

Walking to wellness

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GENTE is a unique program that supports the health and happiness of many Hispanics in the East Bay. Photo: Min Lee, East Bay Regional Park District.

¡Si se puede, si se puede!

A familiar chant rang through the winding paths of the East Bay hills. The voices were joyful, energized, determined. Marching feet hit the terrain at different paces but were unison in spirit. Something big was happening here. For many, it was something groundbreaking.

“I’ve always exercised in one way or another but after my injury, I couldn’t and I was gaining weight,” said Flor Basan, a 55 year old housekeeper from Richmond. “This wonderful program has not only made me excited about life, but now I can actually bend down to pick something up.”

Bazan was one of 47 individuals who participated in PASITO, a research study conducted by the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD), San Francisco State University (SFSU) and the Latina Center in Richmond. In Spanish, PASITO means small step and is an acronym for “Promoting Activity and Stress Reduction in the Outdoors.” The program consisted of 8 two, three and four mile wellness walks for all ages and abilities held at four East Bay regional parks from August to November 2017. The purpose was to understand the physical, emotional and social impact of walking in nature on the participants, many of which had never formally exercised before.

“There is a great need for inner city families to be aware of and to utilize the parks,” said Mona Koh, Community Relations Manager at EBRPD. “Many people don’t know where the parks are, may have never thought of walking in nature, may not know the correlation between walking and wellness or may not feel safe walking.”

In response to the need, the EBRPD held six wellness walks per year for the last two years, attracting 120 to 160 participants. After these successful walks, San Francisco State University asked the park district to participate in PASITO, which would produce useful metrics on the benefits when people walk together in nature. The results have been positive and inspiring.



"I have a passion for walking, being outdoors and finding ways to be healthy." - Eugenia Araque. Photo: Min Lee, East Bay Regional Park District.

Koh, who helped facilitate the walks, said it was difficult at first for some participants who had no previous walking experience. "Many walked a ¼ mile in and complained they couldn't walk anymore because it was quite painful," said Koh, "so we walked them back -- but then we made sure they realized they just walked a half mile," she said with a chuckle.

PASITO was designed to meet the needs of all fitness levels. Walkers were divided into two groups from beginners to more advanced. The hope was members of the community would bond as they walked to wellness. And truly they did as together they learned how to stretch, found ways to reduce stress, shared meals, made friends, listened to music, enjoyed time with family, gained appreciation of the East Bay's beautiful parks and tracked their progress. In total, they would walk 32 miles and over 13,000 steps. Commentary heard amongst participants was encouraging:

"My mind and body is relaxed."

"I heard some eagles and the yawn of my daughter."

"We need to look at strength within ourselves because we are really strong human beings."

"My cardio has gotten better."

"I shared a lot of moments with my husband, now we are going to come more often."

Many of the participants found strength and endurance they never thought they had. The camaraderie made them want to walk faster and longer.

Bazan, who started out slowly, said her stamina increased with each walk and soon she was leading the "si se puede" chant to motivate others. "I wanted to encourage them to never give up," said Bazan.

They did not give up and it paid off. Preliminary findings from the PASITO study indicated the majority of the 32 who filled out surveys reported significantly lower stress levels. Also, more than 50% reported much less of a negative mood. Final findings will be complete in June.

It was these kinds of results that motivated PASITO participant Eugenia Araque, community leader of the Latina Center and seasoned hiker, to develop a wellness walking project in the Latino community.



"All this walking in nature has helped me in so many ways. I feel my memory is better from walking and talking, I feel happier and besides losing 10 pounds, the exercise is good for preventing illness so we can be around for our loved ones." - Flor Bazan.
Photo: Min Lee, East Bay Regional Park District.

"I have a passion for walking, being outdoors and finding ways to be healthy," said Araque. "After PASITO, I developed GENTE (gustosos con entusiasmo nos dedicamos todos a caminar con energía -- we are enthusiastic as we all dedicate ourselves to walking with energy). Families are welcome. Participants bring children in strollers or carry babies. It's beautiful to see people enhancing their lives through walking," she said.

The GENTE program is continuing what PASITO started.

"I was excited Eugenia was sponsoring GENTE through the Latina Center," said Basan who participated in both programs. "All this walking in nature has helped me in so many ways. I feel my memory is better from walking and talking, I feel happier and besides losing 10 pounds, the exercise is good for preventing illness so we can be around for our loved ones."

Ayde Talavera, a 62 year old pre-school teacher from San Pablo, also credits the program with life changing results. "It's given me and so many so much," said Talavera. "Better mood, more energy, more stamina...more regularity," she laughed. "But perhaps what she appreciates most is what cannot be measured in metrics.

"In the 30 years I have been here from Mexico, I have never felt more alive and appreciative of the spiritual connection we can have with nature and people," said Talavera. "It's a beautiful experience to take in the breathtaking views that showcase God's magnificent creation right here at our local parks. Everyone's on social media these days and rarely do people talk anymore. I say put down your phones sometimes and think about what really matters. This program has helped me and I know it can help others."

Help came in a variety of ways including workshops on the benefits of walking in nature, the importance of drinking water and encouraging good nutrition.

Erica Impanaque Ordonez, a homemaker from Richmond born in Lima, Peru, so valued these workshops and virtually everything the project had to offer her and her family.

"I enjoyed the combination of things," said Impanaque Ordonez. "The education, being surrounded by people who have knowledge about the park and the fact that it is a family activity that includes my kids. Our bonding as a family has increased because of this project."

GENTE’s six wellness walks stretched from January to March and with such amazing feedback, more walks and workshops are planned for the near future. Both the park district and the Latina Center will continue to work together to encourage use of the area’s fabulous parks while instilling in the community a love of walking in nature as a lifestyle.

“One thing is for sure,” said Talavera, “every time the walks were almost over, I wanted to walk more. They made me feel complete in mind, body and spirit. Knowing I was doing something so good for me, I just wanted to keep going. And that is what I will do,” she said with conviction. “I will keep going because I don’t ever want to stop. I can’t stop.”

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