

TELLING *the* STORIES of DEMOCRACY



SPECIAL ISSUE:

*Profiles of eight people making a difference
in their communities through study circles*

By Martha L. McCoy



Martha L. McCoy is executive director of the Study Circles Resource Center.

Circles Resource Center is committed to conveying the power of people thinking, talking, and working together to create change. That is why we have begun to use story telling in all of our work. (See side bar below.)

Stories speak to us in ways that nothing else can. As the carrying agents of ideas and inspiration, they can connect us to something larger than ourselves.

As a national organization that helps communities develop their own ability to solve problems, the Study

How we're telling the story of democracy:

- The theme of our national conference—Oct. 7 and 8, in Northbrook, Illinois—is “Telling the Story of Democracy.” Come to listen and share the story of what is happening in your community.
- Our new web site (to be launched this fall) will constantly highlight new and updated stories—on a range of issue areas and from a wide diversity of communities. A new feature on the web site, “Tell Us Your Story,” will give you the opportunity to share your study circle experience in your own words.
- *What Democracy Looks Like* is a new series of stories that provides journalistic coverage of a variety of communities that are using community dialogue to take on tough public problems.

Stories of people who work each day to give everyone a voice and place in the community can:

- Show us what is possible in our own lives and communities. They remind us that we are not alone in the kinds of challenges we face. Then, as we see change taking place in communities like ours, we gain hope and practical ideas. And we experience a connection with people from all kinds of backgrounds and communities who share a similar vision.
- Remind us that community change is a messy and difficult journey. Making real change is tough, and the most powerful stories don't pretend otherwise.
- Help document the results of engaging the whole community. Everyone struggles with measuring the impact of their work, and we all know that numbers aren't the only way to measure progress. Documenting authentic stories of change in communities is a great way to map and convey results.
- Show the way to a stronger democracy. If we hear an isolated story, no matter how powerful, it's tempting to think that it's an exception. But when we hear many stories, themes begin to come out. Voice. Diversity. Relationships. Sharing power and resources. People working together to do things they could never do alone.

For this special issue of *Focus*, we decided to tell stories of community change through some of the individuals who are participating and taking leadership in study circle programs. We asked Julie Fanselow—freelance journalist and writer of our *What Democracy Looks Like* series—to capture their experiences.

What we heard has re-energized our own commitment to strengthen democracy at the local level. We hope that these stories will fuel your own civic imagination and sense of what is possible in our democracy. We look forward to hearing and telling your story.

“...these stories will fuel your own civic imagination and sense of what is possible in our democracy.”

—Martha L. McCoy

Amy Bondoc | Stockton, California

Helping her peers *Mix It Up* at school

A school of more than 2,600 students isn't the easiest place to stand out—or fit in. But Amy Bondoc, a recent graduate of Bear Creek High School in Stockton, California, made a niche for herself when she became an organizer of the school's Mix It Up program. Just as important, she helped other students discover their talents and reach beyond the social and racial barriers of high school life.

Not many years ago, fighting among students was a real problem at Bear Creek. The diversity of the student population was one factor; so was overcrowding, since Bear Creek was built for only 1,800 students. In 2003, guidance counselor Lori Laughlin, then head of the school's conflict mediation center, heard about Mix It Up, a joint project of the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Study Circles Resource Center that helps students identify, question, and cross racial and social boundaries.

Laughlin called on student leaders to help coordinate a Mix It Up at Lunch Day and follow-up discussion circles. Bondoc

was a natural choice since she was a member of the school's conflict mediation team, and active in Bear Creek's "Link Crew," which helps freshmen get settled on campus. In the first year

"Helping people has always been my passion."

—Amy Bondoc

of Mix It Up, Amy used her school connections to help the organizing team recruit more than 600 students to take part in the dialogue.

The following year, Bondoc wrote discussion guidelines to help students focus on what it means to give and receive pride and respect at school and beyond. Later, she and fellow Bear Creek student David Nguyen teamed with SCRC and Tolerance.org to present Mix It Up success tips at the Coalition of Essential Schools' 2004 Fall Forum in San Francisco.

