

# Golf Course *of* Reform



Working on the maintenance staff at the Golf Course at Glen Mills helps troubled youths get their lives back on track

BY ANTHONY PIOPPI

**I**t is 5:45 a.m. inside the maintenance facility of the Golf Course at Glen Mills. Workers shuffle across the dusty cement floor, their eyes still heavy with sleep.

Some grab rakes off racks and climb in the back of utility vehicles. Others inspect walking mowers and bunker rakes to make sure gas and oil levels are where they should be before heading out into the new day.

All this occurs under the watchful eye of superintendent John Vogts, who occasionally chats with his assistants to make sure the manpower is dispersed where it should be.

A similar scene is repeated at thousands of golf courses every day. But here at the Golf Course at Glen Mills, it's different. Most members of the golf course maintenance staff are students at Glen Mills School, a private, non-

profit residential facility for about 1,000 troubled young men between the ages of 15 and 19 who hail from 150 jurisdictions in the United States and beyond.

"Troubled" here means convictions for such crimes as auto theft, assault and drug dealing. Most were involved with gangs. The school does not accept young men who have committed more severe crimes or have psychological problems. The various courts give students the opportunities to serve some or all of their time at Glen Mills rather than in juvenile detention facilities.

The full-time golf course staff is also different from any other. Besides being well versed in the ways of the turf, workers are also trained to deal with the students and to enforce the rules set down by the administration. From Vogts on down, each member is taught how to interact with the students — what is

L.C. LAMBRECHT

accepted behavior and what is not. Vogts spent three months living and working in one of Glen Mills' residential facilities to understand how the school operates before taking over the superintendent's position during the course's grow-in.

Strict sets of rules and regulations guide the students in every aspect of their stay at Glen Mills. Although no bars are on any windows or doors at Glen Mills and no staff members carry guns, students are taught the right way to walk, talk and just about every activity in between.

When Vogts summons one of his workers to meet a visitor, the student immediately "squares up" to the newcomer, facing him directly and looking him in the eye, which is required at the school. Through the course of the morning, every introduction of a student produces the same result. Squaring up, walking only on sidewalks and dropping street lingo when talking are all part of what are known as "norms" at Glen Mills.

"It's the expected way of behavior," Vogts said. "Everybody follows it."

To make sure students don't break the rules, staff members or peers monitor them everywhere they go. At the golf course students are watched constantly, even when performing tasks.

By the time an inmate at Glen Mills is done working on the golf course, he will have operated nearly every piece of machinery and performed nearly every task on the high-end daily-fee design that opened to accolades in 2001.

**G**len Mills School's origin dates to 1826. But for most people associated with the facility, history began in 1975 when C.D. "Sam" Ferrainola took over as executive director. The inmate population was less than 50 and dwindling. The buildings were in shambles. The school's credit line had been cancelled, and Glen Mills was on the brink of failure.

Ferrainola, a life-long sociologist, brought a different view of how troubled youths should be dealt with when he arrived from the University of Pittsburgh. His theory is simple — delinquency is a behavioral problem, not a psychological disorder.

"Delinquency is a social fact like poverty," he said. "Each one of our young men has basic good in them, and they have a great ability to learn."

With that thought in mind, one of Ferrainola's first acts was to take the bars off every window at Glen Mills.

"I established a school, not a jail," he said. "I run a school — not an institution and not a prison."

Students are expected to accept two mandates: change their behavior from antisocial to pro-social, and develop life skills that will help sustain that change.

They are constantly mentored during their time at Glen Mills — by staff at first, and later by fellow students who take up the roles of teachers and monitors.

For the first time in their lives, many students get enough to eat. At Glen Mills that means four square meals a day.

Each student is taught at an individual pace in the classroom. If a 16-year-old comes in with second-grade reading skills, then that's where his teaching begins. Ferrainola says students are forced to learn in the outside world at a level they can't handle. As a result they become bored and act out or quit school, which leads them to join gangs and commit crimes.

As testament to the success of the school, 450 students have gone on to college in the last eight years.

