

OPEN SPACES, SACRED PLACES

BY PAMELA SCHAEFFER

BALTIMORE — Creating open spaces, sacred places where people and communities can find solace and healing. That's what the TKF Foundation has been about since its inception in 1994 when Tom and Kitty Stoner — the T and the K — determined to use some of their money to fund community parks and gardens.

Their inspiration came from a visit to London when, weary from their trans-Atlantic journey and waiting for their hotel room to be ready, they made their way to a quiet Mayfair park called Mount Street Gardens. As they strolled its paths and read the plaques attached to scattered benches, they realized that this peaceful setting had a transcendent quality. The garden paths were laid out in 1889; over ensuing years that brought two world wars and the London Blitz, city residents found solace in the green space on Mount Street.

"We had an epiphany," Tom Stoner wrote in the introduction to *Open Spaces, Sacred Places*, a 2008 book about the foundation's work — the insight that "certain spaces can transform you, that certain places are sacred."

For the couple, the experience evoked memories of other times when nature had fed their souls. Tom Stoner recalled taking to the wilderness with a canoe at age 17 after his father died, seeking emotional breathing room. "Nature surrounded me and helped me feel safe and whole," he wrote of his time in the Boundary Waters, a huge ecosystem between the United States

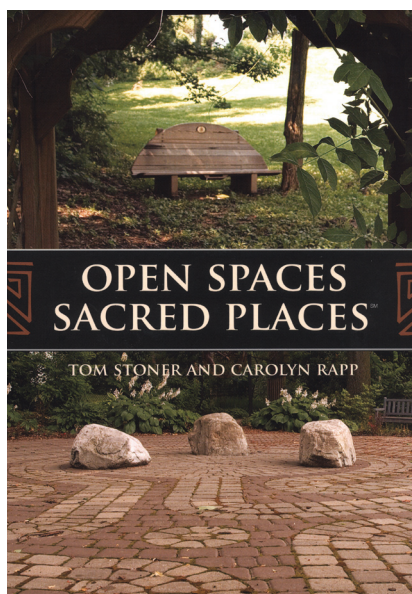
and Canada. Kitty Stoner recalled family summers at a compound on the Mississippi River bluffs. Love of nature was part of the tapestry of their marriage as well. They couple had moved from Iowa, where Tom had built a broadcasting business, to the Washington D.C. area and, determining to live as close to nature as possible, had settled in Mary-

land near the Chesapeake Bay. In 1998, the business was sold to CBS.

"As time passed and success came," Stoner wrote, "we began to ask ourselves

how we could share with others the healing power of the natural world that had so blessed us throughout our lives. We began to think of this search as a pilgrimage."

Mount Street Gardens in London was both an end point on that journey and a beginning. Realizing that people increasingly live in urban settings and



The cover photo for this issue of *Health Progress* was taken at one of the 12 sites featured in Tom Stoner's book: St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Falls Church, Va. (a different St. Anthony of Padua from the one featured in the article on these pages). In a description of the garden for the book shown at left, project manager Pauline Flynn, wrote, "The plantings in the garden — their colors, scents and textures — play a major role in creating the feeling of peace that people experience in this space." The goal, she said, was to create a place "where people can find peace within themselves and then take it out into the community. I believe we succeeded in doing that."



Erin Harmon

Tibetan prayer flags are strung between trees in the “Sacred Writings” garden at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Baltimore.

need oases like the London park, “We felt an urgent call to help foster places like this one,” Stoner wrote in his book. “Kitty and I suddenly, quite clearly, understood the vital and varied role that a sacred space can play in our hectic lives. Such a place can serve to do something as simple as salve two weary travelers or something as complex as spark a spiritual awakening.”

In 1992, the Stoners hired Mary Wyatt, whose writing skills, social interests and spiritual outlook fit their foundation-building needs, and together they conducted focus groups and gathered helpers — environmentalists, sociologists, architects, people of faith, community activists. They decided the new foundation would provide challenge grants and be a funding partner for projects conceived by “firesouls” — the F in TKF — people with the vision and the energy to keep the flame alive until the vision becomes reality. In particular, the foundation would support projects that created or restored outdoor spaces that firesouls and funders believed would have the power to heal individuals and unify communities.

Today Wyatt, my tour guide in mid-November for TKF-funded sites in or near Baltimore, is the foundation’s executive director — otherwise known as “Chief Firesoul.”

Although TKF projects span a wide range, some elements are required of all: a location open to a broad community of users, a firesoul (which could be an individual or a group) to see the project through to completion, and a willingness to include a journaling bench or two.

