



Walking “Walter’s Walk”

by Dr. Jean Moretto, PhD, LPC

The financial crisis affected us all. By 2009, many people lost their jobs and their insurance coverage. At a North Country office, where I was working with two other counselors, we were experiencing an increasing number of cancellations. Clearly, people needed to use their limited funds for food and shelter. They could no longer afford counseling so we decided to do something about it.

We began by offering counseling to 10 percent of our caseload, regardless of anyone’s ability to pay. We needed to see whether our clients would come to their sessions - they did! As these clients came to us, so the idea for Walter’s Walk came to me. One day, while praying with my clients between sessions, I had an epiphany. I was going to open a counseling center in 2010. While I was unsure of the logistics, I was certain of my new goal. A few months later, my landlord told me that a tenant had broken their lease. I could move from 800 square feet to 6,000 and he assured me he would work with me on the cost. Was I interested? What do you think!

The seed of the idea was sprouting, and I never stopped to look back or catch my breath. I bought a copy of Not-For-Profit for Dummies, applied to the State of Missouri to become a nonprofit counseling center and recruited friends and colleagues as board members. Their expertise was exactly what we needed to make this center grow.

While selecting the name, I immediately thought of my father. He always told me, “Face your problems. Don’t run from them. Don’t ignore them — walk through them and you will get to a better place.” The decision was clear: “Walter’s Walk”. There could be no better way to bless the organization than to pay tribute to my dad and remember how he got through difficult times.

It was happening! The State accepted our application so we quickly submitted all the paper work to become a 501(c)(3) corporation, a process that could take several years, but would allow us to accept financial contributions. In the meantime, we continued to see at least 10 percent of our caseload for free or at highly reduced rates. Clients began pouring in when they heard they could get quality counseling without insurance coverage or without paying full fees out of pocket. We were growing rapidly.

As counselors, we knew talk therapy was valuable, but we also knew that other factors affected people’s lives and health. People hold tension in their bodies that can prevent cognitive healing so that needed to be addressed. A massage therapist agreed to see referred clients pro bono or at a fraction of the regular price. After receiving a call from a person who did craniosacral therapy and essential oil classes, these therapies also became part of our offerings. A yoga instructor even came in to offer classes. The results were clear: the more holistic, whole-body services we offered, the more healing we witnessed. As word of Walter’s Walk continued to spread, the number of therapists increased from 3 to 36. There was no doubt that our approach could help many more if we could afford continued growth.

In 2011, the IRS approved Walter’s Walk as a 501(c)(3) organization, allowing us to begin fundraising. Donations from family, friends and those helped by the services at Walter’s Walk have kept us open. Additionally, grants from foundations supporting mental health, a variety of fundraisers and community events have been crucial to our ongoing success.

We also needed more assistance to serve our increasing client base, so we began supervising interns from several local universities. Through teaching and guiding those striving for a counseling career, we have become an “incubator for

counselors". Today, once these young therapists-in-training are fully licensed, we guide them on promoting their own practice and help them understand the importance of supporting their community.

At Walter's Walk, we built a welcoming and comfortable environment for our therapists and their clients. Our rooms are warm, filled with couches, soft chairs, plants, bookshelves and wooden desks. People tell us that our center makes them feel safe and relaxed. As our organization evolved, so did the mission and vision statement that we created with the help of our board of directors:

Our mission: Walter's Walk is a non-profit organization that supports the community by providing integrated mental health services to children and adults who have experienced trauma, depression and anxiety, regardless of their ability to pay.

Our Vision: Walter's Walk will provide psychological and emotional support to each and every individual in the greater St. Louis area who comes to us.

More recently, Walter's Walk began providing local therapists and other professionals with opportunities for continuing education. We EMDR therapy to be an effective treatment for those who have experienced trauma, depression and anxiety. Currently, Walter's Walk has 12 therapists trained in EMDR therapy, including an in-house EMDR consultant. Twice a year we welcome trainings from Trauma Recovery, EMDR Humanitarian Assistance Programs. We are also in the process of becoming a Trauma Recovery/HAP Training Center of Excellence.

We offer trauma recovery services to First Responders and their family members. Walter's Walk schedules special awareness days for the responders, counseling groups for children, and even a night of laughter with comedian David Naster. He came to St. Louis after the events in Ferguson and created a documentary on the importance of humor in recovery and wellness. He also produced a video about PTSD and how humor can assist with healing. The video is available on our web site (www.walterswalk.com).

Whatever we do and however we grow, we are constantly reminded of where we began. A picture of Walter, my dad, hangs in our foyer, and I often stand before him and ask for his intercession for our center. Sure enough, just when we need it most, we get what we need: an unexpected donation; a new client who needs us; a new provider who wants to help.

For more information on our classes and workshops, open to all, or to find out how you can contribute to the work of Walter's Walk, visit our website at www.walterswalk.com.

I am humbled and grateful for my dad's inspiration and the life experiences that helped me to bring my idea to fruition. Click [here](#) to take a walk in my past with me, and you'll understand.