

# Appleton woman spearheads massive effort to clean veterans' grave markers at Riverside Cemetery

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*Army veteran Laurel Sternhagen cleans and repairs veteran's grave markers at Riverside Cemetery in Appleton. Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin*

APPLETON – For several years, Laurel Sternhagen, a 36-year Army veteran, has placed U.S. flags at the grave sites of veterans buried at Riverside Cemetery as part of a Memorial Day tribute.

But while she is grateful to volunteer for the annual project, Sternhagen, a 63-year-old Appleton woman, noticed something that bothered her: the grave stones were in a state of deterioration.

"I thought, 'these (grave stones) are hard to read,'" she said. "So I decided to go out there and clean them up."

If that sounds like a daunting task, well, it is. There are roughly 2,000 veterans buried at Riverside Cemetery, which is situated on a 96-acre parcel of land in Appleton.

But Sternhagen wasn't deterred by the challenge. She embraced it.

With the help of a dedicated band of volunteers and the support of cemetery officials, veterans' organizations and businesses, the work is virtually finished – in only a handful of months.

"I thought this was going to take a few years," she said. "Some (grave markers) were hard to read and some were buried. Some were really sad. (A volunteer) had to cut around the flat stones so we could see them. We took a lot of dirt off."

Sternhagen has a simple reason for her dedication to the project.

"You do what's right, not what's easy," she said. "My family calls me the 'pit bull.' I don't like to leave anything undone."

In addition to working on headstones, Sternhagen's crew cleared dirt from bronze markers and cleaned grave sites of a number of spouses of the veterans buried at Riverside. Businesses donated some of the supplies for the effort.

Sternhagen said the work was done in sections within the cemetery. Volunteers scrubbed the dirt using a D/2 Biological Solution.



Volunteer Annaliese Lezotte cleans grave markers of veterans buried at Riverside Cemetery in Appleton. She was among a volunteer force that cleaned more than 1,000 headstones and bronze markers. *Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin*

"For the bronze markers, we'd sand them and use a special wax. For the uprights and flats made of stones, we'd try to spray (the dirt) off them with D-2. We'd scrub with a wet brush. And we used lots of pails and brushes," she said.

"Basically, it's a lot of elbow grease through this whole process."

Sternhagen recruited friends and messaged people on Facebook to assist with the effort. And the response was strong.

"We had so many different veterans and their wives come out to clean," she said. "It does get tiresome, but – along with other veterans and with the unrest in our country – I believe we needed something good."

A key volunteer was Nathan Lezotte, a 17-year-old De Pere boy who embraced the project and got approval to use it as an Eagle Scout project.

"He wanted to do this," said Sternhagen, who was his mentor for the project. "He is such a good kid."

Sternhagen also is grateful to Debbie DeBruin, administrator at Riverside Cemetery, for her support during the arduous project. "On hot days, Debbie always had Gatorade and water (for the volunteers)," she said.

Sternhagen, who was a longtime drill sergeant in the Army, loved being in the military and remains active in assisting veterans in the area.

She is proud of what her volunteer force accomplished at the cemetery. "White stones are now white; they were gray and black.

"I'm doing this because it is rewarding for me. These veterans sacrificed so much for us. I don't do it for any kind of praise."

In DeBruin's view, Sternhagen deserves a considerable amount of praise.

"It was an amazing effort," she said. "We are so fortunate that we were selected for this project for veterans at the cemetery. I'm shocked that, within four months, they accomplished this.

"The cemetery grounds are just beautiful, and when you add the service they are providing to veterans, it's really positive and good. (Laurel) is huge into helping anybody.

"She is an amazing person."

DeBruin said families and friends of veterans buried at Riverside will be extremely pleased with the restoration of the granite stones and bronze markers.

"Just think of the years to come, when the families come to the cemetery," she said.

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## How to help

Donations are being sought to defray the costs of cleaning products at Riverside Cemetery. Checks can be sent to: Riverside Cemetery, 714 N. Owaissa St., Appleton, WI 54911.



Volunteer Annaliese Lezotte cleans and repairs veteran's grave markers on Aug. 19, 2020, at Riverside Cemetery in Appleton, Wis. *Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin*

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