

Public Reflexology Paths Built in Washington State

By Diana Khoury (WA)

Exciting things are happening with Reflexology in Washington State. The largest county in Washington, King County, has led an initiative to fund and build reflexology walking paths in several local public parks, with the goal of promoting and improving public health. Many hands went into the planning, development and installation of these paths, including cooperation and partnership with the local Reflexology community. This is a significant achievement because this is the first place in the country where the government is funding reflexology as a public health initiative.

Reflexology paths are cobblestone walkways, made up of stones of different shapes and sizes, spaced at varying distances from one another. Walking a path stimulates the reflex points of the feet, relieving tension and stress, and moving the body towards a greater state of internal and external balance. Reflexology paths take the form of both indoor walking mats and outdoor paths made of real stones. A number of reflexologists in Washington State have installed private reflexology paths in their back yards and gardens.

Elizabeth Marazita is a WRA Member and Licensed Acupuncturist who teaches Reflexology at Bastyr University and the University of Washington Nursing School. She is also the co-founder of Paths of Health, Inc., a company that specializes in the design and installation of public reflexology paths. According to Elizabeth, "Reflexology paths have been used in Asian urban centers since the 1970's and were brought to prominence by Taiwan in the 1980's." Today these public use paths can be found throughout Asia. The very first public reflexology path in the U.S. was designed and installed at Bastyr University in Kenmore, WA, under Elizabeth's leadership.

Following its installation in 2004, the Bastyr path received a great deal of local, national and international press coverage. Elizabeth recalls, "We had no idea at the time that this was to be the first public use path in the United States nor that it would... lead to interest around the state, country and Western world as an innovative means of public health."

A scientific research study by the Oregon Research Institute (ORI) concluded that walking on a cobblestone mat surface significantly reduced blood pressure and improved the balance and physical performance of adults 60 and over. Coinciding with the Bastyr press coverage, the notable ORI results were published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, then in the New York Times in 2005.



Michael Spano of Paths of Health sets stones

This research caught the attention of Ron Sims, the Executive Officer of King County's government. King County is the largest county in Washington State, home to Seattle and its many growing suburbs, with more than 1.8 million diverse residents. The idea of building public reflexology paths was directly in line with Executive Sims' Initiative on Healthy Aging, thus he issued a directive to move forward with the planning of these paths for two parks in King County.

Jo Sullivan, a nationally-certified Reflexologist and WRA member who is also a King County employee, served as a reflexology consultant for the project. She said, "It was thrilling to have our County Executive not only get excited about reflexology, but to take it a step further and put reflexology paths in our parks so they are accessible to everyone! That is real leadership and it makes for a better world."



Elizabeth Marazita places stones during construction of the reflexology paths

Jo added, “This was an ‘it takes a village’ experience -- many people contributed their expertise to the project. Doug Rice, a landscape architect, designed the paths. Paths of Health employees contributed their expertise, picking and setting special stones, and writing the instructions in three languages. [King County project manager] Jessie Israel secured corporate sponsors. King County Parks staff obtained donations of stones, helped with pouring concrete and setting the railings, and made the signage. Everyone was really cooperative and excited about the potential of reflexology. It was a wonderful experience. [The paths] are a resource that is there for everyone and will be there in perpetuity. I think it’s exciting that King County made this commitment to its citizens.”

King County’s Public Health Department was also actively involved. They worked with the Parks Department on site selection for the paths and developed messaging and signs for each location. After installation was complete, the Public Health Department provided community outreach in the form of flyers, articles, and education. Community awareness events were held at the paths in partnership with King County Steps to Health (a federally-funded program), with support from Paths

of Health. The public’s response has been very positive.

It took a week of intensive work to build each of the paths, the first at White Center Park in Seattle, and the second at Marymoor Park in Redmond. The reflexology paths were dedicated by King County Executive Ron Sims in 2007.

Funding for building the reflexology paths was provided by King County and sponsorship grants from private business. AegisLiving, a Redmond-based leader in senior living communities, donated \$10,000 to the project. Paths of Health, Inc. provided a \$10,000 in-kind donation. The balance for the project, as well as ongoing maintenance costs, are funded by King County.



Ron Sims dedicates Marymoor Park’s Reflexology Path

I asked Amy Shumann, a health educator from the Prevention Division of King County Public Health what advice she would give to other state or local governments who are interested in building public reflexology paths in their communities. She answered, “As someone from the Public Health sector, I would encourage others in Public Health to reach out to their parks departments. Public Health and parks are a natural fit and the experience of working with them was great. Their ongoing commitment to the upkeep of the parks and the paths is critical. But the whole thing would never have happened without the leadership and support that

Executive Sims provided. If you can, find someone in a leadership position to champion your cause.”

Jessie Israel, the King County Project Manager who spearheaded the entire reflexology paths project, said, “Not only do these reflexology paths contribute to public health, but they are also beautiful art pieces in the community.” Continuing on the success of this initiative, King County has plans to build two more public reflexology paths in the Northwest in 2008.

For more information:

- King County Parks Reflexology Page:
www.metrokc.gov/parks/reflexology
- King County Website: www.kingcounty.gov
- Paths of Health: www.pathsofhealth.com
- Washington Reflexology Association:
www.washingtonreflexology.org



*WRA Members at the
Marymoor Park Reflexology Path*