



Working to end poverty one family at a time.



SNAPSHOTS OF HOPE

Stories gathered and compiled by
Laurie Oswald Robinson

Real stories...real people

In your hands are real stories from real people, members of the Circles of Hope community in Newton, Kansas. We believe stories connect people as little else can.

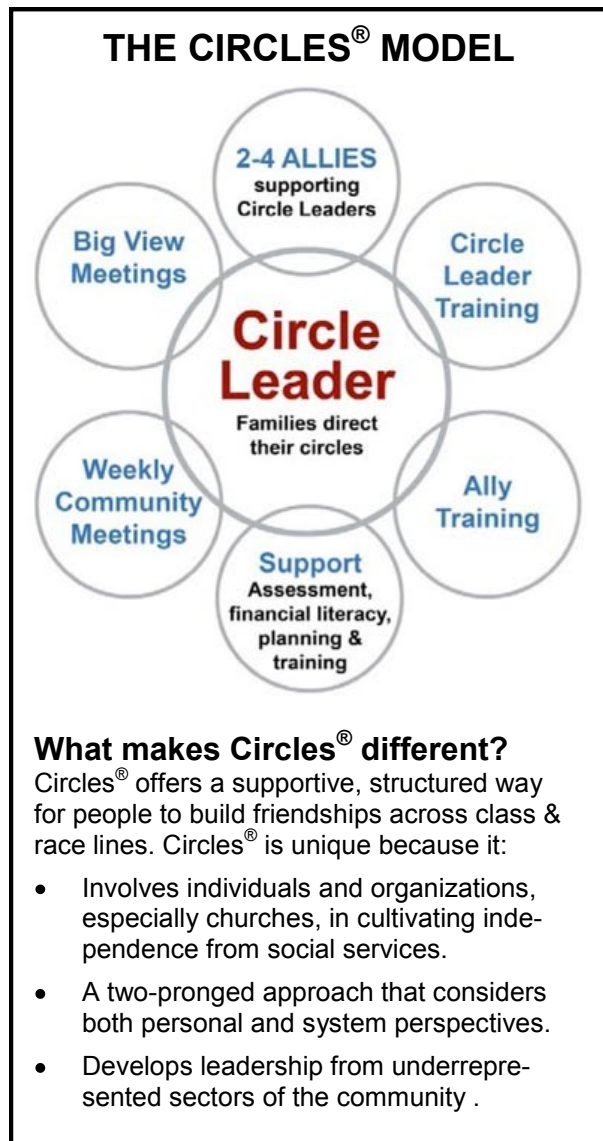
Facts and figures allow humans to wrap their heads around issues; stories enable us to wrap our hearts around one another.

The courage to tell a personal story and the grace to listen compassionately are qualities capable of healing breaches and minimizing differences in class, race, beliefs or politics. In human communion at this deeper level, we discover our common threads and patterns.

Circles of Hope is part of Circles[®] National Campaign, a transformational approach that partners volunteers and community leaders with families wanting to make the journey out of poverty.

Operating in communities around the country, each Circles[®] initiative consists of families getting connected to several middle and upper income Allies who befriend and lend support as the family sets and achieves goals unique to their own needs.

Circles[®] engages the community as a whole and encourages growth from people of all financial classes. The initiative is designed to assist families in creating their own personal paths out of poverty while at the same time expanding opportunities, connections and eliminating barriers in the community that make it difficult for families to thrive.



Carolann Adair

When Carolann Adair comes to the Circles of Hope meetings at the First United Methodist Church in Newton, she often has her camera in hand.

Carolann, a self-employed professional photographer, does not want to miss an opportunity to capture the essence of Circles. It's been her community since she became a Getting Ahead participant in April 2011 and a Circle Leader later that fall.

Carolann, homeless several times in her life, was no stranger to the struggle of low resources, though she had held many jobs that kept her family afloat. Before she became a photographer, Carolann worked as a taxi driver, a courier, a cashier and a traveling carnival worker.