The last time an independent organization tracked the school's recidivism rate nearly a decade ago, it was at 38 percent, nearly half the national average. But not good enough for Ferrainola. "We can do better," he says.

Getting on to the golf course crew is not easy. "This is the most wanted job on campus," Vogts says. Students work either the 6 a.m. to 12 p.m. or 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. shift five days a week, earning \$25 a day plus a cut of the tips the pro shop brings in, which usually works out to \$10 per person.

The school offers training in 14 vocations including optometry, barbering, machining and carpentry. There is also a weekly school newspaper.

In order to earn a slot on the golf course crew, a student must become a "bull." To achieve that status, which is determined by the staff and is equivalent to a high-school student

*Continued on page 28*

"Each one of our young men has basic good in them, and they have a great ability to learn."

**C.D. "SAM" FERRAINOLA**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
GLEN MILLS

## Golf Course of Reform



ANTHONY PIOFPI

**Under the guidance of Fred Hayfield (right), Larry Pratt learns to mow a tee. It was Pratt's first day on the job at Glen Mills.**

*Continued from page 27*

council member, students must be a model of good behavior as well as confront negative behavior. About 50 percent of the population are bulls.

Most of Vogts' crew members are at the school for at least four to six months before getting a chance to become part of the crew. That makes for problems. Since the bulls are some of the more responsible of the young men, it means they will be leaving Glen Mills in the near future, which is not good news for Vogts.

"One of a superintendent's worst problems is training help," he says. The average stay for a course worker is eight to 10 months.

On this day, Larry Pratt, 16, is making his debut as a golf course worker. Under the guidance of staff member Fred Hayfield, Pratt is learning to walk-mow tees. Dressed in a Glen Mills gray sweatshirt, matching sweat pants and a white helmet, Pratt tentatively makes his first few passes over the second tee. At times, Hayfield walks along side offering words of advice. As Pratt gains confidence, Hayfield stands off to the side, giving tips as Pratt makes slow, deliberate turns.

"I'm just doing something with my time," Pratt said of his decision to work at the course.

Khalil Madison, 19, hopes the lessons and skills he's learned at Glen Mills will give him a chance to find a good job once he returns home. Riding a bunker rake machine on this day, Madison has operated walk mowers and triplexes.

"One day I can take this out in the world," Madison says.

But it's not just the ability to mow grass that was taught to him on the golf course. "They show you how hard work pays off," he adds.

Madison already has high hopes. Word has filtered back that Philadelphia-area superintendents want to hire workers from Glen Mills.

"This will give me help getting a job on a golf course when I go home," says Philadelphia's Ronald Fenwick, a 17-year-old student.

**S**tudents need to go no further than Llanerch Country Club in the Philadelphia suburb of Havertown to see the rumors are true.

There, superintendent Brendan Byrne hired

*Continued on page 30*

“One of the most gratifying aspects is that some of these kids are able to learn this trade and take it out into the business world and get good-paying jobs.”

### BOBBY WEED

ARCHITECT

GOLF COURSE AT GLEN MILLS

*Continued from page 28*

Ismael Morales in October 2002 at the suggestion of Vogts.

“I had high expectations, and he exceeded them,” Byrne said, “He’s extremely hard-working and respectful.”

Morales, 19, heaps praise on Llanerch.

“I’m loving it,” he said of his job, which involves mowing tees or greens in the morning, then climbing aboard a mower to tackle Llanerch’s rough for the rest of the day.

Morales admits he was nervous when he first took the job at the high-end private club. But according to Byrne, it was obvious from the first few minutes on Llanerch that Morales knew what he was doing. Byrne said he sent an assistant to monitor Morales on his first day at work. The assistant called back a few minutes later saying he could hang around and waste time watching Morales, but it was unnecessary.

“When he got here, I didn’t want to be hawking him,” Byrne says. “We kept a little bit of an eye on him.”

Byrne knew he was getting a convicted felon when he took on Morales, but he was also keenly aware of the work Glen Mills does.

“It’s not about mowing grass. It’s about the lessons they teach them,” Byrne says of the school.

Morales appears to have learned a lot at Glen Mills.

