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By Auditi Guha
aguha@s-t.com

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UMass Dartmouth labyrinth project halfway to fundraising goal

A committee at UMass Dartmouth has been working for more than a year to raise money to create a labyrinth that would allow students, staff and visitors to pause, walk and take a breath. It has raised half of the \$50,000 needed.

DARTMOUTH — There is more to life than work and stress, and there's no better way to demonstrate that than with a labyrinth.

A committee at UMass Dartmouth has been working for more than a year to raise money to create a labyrinth that would allow students, staff and visitors to pause, walk and take a breath. It has raised half of the \$50,000 needed.

"It will serve as a place to relax, pray or meditate, will beautify the compound and could become a real focal point," said Frank Lucca, Catholic Campus Ministry deacon and head of the Center for Religious and Spiritual Life, which is leading the project.

Originally conceived in 2005 by retired Sr. Madeleine Tacy, Lucca said he was happy to take up the project that has brought together several interested groups.

"The Labyrinth project I think is a labor of love that speaks to the spiritual nature of who we are as a university," said Shelley Metivier Scott, associate dean of students, who is on the committee.

Unlike a maze, a labyrinth has one path that spirals in and out without dead ends, said Crystal Lynn Lubinsky from the Religious Studies Program, who is also on the committee.

"Labyrinths belong to many different faiths for spiritual contemplation, as a physical enhancement to prayer, like using a rosary in a way, or as a centering technique," she said. "The twisting yet unbroken path symbolizes a journey to the center and then back out again to a larger reality. Although some see it as more all-encompassing, representing the journey through life from birth (start) to spiritual awakening (center), and finally to death (finish or exit)."

"It almost symbolizes a path towards enlightenment," said committee member Wendi Chaka, director of the Center for Access & Success, who thinks a labyrinth would be a nice addition because school can be stressful.

There are examples abound in history and literature from labyrinths being protective and decorative symbols in the Roman Empire to the labyrinth at Knossos in which the Minotaur was imprisoned in Greek mythology.

While it is not a part of his personal or theological tradition, the Rev. Neil Damgaard said a labyrinth would be a welcome "unifying feature" applicable to many faiths and visually appealing.

"It is a symbol that there is more to this life than just what we see," said the Rev. Damgaard, the Protestant chaplain at UMass Dartmouth.

It can help slow down fast-paced lives and bring about "mindful awareness," Metivier Scott said.

The committee is considering the famous 13th century labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral, France, as a prototype. An online fundraiser is selling bricks that can be personalized for \$100 to be later used to build walls and benches near the labyrinth.

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This is a prototype the labyrinth committee at UMass Dartmouth is considering for the design. Contributed photo.