As we drove to the four projects on our day-long tour, each with a Catholic connection, Wyatt pointed out a couple of other foundation projects along the way: Patterson Park, a city park in a formerly deteriorating Baltimore neighborhood where a TKF-funded community plaza and restored fountain are magnets for the many people now circulating through the space; McElderry Park, where, in a landscape once dominated by vacant housing, neighborhood residents installed a labyrinth made of found objects. Later, a neighborhood resident donated a house and some land, and voilà, a safe haven emerged in an area formerly noted for its crime. Today, Baltimore remains a violent city in parts, but in the McElderry Park area, the crime rate is down

The first of the four TKF projects on our tour was the garden at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church, followed by Marian House — both in Baltimore proper, Providence Hospital in Northeast Washington D.C. and a labyrinth at the Bon Secours Spiritual Center, situated on land that includes the Bon Secour Health System headquarters in rural Marriottsville, Md.

A brief description of each project follows.

After two parishes in a diverse and challenged neighborhood merged to become **St. Anthony of Padua/Most Precious Blood**, firesoul Gloria Carpeneto, a member of the parish health ministry, envisioned a labyrinth that neighborhood residents could enjoy. TKF provided \$25,000 of the \$46,000 anticipated cost. As is standard in TKF grants, the additional \$21,000 could be either raised in cash or in-kind donations of materials and labor.

Today a labyrinth of square stones interspersed with moss is linked to a “sacred writings garden,” an interfaith garden made up of five small gardens in one large plot. As in every garden funded by TKF, a “journaling bench” — a bench with a slot under the seat for a waterproof journal where visitors can write reflections — provides a place for





Photos courtesy of TKF Foundation

Four caryatids, each representing a different attribute, overlook the courtyard garden at Marian House.

people to rest and share their thoughts. Made by prisoners at Maryland's Western Correctional Institution, the benches are fashioned of recycled pickle-barrel wood.

Signs scattered through the garden carry messages about nature from five different faith traditions. For example, a sign commemorating Eastern religious traditions is set within a garden of plants noted for their fragrances. It carries a message from the Hindu Upanishads: "As the scent is wafted afar from a tree laden with flowers, so also is wafted afar the scent of a good deed." Strategically scattered "peace poles" speak of peace in languages of the neighborhood: Farsi, Korean, French, Spanish, Russian, Gaelic, Hebrew, American Sign Language and animal paw prints — the latter to honor creation, Carpeneto explained. Tibetan prayer flags, some tattered, flutter from lines strung between small trees. "The idea is to allow them to deteriorate so the prayers go out to the whole world," she said. "It's a Buddhist tradition." One flag is left blank so visitors can write in

their own prayers.

In the decade since the labyrinth was built, ongoing programs related to healing have been held at the site. A small "Garden of Forgiveness" was installed, Carpeneto said, to commemorate a relationship between a formerly incarcerated young man and the father of a woman he killed when driving under the influence. In an act of forgiveness, the father worked to get the young man paroled so they could give talks together on the dangers of drunken driving. "Both the father and young man were here to dedicate the garden," Carpeneto said.

Marian House, a center founded by the Sisters of Mercy and the School Sisters of Notre Dame, provides housing for women coming out of prison and drug treatment. The center, which consists of two former convents and a Catholic school, provides a full rehabilitation program for the women, many of whom have a history of abuse, said Katie Allston, executive director.

TKF Foundation funded a streetside brick courtyard where the focal points are four caryatids — sculptures of African-American women suggesting centeredness and strength. The gray marble figures, carved in Carrara, Italy, by artist Claire McArdle, stand against the building and overlook the courtyard like so many sentinels. Each is backed by marble intentionally left rough.

In a framed artist's statement, McArdle notes a parallel between the sculptures and the center's residents. "Both walk out of a rough past, able to stand on their own, resisting harsh outside elements," she wrote. Allston said the plan for the sculptures, and their names — Integrity, Patience, Honesty and Trust — had emerged in meetings between the artist and center residents.

A great room and dining room where residents gather nightly for dinner overlook the courtyard garden, embraced by three outside walls of the former convent. The courtyard is reached from inside by a graceful staircase and is set off from the sidewalk by a low iron fence. Within are small trees, an assortment of plantings in large pots, a fountain and, of course, a journaling bench. Signage invites people from the neighborhood to come inside.

