

Lebanon's Coleman Memorial Park loses loyal caretaker

After 11 years, Craig Henninger spent his last day at the park tending to the mess left by Hurricane Sandy

By JOHN LATIMER
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Craig Henninger knows something about dealing with storm damage. That's because he has been the superintendent of Coleman Memorial Park for the past 11 years. During that time he has had to clean up after Isabel, Ivan, Irene, Lee and dozens of other unnamed but damaging storms that roared through the 100-acre city-owned park. So it was only fitting that Hurricane Sandy left her calling card this week, Henninger's last as caretaker.



Craig Henninger, left, and Scott Moyer discuss how to clear an oak tree that fell during Hurricane Sandy and blocked the entrance road to Coleman Memorial Park. Tuesday was Henninger's last day as superintendent of the 100-acre city park, a job he held since 2001 that will now be done by Moyer. (LEBANON DAILY NEWS JOHN LATIMER)

Henninger spent Tuesday morning cutting the tree with a chain saw. On Thursday, the 51-year-old will be driving to Orlando, Fla., to fulfill a long-time goal of studying to become a marine engine mechanic at Universal Technical Institute.

Henninger said he got the idea several years ago after returning to visit Orlando, where he lived for several years in 1980s. During the trip, he ran into an old girlfriend who makes her living repairing boat engines. "She kind of planted the seed," he said. "I've been thinking about this since '04. I just finally made the decision.

"I'm just tired," he continued. "I love the park. But I am just tired. It is a lot of work. And I don't want to be 70-year-old looking back thinking I should have done that." Henninger is one of only a handful of loyal caretakers at the park since it was deeded to the city in 1936 by ancestors of the Coleman and Brock families.

The families, whose patriarchs made their living in the iron and steel industries, occupied the land beginning in about 1853 and built five mansions there. All eventually fell into disrepair and were demolished. The families, whose patriarchs made their living in the iron and steel industries, occupied the land beginning in about 1853 and built five mansions there. All eventually fell into disrepair and were demolished.

For many years, two full-time caretakers handled the job. But that changed a few years back for budgetary reasons. For the past two years, Henninger's only help has come from part-timer Bob Conrad and an additional summer part-timer. Of course, in addition to storm cleanup, there was plenty else to keep Henninger busy, including general maintenance on the equipment and park buildings. Henninger was hired by the park's board of trustees, which recently held a surprise going-away dinner for him.

Dave Schnoke, chairman of the park's board, had high praise for Henninger and his contributions. "Craig has treated the place like it was his own backyard," Schnoke said. "He was really fussy about things being done right." Henninger was also a good ambassador to the park, with a friendly smile and a quick hello to its visitors, and he often offered a biscuit to the many dogs walked there, Schnoke added.

Another long-time trustee, Skip Wolfe also lauded Henninger's dedication to the park. "Craig is a go-getter and a worker," he said. "We were afraid he was going to burn out. He would see things that needed to be done and would go right after it."

The trustees feel like they have found someone with the same characteristics in Henninger's replacement, Scott Moyer. He was hired at the beginning of October so Henninger could train him. He previously worked for 21 years for The Hershey Co. as a team leader at Chocolate World.

Like Henninger, Moyer grew up in Lebanon and remembers visiting Coleman Memorial Park as a boy. "From 10 to 14 I was here every summer in the pool swimming," he said. "We always had our family reunions here."

Schnoke said Moyer has strong interpersonal skills, which will help him in the job - especially as the park begins to implement some of the recommendations in a recently completed Master Plan, including construction of a new entrance to begin in November. "I think we hired the right person with Scott," he said. "I think he has good management skills, which are going to be needed with what is happening with the park."

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Lebanon native Scott Moyer, left, watches Craig Henninger, with cigarette in mouth and chain saw in hand, make a cut into an oak tree that was uprooted during Hurricane Sandy and blocked Coleman Memorial Park's entrance road. Tuesday was Henninger's last day as the superintendent at the park, a position he held since 2001. (LEBANON DAILY NEWS JOHN LATIMER)

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Moyer said he did not know much about the park's history but is learning quickly. "I had no idea the history went that far back with the park," he said. "That is really something I am going to have to get used to because you can't just go in here and move something or trim something. Because some of these bushes and plants that are in here have been here 100 years." As a requirement and perk of the job, Moyer will live rent-free in a house near the baseball field that Henninger has occupied for the past decade.

Because the park has become his home, Henninger said, it has made leaving even harder. "Coleman's Park is a lifestyle, not just a job," he said with a laugh. "The park has been a big part of my life. Eleven years out of your work history, that is a long time. It is hard to leave. I've been trying to give my keys to (Scott) for about a week now, and I'm loathe to give them up. Once I do that, the ties are severed."