

SUPPORT CIRCLES - BUILDING A VISION

by Judith Snow and Marsha Forest

INTRODUCTION

Five years have passed since we first wrote an article about the Joshua Committee, and we are now more than ever convinced that we were and are on the right track. We are all the more certain that in order for human beings to survive they must have a network of real relationships in their daily lives. Real relationships include friends, relatives, co-workers, lovers, not simply paid professionals who come and go at the whim of the service world. This is not to imply that professionals are never needed, but their role is always best defined and limited by the needs and vision of an organic, living network of ordinary people who know and relate to each other.

Five years ago we wrote about ourselves as two women whose lives came together in the context of the Joshua Committee. This experience has become a major focus for both of our lives. The Joshua Committee model makes it possible for people who have been denied an ordinary chance at having relationships to enter into this empowering means of life. Here is a process in which everyone grows and everyone wins. Not only does the person with the challenging need benefit, but there is value for everyone involved.

We have learned and we have changed through sharing this experience. Judith has grown as a person and a professional, and has learned a great deal about the importance of a powerful vision in drawing people together in mutual commitment. She has helped hundreds of people throughout Canada and the United States to discover their giftedness through "circling together." Marsha has learned and also grown as a person and a professional, and has helped hundreds of people throughout Canada and the United States to bring education alive through curriculum developed in the context of supportive relationships in the classroom.

One of our major contributions has been the founding of the Integration Action Group. During one of our summer Education for Integration courses, we inspired a group of parents to re-connect with their hearts and their children. They began to demand excellence and thus integration in all aspects of their children's lives.

Through the synergy of the group we have seen countless examples of partnership and interdependence leading to growth, energy, hope action and success.

Each individual in the group could never have accomplished what the team has done as a cooperative and organic unit. Slowly but relentlessly, school boards everywhere in Canada are learning that a complete education is an integrated education.

We do not want to imply that all of this took place in an atmosphere of "peace and tranquility." The Joshua Committee has thrived because each recognizes the unique and different experience offered by every other member. Deep and sometimes painful listening takes place, and we have weathered many a stormy meeting, including tears and shouting! Through it all, the Joshua Committee members have all become stronger and wiser. How glad we are that we discovered circling!

SEVEN TRUTHS ABOUT CIRCLES

No two support circles are the same. (We suggest each group have its own name.) However, there are some general principles that are applicable to all circles and circling. Here is what we have learned:

1. Circles often form around two people who are in a very strong relationship, where the advocate speaks for the challenged person. This was true for Judith when she had her collapse, when Marsha called friends to her house to think and do what was necessary to get Judith back on the road to health again. This is also true for parents who speak for a young child with a challenging need. As these children move into adulthood it is often necessary to build a double circle: one around the parents and one around the child and her/his new friends. This allows the child to develop independence from her/his family. Later on, in full adulthood, a single circle around the challenged person will remain, with or without his or her advocate, depending on other circumstances.
2. Strong circles usually form around a person who herself/himself wants to change. Such people make phenomenal changes in their own lives once they have the required support of a circle. On the other hand, you cannot force a circle on someone who is content with life, or afraid of change. Meetings will always be boring and the group will eventually fall apart.
3. The person who is the focus of the circle will grow in direct relationship to the honesty and commitment of the circle membership. Her/his vision is shaped and brought into reality by a combination of deep listening, caring, challenge and committed effort on the part of each circle member.

The purpose and direction of the circle is defined by the dream of the person in question. The key question must constantly be, What do you

want? What do you really want? When a circle loses touch with the dream of the "circled" individual, she/he will subvert or stall the process by getting sick, behaving badly, or otherwise holding up the process until real listening happens again.

5. If a circle is too small, everyone will feel under pressure. Invite more people to join! If a circle is too big, people will quit because they don't have enough to do. The size of the circle is dependent on how much the "circled" person wants to change and how fast. Small circles form around little dreams; big ones are needed for big changes.
6. Circles often come into being first during a crisis because this is when the "circled" person figures out what they really need instead of simply tolerating and adjusting to things as they are. A circle can form without a crisis if the central person is prepared to ask for what she/he really needs. Quite often people ask for what they think they can get, not what they want. This causes other people to feel manipulated and they back off or reject. When a person asks for what she/he really needs, other people feel needed and empowered to commit energy and time. This explains why circles are usually made up of people that the circled person has known for a long time, but never successfully approached before.
7. Because it is often difficult for a person who is devalued or his/her advocate to tell the dream or ask for what they really need, it is often necessary for a facilitator to work with the person(s) during the formation of the circle, or at other times when the group seems "stuck". The facilitator may be a member of another support circle. Sometimes a "broker" or "co-ordinator" may be paid to work at forming these groups. Such a person must be deeply committed to the value of relationships instead of therapy in a person's life. She/her must be a good listener, ready to love and challenge the circled person to reveal the empowering dream. The facilitator must trust the circle members, helping them to value the story and the person behind the story. The facilitator must also be clear about the amount of time and the number of meetings she/he can spend with each circle in order to maintain everyone's trust.

