

'Talk That Leads Somewhere': Study Circles in Jackson, Minnesota

By Brad Rourke

For decades, Western Community Action, a community development organization, had been working to wipe out poverty in Jackson, a southwestern Minnesota town of about 3,500. The organization, which works in five counties in Minnesota, looked back over years of work and came to a stark conclusion: What they were doing wasn't working.

"We realized we had to stop doing *for* the community and start working *with* the community," said Greg Warner, coordinator for Circles of Support, a project of the organization.

When the staff heard about study circles, the idea appealed to them because the process brings community members together to work for change. Jackson, they decided, would be a perfect test site for a new discussion guide, *Thriving Communities: Working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all*.

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— Circles of Support Coordinator
 Greg Warner

Some members of the community worried that this would just be more talk, leading nowhere, said Warner, who coordinated the "Community Roundtables" in Jackson. But, by the end of the study circle meetings, there was a "buzz"

in town. All the study circle participants came together for an action forum. And many new faces showed up, including three members of the city council, the mayor, and two county commissioners.

"We've got a quorum!" one member of the city council joked that night.

Just a few months after the action forum, seven of 15 ideas for action are a reality, including:



Participants in a "Community Roundtable" in Jackson, Minnesota, get to know one another at their first meeting.

- A community foundation is up and running and has already received contributions.
- Community members have been invited to present a new plan to the city council for how, when, and whether security deposits are collected for new utility customers.
- A resource room—owned by the county—is up and running. People can drop off items and also pick up basic necessities such as dishes, pots, and pans.

But these aren't the only results. What else is different in Jackson?

"We have new leaders in the community," Warner said, "because of what we are doing here. People are volunteering for things that they had never even been invited to before."

"I attribute that to study circles."

Thriving Communities: Working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all
 is now available from the Study Circles Resource Center

Expanding conversation and action on poverty

By Martha L. McCoy

FROM THE
DIRECTOR

We know that poverty is important. It affects all of us—in every community, and in every region of the country. But will people really talk about it? And further, can anything be done that will make a difference?

These are some of the questions we asked ourselves when we started exploring how to help communities work on such a challenging issue.



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

In partnership with the Northwest Area Foundation, we decided to create a new study circle guide, *Thriving Communities: Working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all*. In the process of writing the guide, we conducted focus groups and field tests, and we found some answers. Yes, reducing poverty is daunting. Yet many people want to try. And there is strong

evidence that people and institutions can work together to make a difference.

Several communities, including Jackson, Minn., and Standing Rock, N.D., tested the guide as it was being developed. Their stories appear in this issue of *Focus*. These early results are powerful. They show us what can happen when communities involve all kinds of people in talking and working together on poverty. And they give us hope that it is possible to create a community where everyone can prosper.

Take a look at this guide. See if you can use it to bring about conversation and action on poverty in your own community. We are committed to helping you, and to learning with you as you take on this important work.

'Talking Circles' prompt residents to promote community safety

COMMUNITY
VOICES

Laurel Vermillion is acting president of Sitting Bull College, located on Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, which spans the North and South Dakota border. Vermillion helped the college support a field test of the new discussion guide, Thriving Communities: Working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all. Young people in the "Talking Circles" program talked about their hopes and concerns.

“We used the Talking Circles idea to bring youth together. We said, ‘Tell us what you think and feel about your community.’ They told their story in pictures. A lot of the pictures depicted a broken community with graffiti on the buildings, dirty streets, cars on lawns, and gangs. Also, at that time, there were a lot of youth suicides. Some pictures actually showed people hanging. The youth said they didn’t like the trash, the graffiti, the idea that young people were hanging themselves. Some were afraid even to go down to the movie theater. They drew a police department that had a big X on it because there was no law enforcement.

Their message really ignited a fire within the group to do something. So we put the pictures into a presentation, and got a meeting together with representatives from the city and the tribe. The pictures had a big impact on them, too.

We suggested the tribe and the city work together on law enforcement. Every time we see someone from the council, we ask, where are we with this issue? We’re not going to let it go. We’ll continue to push to make a little bit of difference in the lives of these children.”



Youth members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe participated in a study circles action forum on poverty last fall.

