

Vandals once again target Bayside graves

by [Anna Gustafson](#), Editor | Posted: Thursday, July 21, 2011 12:00 pm

When Anthony Pisciotta went to do some cleanup work at Bayside Cemetery in Ozone Park earlier this month, he was prepared to encounter the disarray typically found at one of the city's oldest burial grounds — felled headstones and trash littering the ground.

Instead, Pisciotta said he ran across a sight more disturbing than he had ever encountered at the Jewish graveyard — mausoleums that had been broken into and where human remains could now be seen.

“I’m concerned these people’s bodies are being desecrated,” said Pisciotta, a Bronx man who originally became interested in cleaning up the cemetery when he drove a delivery truck around the historical cemetery 20 years ago. “They’re out there with no dignity. It’s someone’s daughter, someone’s son, someone’s mom or dad, and they’re laying there like a dead animal on the side of the road.”

Pisciotta said he and his son found “probably four or five mausoleums that you could clearly see into.”

The final resting place for 35,000 Jews, including some Civil War soldiers and a Titanic survivor, the cemetery long ago fell into disrepair and has repeatedly been targeted by vandals.

This has spurred both a cleanup initiative by the synagogue that has owned the site since the 1840s and the Community Association for Jewish At-Risk Cemeteries, as well as lawsuits alleging the synagogue has not sufficiently protected the graves of people who had paid for perpetual care of their final resting places. Perpetual care means those buried there will have given a certain amount of money, often anywhere between \$200 and \$4,000, that is placed in a trust and from which interest is supposed to be generated to take care of the grave.

Russell Steinthal, a member of the cemetery committee for Congregation Shaare Zedek, the Upper West Side synagogue that owns Bayside Cemetery, said they plan to secure the entrances to the mausoleums.

Andrew Schultz, director of CAJAC, also said the religious institution is expected to soon repair the open mausoleums.

“No one wants to see human bones exposed,” Schultz said. “That’s reprehensible. I’m confident the congregation will repair this.”

Schultz said the mausoleums have often been targeted by vandals because “there’s an assumption there are things of value inside.”

For the past couple of years, CAJAC and synagogue officials, as well as area civic leaders and legislators, have worked to clean up the cemetery, including trash and the vegetation that Schultz said had essentially overrun the area.

While Schultz said he was upset to hear about the destroyed mausoleums, he did note that it is important that residents are aware of the conditions at the cemetery and hopes additional volunteers work on clean-up efforts there.

“The more progress the cleanup makes, the more the cemetery appears operative, the less attractive is its for vandals,” he said.

Councilman Eric Ulrich (R-Ozone Park), who has also spearheaded efforts to ameliorate the situation at Bayside, just gave a \$10,000 grant to CAJAC, which Schultz said the group plans to use to “fortify the peripheral fence and initiate other security there.”

Pisciotta said he hopes the repairs come quickly to honor the memory of those buried there.

The Bronx man said he called 311 to report the exposed human remains, but officials told him there was nothing they could do because the property is not owned by the city.

“If I had garbage on my property, they’d give me a ticket but you can have human remains exposed with flies around them and that’s perfectly fine?” Pisciotta asked.

City officials did not return requests for comment.