



PHOTOS COURTESY JULIET ALTHAM / KENNEBUNKPORT CONSERVATION TRUST

The **COMMUNITY LABYRINTH** in Kennebunkport

A PEACEFUL PLACE FOR REFLECTION,
MEDITATION, AND GROUNDING

By Robert Cook

The Kennebunkport Conservation Trust (KCT) trails in the Emmons Preserve have always served as a great option for those who want to get outside, take a walk in the woods, and get closer to nature. But the new KCT Community Labyrinth they encounter (just a short distance from the main parking area) takes such treks to a whole different level.

Located in a small clearing adjacent to the tranquil waters of the Batson River and a historic cemetery, the labyrinth was conceived, designed, and created by a group of dedicated volunteers led by Juliet Altham. It gently

unleashes its healing power. Those who walk its narrow circular paths that lead to the center have an opportunity to engage in quiet reflection and meditation. It is designed to give an experience of grounding or reconnection.

Throughout the pandemic that arrived in Maine more than a year ago, Juliet said she and a group of hearty women completed the work. Their job was to haul the individual stones and place them in the pattern.

“It was very hard labor through the summer,” Juliet said. At the end of last summer when COVID numbers remained low, she said they once again asked other members of the



community to pitch in with the work of digging in the stones. (They had initially reached out for help and had some amazing community volunteers to begin with but couldn't continue with them due to the pandemic.)

As Maine, the nation, and the world were reeling from the spread of COVID-19 and the stress, fear, and the loss of lives that accompanies it, Juliet and her volunteers saw the labyrinth project as a refuge. "It was a blessing to be out there doing that type of work."

Throughout the fall, Juliet said "we just kept going" until it was finally completed. "When we were done, we felt that it was our gift to the world in such a traumatic time." Juliet, 50, of Kennebunkport said the labyrinth was not completed until November 4, 2020.

Almost immediately as word spread, Juliet said a steady stream of people experienced the Community Labyrinth for themselves. "I have never been there without seeing someone come across it," Juliet said.

During the annual Prelude holiday celebration, the labyrinth was illuminated via the solar lights that were installed especially for the occasion. Every night, the labyrinth was illuminated for people to enjoy. The lights will be taken out and kept ready for next year, for use in the darkest time of the year, when most needed.

The idea for the labyrinth actually came from KCT Executive Director Tom Bradbury. It had been on his to-do list for a while. In 2018, Juliet remembers that she was walking in Emmons Preserve and came across the clearing encircled by trees next to the Batson River. "It just felt incredibly special. The thought came to me immediately that if they are going to build the labyrinth, it needs to be here," Juliet said.

Once Tom Bradbury and the KCT Board gave them the greenlight, Juliet and other volunteers went to work. They worked with local landscaping companies, Spang Builders, Woods Farm Landscaping, and Terrapin Landscapes, to do the initial groundwork. Volunteers took over to create a classic labyrinth design, lay out the stone pattern, and install the solar-powered lights. Juliet said several other businesses donated their time and materials to go with donations raised from the community.

"Building the labyrinth was a very deep and meaningful journey all in itself," Juliet said. "It was an amazing collaborative process, and strong bonds were formed between us volunteers. We wanted to make it as accessible to as many people as possible. And we wanted to involve the community as much as possible, which is why we invited anyone to donate a stone in honor of a loved one."



They used stone dust for the pathways inside the labyrinth and held a kick-off ceremony in September 2019 that was attended by more than a hundred people.

“We gave everyone a pebble and asked people to think about what they really wanted for the labyrinth. The pebbles were buried in the middle of the labyrinth,” Juliet recalled. The first path stones were placed in November 2019.

Juliet explained that the KCT Labyrinth is one of many that are being created across the country and the world as more people want a connection to the ancient world it represents. These patterned stone paths are appearing in places like hospitals, churches, schools, parks, and public gardens.

According to the KCT, a labyrinth, unlike a maze, is a single path. Sometimes it can be painted on a wall or drawn on paper, but a path is most often the labyrinth’s hallmark. When people follows its path, it leads them to the center and back out again. The pattern itself is rather mysterious, having turned up in various archeological sites and artifacts dating back thousands of years. Examples include petroglyphs in Goa, India, rocky constructions on the Solovetsky Islands of Russia, and prehistoric cave drawings in Val Camonica, Italy. Then there is the legendary labyrinth of King Minos depicted on 5th century BCE coins from Knossos, Greece, and the “Man in the Maze” symbol of the Native American Tohono O’odham people.

Labyrinths were adopted by the medieval church in different forms. Perhaps the most famous remaining medieval labyrinth is that found embedded in the stone floor of Chartres cathedral in France, dating from the early 13th century. This one and others harken back to primeval times when men and women sought to be one with



the world around them, to be closer to God and the universe. But we don’t know exactly what labyrinths were used for. They have a mysterious aspect. It has been proposed that in the medieval church labyrinths were used as a form of pilgrimage during the times when it was too dangerous to make pilgrimage to the Holy Lands.

Labyrinths are familiar to Juliet. She is originally from the United Kingdom, having moved from her native Manchester, England, to Kennebunkport, with a certain amount of chance involved. She and her husband, Richard, also 50, first came to Kennebunkport when they swapped houses with some friends for three years. They didn’t intend to make Maine their permanent home, but Juliet said her family liked Kennebunkport so much, they decided to stay.

“I really loved Manchester, and I didn’t want to leave the city,” Juliet recalled. But after living in coastal Maine for a few years, she discovered what so many other transplants have found: “It’s very hard to leave.” Juliet finds the seaside town to be a very down-to-earth place. “You never know who you could be talking to—famous people or a local

lobsterman—and nobody cares. There is a really strong sense of community.”

“We ended up buying our own house here,” she said. Her husband was able to continue his work in Maine just as easily as he did in the UK, and he has clients across the United States. Their children attended the Consolidated Elementary School. It was their kids who introduced them to the KCT.

The children took many field trips to places like Stage Island and other areas of Conservation land. Juliet joined a group that met at the KCT Headquarters, and she enjoyed walking the trails. When she first learned that the KCT wanted to build a labyrinth, she was intrigued.

Thanks to Juliet and the rest of the volunteers, the KCT Community Labyrinth provides a spiritual escape for all those who seek it. “The labyrinth is definitely driving its own story. We couldn’t have planned it this way,” Juliet says. The Community Labyrinth was not created in response to the pandemic, but Juliet believes it continues to provide people a safe and welcoming place where they can just exhale and reconnect with nature and its healing powers.