“School teaches you the basics. They can get your mind straight, but it’s up to you to keep it focused,” he said.

Keeping his mind right is no small feat for Morales when he is not at Llanerch. He still lives in the same Philadelphia neighborhood and sees the same people that led him into drug dealing and prison before.

“I hang with them a little bit, but I don’t do the things I did before. I’m not going to go back to jail,” he says in a tone firm and confident enough to make you want to believe him.

**G**len Mills architect Bobby Weed is amazed by what the school has accomplished and how the golf course acts as an integral part to the students’ rehabilitation.

“One of the most difficult situations we’re faced with is finding good help. We’re dealing with some very specialized equipment,” Weed

says of the golf course maintenance business. “One of the most gratifying aspects is that some of these kids are able to learn this trade and take it out into the business world and get good-paying jobs. It’s a win-win situation for everyone involved.”

For some, the good work ethic learned at the school and the course does not necessarily mean a job in the golf business.

Jamie Tarascio, 17, of Enfield, Conn., worked on the golf course for a while, but he moved to the Glen Mills pro shop upon learning he had an allergy to bee stings. He has impressed head pro Bob Pfister with his efficiency and ability to interact with the public.

“If he were to go home and go to a club, he could be an entry-level golf professional,” Pfister says.

Tarascio, though, intends to attend college in Georgia and pursue a degree in video. He says working at a golf course during the summer is a possibility.

While the course is in its third season, Pfister says many of the golfers still don’t know that the young men helping them enjoy their days are convicted felons, a testament to the efficiency and professionalism the school has taught the students.

“If they come and go and don’t know they were delinquents, then we met our pro-social goals,” Pfister says.

The idea of building a golf course in conjunction with the school came from avid golfer Ron Pilot, a retired railroad contractor who sits on the Glen Mills School board of directors and is chairman of the property committee. After the board approved his \$6 million project, Pilot headed up the search committee that chose Weed.

When Weed presented his design, Pilot was ecstatic. “I knew how good we were going to be after we finished,” he says.

Glen Mills charges \$75 during the week, \$95 on weekends and \$50 for seniors. It was named the best public-access golf course in Pennsylvania by *Golf Digest* and one of the top 50 women-friendly golf courses by *Golf For Women* magazine. The course averages about 30,000 rounds a year.

The golf course experience has had mixed results when it comes to getting the students to take up the game.

*Continued on page 32*

## Golf Course of Reform



ANTHONY PIOPPI

Larry Pratt (left) learns the art of bunker raking. "I'm just doing something with my time," he says.

*Continued from page 30*

"I never liked it before, but this absolutely got me interested in golf," says Madison, who wants to start playing.

But Ken Gannon, 16, has no desire to play and prefers to stick with track and cross-country.

"I'm not too interested in a hitting golf ball and chasing it down a big, long, narrow fairway," he says taking time out from raking a bunker.

**A**s the morning moves on, Vogts zips around the golf course checking up on the students. He chats with his staff. With the course soaked from days of heavy rains, Vogts decides to forgo mowing fairways and concentrates the crew on rebuilding washed-out bunkers.

He is informed that a group of students did not show up today because of a disciplinary problem in one of the housing units. A transgression by just one student can lead to problems for many others.

For instance, Vogts said if even the smallest bit of graffiti is found anywhere on the grounds, the entire school comes to a stand-

still until the culprit is discovered. That means every student working on the course is taken from his job and returned to campus. In one instance, Vogts said it took eight hours before the staff discovered who committed the offense.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, students are also rewarded for excelling, whether it is in the classroom or the living quarters. At the course, if his crew has gone through a particularly tough month, Vogts might give members the afternoon off, roll out the grills and cook up hamburgers and hot dogs.

An even better reward is when Vogts grabs the fishing poles out of his office and takes the students to one of the on-course ponds for some angling. Most of the students have never fished, and they revel in their chance to try.

"It's a whole different world up here," Vogts says.

It's a world where growing grass on the golf course is secondary to growing the young men who work there.

"They've all had mulligans," Weed says. "And they're taking advantage of them." ■

---

*Pioppi is a free-lance writer from Middletown, Conn.*