



# 'A Place for Healing'

*Therapeutic garden provides holistic setting for hospital's patients, staff*

*By Jennifer Schmidt*

**S**t. Joseph's Hospital is committed to providing skilled, compassionate care to all who walk through its doors. The 193-bed Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, hospital prides itself on treating the whole person – the mind, body, and spirit. Wanting to further its quest to help and heal, the facility's staff started exploring the addition of a therapeutic garden to its grounds.

The hospital conducts a "colleague campaign" every one to two years to support hospital improvements. In 2010, the facility's 12-member Colleague Task Force met to discuss its next project. After discussing the many suggestions that had surfaced, one kept coming back: a healing garden.

"As we progressed through the conversation, we identified the front area – a big, front, empty lawn area of the hospital – and how nice it would be to have that developed into a healing garden," said Bobbi Giles, the hospital's director of development. "At the time we didn't really know what a healing garden was, but we just knew we wanted more than what was there."

Plant Services Director Roger Elliott felt strongly that the work should be done professionally, and through his involvement with the Wisconsin Healthcare Engineering Association, he was referred to Phil Johnson, a landscape architect at Ayres Associates.



“We started conversations with Phil, and we soon realized that there’s a lot more to a healing garden than just some trees and plants and flowers – and he was just exceptional,” Giles said.

“He was truly looking at this as a healing garden, something that was going to have elements of solitude and a place of spirituality,” Elliott added. “We were very impressed with his approach and, once we got the chance to look at his designs, it was obviously so much more striking than what any member of the committee imagined. This was an eye-popper.”

### Goals of the garden

Johnson, a registered landscape architect who served as Ayres Associates’ project manager and designer, said the garden had three primary objectives: to provide a calming, reflective environment for patients and visitors; to make the hospital entrance more welcoming; and to offer an outdoor option for performing physical therapy.

The garden, approximately 136 feet wide by 108 feet long, features two walks, one made out of colored concrete and one out of brick pavers. The space also offers retaining walls accented by native grasses, wooden tables, chairs and benches, a small shelter with rocking chairs,

a water feature, memorial bricks, a sculpture, and a selection of shade trees and annual flowers.

In addition to designing an aesthetically pleasing garden, Johnson put careful thought into the special populations who might be using the space.

“If you look at it from a therapeutic benefit perspective, you have to look at the different conditions that are typically treated at this facility,” he said. “For example, if you have elderly people that you’re treating – and most facilities do – you need to be able to use darker surfaces, less reflective surfaces.” Darker walking surfaces anchor the site, he explained, and colored concrete helps reduce reflectivity on the eyes.

For Alzheimer’s patients, it’s important to have color contrasts and defined spaces. Water is important, but reflective water should be avoided because an Alzheimer’s patient could become confused or fearful after seeing his or her reflection.

Johnson also tried to avoid greenery that would aggravate common allergies and even considered possible medications people could have in their systems while visiting the garden. For instance, people on certain antibiotics need to avoid sunlight,

so Johnson was sure to create spaces “that are shaded but yet create that outdoor experience.”

“You can make big mistakes by not understanding what the impacts of your design are,” Johnson said.

### Consulting hospital staff

Early in the process, Johnson facilitated information sessions with hospital staff, allowing them to share their personal ideas and preferences. He used the feedback to create three schematic designs, which the group viewed and provided input on at a subsequent meeting.

“He would explain to people what the diagrams were, and rather than having to pick one, he allowed us to kind of pick the elements we liked the best,” Giles said. “So it wasn’t like either/or. It was ‘Well, I like this about this. I love this about this.’ And then he took all of those and came up with his final plan.”

Involving the employees allowed them to feel a part of the process, Giles said.

After unveiling the final plan, the hospital’s Development Office was ready to start fundraising. Giles and her staff launched a campaign in fall 2011, and money was collected throughout the year via payroll deductions and one-time donations. Not everyone was initially

supportive of the project. Some staff members were more accustomed to their donated money going toward a new piece of equipment or renovation of a service area. They couldn’t see supporting “plants and trees.”