Longtime Bear Creek principal Bill Toledo and Lisa Deeter, who has taken over Laughlin's job, agree that Mix It Up definitely improved the school climate. Three years ago,

Bear Creek High School's *Mix It Up* Dialogue program at a glance:

- City and state: Stockton, California
- Population of Bear Creek High School: 2,600
- Focus of Mix It Up: Social barriers and school climate
- Number of Mix It Up Dialogue participants to date: 600



PHOTO CREDIT: Bear Creek High School

Amy Bondoc (center holding sign) poses for a photo with fellow Bear Creek High School classmates while presenting on Mix It Up Dialogues at TeenWorks 2004 conference.

student surveys mentioned racial tensions as a key concern. "Now it's rarely brought up," says Deeter. Toledo credits Mix It Up and the follow-up discussion circles with giving students opportunities to talk about differences instead of resorting to violence. The educators also give kudos to Bondoc, whose quiet leadership style and can-do attitude motivated her peers to get involved. "She is very perceptive, very aware of the whole picture and how people influence their own outcomes," Laughlin says.

Ask Bondoc how many hours she put in weekly on her leadership roles—which also included student government—and it's clear she doesn't view her activities as extracurricular. "I apply my values the whole school day, no matter what I am doing," she says. "Helping people has always been my passion."

Bondoc is now in her first year at Fresno State, where she plans to major in business. She'd like to become an entrepreneur someday, and she believes the skills she learned at Bear Creek—teamwork and listening with an open mind—will serve her well in the business world. But the experience has been rich on a personal level, too. Bondoc hopes her four younger siblings will benefit from the results of her activism and continue the tradition, becoming activists themselves someday. "Being an example for my brothers and sisters is what motivates me," she says.

Fire station project sparked new partnerships

PHOTO CREDIT: Julie Fanslow



Benny Nichols, study circle facilitator and now chief of Fayetteville's fire department, helped make Fire Station No. 14 a reality. The station will serve as a hands-on site for 12-week internships that are part of a four-year fire science degree.

There's a new fire station in Fayetteville, North Carolina, but Station No. 14 isn't just any firehouse. For the first time in three decades, the Fayetteville State University neighborhood has its own fire station, and it doubles as a learning center for students preparing for fire science careers.

Fire Station No. 14 was the inspiration of Benny Nichols, chief of the fire department serving this mid-size city. In early 1999, Nichols—then assistant fire chief—was a facilitator for race relations study circles sponsored by the city Human Relations Commission and Fayetteville United, an organization dedicated to building stronger connections among residents of different races. Providing mentoring for youth was among the top priorities identified in these circles.

Soon after, Nichols had a brainstorm. Local high schools had just established career "academies," as a way to help students think about job opportunities. Each academy focused on different trades and professions. At the same time, the fire department was struggling to attract more minority applicants. Says Nichols, "In the study circles, people kept on saying we need to support our young people, and I suddenly thought, what if the city built a fire station near Fayetteville State University—a historically black institution in a predominantly African-American neighborhood? And what if we used it as a magnet to recruit and train more people of color and women?"

Nichols took his proposal to Fire Chief Pete Piner, the chief's successor Chief James Hall, and City Manager Roger Stancil. The three men liked the plan, but other projects took precedence. A faltering economy kept the idea on the back burner until 2003, when Fayetteville State welcomed a new chancellor, T.J. Bryan, whose goals included stronger campus-community ties. Within weeks, Stancil visited Bryan to tell her about the fire station plan, and Bryan expressed interest.

Fayetteville State soon made a commitment to develop a four-year fire science degree with two concentrations—fire department manager and fire investigator. And Fayetteville Technical Community College expanded its own fire science program. The partnership grew in spring 2005 when staff at E.E. Smith High School, located near Fayetteville State, made the classes available to its students, too.

At the college level, many of the classes will be offered online—for local students and for people everywhere, including military personnel based at nearby Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base who are stationed around the world.

Ground was broken on Fayetteville State land in spring 2005 for the city-funded \$3.4 million, 19,000-square-foot Station No. 14, with completion expected in October. Aside from providing fire protection to the university neighborhood, the station will serve as a hands-on site for 12-week internships that are part of the four-year fire science degree.

It took six years for the project to move to completion, but Nichols says that gave officials plenty of time to build support and wait for the right people, like Bryan, to emerge in the right places. Ron McElrath, human relations director for Fayetteville-Cumberland County, credits Nichols with keeping the idea alive and providing leadership to see it move forward. "He kept the coals hot," McElrath says.

