

Walking in new directions



JERSEY ROBERTS

A new labyrinth built by inmates at the Hampshire Jail and House of Correction in Northampton has given them a place for reflection.

Jail's labyrinth project offers inmates 'tool of transformation'

NORTHAMPTON

OUT. A concept often dreamed of when one is serving time. Getting out. Back to family, back to traffic, back to work — in some cases, back to the life that landed one here in the first place. The pitfalls of parole.



Bob Flaherty

A group of men from the Life Skills program at the Hampshire Jail and House of Correction decided that getting "in" might be more important in the long run than getting out. Inside, that is, deep inside — a private search

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JERSEY ROBERTS

Don Wright, an inmate at the Hampshire Jail and House of Correction, unveils a hawk (also shown at left) he carved from wood at the entrance to the labyrinth in the jail's recreation area.



Labyrinth leads inmates in fresh directions

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of the soul brought on by the simple act of walking, around and around.

And around and around.

A labyrinth was dedicated at the jail last week, an 80-by-80-foot fingerprint-like pathway of embedded stones and gravel. It went in on prison grounds at the far end of the exercise yard. It was built by 20 inmates — or clients, the term Sheriff Robert Garvey prefers. The ground was broken last spring.

It was the inmates who lobbied for the labyrinth, in fact, badgered Garvey into letting them try it, and then toiled all summer and into the fall until a circular path was carved and stones laid into it.

"This was shovels, picks and manual labor," Garvey said at its dedication last week. "So manual that I stayed as far away as I could."

Place for souls

But photos taken as work progressed show a tiny gray-haired woman of 77 leaning into a shovel, too, as muscular men around her swing heavy tools. She is Sister Lorry Villemaire, SSJ, of Holyoke's Mont Marie convent, a strong believer in the power of labyrinths and the lead facilitator of a course on labyrinths taught at the jail.

"Well, I didn't do as much work as a number of the pictures show," said Villemaire. "If I didn't have a bad back I would have done a lot more."

Villemaire has walked the world's oldest labyrinth, the one at Chartres Cathedral in France, built in the year 1201, and was part of a group of women who got the one built at Mont Marie, which now has solar-powered footlights to aid those walking at night.

"In the Middle Ages, thousands made pilgrimages to the Holy Land, but the Crusades made it too dangerous," said Villemaire. "People built labyrinths to get in touch with their souls, to look into themselves."

"You're looking for balance and relaxation," she said about a labyrinth experience. "Many who walk it are hoping to find a new direction."

The dedication Thursday took place in the same activity room where it all began, in the classroom. Villemaire hauls around a portable labyrinth that allows her to set up in schools, hospitals, nursing homes and jails, spreading it out on the floor for participants to walk, while having them focus on relaxation.



Don Wright, at podium, speaks beside fellow inmates who helped build the labyrinth at Hampshire Jail and House of Correction during a dedication ceremony Thursday.

"That's surprising," Villemaire said. "They entered into it right away. After the first few times they asked to build one outside, and began to talk about it. They said, 'We can't wait a whole week for the next class — we need to have our own.' They kept asking for it, asking for it, so we said, 'Why not?'"

The sheriff gave in, a slew of grant proposals were written and an anonymous donor kicked in for supplies.

But all great ideas can stall in infancy. Enter Don Wright, 32, a native of the South End of Boston who is in the last two years of an eight-year sentence. Wright took to the concept of the labyrinth from the moment Villemaire presented it. He explains its power:

"I look at my feet, and look at where they're going. ... There's this calming effect, caused by paying attention to one particular thing. The mind begins to focus on just walking ... and that continues, as you go around, as you go around."

Wright, said Villemaire, was a presence in the classroom from day one.

"At the second or third one, he said, 'I'd like to say something to the guys. The thing of it is, if you let everything go, something comes of it.' After he gave that talk to the class, it became very much a part of him," said Villemaire. "He was their foreman, the one who made sure they got out there every day."

"The only reason they followed me is I'm the oldest one," said Wright. "It became a more spiritual thing for all of us. You had guys laying stones on their hands and knees. If that don't make you spiritual, I don't know what does."