“When we got done, people were so amazed that I actually had calls saying, ‘I didn’t support this, and I was wrong. This is amazing,’” Giles said. “This so far exceeded anybody’s expectations. It’s a gorgeous spot, and it really is a healing spot.”

### Feedback from users

Giles said the garden is being widely used for meetings, hospital receptions, lunch gatherings, or simply for personal reflection. Someday the hospital plans to hold Mass in the garden.

Marlene Luther, an administrative assistant at the hospital, eats lunch in the garden most days during the summer.

“I think it’s a great spot to just go have lunch, step away from the desk for a little while, and get some fresh air,” said Luther, who contributed to the garden’s funding. “Colleagues seem to be relaxed and calm when they’re having lunch or taking their 15-minute breaks.”

She’s seen families and patients use the space too.

“I just think it’s wonderful,” she said. “If you’re a patient or visitor, the healing garden gives you a place to get away from the stressful situation that may be going on inside. It is truly a place for healing.” ■

## GARDEN SPACE BRINGS RENEWED LIFE TO TREATMENT FACILITY’S OUTDOOR AREA

After Ayres Associates helped St. Joseph’s Hospital transform its bare front lawn into a blooming healing garden, a new idea began to blossom within hospital staff. Perhaps the clients at the nearby L.E. Phillips-Libertas Treatment Center (LEP) could benefit from a healing landscape. The change of scenery might bring much-needed perspective to patients undergoing substance abuse or mental health treatment, the Colleague Task Force thought.

“As they started talking about the garden at the hospital, what we heard was that we really need to have a garden at LEP,” said Tom Fuchs, director of the treatment center. “We heard that not only from the LEP colleagues but also from the hospital colleagues who said, ‘You know, that’s a place that really needs healing.’ LEP works with a lot of broken people, a lot of broken families, a lot of broken lives.”

The hospital retained Ayres Associates to design the garden at the treatment center, located in a separate facility adjacent to the hospital. The hospital’s Development Office spearheaded a second campaign, and plans for another garden quickly took root.

Again using hospital employee input, Ayres Associates’ landscape architect Phil Johnson designed a 100-foot-wide-by-70-foot-long garden space that leads to several acres. Once a simple lawn area, it now includes a labyrinth, quarter-mile walking path, bench swing, shelter and bridge over a pond, wood fencing, disc golf course, moon gate, and more. Johnson said he considers the moon gate – a circular structure that acts as a passageway to the labyrinth, walking path, and disc golf course – to be “unique as a focal point.”

“We use that to kind of bring people from one space to the other,” Johnson said.

The additions replace a largely vacant outdoor break space that offered little more than a concrete picnic bench and rarely used volleyball and basketball courts. The design plans were completed in summer 2011, and construction began in 2012. Construction was largely completed in 2012, with a dedication and blessing event held on Sept. 8, 2012.

Feedback has been “remarkable,” Fuchs said. Patients, families, and staff are using it. He has even seen outpatient counselors conduct sessions with clients while walking on the trail. “We’re just thrilled with it. It’s been an inviting, welcoming addition,” he said.

“I see what used to be one family out at a concrete picnic table really kind of in some deep emotional stress. ... I now see them walking around, and their children are smelling the flowers,” he said. “It’s just a more engaging environment out there. It’s not a big mud hole. It’s a beautiful facility, and it’s part of the facility.”

Fuchs noted that the improvements were long overdue because the exterior of the building had been unchanged since 1976. “It makes good sense to have an exterior environment that matches your interior environment,” he said. “If you think about recovery, it’s about transitioning your exterior environment and reconciling that with your interior environment. It’s about work on the inside and the outside.”

Bobbi Giles, director of development at St. Joseph’s Hospital, said the gardens “have been a terrific addition for both places.”

“They have given the whole hospital a face-lift,” she said.