

Freedom Grove receives revitalization



Photo by Alixandria Wells-Good

Clean-up day was held at Freedom Grove in August. The effort included members of the Rotary Club, Master Gardeners and Scouts who volunteered.

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A piece of American history subtly resides in a spacious 6-acre memorial park located right in Champaign County, and is getting a revitalization thanks to the collaborative efforts of local organizations.

The Freedom Grove Memorial Park is located near the corner of state Route 55 and U.S. Route 68 in Urbana. The centerpiece of the park, a steel beam recovered from the World Trade Center wreckage of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, stands near the center of

the park and is one of the main focal points.

The Rotary Club of Urbana established the park to honor those who lost their lives on 9/11. The land, which is owned by Champaign County, is leased to the Rotary Club of Urbana.

There are many unique elements to Freedom Grove memorial park that have special meanings. The mound where the beam stands is surrounded by “ripples” in the earth that represent the powerful impact of the fall and how the event reverberates today.

Limestone corners mark the 208-foot footprint of one of the

towers. The circle beneath the beam represents the globe, relationships, the circle of life and embraces the beam. Inspired by the U.S. flag, the stars around the beam were created from steel, and represent the Twin Towers and the spirit of ingenuity.

The beam, which arrived in Urbana in 2011 courtesy of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, undeniably has significant meaning.

According to the local artist, Mike Major: “The beam symbolizes our journey together. This

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beam is twisted. This beam is tormented. It has been through a horrific tragedy. It now represents our spirit, our will to embrace faith, hope, and freedom. It lies down no more. It does not lean over. It stands tall with America."

The park is also home to multiple other monuments honoring fallen soldiers and veterans from past wars, and an Underground Railroad Marker honoring Lewis Adams' efforts assisting the enslaved people's journey northward to Canada.

Now, the Rotary Club of Urbana in collaboration with the Champaign County Master Gardeners is refreshing the park in hopes to bring more visitors and raise community awareness of the Freedom Grove project. It is also hoped that the park can be an educational experience for local youth.

The members of the Master Gardeners have been instrumental in the detailed choices of plants and flowers around the park. Plants within the



The beam arrived in Champaign County in 2011. It stopped in Mechanicsburg (pictured in this 2011 photo) on its way to Freedom Grove in Urbana.

Trade Center Tower "footprint" were specifically chosen to be "contemplative, soothing, and reflective type of flower" according to Master Gardener Volunteer and Freedom Grove Chairperson Carolyn Roark.

On the outside of the four corners, the more vibrant plants are used, including a recent addition of a pollinator garden, which is an adjunct to the Master Gardener Volunteer annual butterfly larva hatching program. Surrounding the Underground Railroad Marker are prairie flowers, to pay homage to the type of land the enslaved

people would've passed through in Champaign County during their journey northward.

Roark shared: "In 2023, the Champaign County Master Gardener Volunteers (MGV) entered into an extensive collaborative effort with our local Rotary Club to revitalize the park. While the Rotary Club's efforts are focused on hardscape repair and tree trimming within the park, the Master Gardener Volunteers are focused on the creation and planting of nine additional landscape beds; beautification of the park through the use of perennial, native and annual

flowers; and promoting education of local school age children by the creation of a pollinator garden, which is an adjunct to the Master Gardener Volunteer annual butterfly larva hatching program which is managed by Linda Lensman MGV."

One of the upgrade projects is an opportunity for individuals or groups and organizations to purchase a brick that will have their name engraved on it and will be set in the walkway surrounding the park's bell. The purchase of the paver will go towards upkeep of the park.

On Aug. 26, a "commu-



Mechanicsburg dignitaries stand with the beam as it stopped briefly in the village during its journey in 2011.

nity refresh" was held at the park where community members were invited to help pull weeds, trim bushes, and assist with other park maintenance. Many members of the local Rotary Club and Master Gardeners were present as well as local Scouts from Troop 11.

Other area organizations that have been helpful to this project, whether with volunteer time or donations, are Troop 87, Hillside Greenhouse (West Liberty), Seth's Produce and Garden (Urbana) and Outlook Landscape and Lawn care (West Liberty). The majority of the plants at the Freedom Grove memorial park have been primarily supplied by the

Master Gardeners' private gardens.

Volunteers are always welcome to help with the efforts to maintain and revitalize the park. Interested individuals may contact Carolyn Roark MGV, Freedom Grove Chair Person through the Champaign County Extension Office at the Community Center, phone number 937-484-1526 or Paul Waldsmith at the Champaign Family YMCA at 937-653-9622.

Individuals interested in becoming a Master Gardener Volunteer can contact Grant Davis, OSU Extension Officer at 937-484-1526 for details.

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