"It was doing things I'd never done before," said fellow inmate Scott Henley, 29, of Holyoke. "I like hands-on, hard work, but this is hard work. Out there in

afterwards. 'I write a little music so I'm good with words,' he said. 'I can't wait to get back to my music, but I'm on temporary standby as you can see.'"

Rivera's been in and out of jail since he was a teenager. The thing with labyrinths, though, is that building one can be just as life-changing as walking the finished product. His moment of clarity, he said, came over him when he focused on his 13-year-old daughter.

"I can't do this to her," he said. "She doesn't deserve this. It was done to me by my father, but I made a promise that I wouldn't be like my father. He never went to jail or anything, but he took off. By being in and out of jail, I'm doing to her the same thing he did to me. I want to be there for her. I want to be there for her Sweet Sixteen, to see her get a license, to buy her her first car, to see her graduation. Those are the things a father should do."

The ground in the exercise yard is shoe-sucking muddy right now, so the laying of the cornerstone is on hold.

"Bless this tool of transformation," Villemaire said as she dedicated the soon-to-be-installed stone. "We have hopes and dreams of those who walk this path, those who seek enlightenment and courage. May those with guilt be set free from their burden ... and find answers to questions."

Outside, chrysanthemums can be seen at each curve of the labyrinth, and a wooden sculpture of a red-tailed hawk sits atop a pole at its uppermost arc. It was carved by Wright, a stalwart of wood shop who also presented Garvey with a carved replica of the labyrinth. Beyond the hawk's regally posed wing, one can see an intoxicating grove of pine trees towering in the distance, a view marred only by the high fences and rolls of barbed wire between.

labyrinths can lead to long-term health benefits, lower blood pressure, better sleep, less pain.

In a project pamphlet, Villemaire has collected comments from inmates from Hampshire and elsewhere who have walked her labyrinth:

"The labyrinth project has given me the opportunity to have a single piece of the day to myself."

"Even though I share this time with others, the time is pleasant and peaceful."

"This experience allows you to search ... to try some multiple positives, ideas and answers."

"There's no house of correction that I've been to — and I've been to a lot of them — that has programs like this," Wright said. "Something's working. I hope and pray that this is my last time in this system. I've learned that it isn't the world, it's my thinking. It's my thinking that's got to change. Because of the programs here I've identified those character flaws."

Bob Flaherty, the morning host at WHMP-AM in Northampton, writes a weekly column for the Gazette.

self-esteem, forgiveness and inner peace.

"It provides free space where there are no walls or rules," said Villemaire. "The atmosphere allows the mind to clear and the body to relax. Walkers have an opportunity to listen to what is going on within them. Placing one foot in front of the other is a physical activity where the body tells us things the mind cannot."

'Calming effect'

The participants at the Hampshire Jail and House of Correction, she said, did not roll their eyes in weary skepticism.

the pouring rain. But to actually stand there and see it from afar — whoa."

"To be honest with you, I used it as a weight-loss tactic," said the mountainous Moises Rivera, 33, of Holyoke, who gets out in 18 months and lost 11 pounds during the project. "I'm 6 feet 2 inches and a healthy 383 pounds."

"A project started is a project finished," he said during a speech to the crowd of 100 who turned out for the event.

Moment of clarity

Public speaking's not too hard, Rivera said with a shrug

"Every time we were out there, the red-tailed hawks circled," Wright said. "It became our symbol — every time we were out there by those tall trees, the hawks were with us. One day, a cup of water was out there on the ground. A hawk came down and hit it and flew off. It's a spiritual bird, a hawk. Out there in those trees you had a feeling that something great was happening — and something great did happen."

Studies undertaken, including one done at Harvard University Medical School, suggest that the walking meditation provided by

reality and that part of No Child Left Behind is just not working.

Massachusetts is asking the federal government to back the state's own five-tiered educational accountability system. Under that system, the state can move to intervene in schools and districts that are deemed underperforming or worse, chronically underperforming, based on results of the standardized Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, exams in English and math.

The state also plans to set six-year targets for every school in Massachusetts that seek to c