

Exploring the healing power of nature

By Molly Hucklebridge Coolidge

Carol Bennis was recovering from joint replacement surgery when she was asked to go on a snowshoe hike under the full moon.

At the time, the 75-year-old had never hiked at night or even put on a pair of snowshoes. But when she heard her surgeon and other patients at a similar stage of recovery would be there, she decided to try something new and go.

So Bennis and 12 other patients joined Barton Health clinicians and U.S. Forest Service rangers on a “wellness walk” through the snow, on a clear night in the forest. The rangers guided the hikers and explained the area’s natural history. Barton Health clinicians provided medical guidance and, where needed, support for the patients. Bennis loved it.



Nurse Khristy Gavigan with Carol Bennis, center, and Gustavo Yanez Nava with the USFS. Photo/Provided

“This opportunity enabled me to step out of my comfort zone, make new friends, and learn the history of the area,” she says. “I kept thinking, ‘Wow, I just had a knee replacement. Look at this; I can do this now.’ All my inhibitions were gone.”

Learning, connecting, healing

Bennis participated in one of the first Wellness Outings, Barton Health’s newest wellness program. While South Lake Tahoe is surrounded by public lands, orthopedic surgeon Steven Bannar of Barton Health’s Tahoe Center for Orthopedics, noticed many of his patients were nervous about going outside and incorporating physical activity in their recovery process. He and Khristy Gavigan, a registered nurse, saw an opportunity and partnered with the U.S. Forest Service’s Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit to provide a unique healing experience for their patients.

“Having Barton’s medical professionals on hand is key,” says Bannar. “It allows folks to gain the confidence they need to get out of their house, overcome isolation, and connect with others that are living with similar health issues.

“Bringing the Forest Service provides that interpretive piece to support the logistics, help identify the outings, and deliver a message about the connection between community wellness and ecosystem health.”

The health benefits of nature

Barton Health’s Wellness Outings aren’t just for people recovering from joint replacement. They’re also aimed toward people (and their families) with chronic diseases or behavioral health issues, as well as at-risk youth.

Research shows that time spent in nature lowers blood pressure, heart rate, and cortisol levels. It increases concentration, memory, and attention span. It’s even been

shown to boost immunity. After her walk, Bennis saw both the physical and emotional health benefits.

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

Molly Hucklebridge Coolidge works for Barton Health.