"In the study circles, people kept on saying we need to support our young people, and I suddenly thought, what if the city built a fire station near Fayetteville State University...And what if we used it as a magnet to recruit and train more people of color and women?"

—Benny Nichols

Fayetteville's study circle program at a glance:

- City and state: Fayetteville, North Carolina
- Population: More than 124,000
- Focus of study circles: Racism and race relations
- Number of study circle participants to date: More than 2,500

Johnnie Ellison | Austin, Texas

Mobilizing students for the future

Since its start in 2003, Austin Voices for Education and Youth has been pursuing its vision of creating schools and neighborhoods where young people can “learn, connect, work, lead, and thrive.” One way it does this is by hiring high school students as Youth Mobilizers, a small but mighty corps of students who are becoming catalysts for more effective communication and action among school officials, students, and the whole community.

Johnnie Ellison is a key member of the team. After leaving school to have her two children, Johnnie enrolled at Garza High, where the Youth Mobilizers are based. In spring 2004, enticed by the opportunity to earn volunteer credit toward graduation, Ellison took part in “Community Conversations about Education”—study circles organized by Austin Voices and the Youth Mobilizers. Free child care for her sons made it possible for her to attend. But Ellison says she stayed with it because she found her views were taken seriously. “I was so amazed they wanted youth input,” she recalls.

Soon after, Ellison joined the Youth Mobilizers and began her own activist career. “Johnnie is a risk-taker and willing to take chances, even in situations that are completely new to her,” says Amy Averett, Austin Voices’ executive director. “She is willing to get outside her comfort zone to take on new experiences and challenges.”

For example, Ellison and the other mobilizers helped the Austin Independent School District turn out the vote for its largest-ever bond issue. Using a balanced, four-page informational fact sheet, the team publicized the election throughout the community—distributing leaflets at schools and in neighborhoods, and making the most of the media, including a student-produced public service announcement



Johnnie Ellison stands in front of a mural of the Texas flag and the griffin school mascot at Garza High School, home of the Youth Mobilizers.

aimed at encouraging older students to register and vote. The \$519 million measure passed in September 2004.

The Youth Mobilizers are now working on an initiative called “Ready By 21” for which they created, distributed, and tabulated a survey of more than 400 youth to identify and fill gaps in current community resources for youth. And recently, the school district invited Austin Voices and the Youth Mobilizers to help coordinate two one-session conversations about the district’s plans to redesign high schools so they work better for all students. No matter what the project, “the idea is to empower youth who are equipped to make the future a better place,” says Austin Voices community organizer Tim Eubanks.

Like all the Mobilizers, Ellison earned both school credit and a stipend for her work, and she has the option of saving some of her earnings in a college account that is matched two-to-one by Austin Voices. At graduation, Ellison was honored with the “Spirit of Garza” award for the Class of 2005. She’s now attending Austin Community College and would like to be a restaurant critic.

Of course, she also spends plenty of time being Mom to sons Jamor, 2, and Jaylynn, 1; in that role, she’ll continue to draw on her experiences as a mobilizer. “When they start going to school, I will be able to be a more involved parent—to know where to go and who to talk with to make things better,” Ellison says.

“...I will be able to be a more involved parent—to know where to go and who to talk with to make things better.”

—Johnnie Ellison
on her youth mobilizing experience.

Austin’s study circle program at a glance:

- City and state: Austin, Texas
- Population: More than 680,000
- Focus of study circles: Education
- Number of study circle participants to date: More than 80

Fostering understanding across cultures and continents



PHOTO CREDIT: Yonkers Early Childhood Initiative

(From left to right) May Annabi, Immaculate Ferreria-Allah, and Maria Diaz, facilitators for Yonkers Early Childhood Initiative's Neighborhood Circles.

When May Annabi moved to Yonkers, New York, from Jordan, she noticed that Arab-Americans didn't interact much with the general population. But through her work with Neighborhood Circles, Annabi helped many Arab-Americans in Yonkers feel more connected to the community at large and to their own culture.

The Neighborhood Circles, organized by the Yonkers Early Childhood Initiative, began in 2002 as an effort to strengthen community life and help residents improve their neighborhoods. Annabi, who was executive director of the Arab-American Foundation, leaped at the chance to organize and facilitate a Neighborhood Circle. "I got involved because I want the Arab voice to be heard, and for the women and children to have better chances," she explains.

