

## A Place For Peace in The Swirling Storm

*Labyrinth is Montauk women's gift to community*

By Joanne Pilgrim | July 9, 2015 - 1:39pm

As all of the pre-summer frenzy was under way here this spring, slowly taking shape — stone by stone, row by concentric row — on a field of grass overlooking Fort Pond Bay in Montauk was a labyrinth, an ancient shape for a walking practice of contemplation and meditation.

A project of a community group called 12 Women — comprising, as might be expected, 12 Montauk women — the labyrinth was completed late last week in an area of the Edward V. Ecker Sr. County Park at Navy Road.

12 Women groups have come together in various communities all over, with a goal, local members explained, of contributing “something of beauty” to their town and environs.

The Montauk women did not know each other before forming their group in 2012. They came from different segments of the community, but many of them had adopted some form of spiritual practice.

They met once a month, at first focusing each meeting on a topic or workshop, and using rituals, like passing around a talking stick and a listening stick, to frame their time together. “It’s a commitment that supercedes all commitments,” said Laurie Cancellieri, a member.

For a while before the idea of building the labyrinth took shape, the group decided that they were the “thing of beauty,” and just gathered in solidarity, with no particular goal.

The fellowship and sharing was a healing thing, said Michelle LaMay.

The women have “become like family,” Allison Harrington said, “soul sisters.”

Sarah Conway walked a labyrinth in Mexico and so loved the experience — one that is “very grounding and uplifting, calming, and joyful,” she said — that she brought the idea to the group in Montauk.

In researching labyrinths and how they can be built, she talked not only to the designer of the one in Mexico, but to a woman who has a labyrinth on Block Island, and to labyrinth builders around the country.

The process in Montauk took about a year and a half, and, early on, included a facsimile drawn in the sand.

“We are 12 very diverse women with diverse interests and expertise,” Ms. Cancellieri said. “So whatever we need to do we can figure it out.” They motivated one another.

Ms. Harrington is a hiker and birdwatcher. Joanie Schilling is a yoga practitioner. There’s an artist and a dancer and a computer person. Susan Vitale, the ladies said, is the group’s “Mother Earth.”



Members of a Montauk group called 12 Women put the finishing touches recently on a stone labyrinth they laid out in the field at Eddie V. Ecker County Park on Navy Road. *Joanne Pilgrim*

And the labyrinth, said Cathy McGuire, would never have been built “if it wasn’t for Sarah figuring out how to get it from the paper to the earth.”

Several Montauk sites were considered, such as at Camp Hero, in Kirk Park, and near the lighthouse.

To test the energy of a location, Ms. McGuire learned about dousing, and took a reading of each potential site — a tradition in labyrinth building that is a way to “speak to the land,” Ms. Conway said.

“This was the strongest energy spot,” she said, standing on the windswept field at the Navy Road park. Initially, the group chose another location, but at Ms. Conway’s behest revisited the site on Fort Pond Bay. A perfect circle had been mowed into the tall grass, the women said, with a path leading to a tree.

With the help of East Hampton Town Councilman Peter Van Scoyoc, the women got permission to build the labyrinth there.

Dousing was used to pinpoint the labyrinth’s center, where a tall mullein plant happened to be growing.

The shape was laid out with a long rope, and the paths — seven lanes in four quadrants — were marked with flags. To begin, each woman gathered a collection of 35 rocks.

Ms. Conway said she is “grateful to my 12 Women sisters for embracing the project with me and bringing it to fruition.”

“The greatest thrill for me in building the labyrinth here in Montauk is watching others discover it and walk it, seeing children and adults delight in it and walk it together,” she said.

Stone labyrinths dating from medieval times have been found all over the world and were built at gothic cathedrals such as the one at Chartres Cathedral in France.

The symbol and shape has appeared in various cultures — depicting, some believe, a path to God or enlightenment. Walking the labyrinth, a sacred path, may be seen as a substitute for a pilgrimage, a devotional practice.

The quiet and calm space of the labyrinth offers a “counterbalance,” said Ms. Harrington. “For me, this type of creative and spiritual energy is a really needed respite from the money-driven self-indulgence that seems to define so much of the Hamptons in summertime. It gives me hope and restores my spirit.”

The circular shape, on a slight incline, aligns with the curve of a mowed line as the land rises at a slight hill sloping toward Hither Woods.

Entering the labyrinth, you cannot worry about where you’re going; you take each step and follow the path, trusting in the rightness of the circles you are walking, their tight turns and long sweeps, circle-backs and stretches that take you clear to the other side.

You notice the grass, its greens and carmine, the birds singing, the sun, the breeze, the variety of stones. You stop anticipating and just follow the rhythm of the circle, of the rows. You stay in the moment and all is well.

Over to the side of the park, people amble out on the old Navy pier. They walk their dogs. A plane crosses overhead. The train passes on the tracks close by. All is peaceful.

On the wide outside edge the stones, tighter together, make a perimeter boundary. In the center there are two black locust stumps to sit on and an altar of sorts, a jumble of rocks, a glitter heart on one, with tall feathers stuck in the dirt, and coins sprinkled atop, encircled by long strands of beads.

It’s a good bet that this altar will change and grow as people discover the labyrinth and leave tokens, mementos, talismans of their own.

As the grass grows, the 12 Women group members will keep the labyrinth paths cut short, a continuing commitment to come back with weed whackers in hand.

On her visits to the site, Ms. McGuire said, she has met a woman from Denmark, who said she wants to start a 12 Women group of her own and make a labyrinth; two girls from the Czech Republic who also want to get involved in a similar project, and two young men, new to meditation, who vowed to bring the practice to their corporate workplace.

“It’s just so exciting to see people so interested,” Ms. McGuire said. “I really can feel that this is going to be an amazing, healing place.”

The labyrinth, said Louise Juliano, a member of the 12 Women group, was a “labor of love.” She believes it will inspire those who walk it to meditate and will help people “get in touch with their higher selves, to promote healing and a sense of well-being.”

The other labyrinth makers were Anna Guebli, Connie Judson, Melissa Mahone, and Stephanie Whiston.

“I think each time it will probably become a different experience,” said Ms. Harrington, who was waiting to take her first walk through the Montauk labyrinth until the 12 Women could “christen” it together. “It’s a container for everything,” she said.

***About the Author***

---

***Joanne Pilgrim***

*Associate Editor*

**Need to Know**

---

[Bitter Denunciations at Marathon Meeting on Wind Farm](#)

[Time's Up for Gurney's Timeshare Owners](#)

[New Candidate Seeks Village Seat](#)

[So Who's Ready for a Do-Over?](#)

[Islip Man Found Dead at Point Was Chef and Avid Fisherman](#)

