

ACE Award

By Stan Goldstein



the Winner

The first grave one sees as they enter Michigan Memorial Park is William Heston, the cemetery's founder, who is buried near the main entrance.

“He can always see what’s going on,” said Kelly Dwyer, Heston’s great-granddaughter and president/owner of Michigan Memorial Park in Flat Rock, Michigan. “He has a beautiful plaque with a custom football.”

Michigan Memorial Park

Flat Rock, Michigan

The Shrine of Remembrance Chapel and Mausoleum is one of 14 mausoleums at Michigan Memorial Park. (Photo credit: Michigan Memorial Park)

Heston, a football standout at the University of Michigan and later an attorney and judge in Detroit, started the cemetery on the Huron River in 1926 when he purchased 178 acres of land from a farming family. Ten years later, he bought an additional 100 acres, and the cemetery has now grown to 290 acres with 87,500 interments.

Michigan Memorial describes itself as “Beautiful • Peaceful • Comforting” on its website. The cemetery features a variety of burial and interment options, including a lighthouse, a 19th hole putting green with cremation spaces, a butterfly garden, a designated veterans’ section with eternal flame cremation spaces and a “be-a-tree” burial option. There are also winding roads, majestic trees, lakes and fountains.

In addition to its community involvement and overall beauty, Michigan Memorial Park has been selected as the 2022 American Cemetery Excellence Award winner.

Dwyer, 55, is the co-owner of the cemetery with her sister, Heidi Umin, 52. “Heidi is the absolute best partner anyone could ever have. She’s the nicest person in the whole wide world and a wonderful business partner,” Dwyer said.

“It’s a special place, all the history here,” Umin said. “The fact that we’re fourth generation and women-owned is also special. The park has been very successful and continues to grow and improve.

“It’s important for us to continue the tradition,” she added. “We hear from a lot of people who grew up around here that they remember the lakes and the swans. They liked to visit here as a child, and they continue to visit as an adult. It’s important for us to keep going with this park-like setting. It’s a place for the living and that’s how we want it to be.”

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Fourth Generation

Throughout its history, Michigan Memorial Park has remained in the Heston family. In the 1940s, the cemetery was passed on to William Heston's son, John P. Heston.

"In the 1950s my grandfather, John P. Heston, was the first at Michigan Memorial to start offering prearrangements of cemetery property," Dwyer said. "At one point he even rented a helicopter for families to select their cemetery property. He would take them high above the cemetery grounds allowing them to take in the entire park in a one-of-a-kind memorable way."

In 1957, John Heston began the construction of the Shrine of Remembrance Chapel and Mausoleum.

"It's a very large mausoleum that was built in stages," Dwyer said. "The first stage that my grandfather did was a functioning mausoleum. It was very costly, and it ended up

being only a half-circle, but it still looked good. My grandfather is entombed in it. His dream was to have the first circular mausoleum in the country.

"My mom was determined to complete the mausoleum and it was finally completed in 1993," she added.

Barbara Heston, John's daughter and Dwyer's and Umin's mother, took over the cemetery operations in 1980. She added the first upright monument section to the park, additional mausoleums and purchased 15 additional acres of surrounding land for future growth.

In 2008, Dwyer and Umin became the official owners and operators of Michigan Memorial Park, purchasing the cemetery from their mother.

"I like telling stories about our family," Dwyer said. "I wonder what my grandfather and great-grandfather would think about Heidi and I taking

over and running Michigan Memorial."

Dwyer and Umin grew up on the cemetery grounds. "We had the best neighbors. It was so much fun," Dwyer said. "Living on the cemetery grounds, it was our playground growing up. We had miles and miles of roads and we loved to ride our bikes," Umin added.

Both started working on the grounds when they were young.

"When I was 10, I would cut drain tiles down the middle, 6 inches in length, and load them up in my wagon," Dwyer said. "I took them to a newly developed block and put them around a tree so the lawnmowers wouldn't damage them. I got 25 cents a drain tile. Both Heidi and I painted the fence around the property many times."

Unique Features

Where to start? Michigan Memorial offers numerous burial options in a variety of gardens and sections.



Opposite page: Kelly Dwyer, left, and her sister, Heidi Umin, are the fourth generation of the Heston family to own and operate Michigan Memorial Park. Above: Michigan Memorial Park features a 35-foot-high lighthouse for niches. Situated on the banks of the Huron River, it has a working beacon and a steel deck that extends 12 feet over the river. Right: The grave of William Heston, the founder of Michigan Memorial Park and a standout football player at the University of Michigan. “He’s buried in the first grave at the entrance so he can always see what’s going on,” Kelly Dwyer said. (Photos credit: Michigan Memorial Park)

“We have 14 different community mausoleums, and we have over 25 cremation burial options,” Dwyer said. “There’s also 38 burial block areas for traditional burials; we have two monument sections and two baby lands for children.”