Historically, Yonkers social service organizations have had a difficult time reaching the Arab-American community, says Lorelei Vargas, coordinator of the Early Childhood Initiative. But with her trademark hospitality—she'd sometimes bring falafel and other Arabic treats to meetings—Annabi soon proved an effective bridge between Arab-Americans and the larger culture.

"She was definitely able to open doors for more than 60 organizations to communicate with the Arab-American community in Yonkers," Vargas says. "Many of our member organizations—including St. John's Riverside Hospital and a local ecumenical group—now report having contact with and being able to provide services to the Arab-American community in Yonkers. Prior to May's work we knew the population existed, and we knew they had needs, but we were unable due to language and cultural barriers to reach out."

Annabi's circle met for six weeks to talk about ways to build a neighborhood where children and families could thrive.

They talked about wanting to preserve their own culture while working for a better future in the United States. Young people, working mothers, and senior groups spun off into separate groups to continue exploring what it means to be Arabs in America. "My concern is not to be closed off on ourselves," Annabi says.

At the end of the Neighborhood Circles, each group received a \$1,000 grant from the Sherman Fairchild Foundation to support their plans for improving their neighborhoods. Annabi led circle participants, family members, and friends—55 people in all—on a field trip to Paterson, New Jersey, home to one of the East Coast's most vibrant Arab-American neighborhoods. The circle also sponsored an exhibit of Jordanian art at the local public library. Impressed by the work all the circles had done, Congresswoman Nita Lowey obtained \$10,000 in federal funding to help run more study circles.

The Arab-American circles and follow-up events were successes, says Vargas, because Annabi really cares about her community and wants to make it a better place for the families and children living there. Annabi would like to start study circles in her Jordanian homeland, and in Seattle, where she has moved to be closer to her daughter. With ambassadors like Annabi ready to spread the message of community dialogue and action, study circles can become an international tool that can make a world of difference no matter where they are used.

"I got involved because I want the Arab voice to be heard, and for the women and children to have better chances."

—May Annabi
on volunteering as an organizer
and facilitator for the Yonkers
Early Childhood Initiative's
Neighborhood Circles.

Yonker's study circle program at a glance:

- City and state: Yonkers, New York
- Population: More than 198,000
- Focus of study circles: Neighborhood revitalization
- Number of study circle participants to date: More than 100

Bert Cohen | Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Experience is the best teacher

On Earth Day 2005, Bert Cohen gathered 45 children in the music room at Greenland Elementary in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. “Tell me about your favorite foods,” he said, directing the students to place themselves along an imaginary line according to how healthy the foods are for their

bodies. He then asked them to realign themselves according to how healthy the foods are for our planet. “How is it grown? How is it packaged? How does it get to you?” he inquired. Before long, the

“Study circles are a tool to find out what’s on people’s minds.”

—Bert Cohen

children were grasping the concept of sustainable living and the impact our choices have for the Earth and its future.

Sustainability is a watchword throughout Portsmouth these days. This new mindset is the direct outgrowth of action taken by Bert Cohen, Skye Maher, and Zelita Morgan, all of whom participated in a round of study circles held by Portsmouth Listens, a partnership between the city, volunteer leaders, and several hundred citizens. The trio worked to introduce the idea of a sustainability framework to Portsmouth’s master plan. “It really shows the power of the study circle process,” says Jim Nocas, Portsmouth Listens co-chair.

Portsmouth’s new master plan features many sustainability measures including recycling, improving energy efficiency in city buildings, reducing water consumption, and boosting the city’s public transit and bicycling infrastructure. Portsmouth also is building a new “green” public library using recycled steel and pollutant-free paints and carpeting.

Sarah James, co-author of *The Natural Step for Communities: How Cities and Towns Can Change to Sustainable Practices*, recently visited to present a workshop to city department heads and other community leaders, with another workshop planned later for the wider community.

Portsmouth’s study circle program at a glance:

- City and state: Portsmouth, New Hampshire
- Population: More than 21,000
- Focus of study circles: Visioning, education, and bullying
- Number of study circle participants to date: More than 400



PHOTO CREDIT: Amy Donle

Bert Cohen poses for a photo with Portsmouth as the backdrop. Cohen, a study circle participant, introduced the idea of sustainability to Portsmouth’s master plan.

