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Earth Day Celebration



Photo by Tony Barsamian

St. Michael's Cemetery celebrated Earth Day with a Tree Planting Ceremony honoring boxing legend Emile Griffith on Saturday, April 20. This was St. Michael's Cemetery's first annual Earth Day event and the community gathered to commemorate Earth Day in a unique and meaningful way. Emile Griffith was the Welterweight Champion of the World at age 23. A large turnout came to experience the beauty of the cemetery and to appreciate a true boxing champion. *See page 5.*

St. Michael's Cemetery Celebrates Earth Day & Honors Emile Griffith

St. Michael's Cemetery celebrated its first Annual Earth Day event on Saturday, April 20, as the community gathered to commemorate Earth Day in a unique and meaningful way. The event, which included a Tree Planting Ceremony in honor of boxing legend Emile Griffith, a six-time boxing champion and Ring Magazine's Fighter of the Year in 1963 and 1964, attracted visitors that were interested in both experiencing the beauty of the cemetery and to appreciate a true boxing champion.

The highlight of the day was a tribute to the late Emile Griffith and the importance of Earth

Day, by the Rev. Kate Flexer from St. Michael's Church in New York City. She started by informing the crowd that Earth Day was established in the U.S. in 1970. Over 20 million people had joined demonstrations for clean air and water and for better care of our planet. It was the impetus for national legislation such as the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts.

She went on to honor Emile Griffith by stating that Griffith's career as a professional boxer began in 1958. In less than three years, at the age of 23, he became the Welterweight Cham-

pion of the World. In all, he won six boxing championships – as a welterweight, junior middleweight, and middleweight. Griffith was best known for a match with Benny Paret. Paret had taunted him with an anti-gay slur before the bout. Griffith won the bout by a knockout, but unfortunately, Paret died shortly thereafter. From that moment on, Griffith fought differently, terrified of killing someone else in the ring.

Emile Griffith's life story is complex and has inspired various productions, including a 2005 documentary, *The Ring of Fire*, and two different plays premiering in 2016 and 2018. Most recently, *The Metropolitan Opera* unveiled its production of *Champion* in 2023, bringing his complex life to a wider audience.

Emile Griffith's life was marked by both personal triumphs and challenges. His story resonates with audiences across different mediums and continues to inspire people around the world. He died at the age of 75 on July 23, 2013 and was laid to rest at St. Michael's Cemetery, in East Elmhurst.

In honor of Griffith's Caribbean heritage, St. Michael's also took collections in excess of \$1,000 for the New York Haiti Project, a charity of the New York Episcopal Diocese that funds a school in the rural town of Martel, Haiti.

In addition to the solemn Tree Planting Cer-

Attendees submitting donations for the New York Haiti Project.

Eastern Redbud Tree in full bloom.

The Rev. Kate Flexer and Ed Post Esposti who came out to the cemetery to honor the memory of his friend and peer, Emile Griffith.

The Guided Walking Tour.

Dennis Werner explaining the correct method for a successful tree planting.

emony, the event offered a detailed guided walking tour highlighting the cemetery's diverse array of flowering and ornamental trees. Led by St. Michael's Cemetery General Manager Dennis Werner, participants asked questions about the various ornamental trees during the tour that included the Snow Fountains Weeping Cherry, planted in honor of Emile Griffith, and an Eastern Red Bud tree that was in perfect bloom on that day. It also included three beautiful crabapple trees that were also in full bloom, three other varieties of cherry trees, a Japanese Lilac tree and several other trees that bring beauty to the cemetery each spring.

As the tree tour was winding down, attendees were treated to the soulful melodies of live music from Joel Mofenson and Harry Fraser and a BBQ prepared by the staff of St. Michael's Cemetery. Families and friends gathered around and enjoyed the music, food and the beautiful weather together, as the crowd talked about how much they were appreciating this wonderful event.

Reflecting on the day's events, the organizers, Katie LaBella and Rita Gambino expressed gratitude for the overwhelming support from the community.

"Today was about more than just planting trees or enjoying a BBQ," Katie LaBella remarked. "It was a celebration of our connection to the earth and to each other. Emile Griffith's legacy reminds us that we all have the power to make a positive impact on the world around us."

Rita Gambino took notice of how much the families that attended enjoyed the event. "St. Michael's continues to hold family friendly events to gather in celebration of those we love and have lost and it was especially poignant to celebrate Earth Day on such a magnificent day."

As the event came to a close, some of the attendees lingered on the gorgeous day, a testament to the success of an Earth Day celebration filled with reverence, joy, and a shared commitment to environmental stewardship. With the promise of newly planted trees taking root and flourishing, the day's event will hopefully continue to inspire future generations to nurture and protect our planet for years to come.



Photos by Tony Barsamian