There’s even a 35-foot lighthouse with a working beacon situated on the banks of the Huron River for niches. It has a steel deck that extends 12 feet over the river.

“There was a cinderblock building by the Huron River. There was a pump in the building that





pumped water from the river to the pond up front,” Dwyer said. “I looked at the building and thought it could be replaced and look so much better. I put an ad in the newspaper saying I was looking to beautify a place by the Huron River, and I asked artists to submit ideas for the building.

“I got a call from a mason who said we should turn it into a lighthouse,” she added. “I asked him to please put his idea in writing, it sounded so good, but he never did. So, Coldspring granite of Minnesota turned the building into the lighthouse in 2008. It still has a working pump. We have canoes and kayaks go by it on the river all the time.”

For those who like golf, there’s the 19th hole putting green surrounded by in-ground burial spaces.

“It’s a special area in the park for golf enthusiasts,” Dwyer said. “It’s one putt-putt hole. You can use it to putt and you can be buried around it. There are 23 double spaces for you and your loved one to be buried.”

For veterans, Michigan Memorial offers an eternal flame in perpetual gratitude toward and in remembrance of those served.

“In 2013, we built the very first

witness crematory in Michigan,” Dwyer said. “We rent space in the adjacent Michigan Memorial Funeral Home. A witness crematory is a special space where the family can come and spend some time with their loved one before they are cremated and they can witness part of the process.”

Dwyer’s husband, Daniel P. Dwyer, is the CEO, president and owner of Michigan Memorial Funeral Home.

Connecting with Nature

“We have so many critters in our park,” Dwyer said. “We have swans, deer, foxes and a pond in the back that is filled with turtles. We even have a resident crane – who we call Mr. Crane – in our pond.”

In 2012, Michigan Memorial dedicated its Butterfly Garden, a certified Monarch Waystation Habitat, a place that provides resources necessary for monarch butterflies to produce successive generations and sustain their migration.

“There’s a statue of a bronze angel in our butterfly garden. She’s reaching out to gather a butterfly,” Dwyer said. “The butterfly garden is a special place designed for in-ground burial.”

The cemetery is also home to 18,000 bees.

“It started three years ago when we were at the height of the bee shortage,” Dwyer said. “I have a friend who is a beekeeper, and we now have six hives that are home to 3,000 bees in each hive. We give out honey from the bees to our families.”

Dwyer, Umin and other Michigan Memorial staff take visitors on tours of the cemetery in golf carts.

“I love to take people on tours. When you get in the golf cart you can feel Michigan Memorial,” Dwyer said. “I like telling stories about our family, our employees and where we’re at now. You can feel the stories of the cemetery. Plus, I like showing them the turtles, the swans, the lighthouse and the butterflies.”

Also available for touring are three cruiser bicycles for visitors. “Anyone can park their car, get on our bikes and ride around Michigan Memorial and get a feel for it,” Dwyer said.

On Memorial Day, a new statue was added to the grounds. “It’s a little girl, she’s bronze, and she’s saying, ‘Come sit with me,’” Dwyer said. “It’s precious. Someone can purchase the bench if they want to be cremated. It’s very inviting to come



sit with her. Right now, it is located at our main Family Service office. This bench will be relocated when a family purchases it and selects the bench space for it to go on.”

There’s also the “Be a Tree” cremation burial space. “There are those who want to be cremated and go into the Earth and become a tree. They are buried in a biodegradable urn and buried under a young tree. It’s becoming very popular,” she said.

Community Involvement

Michigan Memorial has a variety of year-round events for what’s known as the Downriver community, an unofficial name for a collection of 18 cities and townships in Wayne County, Michigan, south of Detroit, along the western shore of the Detroit River.

In the spring, there’s fishing derbies for children with special needs hosted by local Rotary clubs. There’s also blood drives, Catholic Masses and a walking club.

“Community events are my favorite,” Dwyer said. “I am a huge fan of the Red Cross and we do two to three blood drives a year. We have at least three fishing derbies a year in

From left: For the golfing enthusiast, Michigan Memorial Park has the 19th hole putting green surrounded by in-ground burial spaces. Center: The “Be a Tree” is a biodegradable urn and tree planting system that transforms a loved one into a living tree memorial at Michigan Memorial Park. Above: The bronze angel statue is reaching out for a butterfly in the Butterfly Garden which is also a certified Monarch Waystation Habitat. (Photos credit: Michigan Memorial Park)

our fully stocked ponds and each child is guaranteed to catch a fish.”

The walking club runs from April 1 to Oct. 31 and Dwyer calls the participants “the eyes and ears of the cemetery.”