According to Cohen, study circles and Natural Step go hand-in-hand. Cohen says that study circles via Portsmouth Listens, are “unique, powerful, and terrific” since the city commits to listening to what Portsmouth Listens participants have to say. “Study circles are a tool to find out what’s on people’s minds,” he adds. Moreover, the circles developed a network of citizens who are ready to engage in creative dialogue and action plans, no matter what issues arise. Natural Step offers “a framework for sustainability, because it allows people to talk across disciplines,” whether they’re addressing waterfront renovation, worker housing, or a new public library. “The Natural Step framework gives you a compass to help determine which way to go.”

A lifelong educator who has taught in elementary schools and in universities, Cohen says study circles dovetail with his passion for experiential learning. Whether it’s helping grade-school kids navigate a “Healthy Earth Lunch” exercise, or accompanying New Hampshire teachers to Belize each year via a program he founded, Cohen knows experience leads to understanding.

Cohen believes the collaborative nature of study circles can help lead the way from talking about environmental issues to taking action. “Frequently, we have the technological solutions and intellectual information we need to address issues,” he says. “What we need to build is the social capital,” which study circles do by bringing together all kinds of people and giving them a way to talk and work together to solve problems.

Leading and thriving in a diverse community

TELLING the STORIES of DEMOCRACY



PHOTO CREDIT: Julie Fanselow

Brenda De León and Moises Padilla pause for a photo at Lexington's study circle action forum on immigration.

For Brenda De León, study circles represent “a life-changing experience.” And Moises Padilla says he learned many things in study circles that he can take on to college and a business career. For both graduates of the Lexington High School Class of 2005, taking part in the process was an exciting new way to learn more about how others view the world.

De León and Padilla were part of a team that helped launch study circles in Lexington, a city of about 11,000 people in south-central Nebraska. A former railroad town now dominated by a meat-packing plant, today Lexington is home to many new residents from Latin America who have come to town because there are opportunities to find work.

This community that once had few people of color now has a majority Latino population, along with a growing stream of refugees from Africa. To help longtime residents and newcomers find ways to communicate and improve services in their community, Lexington has begun study circles.

Just a few weeks before their graduation last spring, Padilla and De León put in a full day of classes, then competed in school sports events before heading off to an “action forum”—a community event designed to capture ideas generated in a round of study circles on immigration. Throughout the evening, the bilingual teens—both born in Mexico—helped keep discussions on track, translating the proceedings for participants who spoke only Spanish.

When it came time to decide on action priorities, the participants agreed that a one-stop information center for new immigrants was badly needed. Some community leaders from churches and other organizations had already begun

meeting to revive and expand the one-stop resource center idea. Participants at the action forum were invited to join the team, and 12 people signed up that night.

Inspired by their experience in the study circles, De León and Padilla started a study circle-style program at Lexington High School. Called Breaking Boundaries, the circles aimed to help students reach beyond race and class barriers.

Patricia Sanchez-Stewart, a leadership development specialist for the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service, says taking leadership on this project enhanced Padilla and De León's stature as positive role models. “Other kids want to know how to get involved,” she adds. In June, both teens went to Seattle, as part of a 12-person team, to report on Lexington's study circles success at the Developing Networks of Responsibility to Educate America's Youth conference.

Both students have been awarded college scholarships. This fall, De León plans to attend the University of Nebraska at Kearney, while Padilla will enroll at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Wherever life leads them, the skills they've developed as study circle leaders will help these dynamic teens take leadership in college and beyond.

Inspired by their experience in the study circles, De León and Padilla started a study circle-style program at Lexington High School.

The study circles are part of a project that grew out of “Developing Networks of Responsibility to Educate America's Youth”—an initiative that is funded by the Kellogg Foundation via the Institute for Educational Inquiry.

Lexington's study circle program at a glance:

- City and state: Lexington, Nebraska
- Population: More than 11,000
- Focus of study circles: Immigration, parent involvement, and breaking down social barriers
- Number of study circle participants to date: More than 140

Building bridges between schools and the Latino community

In Latin American countries—including Guatemala, where Gladis Martinez grew up—parents are not expected to get involved in their children’s schools. But soon after she came to the United States and had children of her own, Martinez learned that in North America, parental involvement is not only encouraged, it’s expected.

