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Photos by JAYME FRASER/THE OREGONIAN

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Volunteer Mary Andonian (left) leads Nakeea Wood, Michelle Therrell and other inmates along the canvas labyrinth at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville. Participants in the labyrinth sessions discuss spirituality and practice walking meditation.

AMAZING JOURNEYS

Labyrinth Network Northwest helps Coffee Creek inmates walk a path of peace

By CORNELIA SEIGNEUR
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

When Michelle Therrell reflects on the labyrinth walks offered at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility every other Monday, she gets teary-eyed.

"A lot of people say when you come to prison you find God," said Therrell, 34, who was convicted of first-degree manslaughter in 2000 for stabbing a friend who later died. "But when I came here, I found myself, and the labyrinth was a part of that. I want to think about giving back when I get out." She is scheduled to be released in 3½ years.

Since January, members of the Labyrinth Network Northwest have volunteered twice a month to lead labyrinth

walks at Coffee Creek; starting next month, they will come weekly. The hourlong sessions affect participants and volunteers in different ways.

Emily Brault, chaplain at the prison since 2004, began the labyrinth program in 2005. "I had participated in labyrinths in my youth group in church in Minnesota," she said.

Volunteer Anita Trudeau led the walks from the start before succumbing to cancer in 2010. After she died, Brault asked Labyrinth Network Northwest to lead the sessions. Initially, about three inmates attended the walks; now 10 to 15 regulars come, out of the prison population of 1,095. The inmates first gather in a circle

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Labyrinth Network Northwest

What: An organization that supports labyrinth activities and practices.

Why: Devotees believe the practice of walking a labyrinth clears the mind for prayer, meditation and spiritual reflection. The labyrinth, with its single circular path, is said to represent a journey to a person's center and back out into the world.

Information: labyrinthnetworknorthwest.org



Nakeea Wood prays before ringing the bell and exiting the labyrinth at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville.

Labyrinth

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to focus, and afterward they reflect.

The July meeting theme was flowers. Kay Kinneavy, founder of the labyrinth network, and Paula Starr, a founding board member, led the session, asking participants, "What do flowers tell us about God?"

In May, their focus was Mother's Day.

"I come to find that some of these women had two, three, even four

kids," Starr said. "The labyrinth offers an opportunity to help them deal with that ... to think on personal issues, and to perhaps work them out in their minds."

Out of more than 30 outreach programs Brault oversees as chaplain, the labyrinth program stands out as a rare multifaith effort. "It builds bridges," Brault said.

Nakeea Wood, 33, who has been convicted of first-degree robbery, identity theft and possession of methamphetamine, was invited by Therrell to attend and "got hooked."

"At the center of the labyrinth you let go of everything and it changes

you," Wood said. "There's a woman in here that I wouldn't talk to out there, but in here it's different. Now we acknowledge each other" outside the labyrinth sessions.

Volunteer Mary Andonian, author of "Bitsy's Labyrinth," a novel about a 13-year-old's experience with God and a labyrinth, said the power of a labyrinth is that "it forces you to slow down, to pray."

She told inmates during the reflection time, "I thought I had problems, then I came here and see you're all so joyful. Thank you."



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