



## Community News

## Berkeley: Wellness walks help a new demographic discover regional parks



Credit: Courtesy Cali Godley Multicultural Wellness Walks bring all ages and backgrounds to the outdoors for activity together.

By **MARTA YAMAMOTO** | Correspondent

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On recent Saturday morning a melting pot of about 100 people met at Tilden Regional Park's Jewel Lake. Participating were people of African-American, Latino, Korean, Chinese, Lithuanian, Middle Eastern and European heritage, among others. One activity they engaged in was whooshing their hands and their cares away toward Jewel Lake, a good way to break the ice and share a common bond.

The event was one of the East Bay Regional Park District's Multicultural Wellness Walks, a program designed to extend the park district's mission of preserving and protecting open spaces and making parks accessible to the broadening and diverse demographics that make up the East Bay.

Answering the question as to how the park district could play a greater part in connecting all people together and to nature lead to the development of the Multicultural Wellness Walks program. As part of Healthy Parks Healthy People and with the support of Kaiser Permanente and the Regional Parks Foundation, the program is opening the parks to new multi-cultural communities.

Mona Koh, community relations manager EBRPD, began organizing the program in 2014.

“The park district received a grant from Kaiser Permanente, who was interested in having the park district reach out to the multicultural communities in Alameda and Contra Costa counties and bring them to the parks for health and wellness,” she said.

The first step for Koh and her staff was to find a way to reach their target audience. Posting on the park district website would bring response, but not those the team was trying to reach. The solution was to work with community leaders with big constituencies representing a range of ethnic, socio-economic and faith-based groups.

Koh made contacts with the Latina Center in Richmond and with media leaders, including Sound of Hope, a local nonprofit Chinese-language radio station; the Korean Alpine Club, Latino radio stations, several African-American churches and Samuel Merritt University Ethnic Health Institute in Oakland.

“I work with community leaders, send flyers about the Wellness Walks, and arrange for a bus to pick them up and transport them to the park. The leaders sign up their constituents to participate in the walk,” Koh said.

“Generally we have 80 to 100 people. It’s very inclusive and multicultural; 95-percent are people of color and most have never been to the parks before.”

The second step was to create a program model that was educational and appealing. The result is a three-hour activity that includes nature and health education, exercises and games, and a healthy lunch. Multicultural Wellness Walks have become one of HPHP’s most successful efforts.

Six parks are visited each year, with the idea of introducing different types of natural settings.

“We’ve taken our participants to shoreline parks like Big Break and MLK; to lake settings like Lake Temescal and Lake Chabot; to the forest setting in Redwood and to rolling hills like Sunol,” she said. “The areas we take them truly showcase the diversity of the parks.”

The walks are all about being welcome and inclusive, and Koh begins each by greeting everyone in five or six languages, with the group joining in. A naturalist then introduces the park and talks about what it is like to be out in nature.

Safety in nature is another important component, and Koh or her staff explain that’s it’s best to go with someone, to carry water and to dress in layers.

The healing aspect of nature is stressed, and every hike includes a health care representative who introduces participants to nature as medicine.

“We want to combine learning about the nature, the natural surroundings and the resources; with health, how to take care of themselves,” Koh said.

“Similar to what’s happening now with Park Prescription where, along with medicine, doctors prescribe certain amounts of time out in nature.”

The final goal is to break down stereotypes and fears of other cultures. This happens naturally as people of different cultures meet and greet one another, walk and learn things together, practice tai chi or zumba, engage in laughter yoga and share a meal.

“Just think about all the ways people can interconnect and these interconnections help reduce the stereotypes and anxieties,” Koh said.

In August, the program will visit the hilly terrain of Briones and in October the walkers will go to Contra Loma to admire its lake.

EBRPD is concerned about environmental equity, namely who has access to parks and their vision is to ensure that people of all ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds have access and find health and wellness there.

“We have found in research that those who have access to parks live longer.

We want them to know where the parks are and feel comfortable going there,” Koh said. “We hope they find a connection and also find health in the parks.”

Joining or donating to the Regional Park Foundation will help support the Multicultural Wellness Walks:

<https://www.regionalparksfoundation.org/>.



*Credit: Courtesy Cali Godley Multicultural Wellness Walk participants gather for a photo at Tilden Nature Area.*