

Nature becomes a prescription for healthy living

By Molly Coolidge

Recovering from a major joint surgery doesn't usually inspire the idea of snowshoeing by moonlight, but that's exactly what Carol Bennis, age 75, was asked to do during her recovery last February.

Bennis had never been on snowshoes before, or hiked at night, but when she heard her surgeon and other patients at a similar stage of recovery would be there, she decided to try it out.

On a clear night at Tallac Historic Site, she and 12 other patients joined Barton Health clinicians and U.S. Forest Service rangers on a "wellness walk" through the snow. Bennis loved the experience.

"This opportunity enabled me to step out of my comfort zone, make new friends, and learn the history of the area from the ranger," she said. "Lucky me."

This winter "wellness walk" and the idea of "nature as medicine" spurred the creation of Wellness Outings, one of Barton Health's newest wellness programs. Orthopedic surgeon, Stephen Bannar noticed that while South Lake Tahoe is surrounded by public land and plenty of opportunities to enjoy nature, his patients were often too nervous to head outside and incorporate physical activity into their recovery.

Research indicates that time in nature lowers blood pressure, heart rate, and cortisol levels. It increases concentration, memory, and attention spans. It has been shown to boost immunity and is particularly beneficial for at-risk populations, such as those recovering from surgery, who often spend less time outside. These benefits were something Dr.

Bannar wanted his patients to experience.

“Can I prescribe nature as medicine?” he asked.

Indeed, he can. In fact, there are a number of researchers and medical providers who support this idea. Nature prescriptions have been commonly used in Japan since 1982 to reconnect people with the outdoors. Bannar and Khristy Gavigan, a registered nurse, saw an opportunity and partnered with the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit to provide a unique healing experience for their patients.

“Our idea was to unite health providers with public land managers to facilitate health benefits for those at-risk populations,” said Gavigan. “Partnering with the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit rangers provided that interpretive piece where they could support the logistics, help identify the appropriate outings, and deliver a message about the connection between community wellness and ecosystem health.”

Participants were inspired by their experience, not only reconnecting with nature, but connecting with other people. Isolation is often an issue for those who are recovering at home, especially if they’re concerned that they may injure themselves further by heading out.

“Having Barton’s medical professionals on-hand gave folks the confidence to come out and join the walk, whereas they previously may have been worried about leaving home,” said Bannar.

Though the program just launched, it has already been recognized as an innovative way for the U.S. Forest Service and health care organizations to improve community health. In June, Bannar, Gavigan, and Joseph Flower from the U.S. Forest Service, were asked to share their idea at RecX, a conference run by the U.S. Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C.

The focus of the conference was Great Ideas for the Outdoors

and the Barton team shared the successes of the Wellness Outings and the implications for health across the country.

“We need to change our mindset from treating disease to promoting wellness,” said Bannar. “A prescription for nature can enable accessibility for at-risk groups as well as preventive medicine for other members of the community.”

For Bennis, she saw both the physical and emotional health benefits.

“Public lands are special treasures and not to be taken for granted...but appreciated and respected, not only for their beauty, but for their power to heal,” she said. “The land is truly a gift that must be re-gifted to each generation.”

Wellness Outings are scheduled monthly with Barton Health and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.

Molly Coolidge works for Barton Health.