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'Circles in the Sand' inspires crowds on the southern Oregon coast

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Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

Denny Dyke never intended to draw a crowd. When he first started drawing sand labyrinths on the beaches of the southern Oregon coast, the designs were personal, for his own meditation. But now, seven years later, his drawings have transformed into a popular public art project, drawing hundreds of people for each event, anchored on the beaches of Bandon.

Dyke, who lives in nearby Coquille and also works as a religious practitioner, calls the project "Circles in the Sand," and alongside a team of two dozen volunteers, or "groomers," he makes some 60 labyrinths of varying sizes and designs each year. His 2018 season is about to come to a close, but the artist shows no signs of slowing down.

"Everybody always asks do I have a plan," Dyke said, his piercing blue eyes shining beneath a pale pink ballcap. "I say no."



Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

Dyke started making labyrinths in the sand back in 2011, but it wasn't until 2015 that he started drawing them full time, supported in his efforts by an enthusiastic fan base and a pair of local sponsors. He advertises the events [on his website](#) and on posters placed in the windows of local businesses. Over the last four years, he's built a loyal local following buoyed by tourists who travel to this stretch of the Oregon coast just to walk one of his creations.

Last Tuesday morning, a large crowd gathered at the Face Rock Viewpoint in Bandon, where a veil of mist hung over the ocean as the tide receded. Dyke arrived early with James Ferreira, a lead groomer he calls his "wingman" and with whom he makes each design on the fly.

It always starts out with a blank canvas of beach, both men said, which varies based on the tide, the weather and the constantly shifting sands. The two of them spontaneously make central design elements, which the other groomers fill in with metal rakes and simple pointed sticks.

"It's like an empty dance floor, and you don't know what they're going to do or what's going to happen," said James' wife, Jacque, who's also a volunteer groomer.

Within two hours the drawing was finished. The massive labyrinth – one of Dyke's biggest – contained a walking path roughly one mile long, which wandered through spirals and sweeping curves that ran alongside towering Face Rock itself, the ocean tumbling just beyond.



Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

Dyke is quick to note that his creations, which he calls “dreamfields,” are not technically labyrinths, since they have separate entrances and exits – a necessary design element when hundreds of people walk through at a time. But many in the labyrinth community have praised his work, embracing it as a modern take on an ancient tradition that stretches back thousands of years, when the designs were first incorporated into floors of cathedrals and civic buildings, reflecting the complexities of life, philosophy and faith.

As we talked Tuesday, Dyke was approached by Jean Houston, an Ashland-based author and lecturer who is widely credited for popularizing labyrinths in North America. The two spoke briefly and hugged, leaving Dyke in awe.

“She’s the starter of the starter,” he said. “To be loved like that, wow ... it just keeps getting better.”

Standing at the edge of one of his labyrinths, what’s immediately clear is the profound impact they have on the people who walk them. As walkers reached the end of the most recent creation, several raised their arms in triumph, and dozens swarmed Dyke to offer thanks, get a hug and take a picture with him.

Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

James and Jacque Ferreira, who moved to nearby Langlois from Sacramento, stood to the side with other groomers, fielding questions about the process and marveling at the impact Dyke's labyrinths continue to have on the general public.

"Denny is just one of those people who makes people feel good," James said. "It's something that's obviously temporary, but it gives this personal experience to so many people."

That temporary element of the labyrinths is by design. They're always made in the hard, wet sand of low tide, and within hours the surf naturally comes back in, washing away the beautiful works of art. In that way they're a statement on the temporary and ever-shifting nature of life, where moments of joy can be fleeting, always leaving us in need of fresh experiences.

That's a message Dyke has tried to carry over from his personal meditations to the community experiences he curates on the coast. He encourages people to take their worries into his dreamfields, leaving them in the center of a spiral, and exiting the labyrinth with a smile.

"The ocean will take it and deal with it," he said.

Circles in the Sand will hold three more public draws this summer, on Aug. 26, 27 and 28, which will be open for walking from 8 to 10 a.m. at Face Rock Viewpoint in Bandon. Find more information at sandypathbandon.com.

--Jamie Hale | jhale@oregonian.com | [@HaleJamesB](https://twitter.com/HaleJamesB)

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