Trip to France inspires group to install labyrinth at hospital

Trinity’s Healing Garden gets addition
BY LORI HALL - THIS WEEK NEWSPAPER

Many think of labyrinths just as mazes with many twists, turns and dead ends, meant to challenge and trick the mind. However, the idea of using labyrinths as meditation devices is thousands of years old.

From being paved in the floors of medieval churches in Europe to being scratched in stone inside caves, labyrinths have been found in Peru, Arizona, Iceland, Crete, Egypt, India, Sweden, England and France. Some date back as long as 5,000 years ago, according to Martha Erickson, a Lakeville resident and a member of Trinity Hospital’s Circle of Friends.

The group Circle of Friends was instrumental in installing the Sanford Memorial Healing Garden at Trinity Hospital in Farmington two years ago. It is an area for patients, family members and the public to retreat to, clear their minds and enjoy the plants and flowers.

This year, Circle of Friends is adding a walking labyrinth to the Healing Garden, which is located between the hospital and the care center. The labyrinth will be modeled after the one at Chartres Cathedral in France, which four area women visited in May.

Built in 1220, Chartres Cathedral’s famous labyrinth is embedded in the church floor. The labyrinth’s pattern is a symbol that churches used in the Middle Ages to represent the journeys of life, said Erickson.

During the time of plague and wars, pilgrims could not travel to Jerusalem. So, the pope designated certain cathedrals in Europe to serve as a pilgrimage destination. According to Erickson, many of these churches had labyrinths and the centers of the labyrinths were known as ‘Jerusalem’.

Forgotten for many years, labyrinths are starting to find their way back into popularity. The labyrinth in Chartres actually went unused and closed to the public until just a few years ago when Canon Laura Artress from Grace Cathedral Church in San Francisco worked to bring people into the church and walk the labyrinth’s path.

In May, the church opened its labyrinth for the first time for a month, hosting about 80 people each week. Four members from Circle of Friends were among the first group of people to walk the Chartres labyrinth again. Erickson, Leslie Pettis, Jenell Gagne and Lynn Nordline spent one week attending seminars, concerts, and walking the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral.

Walking labyrinths have no dead ends. A path leads the walker slowly to the center and then back out again. The walk is supposed to give the body something to do in order to clear the mind.

The philosophy behind the labyrinth is that a transformation occurs during the trip. The entrance is described as a cleansing or a release, the center is a time for pause, reflection or prayer, and the exit is being led back out into the world with focus.

“It’s a lot like life,” said Pettis. “You just take it one step at a time. There is one way in, one way out. You can’t get lost.”
Often affiliated with churches, labyrinths are really non-denominational. Pettis said Buddhists, Muslims and atheists visited Chartres Cathedral, and all were interested in labyrinths.

"Those who walk the labyrinth say it focuses the mind, slows the breathing and can induce a peaceful state of help one confront their problems," said Erickson.

Labyrinths are now being used in churches, prisons, parks, schools, treatment centers, hospitals and retreat centers, according to Erickson. They have even been found helpful in dealing with children with attention deficit disorder, she added.

Though they vary in size and length, most labyrinths are about 1/3 mile long and are about 50 feet in diameter. The paths are flat on the ground, designed with stones, pavement or cut into grass. The walk can take about 40 minutes, but people may walk faster or slower and pause or stop in different places. Some places even encourage the labyrinth be danced, said Pettis.

She described her experience at the Chartres labyrinth like being in a different world. During the trip, Pettis walked the labyrinth four times, each during a different time of day, and each with a distinct setting. Once she walked it at night while it was lit with candles and live music played in the background.

As part of the occasion, PBS sent crews to Chartres to film the groups walking the labyrinth. Erickson was among those interviewed on camera and several women from Circle of Friends were filmed walking the labyrinth.

Though Circle of Friends had been throwing around the idea of installing a labyrinth at Trinity Hospital for more than a year, the trip to France cemented the notion.

Using donations, the labyrinth at Sanford Memorial Healing Garden will be a replica of the one at Chartres. It will be 50 feet in diameter. The pattern will be made of brick and the center will be acid-etched cement. The paths where people walk will be grass.

To accommodate wheelchairs, Circle of Friends is also having a canvas labyrinth made, which can be used indoors and is portable. Having just recently ordered the canvas labyrinth, the group does not expect to receive it until September.

Circle of Friends hopes to have the center poured, sand laid and grass seed planted in time for the Trinity Hospital fourth annual benefit Garden Tour, July 17 and 18.

The outdoor labyrinth should be completed by mid-September and will open to the public. The labyrinth at Trinity is proposed to be open 24 hours a day and lit at night for anyone to use it.

Since many find an introduction helpful when first walking a labyrinth, Circle of Friends plans to offer retreats and guided instructions regularly. Erickson has been trained as a labyrinth facilitator and will be available for programs outside of the hospital. Several groups have already booked classes.

"It couldn't be much more timely in the millennium," said Pettis. "It's spiritual, meditative, calming, nurturing, getting back to the basics. It's powerful and it needs to be shared."