

Not In My Backyard

I'd like to share an extraordinary experience I had in a circle. I'm not in the justice system, but I do work on many volunteer projects in my community. I was introduced to circle in a workshop given at a conference for victim offender mediation volunteers in Oregon. I immediately knew circles would work . . . I never dreamed that one of my first circles would be for such a difficult and emotional problem in my community. Here is my story about the most inspiring circle experience I've had – an experience that still gives me goose bumps . . .

Tom, a friend from Corrections shared the difficulties he was facing in a neighborhood where Corrections sought to establish a transition house for male sex offenders coming from prison back into the community. While local ordinances did not require permission from the neighborhood, he realized that the neighbors could make it very difficult if they opposed the house. He expected they would be opposed. I offered to hold a circle with the neighbors if Tom agreed to abide by the neighborhood decision. He agreed. I went door to door in the neighborhood introducing myself and inviting people to a meeting to discuss the transition house. Nearly everyone was eager to talk and share their anger or distress at the possibility of a house for sex offenders in their neighborhood.

I spent time with the offenders who would live in the house individually and as a group, walking them through a peacemaking circle process, talking about potential things that could be said, and then assisting them to think through how they wanted to respond respectfully. I initially talked to eight offenders and out of the eight, five agreed to participate.

The circle was held in the evening at the neighborhood community center to make it as accessible as possible for people to attend. I greeted people as they walked in and my anxiety began to rise as the 20 I expected to show up grew to 70 and they were ready for combat. This was the biggest circle I had experienced and I was alone. But people were extremely respectful. Probably one of the most significant things in looking back is that I had connected personally with almost everyone there so there was already trust. Just that piece alone was extremely helpful and I think had a lot to do with how it turned out. That may be the thing that saved me.

Because there were so many people I arranged them in a double circle.....actually it was more elongated! On the inside circle were those directly affected by the transition house, neighbors in the immediate area, probation/parole, county commissioner, three of the five offenders, offender supports, neighbor supports. In the outer circle was everyone else.

I started by reading a story, *You are Special*, a children's story no less, about the value of people, and the rewards we reap personally by building bridges, finding a way through to resolve our differences. This story is about Wemmicks, carved wooden creatures, who live in a village together. The Wemmicks put gray dots and yellow stars on each other - gray dots for faults and imperfections like chipped paint or clumsiness and yellow stars for talents or blessings such as perfect paint and an ability to jump high. Those with gray

dots sometimes found fellow Wemmicks putting more gray dots on them just because they have gray dots. I had 70 plus people straining to see the pictures! I presented it as a way to help us focus on the business at hand, as well as to take a deep breath and relax a bit after a long day. At the end of the story I said, "I'm just curious, have any of you fellow Wemmicks ever felt for whatever reason that you were walking around with more than your fair share of gray dots? Maybe your gray dots are on display for all the world to see, or maybe you have become adept at hiding them, but you know they are there all the same." Initially, people were quiet, but I could see them thinking. Then I shared a couple of my gray dot experiences of which I am not proud. Then I said, "Please don't feel like you have to share, but you are in the presence of fellow Wemmicks after all, who have all their share of gray dots."

One lady then shared when she was younger the state child protection agency removed her children and she almost lost her parental rights. A man in his 20's talked about his struggle with drugs, his on going struggle. Another man about how his drinking cost him his family, yet the price still hasn't become high enough for him to give it up. Interspersed were stories about being children who never felt they measured up, were never smart enough, athletic enough etc.

After a round of sharing personal stories, I thanked everyone for coming and for their willingness to grapple with this very difficult issue, to themselves be bridge builders, to find a way across this difficult division in the community. I said I was hopeful that whatever the outcome the community would benefit by coming together to share our concerns in a good way and talk with each other with respect. I addressed up front that this potentially could become very emotionally charged, but it needed to stay respectful.

