I watched as Marcus Penn, a tall, thin African American man wearing a gray newslboy cap, began leading the 30 or 60 people assembled through a series of yoga poses, using a voice that carried. Everyone raised their arms above their heads and I took in the faces: older Asian ladies wearing big sunglasses, white guys in their baseball caps, Latinx families and kids. There were white couples, black men—myself included—and women in headscarves.

Penn interspersed his instructions with comments on the day-to-day grind people in the Bay Area face. A medical doctor in his forties, Penn emphasized that these yoga stretches and the hike we were about to embark on were an opportunity to get away from that stress, if only momentarily. The purpose of the walk was to expose East Bay residents who don’t typically visit parks to the health benefits of doing so.

That was the overarching goal of the Multicultural Wellness Walks organizers—the East Bay Regional Park District, its supporting Regional Parks Foundation, and Kaiser Permanente.

“Why is this program so special?” Koh asks rhetorically about the Multicultural Wellness Walk series. “Walking is not an exceptional phenomenon. You can go for a walk, but we’re working with the health industry and a very different demographic community of people. We’re bringing in people from all different backgrounds and faith traditions to walk together and connect with each other in meaningful ways.”
A San Francisco native, Penn knows how culturally rich this part of the world is, and also how divided it can be. San Francisco is home to more billionaires per capita than anywhere else, as well as grinding poverty and homelessness so egregious that the United Nations has called it “crucial and inhumane.” And then there are the many middle-income people trying to navigate an increasingly unaffordable local economy. Relieving the stress that arises from these pressures is one reason for the walks, Penn told the crowd. Another is to promote “cultural exposure, as a way to bring community together—and discovering different parts of the Bay.”

After muscles were stretched and jokes cracked, people popped off water bottles, loaded up on apples, oranges, and Nutri-Grain bars, and prepared to hit the trail, but not before a few words from Koh. As attendees continued to arrive in the grassy clearing, she spoke into a microphone attached to an amplifier, her voice echoing around the small valley, asking for audience participation in saying good morning in various languages. The crowd joined in saying “jöh-uhn achim,” “buonos dias,” “sahab alchemy,” “tsaohshang hao,” and “good morning,” collectively covering Korean, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and English. She closed by suggesting that everyone talk to three different people—folks whom they didn’t know before today, people of different cultures, faiths or traditions—and “think of something to be grateful for.”

As people started down the trail, I fell in with Bobbie Carpenter, a first-time walker, and her friend Charlotte Harrell, a more seasoned hiker. Harrell, who had invited Carpenter along, said she’d been coming to these hikes for more than four years for three main reasons. “First, to have the experience of coming to the diverse parks within the regional system; I really like that,” she said. “Second of all, it’s intergenerational. I love seeing the seniors—which, I’m a senior. And the children. I’ve been coming long enough to see some of the kids grow up. The third thing is having the naturalists lead the docent-led walks,” Harrell added. “And then also, the warm-ups. I like the warm-ups.”

Harrell laughed as she recalled recent warm-up exercises. “One walk I was on, we had someone warm us up with laughing therapy, which was different for me,” she said. “Laughing yoga” aims to get people to let down their guard—“to relieve tension and to build community”—by laughing together. EBRPD brings in health professionals, like Penn, from a variety of disciplines and cultural traditions, including qigong, yoga, and acupuncture, to help lead each walk.

“The last walk I was on,” Harrell said, “we had a Zumba instructor, so it was interesting in assisting some participants to do the Wobble Wobble.” I smiled, imagining the spontaneous “laughing therapy” that likely occurred when the group did this hip-hop dance.

From the patch of grass that served as a yoga mat, the party beaded west for an easy, roughly three-mile hike. Koh moved from group to group introducing people. Several kids ran ahead, speaking Spanish. Jordan Pond, a small water body with a wooden dock, appeared around a bend. It seemed to be out of a storybook, with ample reeds surrounding it and a few mallard ducks floating lazily in its calm waters. The group sped through an area resulting in a sound along its shore. The same kids who had run past earlier were now squatting on the bank of the pond, pecking at vegetation and the water with sticks. The adults followed Penn for another round of yoga. Park district naturalist Kristin Parker spoke about the park’s ecology and history.

When we set off again, we came to a small branch of Dry Creek that we had to ford. It was probably the most challenging part of the two-hour walk. A boy in a gray hoodie slipped and fell on the stream bed. “What is this again along its shore? The same kids who had run past earlier were now squatting on the bank of the pond, pecking at vegetation and the water with sticks. The adults followed Penn for another round of yoga. Park district naturalist Kristin Parker spoke about the park’s ecology and history.

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As the clouds broke, birds flew past. The cold falling from the sky mingled with the mildness of the town. From that vantage point, looking west across the East Bay—the houses, BART, and the Bay Bridge—spread out before us. A few cars moved through the streets below. The cold morning was a breath of fresh air after California sun. As the clouds broke, birds flew past. It was like looking into a snow globe of the East Bay. My usual train of thought about work and the many things I needed to do fell away for a brief moment. I could see how this could be very meditative.

The kids were still running around chatting, and a footprint in the middle of a pile of cow dung indicated that one of them had learned the hard lesson that cow pies are dry and crusty on the outside, but inside is a whole nother story. A portion of the group headed toward the parking lot, but the rest of us walked back to the grass where we’d convened earlier, and where now a post-walk meal was to be served. As people ate, a performance of traditional Korean dancing began. A group of little girls spun, accompanied by a drumbeat, wearing magnificent Korean dresses called hanboks.

Some people gathered to watch, while others mixed and mingled. Park district naturalists set up an educational display of fox, skunk, and squirrel pelts—examples of animals that live in the park. Kids and grown-ups gathered around to touch and marvel at the furs.

I began talking with a young African American man wearing a Howard University sweatshirt. He was a nurse and had recently moved to the Bay Area. He had come on these walks several times to meet people and find community. With his medical background, he was also well aware of the health benefits of spending time in nature—another reason for being a repeat customer. We both remarked on the diversity of the group making Korean kimbab, the all-veggie rice-and-seaweed rolls that we were eating, and wondered aloud where else this could happen. The scene got me thinking. I know people who organize walks like this—hikes for the Latinx or African American communities. But often those walks end up including just the organizers’ friends, who are mostly of the same ancestry and who already know each other. This hike, by comparison, had a true breadth of participants. Unlike those other walks, it was full of people you really might not meet in your daily life—and better organized as well. I made a mental note to tell my friends about it.

After a while, the 240-plus participants began to disperse. They’d had a rich experience: nature, conversation, yoga, food. Penn hoped they’d take some of it with them to their daily lives. “The focus is health within nature,” she told me later. “That’s why it’s constantly reinforced,” he added, alluding to how he constantly pushes yoga, meditation, and community during these walks. He doesn’t only want people to do yoga in the park on select Saturdays, he told me. He wants them to take what they’ve learned home, so they can better manage stress that might occur on a daily basis.

During Multicultural Wellness Walks, guests from all 14 East Bay Regional Parks are invited to participate in a diverse and inclusive program that promotes health and well-being. Participants will experience a variety of traditions and cultural backgrounds, including qigong, yoga, and acupuncture, to help lead each walk.

The walks, organized for 100 to 150 people, typically last two to two-and-a-half hours, begin in the morning, and conclude with lunch. For large groups, free transportation can be provided.