A dozen projects featured in the book and the four on the Wyatt-led tour are among some 130 projects the foundation has funded so far, Wyatt said, with grants totaling about \$600,000 a year — \$500,000 for new projects and \$100,000 for "enrichment grants" which allow groups to add features to projects already in place. Typically the

foundation funds four to five new projects a year. The largest grant was \$250,000; the smallest approximately \$1,000, she said. “We call them open spaces, sacred places, meaning they are open in spirit: open to the community, bearing universal symbols and images,” she said. “We have become more and more sensitive to ways in which images from our own faith tradition can be threatening or feel exclusive to others, so we encourage grantees to use images that reflect diversity, that are not necessarily linked to a single faith tradition.”

At **Providence Hospital**, a small streetside garden was installed in 2001 after the TKF Foundation sent letters about its programs to hospitals in the D.C. area. They received a call from Sr. Carol Keehan, DC, then the hospital’s president and chief executive, now the chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association. “Sr. Carol called right away,” Wyatt said. “She said she totally believed in the healing power of nature, and wanted a healing garden at Providence, but they didn’t have any space.” A small area right in front of the hospital was identified, and now a peaceful garden with pond, waterfall and two stone bubbling fountains divides the hospital from the parking lot and street.

“You sit here with the water and the world is closed away,” said Robert Hutson, president and chief executive of the Providence Health Foundation. Green hedges backed by an iron fence separate the garden from the street. Inside, a path links the water features in a landscaped area of small trees and flowering shrubs.

Providence, affiliated with St. Louis-based Ascension Health, is a 408-bed urban community hospital serving a predominately elderly, African-American population. The hospital operates two primary-care clinics in the community, a 25-bed nursing home and a behavioral health center and annually provides about \$30 million in charity care and \$20 million in uncompensated care, Hutson said.

“Hospital healing gardens are very special because people are in crisis,” said Beth Fromm, the hospital’s director of grants. “They can come here and take what they need.” A variety of programs, including concerts and Tai Chi, are provided in the garden for staff members and patients’ families, Fromm said.

The iron fence is divided by brick posts with markers sporting quotations from spiritual leaders, such as this one from African-American theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman: “There must be always remaining in every life

some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathless and beautiful.” Inside the garden, the journals attached to the benches carry spiritual reflections of garden visitors. In one, a former patient wrote: “My Lord, my Father, thank you for all. One year ago, two major surgeries, another one soon. I trust you will give me all that is needed. Into Your hands I give myself, with praise and peace. Keep me in the NOW.” Once filled, the journals are archived at the foundation’s headquarters in Annapolis, Md.

At the **Bon Secours Spiritual Center**, a labyrinth of paving stones and moss rests inside a grove of tall native oak trees on a peaceful, hilltop setting in rural Howard County. The labyrinth was installed in 1999 to mark the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Bon Secours order in Paris at the Church of San Sulpice. Thomas Little, executive director of the center, said people come “just to spend the day, walk around, have spiritual direction” — or to write reflections at the journaling



A healing garden at Providence Hospital offers respite to employees and families of patients.



At the center of the labyrinth at Bon Secours Spiritual Center, a woman pauses to pray.



Carrie Muldrow, payroll coordinator at Providence Hospital, adds her thoughts to the journal attached to the journaling bench in the hospital's garden.

bench. Some days are dedicated to people with special needs, such as one recently for people who had lost their jobs. Shortly before our November visit, Little said, some 50 mission and leadership people from facilities in the Bon Secours Health System walked the labyrinth as part of a formation program.

A marker at the head of a stone path leading to the labyrinth reads, "May this sacred path lead all who walk it to wholeness in body, mind and spirit."

Wyatt said a 2009 enrichment grant had enabled the spiritual center to develop a DVD showing how to use the labyrinth.

Stoner's book, written with writer and garden-

er Carolyn Rapp and subtitled "Stories of How Nature Heals and Unifies" (TKF Foundation, 2008) describes a dozen projects of various sizes and types, ranging from a meditation garden at the Western Correctional Institution, where the journaling benches are made, to a healing garden at the Whitman-Walker Clinic of Northern Virginia for people infected with HIV. Appropriately, the book ends with a chapter titled "Path to the Future." There, Stoner celebrates a growing awareness of the role of nature in people's lives, "a new awakening," a growing realization "that a place intentionally connected to nature can be a gift that calms the soul, replenishes the spirit, and rekindles a sense of community."

He notes oases that have been created in the center of New Orleans, still recovering from Hurricane Katrina; in war-torn Beirut; in San Francisco. "Stories like these reinforce our hope that others who have an open heart will be inspired to create more open spaces, sacred places," he wrote. "Where will the next one arise? Will it be in your own backyard? In your own neighborhood? We invite you to join this growing movement. Turn the page and start your own journey."

For more information, see the TKF Foundation website, www.tkffdn.org. The organization also maintains a Facebook page and a Twitter site with user name TKF_Foundation.

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