When I first came to class, I felt embarrassed and ashamed. Since then I realized I could set goals—lose weight, go back to church, become a better business woman.

Her husband Merle died in 2005, leaving Carolann and her son James to cope without him. James became a participant in Getting Ahead in Fall 2011. They are learning what it means to have faith in a future that can unfold more sustainably and positively than the past.

"I got involved with Circles because I wanted to change and better myself," Caro-



Carolann with her Matched Circle (L to R): Kate, Carolann, James and Juan.

lann says. "It was a place where I did some deep soul searching. I looked into a mirror and saw that the self looking at me was more than I thought I was.

"When I first came to class, I felt embarrassed and ashamed. Since then I realized I could set goals—lose weight, go back to church, become a better business woman."

What's even better, Carolann has a community of Allies to listen to her and to remind her that God is good and works through a community as people love and support each other.

"I'm enjoying this journey, as I learn to ask for advice and support when I need it," she says. "I am learning that all of us, no matter what our income level, need each other.

"We need to remind each other that when God closes a door, God opens a window. And if God can feed the sparrows, God can feed us. In the end, we all have a lot in common. We truly are brothers and sisters."

Elmo Newman

After the death of the father for whom he was named, Elmo Newman Jr. was searching for ways to fill the void left by his primary role model, whose life was focused on caring for others. When Elmo saw a flier in the Newton Public Library that advertised Circle of Hope's first Getting Ahead class in 2009, it captured his interest.

The Circles community began meeting his need for new hope and new goals. That was important for Elmo, whose blindness due to a birth injury did not allow him to hold down a full time job.

Elmo was working at a discount store, but because he could not read the labels, the manager had to let him go.

"As I became part of Circles, I found good people who were willing to lend helping hands and hearts by connecting me to resources that could help me cope with my disability," he says.

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Thanks in large part to his Allies, Elmo is the proud owner of a pair of glasses that include a telescope to enhance his limited vision. He also now uses an electronic, cordless mouse that magnifies what he is read-



Elmo with his Matched Circle (L to R): Janet, Elmo and Curtis.

ing on the television. This was provided by the local Lion's Club.

Elmo has invested in a small house and volunteers at the homeless shelter as well as at his church, following his father's example of reaching out to others. Once a week, he also helps to care for a disabled man in Halstead.

He knows the challenge of not seeing clearly in life, and his driving passion is to help others see possibilities that may be hidden from view. He is the first Getting Ahead graduate to choose to become an Ally for another Circle leader after completing his 18-month role as Circle Leader.

"I knew Craig before I was his Ally, and I was the one who suggested he get involved in Circles," Elmo says. "I really like being his encourager, supporter and mentor. There are times I am tempted to overdo it, and his hurts become my hurts.

"Then I remember I am here for him to dream his own dreams and make them become reality. That's what others did for me."

Gordon Houser

In 2009, Gordon Houser's editing job was cut to half-time and he looked for additional work. In the midst of the search, he felt God nudging him to volunteer some of the time freed up by the cutback.

The nudge—which would no doubt mean increased people contact—was not particularly comfortable, Gordon says. He describes himself as an introvert who loves nothing more than reading good books in the solitude of his living room.

However, when he learned about Circles of Hope from his wife, Jeanne, he undertook training to become an Ally to a Circle Leader. In training, based in part on *Bridges Out of Poverty* by Ruby Payne, he learned that there are many reasons people are in poverty.

The genius of Circles is that it provides a way for people to move beyond their isolation into a supportive community.

Many people grow up in generational poverty, which includes multiple generations being caught in the patterns that prolong low resources. But other people find themselves in situational poverty, brought on by sudden job loss due to the economic downturn.

"I began to see how there are so many systems at work that keep people in pov-



Ally Gordon Houser with Matched Circle (L to R): Jeanette, Sharon, Dee and Sue (not pictured).

erty," Gordon says. "And it is such an isolating experience."

"The genius of Circles is that it provides a way for people to move beyond their isolation into a supportive community."