Martinez took this lesson to heart. Now, as an Americorps volunteer for the Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program, she is carrying that message to other Spanish-speaking parents.

Martinez found her calling when she took part in study circles in the fall of 2004. The Montgomery County schools serve about 140,000 students

in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. The district uses study circles to look at the ways that student achievement is linked to issues of race and ethnicity and to explore ways to narrow the achievement gap and encourage students to succeed—regardless of their race, ethnicity, or economic background.

Study Circles Program Director John Landeman knew he needed a Spanish-speaking parent who could reach out to other Latinas and Latinos, and he quickly realized Martinez had these skills. If study circles are a bridge for better communication between parents and the schools, then “Gladis is the on-ramp to the bridge,” he says. Martinez doesn’t just call people to invite them to study circles, he adds. “She shows up the first night to make them feel comfortable—to show them it’s something they can do.”



Gladis Martinez, an Americorps volunteer for the Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program, helps organize study circles and recruit Spanish-speaking parents into the discussions.

Martinez began volunteering at her daughter’s school when Gabriela, now 21, was in kindergarten. At the same time, she worked hard to learn English, making it a priority because she realized it was the best way to help her children succeed in school. Today, in addition to her Americorps duties, Martinez is active at both Brookhaven Elementary, where her daughters Elizabeth and Victoria attend, and at Parkland Middle School, where her son Daniel is enrolled.

As her children advance through the school system, Martinez says she hopes to train other parent volunteers to pick up where she and other activists have left off. She also is working to earn her own high school diploma through GED classes. Eventually, she says she would like a job where she can draw on the lessons she’s learned as a volunteer—perhaps as a parent advocate in the schools. “This job is helping me put my ideas together and say what I want to say,” says Martinez.

Although she is now bilingual, Martinez remembers her own struggles to communicate for years after she came to the United States. But she insists the language barrier shouldn’t keep parents from learning about their children’s schools. “Someone said to me, ‘I don’t write and I don’t read,’ and I said, ‘That’s OK. You can hear,’” she says. (The Montgomery County circles use simultaneous language translation through live interpreters.) Martinez also works to help Spanish-speaking parents recognize how schools operate differently here than in their native countries. She acknowledges that racial and cultural barriers exist. “We’re not going to deny that,” Martinez says. “But we are living here and we want the best for our kids.”

If study circles are a bridge for better communication between parents and the schools, then “Gladis is the on-ramp to the bridge.”

—Study Circles Program Director John Landeman

Montgomery County Public School’s study circle program at a glance:

- City and state: Montgomery County, Maryland
- District Population: More than 140,00 students
- Focus of study circles: Student achievement, race and race relations
- Number of study circle participants to date: More than 350

Michael Morris | Indianapolis, Indiana

A new vision of community

PHOTO CREDIT: The Indianapolis Star



Michael Morris, a facilitator for Indianapolis' Family Circles, with his two daughters, Mariah and Melanie.

Life is bright these days for Michael Morris. The single father is active in his community and is pursuing new goals: a career for himself and college for his two daughters. He credits his newfound, positive outlook to his experience in a study circle program called Indianapolis Family Circles.

Morris has endured and overcome many setbacks. As a young man, he lost his right eye after being stabbed by gang members. He went on disability, and he and his daughters eventually had to move to an Indianapolis public housing complex with a particularly rough reputation. He had no desire to interact with anyone at the Hawthorne Place Apartments until several neighbors talked him into joining the new small-group community dialogue known as Family Circles. There, he learned other Hawthorne residents had the same concerns he did, mostly for their children's safety and education. "I realized people wanted something better," he says. This experience proved to be a turning point for Morris and for his daughters.

After the circles concluded, Morris and several other Hawthorne residents began a resident council and launched several projects aimed at improving conditions in the apartment complex, including a youth center and a program in which parents took turns watching children as they waited for their school buses. Several more rounds of study circles were held, including one that mixed teenagers and adults.

Amid his growing community involvement, Morris faced more struggles. His remaining eye worsened and, in 2002, he became legally blind. For about a year-and-a-half, Morris' daughters—Mariah, now 13, and Melanie, 9—had to care for their father and their apartment as Morris' eyesight failed. But in July 2003, Morris' luck changed: he had a successful cornea transplant that gave him 20/40 vision in his left eye.

