make it easy for them and to make sure they didn't get lost.

Did the recordkeeping take much staff time?

No, they just typed the numbers into an Excel spreadsheet that I designed. The security guard would turn in any after-hours reports to the front desk, where the receptionist would take a couple of minutes to log them into the worksheet.

We kept getting more and more people signed up. In July, I issued a challenge. I said Michigan Memorial would donate a dollar for every mile walked that month and at the end of the month, the top three walkers would meet with me to decide what charity would get the money.

That was awesome. We raised \$705, and they wanted to donate it to the Disabled American Veterans of Michigan. So we called them up and they sent a representative over to meet with some of the club members and accept the check.

The walking club members said, "I hope you do this again next year." They absolutely loved it.

Did you get any publicity for that?

No, other than on our Facebook page. This was our first year, and I didn't know it was going to be this big.

I assume you started in April and ended in October because of the Michigan weather.

Yes. And who knows? It could snow at the end of October, but that's usually such a beautiful month here with the fall weather.

And you held an awards ceremony at the end of the "season."

We gave awards to the top three walkers. The top person logged 555 miles in the park; I was blown away by that and I kept thinking, "What can I get her?"

She got a Land's End pullover fleece with Michigan Memorial Park and our logo embroidered on it. And I decided we'd start a Walk of Fame.

At the ceremony, I brought the whole group over to the beginning of the sidewalk at the park entrance where we had fresh cement in place and said to her:

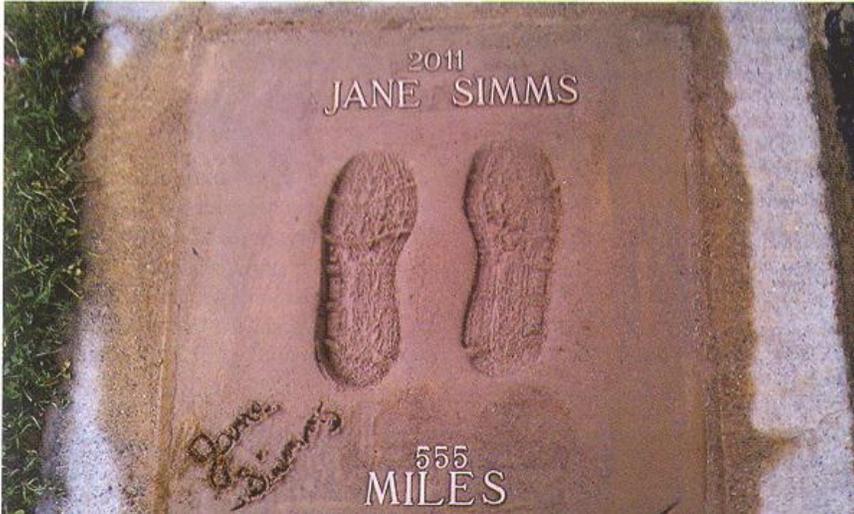
"What we'd really like, Jane, is for you to step in this fresh cement and start off the Walk of Fame and sign your name." She started crying and said, "No one has ever done anything like this for me."

As she's doing it, I'm hearing people say in the background, "Oh, my gosh, I'm going to get my feet in the sidewalk next year." The buzz was really going!

The guy who was in second place was quiet when I gave him his award. My sister, Heidi, went up to him and asked him, "What do you think about your award?" He's in his 50s, and he looked at her and said, "This is my first award ever, I can't believe it." Oh, my gosh, I just wanted to start crying.

So I guess there's going to be a 2012 Walking Club?

Oh, heck yeah. I can't wait. I'm going to do the banner again, advertise it on Facebook. I've got the email addresses of the 81 people who signed up last year and they're going to spread the word. I asked them to each bring a friend. So we'll see how it goes.



What advice would you give other cemeterians who might be interested in starting a walking club?

It's important to include that "hold harmless" clause in the application, in case somebody trips or falls in the park. And my attorney also advised us to limit it to people 18 and older.

I also would suggest that someone from the cemetery join the club and be involved in the challenge. Doing so is one of the best things I've done in a long time. I ended up coming in fourth place with 240 miles.

Walking clears my head, and it's amazing how many ideas you come up with for the cemetery while you're walking through it.

My main advice is just "do it." It's unbelievable. Our club walked a total of 4,577 miles last year inside our cemetery.



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