Aurora, Illinois

On March 6, Mayor Tom Weisner issued a proclamation declaring April 28 a “Citywide Day of Dialogue” in Aurora. “This day is a huge effort by many individuals to celebrate 10 years of dialogue in the community,” said Mary Jane Hollis, executive director of Aurora Community Study Circles. The goal for the day is to engage at least 1,000 people, throughout Aurora, in face-to-face dialogue. Since 1995, more than 4,000 residents have taken part in dialogue to reduce prejudice and bias. “Study circles have helped to open communication,” Mayor Weisner told the *Aurora Beacon News*. “We find that we have much more in common than what separates us.” This year, more than one thousand sixth-graders around the city are participating in the organization’s “Many Young Voices,” as part of a school-based initiative to address diversity issues.



Aurora Mayor Tom Weisner presents a plaque to Aurora Study Circles Executive Director Mary Jane Hollis, proclaiming April 28 “A Day of Dialogue” in Aurora.

of voting. “I think I had students thinking about what’s going to happen when they turn 18,” said Marquez. Roseann Mason, director for The Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, and one of the conference coordinators, said, “I think the conference empowers

students. Everyone has a story and wants to be heard—that combination is empowering.” Read more at www.studycircles.org.

Tulsa, Oklahoma

This spring, more than 450 high school students are taking part in “Teen Tulsa Talks,” an outgrowth of “Tulsa Talks”—community-wide study circles on education. The youth-focused program helps students



Student participants in “Teen Tulsa Talks” at Union High School set priorities for action to improve school climate and make the community a better place for young people.

at Union and East Central high schools work together to improve school climate and make their community a better place for youth. “The program is already motivating and empowering these teens to take action to create a better community,” said Carol McGowen, Tulsa Talks director. “The students’ ideas will help school board members, district leaders, area nonprofits, and city social service agencies improve youth-oriented services.” Student recommendations include: a student committee on school policy and program issues; alternative education programs for potential school dropouts; and increased publicity on Tulsa’s social activities, social services, and education assistance.

Kenosha, Wisconsin

On a blustery March day, more than 350 high school students in Kenosha, Wis., attended the fourth-annual “Diversity Circles in Action” conference. The youth-led event—resulting from a partnership between the University of Wisconsin-Parkside and “Diversity Circles” in local high schools—features diversity-focused workshops, dialogue sessions, and drumming circles. High school senior Xavier Marquez presented “Why Vote?”—a workshop to highlight the importance



Xavier Marquez and Shakaira Wainwright, who helped organize the “Diversity Circles in Action” conference in Kenosha, Wis., facilitate the opening Diversity Café discussion.

New discussion guide helps communities move from poverty to prosperity

In partnership with the Northwest Area Foundation, the Study Circles Resource Center has published *Thriving Communities: Working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all*. This discussion guide helps people look at poverty in their community, talk about why it exists, and explore what they can do together to create a place where everyone can thrive. More than 500 people took part in field tests of the guide held at 16 sites in the rural Northwest. English and Spanish editions of the guide are available for \$5 from SCRC, or you can download free copies from our web site at www.studycircles.org.

SCRC to publish discussion guide on racism

In June, SCRC will release a new, six-session discussion guide to help people examine ethnic relations and racism in their community and in our country. This guide will provide ways for participants to explore gaps among racial and ethnic groups and to build understanding about why inequities exist. And it offers new approaches for what we can do to create equitable communities—working together, and as individuals. Please watch your mailbox and the SCRC web site (www.studycircles.org) for information on the release date.

Study circle stories help define 'the next form of democracy'

During 12 years of working with study circle organizers, Matt Leighninger gathered countless stories of grassroots political change. These narratives form the backbone of *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule is Giving Way to Shared Governance — and Why Politics Will Never Be the Same*. Former Sen. Bill Bradley wrote the foreword to the book, which tells how study circle programs emerged to address a range of public issues. Leighninger, an SCRC senior associate, describes how study circle programs reflect the evolving relationship between citizens and government, and predicts how they will affect political campaigns, the media, and other aspects of public life. The book will be released this fall. You can pre-order copies at www.amazon.com.



The Study Circular

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

Managing Editor: Carrie Boron

Editor: Molly Holme Barrett

Contributing Writers: Brad Rourke, Martha L. McCoy, and Amy Malick

Production Manager: Francine Nichols

The Study Circles Resource Center is the primary project of The Paul J. Aicher Foundation, a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization. We help communities develop their own ability to solve problems by bringing lots of people together in dialogue across divides of race, income, age, and political viewpoints.

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



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RESOURCE CENTER

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

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