STORIES ABOUT CIRCLE BUILDING - the nuts and bolts

Once a person has decided that she/he wants a circle, how does she/he get going? We want to use some real examples to describe the process. (All names are fictionalized.)

Marie and her husband Bob are splitting up. They have two girls, and one has been rejected because people feel she cannot be educated in a regular class in a real school (as opposed to a retarded school).

Marie has just lost a year-long battle with her local school board to have her daughter Joan integrated. The fight has been messy and Marie is emotionally, physically and financially drained. She has also been spending every afternoon and weekend with her daughter because Joan has no friends and no extra support services to meet unusual physical needs.

Marie finds herself thinking about placing Joan in a group home for handicapped children and wonders why things have gotten so out of hand.

Joan was in a regular grade one class last year, but her teacher kept her on a separate program and often sent the aide and Joan away from the class to do entirely different things from the other first grade students. Joan made no friends because the students soon learned from the modelling of the teacher that Joan was not really one of the kids. Now the school board says that they have nothing to offer. Marie is saying, "If this is integration, I don't want it! Integration doesn't work. She's better off in a segregated school."

Sandy is another parent with two sons, both of whom have challenging needs. She knows that Marie needs help and she has reached out through phone calls and visits. She invites another friend, Judith, who is experienced at building support circles to get to know Marie and to offer her help. Sandy also invites along another parent who has a challenging child in a good integration situation. Together they visit Marie and Joan at their own home.

Judith listens to Marie and encourages her over and over again to say what she really needs and wants. She encourages her to get angry, not at Joan, but at the professionals who have failed to see her daughter as a gifted addition to a classroom.

Judith explains what circles are all about; how people would support her to take on another appeal, build friends around Joan, find a better job and get her other daughter a better summer program.

At first Marie says she has no friends, but with some encouragement she is able to come up with a list of fifteen neighbours, friends and professionals who have been supportive over the last few years.

Sandy and the others offer their support and agree to help Marie invite everyone to a night of story telling and dreaming. When the evening arrives, everyone shows up and Marie starts to tell everybody how grateful she is for their concern. At first her story reveals no big problems, but Judith helps her to tell the real story, to trust that people will listen and support her. With much anger, frustration and tears, the story unfolds and then the dream of a real education and real friends for Joan, and of an important new job for Marie plus a chance to start life again, also unfolds.

Several people immediately offer to pressure the school board through personal contacts, a petition and a new appeal. Neighbourhood children offer to invite Joan and her sister to different parties, weekends of fun and the local Boy's and Girl's Club. Someone knows of a job coming up and someone else has heard of a retraining program at the local community college.

Another has a teenage niece who would love to babysit. Three or four people have nothing to say, but they offer to come again to another circle meeting. Judith helps Marie to accept these offers graciously and not to put herself down. Everyone agrees that Marie does not have to bake for the next meeting, but they will bring their own pot luck supper. The circle has begun.

Unfortunately, the pattern that led to this crisis is not unusual. Marie has allowed herself to fall into the handicapping trap of taking on all the work and fighting herself, allowing herself and her daughters to become isolated and victimized by the system. She wants to protect her family from rejection and hurt. She also has some fears about exposing Joan to the real world.

From this story we learn that no one can change the system by herself/himself and that burnout results and everyone loses without a support system.

Over and over we see the pattern. A parent starts to believe all the negative messages sent through the years by the medical and educational establishments. The parent starts to see the child as a problem rather than seeing that the system is failing the child. Afraid to burden others, the parent becomes more and more isolated, fragmented, frustrated and hysterical. Because she believes that nobody else cares, or can understand, believe in or love her child, she never reaches out for the help that neighbours and friends can provide. Rather she becomes the recipient of the wrong kind of service. The help she really needs is the help we all need: that of ordinary citizens.

The mystique is powerful. This child, who has medical-sounding labels seems to need experts, pills and treatment. In fact, this child really needs friends, activities and common sense guidance to support her life.

Marie has learned to ask for what she things she can get, not what she really wants. She has learned to call segregation, integration and abuse, help, instead of using the real language of neighbours and the community.

Marie needs the help of others to ask and to speak about her real experience. She needs to discover that people will care about and believe in her dreams for herself and for her daughters. Many circles are started by a facilitator like Judith who will hang in there long enough to support Marie in her asking.

What we can see from this and other similar stories is that ordinary citizens and neighbours do care but are rarely asked. Once asked, they will respond with a multitude of ordinary resources and lots of energy.

The next story shows what happens when a strong circle is built.

Helen had been segregated all her life. Her parents loved her, but had lost all sense of purpose, direction and hope for her. Helen attended a behaviour management program intended to curb her more disturbing activities and she came home on weekends. With no friends and a weakening family tie, the future looked monotonous and dark for her.

