

Oak Creek Labyrinth Walk & Barbeque



On Saturday, August 13th, three volunteers went to Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility in Albany for a Labyrinth Day Barbeque. There are currently 52 residents at Oak Creek, an Oregon Youth Authority Facility. These girls and young women are between the ages of 12 and 23; they are incarcerated for many different reasons.

This was the fifth monthly labyrinth walk at the facility. After an initial all day labyrinth workshop in March, we have facilitated two-hour labyrinth walks in May, June, and July. The administration at Oak Creek worked with us to develop a program that resulted in a very peaceful time in a place where peace is sometimes hard to find. These young women come from environments that are not always safe. They have good reasons for being skeptical of trusting new people and new experiences. Some have scars on their arms from cutting themselves because the physical pain is easier to handle than the psychological pain they experience. Sometimes the idea of being alone with their thoughts is overwhelming.

We arrived about 9:30 in the morning and four of the young women were assigned to assist us with building labyrinths in the courtyard. We built a 50-foot diameter Chartres labyrinth in the grassy area using the kind of powdered chalk typically used for lines on sports fields. One young woman named *Mary volunteered to help with the 50-foot labyrinth while the other three went to draw labyrinths on the basketball court with sidewalk chalk.



Mary had never seen a labyrinth before, but she quickly caught on. When we made a couple of mistakes in the placing of the turns, she was the first to spot them. After a little practice with the chalk applicator, she finished the last couple of circles by herself.

Meanwhile, some of the very artistic and talented young women had drawn several very beautiful sidewalk chalk classical labyrinths with the help of a volunteer. The arts and crafts table was set up with lots of flower and butterfly cutouts, and the “glitter glue” that they seem to love so much.

After labyrinth building was complete, the rest of the young women were allowed out into the courtyard and it was time for the barbeque. Several of them have participated in the labyrinth program since the beginning, while some were new. Over time, there has been a change in their behavior when they come in for the program. They know we will be there, they know it is safe and, though each one is at a different place in her treatment, the group is more cohesive and more trusting of the process each time we come. It seems that as they progress in their treatment and have experienced a walk, being alone with their thoughts is not so scary.

After lunch we encouraged them to consider experiencing the labyrinths in different ways. In the past few months, labyrinths had been brought in to Oak Creek several times, but they were smaller, fewer, and the time had been more limited, so those opportunities were mainly for large group labyrinth walks. We explained how labyrinth experiences could be different depending on whether we were walking in a group or alone, whether we were walking fast, slow, or dancing.

One young woman, *Holly, expressed concern about not being able to “get in the zone.” We reassured her that this was a typical part of the labyrinth experience, even among experienced labyrinth walkers. Sometimes the experience is profound, and sometimes it is just a good walk.

Another one of the young women asked if she could go straight to the art table and get started on a project. We asked that they all please walk at least one labyrinth first, and then we turned them loose. Many of them ran to one of the smaller chalk labyrinths, speed walked it, and then settled in at the art table for their “glitter glue” fix.



About a dozen of them started walking the large grass labyrinth in what seemed a very reverential way. When they reached the center, they either sat in silence or talked softly with friends. This was a pattern we would see repeated throughout the afternoon as individuals or small groups would go back to one of the labyrinths, walk it slowly, then spend much time in the center talking quietly. These young women have often found the world to be very frightening. They seemed to have instinctually found the center of the labyrinth to be a safe place.

Holly had waited until the activity had subsided on the sidewalk chalk labyrinths and then tried walking one by herself. Afterward she came up to one of the volunteers and said, “I’m sorry, I just can’t do the labyrinth.” She was assured that this was okay and she joined the other young women working on art projects.

Later in the afternoon as the activity on the big labyrinth subsided, we noticed that Holly had walked in to the center, and then start back out walking *backwards*! Though she stepped off the path a few times because it was difficult to see where she was going, she got right back on and continued walking. Later she remarked that she found when she got off the path she was able to get back on, and not for her parents sake or anyone else, but for herself.

Holly also mentioned that it was good for her to look back and see where she had been. She found a metaphor for her life and made the discovery that she could change the path she had been walking. She reported feeling as though she was filled with water after having been very dry. She asked for a finger labyrinth to use before she went to sleep.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Mary handed a note to one of the volunteers on behalf of all the young women in her dorm expressing their appreciation for what we had done that day and asking us to please come back again. Another young woman presented us with an art project she had completed with a big “Thanks” written across it.

One of the staff members asked Mary if she had walked the labyrinth she had helped to build. She indicated no. He encouraged her saying, “You should walk what you built.” She agreed and did go walk the big labyrinth. She seemed to enjoy it, despite her initial reluctance.

One of the most amazing things that afternoon was the reaction of the staff. They were not use to seeing the young women so calm. They definitely want to see us continue to bring the labyrinth to the facility. They were already talking about the possibility of a permanent labyrinth in the grass where we had made the chalk labyrinth. Moreover, they are very interested in having someone paint finger labyrinths on the walls of the safe rooms. These rooms are used to give the young women a “time out” when they are acting out and could be a danger to themselves or others. The young women can be quite upset when put into these rooms. It is hoped that having a finger labyrinth to trace might help them to calm down and rejoin the group more quickly.



As three o’clock approached, we started to clean up. Most of them had already gone back into the dorm. About a half dozen stayed behind to ask if they could help. They worked with the staff to count the colored pencils and glitter glue bottles, and picked up the pieces of

paper and other supplies. They thanked us very much and expressed their hope that we would please come back again. As the last of the young women left to go back to the dorm, one of the staff members commented that these were not the ones you would normally expect to see being so helpful. He called them the “frequent flyers” for getting into trouble. Apparently, we struck a nerve.

This facility uses the Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) model for treatment which emphasizes intentionality and teaches meditation and relaxation, while focusing on calming emotions by calming thoughts. Walking the labyrinth is a practice that very much compliments this treatment model.

If you would like to help with this program by facilitating a walk, helping to create labyrinths on the safe room walls, have ideas for other labyrinth experiences, or just have some glitter glue that needs a home, contact Richard or Elaine.

**The names have been changed to protect anonymity*



“Glitter Glue” art project