“They will let us know if something doesn’t look good or right,” she said. “They are wonderful people and we really appreciate them. We have incentives for them and give out prizes. We have a ceremony at the end of the year where we award the top three ladies and men who have walked the most.

“The person who walks the most in the park each year is known as the ‘Grand Walker,’” Dwyer added. “They get to have their feet placed in concrete in a ceremony and then they sign their name in the cement along with the miles they walked.”

In August, there’s a charity walk where Michigan Memorial Park gives \$1 per mile walked and Michigan

Memorial Funeral Home matches it.

“The charity is picked by the top three walkers of the month,” she said. “This year they picked Downriver Foster Closet that helps foster children. They were given a check for \$3,440.”

There’s also a Little Free Library where people exchange books. It’s located on the cemetery’s main boulevard at the front of the park next to the Family Service building.

For the past 21 years, Michigan Memorial has held a candlelight vigil at the Christmas Box Angel Statue Dec. 6 to honor all children loved, missed and remembered. The statue was introduced in the book “The Christmas Box” by Richard Paul Evans. In the book, a woman mourns the loss of her child at the base of an angel monument. Dec. 6 is the date of the child’s death in the book.

Among the famous names buried at Michigan Memorial, is Preston Tucker,



In a designated veterans section, Michigan Memorial Park offers an eternal flame in perpetual gratitude toward and in remembrance of those served. (Photo credit: Michigan Memorial Park)

the maker of the Tucker car, whose story was featured in the 1988 film “Tucker: The Man and His Dream” starring Jeff Bridges. Also buried on the grounds is Heinz Prechter who founded the American Sunroof Co.

“My favorite famous person here is my great-grandfather, William Heston,” Dwyer said. “He was a football player at the University of Michigan from 1901 to 1904 when his ‘point-a-minute’ teams compiled a 43-0-1 record and were credited with four national championships.”

Heston still holds the Michigan record with 72 career rushing touchdowns.

Credit to the Staff

Dwyer and Umin point out how important the staff of close to 50 is to the success of Michigan Memorial.

“Joe Fugedi, a family service representative has been with Michigan Memorial for over 53 years,” Dwyer said. “Mike and Tim Novak in our maintenance division have been here for more than 30 years. We have a total of 446 years of experience here among our staff. We have very low turnover and are very proud of that.”

“One of the reasons the park is run very well is that we have a great staff,” Umin added.

Matt Bailey, the president of the Bailey Funeral Homes in Connecticut and American Funeral Director magazine’s 2021 Funeral Director of the Year, has nothing but praise for Dwyer.

“Kelly Dwyer is one of my favorite people. She is an extraordinary professional and a wonderful human being,” he said. “I’d say she is the most positive and forward-thinking cemeterian that I have ever come across. She operates from a perspective that is always about improvement and growth and it shows at Michigan Memorial Park. She is a role model for women and men throughout death care.”



Top: Michigan Memorial Park offers visitors three cruiser bicycles to ride to explore the cemetery. Above: Michigan Memorial Park has six hives that are home to a total of 18,000 bees. The honey the bees produce is given out to members of the walking club and to families of those buried in the cemetery. (Photo credit: Michigan Memorial Park)

Michigan Memorial continues to adapt to what families may want.

“In 2021, and we are on a similar pace this year, we did 1,688 burials and out of that, 41% were internment burials, 42% were cremation burials and 17% were above-ground entombments,” Dwyer said. “In Michigan we are at a 52% cremation rate and I’m very happy about the options that we offer to people who want to be cremated.”

Dwyer and Umin are always thinking ahead.

“We will be continuing the growth and improvements to the cemetery,” Umin said. “We have a lot of projects in the works including developing a new garden district area. It will consist of granite memorials, which we do not have, we are a bronze memorial cemetery. This will open up a new area and will provide for more options.

“We also have plans for a new indoor/outdoor mausoleum,” she added. “It will be a large mausoleum for crypts, niches with surrounding new burial sites. We’re hoping to break ground in the spring. Plus, we are improving our current buildings. After time they kind of wither and we like to keep them updated.”

“We constantly have projects. Heidi and I have so many projects, they are not finalized on paper yet,” Dwyer said. “We’re going to start work on a unique jet-black granite mausoleum. I have never seen one in a cemetery. It will have 108 crypts and 100 niches.

“We’re also developing a private family mausoleum area, nestled in the woods,” she added. “It’s going to be very private and exclusive.”

The pride in running Michigan Memorial Park is obvious with Dwyer and Umin.

“My sister and I are so honored to be part of this business,” Dwyer said. “It’s so touching. I always let people know that if funeral directing isn’t your thing, don’t forget about the cemeteries. They are so interesting, and you help families in designing a perfect burial.” •