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More than a walk

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The East Bay Regional Park District's "Healthy Parks, Healthy People" program promotes good health and new cultural connections. Photo: East Bay Regional Park District.

Guided walks inspire health, community connections

Spring is a blessed time of new beginnings, new growth and new opportunities to enjoy nature. Approximately 150 East Bay residents enthusiastically ushered in the long awaited season last weekend at Multicultural Wellness Walk at Shadow Cliffs in Pleasanton. For many, both newcomers and those returning, it was a spiritual experience with one obvious fact -- native flowers weren't the only things blooming.

"I feel wonderful," said 26 year-old Thuraya Lamah, a member of the Latina Center in Richmond attending her second wellness walk. "We walk with our friends and family in beautiful parks, plus we get to meet people of other cultures and dance and have fun activities. These walks are a total experience," said Lamah.

Saturday's walk was one in a series of six walks hosted by the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD), co-sponsored by Kaiser Permanente and the Regional Park Foundation, along with the help of many volunteers. Participants included members of Village Connect, a multicultural group from San Leandro and about 40 members of the Latina Center in Richmond. All were transported by buses provided by EBRPD. The program, called "Healthy Parks, Healthy People", encourages use of and appreciation for the 73 parks sprinkled throughout Alameda and Contra Costa counties. They promote good health, new cultural connections and strong bonding among members of their communities. These events are family friendly and are so much more than just a walk in the park.

"So far the Zumba session has been my favorite part of the walk," said 14 year old Lyana of San Pablo, attending with her mother. Indeed, the day began with stretches and a lively session of Zumba conducted by Fitness Instructor, Carah Herring. Participants young and old and of all cultures Samba'd their way to warming up and raising their heartbeats for an extra energy boost among breathtaking views of the lake. Intermittent Zumba sessions were weaved in along the walking path for a fun change of pace.

But exercise wasn't the only focus of the walk. Shadow Cliffs Regional Park has been open to the public since 1971 and is abundant with nature. Naturalist Constance Taylor led the three groups that moved at varying paces and stopped periodically to point out signs of life. She shared expert information on the many local birds, including double crested cormorants, blue herons, and a bald eagle that soared above.

To some who regularly exercise, the walking in nature was most gratifying. It was Maria and Luis of Richmond's first time in a guided walk. Both felt this was far more enriching than a trip to the gym.

"Out here it is stress-free and we can breathe and enjoy," said Maria. The young family found it a great way to introduce nature to their four year old son Antonio. "This has been fun and we'll definitely be back," said Luis.

The event ended in the picnic area where delicious, fresh, healthy foods were provided for lunch. Live, easy listening music and one more Zumba session was a healthy send off.

"These walks have done wonders to bring together the community," said Mona Koh, EBRPD's Public Affairs Director and walk coordinator. "It takes a lot of wonderful people to make this happen and it takes even more efforts to ensure we have beautiful places to come and enjoy."

Koh was sure to thank participants for their support of Measure FF, a park bond that passed last November to provide funding to keep parks in top condition. The measure saw a huge 85.6 percent voter turnout.

"Yay!" cheered Koh. "People are understanding the correlation between voting and having healthy parks to enjoy!"

The Latino community can tap into future walking events and other activities thanks to the Latina Center in Richmond. Their goal is to keep the community informed, involved and enthusiastic about life. Eugenia Araque, community leader, who last year launched the center's own walking program called "Gente" said it has seen tremendous success and has led to participation in other walks as well. "We have been happy with the response. The interest in walking and being healthy is growing," said Araque.

"Walk with a Doc" is another walking program the Latina Center has participated in where walkers literally walk side by side and have lunch with doctors. The next one is scheduled for Saturday, April 13 at Point Pinole. Like EBRPD's walks, participants can meet new people and enjoy extracurricular activities.

"It was a really fun event with lots for the kids to do," said Lamah who attended the last event.

Spring is a time of rebirth and these walking events are a natural therapy to awaken the body and mind after a long winter or just from the stress of life. “It is amazing to see people from the community come and grow healthy together and celebrate our similarities,” said Koh. Then she led the group in saying good morning in six different languages beginning with a resounding “HOLA!”

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