We discussed and agreed upon some basic guidelines for the circle. Everyone agreed to speak one person at a time, to take a break, get up and walk around if they realized they were becoming too upset to keep comments constructive and respectful. From there I explained briefly about the process, and then basically got out of the way.

I said up front to the offenders and to the group that this needed to be a safe environment for everyone and it was my job to make sure it was safe. If at any point people were not feeling respected and safe, we would first try taking a break and if that did not take care of it, it would be rescheduled for another time. People did such a good job however. I was so proud of everyone. I knew they were positively focused because they were using the language of the story. I think as people shared, there was also an awareness that we all share more ground than not. With 70 plus people in the room, I was grateful for that!

Initially people just talked about being fearful and being concerned that having the home in their neighborhood might bring down the value of their homes. Then one brave woman shared how she had been sexually abused as a child and, while in her case it was a relative, it still brings everything back up for her. That was emotional and I would say probably the turning point. Several others shared similar stories. It was very moving. Then, about 2 1/2 hours into it, the offenders began to share victimization from their

backgrounds. The offenders spoke not to excuse their behavior or seeking sympathy, but as a way to show empathy, care, and concern for victims in the circle.

After all the sharing, an older man in his seventies stood up and said, "I have lived here in the same house for almost 50 years, and I had no idea so many of my neighbors lived with so much pain. It seems to me we have two issues before us this evening. We need to address how we as a neighborhood can come together and get acquainted and support each other, and then where are these young fellows going to live and, if it is in our neighborhood, what will be our part in making sure it works for everyone." For several minutes it was deathly quiet. The same elderly man still standing said, "Well lets start here, is there anyone in the room who thinks these young fellows don't deserve a place to live???" Everyone shook their heads no. Then he said, "Its okay even if you are the only one to say no, we need to start attending to all of us." No one spoke. Then the woman who initially shared her story of being sexually abused said, " I think we need to spend the rest of the time, if no one has any objections, finding out what the men need who will live there, what corrections need, and what we need." Someone said, all in favor say "aye." Everyone said "aye".

They decided that the home is going in, and some of the neighbors offered to help do some of the repairs to get the home ready. Two or three of the community members who shared their stories said they were going to find a support group to begin working on their own abuse issues. One woman said, " It's about time to stop hiding and using what happened to me when I was nine as a excuse not to take responsibility for my life now." Then she turned to the five offenders and said "Thank you. You have been the catalyst to get me to look at myself. I have spent months thinking I hated you and all sex offenders. In reality I have been hating myself. Welcome to our neighborhood."

The neighborhood identified several conditions important to their sense of safety. They requested that additional police patrols be conducted in the neighborhood and they requested that each time a new person moved to the house that he be taken around and introduced to all the neighbors.

Sharing seemed to beget sharing. I was actually amazed that so many people, total strangers for the most part, could come together for the first time and share so intimately from their lives. I was inspired and truly felt I was on hallowed ground. The circle was awesome. The evening was the most rewarding I had ever experienced, certainly to date my most favorite circle experience.

What ended up happening was the neighborhood did help do the rehab on the house - offenders working side by side with community people. Each time a new resident was taken around the neighborhood for introductions, neighbors said, "Welcome to our neighborhood." The transition house was there for less than three months with no problems or concerns. Then the City stepped in and said a mistake had been made with the zoning and it wasn't zoned properly for what it was being used for. I thought we were going to have to have another circle between the City and the neighborhood! The neighborhood was indignant that the City was saying the house would have to be moved!

If I had not witnessed it first hand, I never would have believed it! What a hoot to see a neighborhood fighting to keep a transition house for male sex offenders in their neighborhood! The interesting thing, however, is at some point they stopped viewing them as "one of those sex offenders" and more like a fellow Wemmick, trying hard, and as a result of our messed up world standards, having both stars and more than their fair share of gray dots.

I think anyone who has the ability and inclination to just stand back will be privileged to being a part of enormously wonderful things that circles can bring to communities . . . beyond what can even be imagined!

As told to Kay Pranis by Angie Ober
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