In 2004, the family moved to a nicer apartment complex

10 blocks from Hawthorne, and Morris is already talking with staff from the school across the street about improving recreational access for the school and neighborhood.

He is also working with Indianapolis-based Software Performance Training on its not-for-profit job-training program, Learning Tree. Participants get computer training, partially funded by their work at the busy concession stands at major area sporting events—experiences that help them build communication skills and grace under pressure. "Michael is very good at engaging others and creating the momentum that's necessary for them to be focused in their work and feel valuable," says Rhonda Coleman, the project's director.

Meanwhile, Morris also has begun work toward an associate degree in radiology.

He hopes to have a job as an x-ray technician and start saving money before his girls are ready for college; later, he plans to pursue studies in nuclear medicine and magnetic resonance imaging.

"Study circles gave me my voice back," he says. "Before, I didn't have a voice, or I didn't choose to use my voice. This made me someone who gets things done."

"Study circles gave me my voice back... Before, I didn't have a voice, or I didn't choose to use my voice. This made me someone who gets things done."

—Michael Morris

Funding for the Indianapolis Family Circles was provided by the Central Indiana Community Foundation, as well as by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as part of its Making Connections initiative.

Indianapolis' study circle program at a glance:

- City and state: Indianapolis, Indiana
- Population: More than 783,000
- Focus of study circles: Neighborhood revitalization
- Number of study circle participants to date: Just under 1,000

Resources to make study circles happen

The Study Circular

A monthly e-newsletter with the latest on study circle programs, useful resources, and more. Subscribe to this e-letter at www.studycircles.org.

Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change

A comprehensive guide to help you develop a community-wide study circle program from start to finish. Available at www.studycircles.org or in print from SCRC.

Focus On Study Circles is a free publication of the Study Circles Resource Center.

Managing Editor: Carrie Boron

Editor: Molly Holme Barrett

Contributing Writers: Julie Fanselow,
Martha L. McCoy

Production Manager: Francine Nichols

The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) is dedicated to finding ways for all kinds of people to engage in dialogue and problem solving on critical issues. SCRC helps communities by giving them the tools to organize productive dialogue, recruit diverse participants, find solutions, and work together for action and change. SCRC is a project of The Paul J. Aicher Foundation (formerly the Topsfield Foundation, Inc.), a nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States.

697 Pomfret Street, PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258

Phone: (860) 928-2616 • Fax: (860) 928-3713

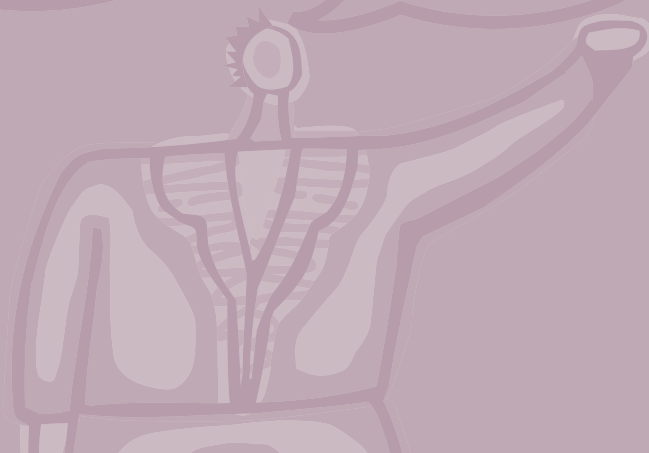
E-mail: scrc@studycircles.org

Web: www.studycircles.org

*Imagine a
democracy...*

*...where having
a voice in the
community...*

*...is as important
as voting...*



www.studycircles.org



We believe in change so much,
we're changing too!

Visit our new web site this fall to:

- Search our study circle program directory by location and issue area.
- Make study circles happen in your community with our step-by-step advice.
- Read stories of communities creating change through study circles.
- Share your study circle experience in our "Tell Us Your Story" section.
- Explore our resource room and find a discussion guide that best fits your community's needs.

Come back often. You'll find even more new features and resources!



STUDY CIRCLES | Helping People Work Together
RESOURCE CENTER | For Creative Community Change

697 Pomfret Street • P.O. Box 203 • Pomfret, CT 06258-0203

A project of The Paul J. Aicher Foundation

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Pomfret, CT 06258
Permit No. 13