

Dedication at Douglass



Indianapolis internship program struggles to survive at golf course in low-income neighborhood

You have to experience the heat and humidity of an Indianapolis summer to appreciate it. The air, heavy with water, makes everything move in slow motion.

Douglass GC suffers particularly from the heat. Surrounded by Flanner houses (ranch-style houses built on the city's poor west side after World War II), nothing blocks the sun in the heat of the day. Maintaining the course is, there-

fore, a hot and sweaty business — even at 4:30 a.m. That's when Douglass GC opens its doors to the students who work there.

At 4:45 a.m., student Jarvis Jointer's car pulls up to the wrought-iron gate at the course's entrance of the course. Perhaps Jointer, who entered Purdue University as an engineering student this fall, will have the opportunity to mow fairways on the course's John Deere mower.

Thaddeus Gray, Douglass' head professional, watches from the clubhouse as Jarvis walks toward the maintenance barn.

"You can tell he has the desire to do the best job he can," Gray says. "It's not easy to get up in the morning to do this kind of work."

Gray recruits students from local middle schools, starting in the eighth grade, to work on the course during the summer. It can be a tough sell. The hours are difficult, the work is hard and the pay isn't great. However, Gray feels that it's Douglass' historical role to make a difference, and that's why he works so

Welcome to one of the most historical golf courses in the State of Indiana.
DOUGLASS GOLF COURSE
ESTABLISHED 1926

The mission of the Douglass Golf Course is to be a fun, challenging, and well kept public golf course that provides affordable, time efficient golf as well as making sure every effort is made to take golf to the community.

The following is a list of Golf Professionals & Managers:
1933-1942 Edison Marshall, Golf Professional
1943-1947 Dynamite Taylor, Golf Professional
1947-1950 Alton Smith, Golf Professional
1950-1985 John Green Sr., PGA
1986-1988 Rodney Yowell, Manager
1988-1993 Stephen Bennett, Manager
1993- Thaddeus Gray, PGA



Douglass revels in its historical importance to Indianapolis. Above: Student worker Jamal McCray edges around sprinkler heads.

hard to keep his 2-year old fledgling program alive. With the help of area superintendents and more money from the city, Gray believes his program could take off.

Uphill battle

Douglass GC, named after Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave whose fiery speeches emboldened the abolitionist movement during the Civil War, has always been the center of the community since its founding in 1926. It was the first course in Indianapolis that allowed blacks to play. More than a place for recreation, the black community of Indianapolis has always treated Douglass as a meeting place to discuss important issues of the day, from civil rights to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

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"We've always been part of the community, and we plan to remain that way," Gray says. "That's why we want to help local students and expose them to golf course maintenance."

Gray worked tirelessly to establish contact with the turfgrass program at Purdue University so he could make his program a pipeline to the school. Eighteen months ago, he contacted professor Zac Reicher. Gray says he's hampered by the lack of a full-time superintendent at the course, one who could teach the students about the science and agronomy of caring for the turf. Until that happens, Gray can only offer students the rudiments of turf care and equipment maintenance. Reicher agrees.

"Until they can convince the city to budget for a full-time superintendent, the program is going to struggle," Reicher says. "They have superintendents in the area who help them out as consultants, but that's nothing like a full-time superintendent. No one can expose students to what's available in this industry, and that's unfortunate. Douglass is fighting an uphill battle."

Gray hopes that someday one of the kids who has worked on the course during the summers will pursue a turfgrass degree, come back to Douglass and give the course its first full-time black superintendent.

"That's my dream," Gray says. "It may be a long time coming, but that's what I'd love to see happen."

For now, Roy Bankhead and Fred Spaulding oversee the maintenance of the course. Both are retired Indianapolis parks workers who have no degrees in turf maintenance. They impart what they can to the students.

"I'm proud to do what I can," Bankhead says. "I train them in cutting holes and mowing the course. It would be great if we could turn out someone who wanted to turn it into a career. It would mean a lot to the people in the neighborhood."

Kids exposed to profession

Jointer became interested in golf course maintenance when he played at Douglass on his high-school golf team.

"Mr. Gray searched me out because he knew I loved to play the game," Jointer says. "Then he offered me a job working on the course."

Jointer, clad in a white T-shirt and jeans, edges around the sprinkler heads. He had hoped to mow greens today, but Bankhead decided to do that himself.

"It's pretty physical around here," Jointer says. "But I've learned about a lot of different grass types, and I've learned how to work a lot of the equipment."

Jointer is pursuing an engineering degree at Purdue, but he says he is more interested in golf course maintenance after his

Douglass experience. Though he's not ready to change majors yet, his work-study job at the school is mowing the test plots at the Purdue's turf research center, which he says he enjoys.

"Jarvis would be the perfect recruiting tool for Douglass to get other kids involved," says Don Fassnaught, manager of the research center. "He picks up stuff easily and is capable. He says he enjoyed his work over the summer. I'd like to see him move into our program."

Aaron Townsend, another Douglass program member, says he never realized how hard it is to work on a golf course until he took the summer job at Douglass. The program lacks an overview about what it would be like to care for the whole course,

however, he adds.

"Right now, it's more like just a job than it is a learning experience," Townsend says. "It interested me enough, though, that I'd like to come back next summer. I'd like to learn more about the science and agronomy behind it."

Jamal McCray, a high school sophomore, says his golf coach introduced him to Gray during a team practice at the course. Gray asked McCray if he wanted to join the crew at Douglass, and McCray accepted.

McCray says he hasn't thought about college and certainly hasn't decided on a major. But golf course maintenance is certainly in the running.

"The hours are a little daunting, but I think maintaining a golf course could be fun," McCray says. "We'll just see how it goes."



Student Jarvis Jointer first learned about golf course maintenance at Douglass.

The future

Gray sits on a golf car as the sun rises above the houses around the course. He watches local residents slowly emerge from their houses to gather their newspapers and prepare to meet a new day. He says he's in awe of the place his golf course plays in the community. In addition to providing a place for kids to play, the course maintains a house on the property where kids can come to do homework, get tutoring and learn computer skills.

It's important to him that Douglass remain a symbol of hope for long into the future. Part of his vision includes an expansion of his turfgrass maintenance program for the kids. He thinks it would benefit the students, even if they didn't stay in the turfgrass industry. To that end, he'll be out at the schools again this spring, working to bring more kids to work on the course.

"We haven't gotten as far as we would have liked at this point, but the program's barely 2 years old," Gray says. "Douglass was blessed to be created at all, and if we can help support the kids in our community, maybe it will have a ripple effect and help revitalize the community through its young people." ■