

Yoga teacher creates 'Grace Trail' at East Lyme park



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East Lyme — Thanks to the efforts of East Lyme resident and yoga teacher Rachel Baer, the 0.8-mile path around Samuel M. Peretz Park at Bridebrook has been transformed into a meditative "Grace Trail."

"GRACE" is an acronym for the five questions that signs encourage people to explore while walking: What are you Grateful for? What do you need to Release? What is calling out for Acceptance? What is my next Challenge? What can I Embrace as possible?

One Look Sign Company of Centerbrook made the signs and installed them last week.

It's an idea Baer has been working on for a while, and while the delays were frustrating, she feels perhaps this was the best time for it to happen, given how prescient some of the questions seem with the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Even though things are tough right now, what am I grateful for?" she ruminated at the first letter, talking as she walked along the trail Tuesday morning. "Everyone's had losses of some sort, big or small, but even though we've had hard times, what are we grateful for?"

As Baer stopped at the last sign, a couple walking their dog stopped to say they were so happy to see the signs go in.

Stuart McKenna said he was struck by the challenge sign "because I'm 65 years old and I jog around here, and that's a challenge for me." He also said gratitude is a big part of his and wife Mary's lives.

Mary McKenna noted that the challenge sign was missing for a bit, so they were trying to guess what "c" stood for before looking it up.

Baer noted the challenge sign was the last to go in because of a hiccup with placements, and followed up later to say that it "shows that we all make mistakes" and if we can't find grace on the Grace Trail, then there's something wrong.

The idea for the trail arose when Baer, who moved from her native England to East Lyme in 2003 for her husband's job at Pfizer, hired a life coach a couple years ago for a few sessions.

"I was just feeling a bit 'eh,' not sure what direction I wanted to go," Baer said. The life coach suggested she read the 2015 book "Grace Trail: Find Your Footing and Move Toward the Life You Were Meant to Live" by life coach Anne Barry Jolles. Along with the book, the author's initiative includes an actual trail in Plymouth, Mass., plus workshops and webinars.

Baer reached out to East Lyme's Parks and Recreation Department about putting a Grace Trail in town. She had been hoping the signs would go in last fall but things got slowed down with licensing, since Grace Trail is a registered trademark, and then COVID-19 hit and sign stores were closed.

On each sign is a QR code and the logos for Grace Trail, the Parks and Recreation Department and the Brian Dagle Foundation, which is an East Lyme organization "dedicated to the healing of grieving adults as well as community education on suicide prevention and awareness." Scanning each of the five QR codes brings up a short video on gracetrail.com for the respective letter, in which Grace Trail founder Jolles poses a few more questions people could ask themselves.

For the word "release," for example, Jolles asks: "What is in my control? What's out of my control, and how do I focus more of my energy on what's in my control?"

Baer said the final cost of the trail was \$1,300, of which about \$500 came from the town, and the rest came from Baer and donations. Baer created the Facebook page titled East Lyme Grace Trail #Elgracetrail, and she hopes people will take pictures and share them with the hashtag.

She also hopes to have Grace Trail events in the future.



Rachel Baer, who worked to install the new Grace Trail at Samuel M. Peretz Park at Bridebrook in Niantic, looks at the welcome sign at the park.



The interactive signs are based of the self-help book 'Grace Trail' by Anne Barry Jolles and lead walkers to questions to help find clarity and strength.



Mary and Stuart McKenna walk their dog Becka on Nov. 17th, 2020, along Grace Trail at Samuel M. Peretz Park at Bridebrook in Niantic.

Mary McKenna of Niantic pauses to pet her dog Becka as they walk the Grace Trail.

