

# Enter the Labyrinth in Joe Smith's Backyard

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Joe Smith's backyard labyrinth takes walkers through circles within circles

In Joe Smith's backyard, giant slices of slate welcome bare feet, paws and shoe soles. Souls are welcome too.

Red and black volcanic nuggets crunch underfoot at Smith's giant labyrinth.

It's 33 feet from edge to edge, and 270 paces, by Smith's stride, to get around in it.

Gray, weathered, second-growth redwood planks accent some paths. In the center, yin and yang lie in wait. The labyrinth is a pattern with a purpose.

Walk along each aisle — head down — watching where you step. Repeat something, like a mantra. Sigh or sing or don't say anything at all. Concentrate on a problem, or just try to de-stress.

At the center, retrace your steps to the entrance. Feel better? Maybe or maybe not.

He doesn't care how his labyrinth is perceived or used. It can be treasured or ignored, considered religious, therapeutic or just good exercise. Walking straight across it — lines and all — doesn't doom someone.

"I'm not religious, but it's something that has helped me."

Smith speaks of days in San Francisco when work issues and being diagnosed with prostate cancer weighed heavily upon him. He turned to the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral every lunch hour. Smith has been cancer free for more than 10 years.



Nevertheless Smith's zeal for labyrinths is subtle, and he encourages anyone with an interest to explore them.



Smith was concerned that a recent letter to the Enterprise-Record complaining about a labyrinth connected with a local church. He was afraid that might color the way people view the circles.

He's all in favor of them, and compliments the Bidwell Park and Playground Commission for its vote last month to endorse one in Children's Playground.

Chicoan Marilyn Jennings, who has built a labyrinth herself here, proposed one for Children's Playground in downtown Chico, as long as she can raise the money to pay for it.

The Park Commission approved her plan, which calls for a 42-foot wide labyrinth. By her own guidelines, she has to raise the money to build it before starting. She's eyeing a pool of \$100,000 to pay for the \$60,000 labyrinth and its maintenance costs.

Jennings suggested that all kinds of individuals would benefit from the circle; from troubled folks to kids who run around it.

"I'd just like to give labyrinths more exposure," said Smith, who is one of three in Chico self-listed online with World Wide Labyrinth Locators at [wwll.veriditas.labyrinthsociety.org](http://wwll.veriditas.labyrinthsociety.org). The Web site helps people locate labyrinths by simply entering a town and its zip code.

In addition to Smith's and Jennings, there's one linked to the Church of Religious Scientology in Chico.

Labyrinths are different than mazes, Smith noted. "You can't get lost or run into a dead-end in a labyrinth. You can in a maze."

It took about three months for Smith and the designer — friend Jerome Canty of Chico — to build the labyrinth at his West 12th Avenue home.



Dotted around the outside edge of the circle are well-placed distractions. Outcroppings of rosemary and sage provide a swath of fragrance for the outstretched hand. Christian, Egyptian and Indian religious statues watch walkers. Large rocks also ring the circle, ones that Smith has brought back from trips to special places such as Death Valley.

A cat named Toby joins in making occasional mad dashes across the labyrinth. Toby makes the near daily walk with Smith, who recites the words "peace and forgiveness, love and compassion, health and hope" as he walks.

"Walk without expectation," is Smith's best recommendation. He's happy to offer tours, and he can be contacted at [cheekay@earthlink.net](mailto:cheekay@earthlink.net)

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