As the Education for Integration course held at NIMR, the parents joined with other families in sharing dreams and stories. When asked what they really wanted, the Rockford's dared admit they wanted Helen to go to a regular high school.

With the support of their new friends, they decided to go to the school system and ask for Helen to be registered at the local high school. Their request was denied and school officials turned nasty during appeal procedures, revealing their underlying prejudice against people with challenging needs. At the human rights board, compromise was accepted and Helen moved into the alternative school system.

Marsha asked a supportive psychologist to help do an educational plan for Helen. He spent the time necessary to get to know her well so that he could talk about her strengths and gifts knowledgably, as well as think with her family about ordinary solutions to her needs. One glaring aspect of Helen's life was her complete isolation from friends of her own age.

Also, her parents had great difficulty in articulating any positive attributes for their daughter.

Their view of her was reflected in her bedroom, the room of a three year old child. It was filled with teddy bears, Mickey Mouse toys, etc.

This family was stuck!!

Marsha helped the family find a grant to hire a young woman who began to build a circle of friends around Helen. She and Helen went horseback riding, shopping and later went to a summer program with kids that attended Helen's future high school. The young woman encouraged and allowed the kids to be with Helen, occasionally modelling appropriate interactions for them. Soon the kids were helping to redesign Helen's bedroom into a teenage style room and going with her and her facilitator to shops, movies, etc.

When the school year began, Helen was no stranger to the high school students and soon a circle formed. The facilitator invited a group of teenagers to help design and implement a program at school. They build her curriculum around strengths she had shown during the summer, drawing from the psychologist's work as well.

Two circles were formed: one for the parents and one for Helen. Soon Helen was going to wrestling matches, dances and attending regular high school classes. Her parents, now in shock from having a house full of teenagers, were enjoying a new vision for themselves and their daughter. They learned to let go of her, to let her be with her friends, take real risks and participate in teenage life. Helen came home to stay as her behaviour became more and more life that of her new friends. Two young people from the circle became paid after-school support workers with Special Services funding.

This summer, Helen is going to be a Counsellor In Training with three other teenagers at an integrated summer program at York University. The future holds nothing but promise for Helen.

This study reveals the importance of a positive vision in the life of a person with challenging needs. For 14 years, Helen's parents had believed that her life could go nowhere and so it was indeed going nowhere. As soon as they knew that she had gifts to share with her community and especially with friends her own age, they began to change and soon Helen revealed how ready she too, was to change.

It took a great deal of courage and enormous doses of support, but this family made incredible changes in one year. Helen herself has unmasked the ignorance of her former educators who labelled her at the bottom of their imaginary scale of abilities. She has revealed that she is a gifted member of her teenage crowd.

In this story as well, we see that importance of two circles or two support systems. Teenagers naturally must lead a life of activity, partly separate from their parents needs and routines. This is a normal part of gaining an adult life of interdependence in the community. A double support group allows this separateness to happen.

We also can see that other teenagers consider Helen to be important. A wide variety of teenagers were attracted to the idea of the circle and ultimately to Helen herself, as a real friend in their world.

We have one final story. Circles are not for everyone.

Duncan is a 42 year old man who is a strong advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. His entire life focuses on his own challenging needs and those of others. He knew about Judith and her circle and decided he wanted one, too.

A dozen people who knew Duncan well gathered at his apartment one evening at his invitation. Duncan spoke about his many struggles to manage his own attendant care services, plus his advocating for others. It became clear as the meeting progressed that Duncan's vision for himself did not include any change in his priorities or life-style. He was looking for helpers in his huge debt, without wanting to examine the causes of his difficulty and how they could be altered.

The meeting dissolved with the realization that Duncan did not really want the challenge of a circle. Duncan is still out there, still fighting and finding new allies every year. He really didn't need or want a support circle.

This story reveals that having relationships is a challenge to anyone and particularly to someone who is viewed as "needing help." The challenge is to change and participate along with the others in the circle, not sit back and tell others what to do. Relationships demand a two-way street, and circles are not for everyone.

CONCLUSION

Building circles and living in the community is a complex and challenging task for anyone. However, we feel that for most families and adults with special needs, the circle is a pre-condition for real community participation. The circle is the focus of relationship and responsibility that values and empowers the contribution of the challenged person. The circle is the means whereby ordinary and professional help can be combined to bring a vision to life in the everyday world. In this way, as well, everyone involved can grow and be known for her/his unique place in the group.

The circle is not a new concept. However, in the context of today's struggle to integrate and fully value people with challenging needs, the circle is truly revolutionary.

We look forward to further understanding and application of the support circle model. A team of workshop leaders is available to teach this concept. Contact Judith Snow or Marsha Forest at the G. Allan Roeher Institute, 4700 Keele Street, Downsview, Ontario, M3J 1P3. Comments and dialogue about this article are most welcome. Happy circling!