Gordon says that even though it would be easy to throw money at the problem, Allies are encouraged to provide other kinds of support.

"Sharon and I have become friends," he says. "Not only that, Sharon comes to the meeting with goals, and she is our leader. She has us share our goals as well."

"And the experience has taught me that no matter where we fall on the spectrum of resources, we all fall short sometimes in setting and reaching goals, and we need each other to help us move forward."

Jerica Hinshaw

When Jerica Hinshaw first became part of Circles of Hope, she worked minimum-wage jobs at two fast food restaurants to make ends meet as she raised her small son, Aidan.

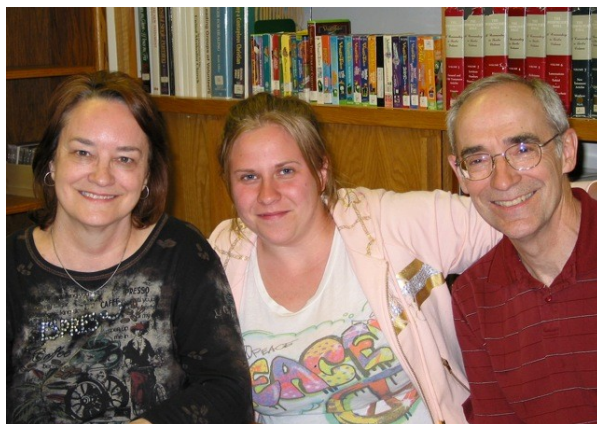
The financial strain as well as the boredom constricted and frustrated her. Two and half years later, after taking the Getting Ahead class and becoming a Circle Leader, Jerica is pushing out the boundaries of her former situation and living a larger life.

In class, she set some goals in budgeting as well as going to college, and she is realizing those goals. Through connections she made at Circles, she heard about a paraprofessional job opening in the public school. She applied and was hired.

Being part of Circles has expanded my world view and given me so many new connections. Because of that, I have been able to dream bigger dreams and set bigger goals.

She worked in the school during the week and weekends at KFC while earning an associate's degree at Hutchinson Community College. Upon graduation there, she enrolled at Bethel College in North Newton, Kan., where she is currently completing her bachelor's degree in education.

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Jerica (center) with her Allies, Brenda and Clarence.

nections," Jerica says. "Because of that, I have been able to dream bigger dreams and set bigger goals.

"My short-term goal is to graduate from Bethel and my long-term goal is to earn my master's and/or doctorate so I can teach education at a college."

Though it is dizzying to juggle studying, working, budgeting and raising Aidan, she would not trade her new life for the old—though some challenges still exist.

"Developing a budget is easy—sticking to it is difficult," she says. "I am now writing everything down that I earn and spend and am learning to organize and manage my finances.

"Budgeting helps me develop some self-control at the times when it would be so easy to be self-indulgent. Though all of this is a challenge, I am striving to set a good example for my son. I want to model for him a different way of living."

Lea Ann Reber

Lea Ann Reber has lived her entire life in south central Kansas, growing up in a family that taught her the joy of serving others. As a result, Reber developed a servant's heart and has engaged with many church and civic endeavors as an adult.

So when she joined Circles of Hope as coordinator of the Weekly Community Team, it wasn't a new idea for her to connect to ministries and causes. What was different about Circles was the way it deepened her view of community.

"What captured my heart immediately was how everyone on Tuesday evenings came together as a big family, no matter what one's situation in life," says Reber, who makes sure meals are available for the Circles gatherings at the First United Methodist Church where she is a member.

I have watched many participants persevere through these tough times, and it is an honor to help them build strength in the face of so much that threatens to tear them down.

"What's impressed me most about Circles is that there are no social lines. I wasn't able to tell who were the participants and who were the volunteers supporting the participants. We are here as one big family, and we support each other as we evolve and grow."



Lea Ann (right) in the kitchen coordinating the wonderful volunteers who provide meals for Circles.

It's important for Reber to be part of this community-wide initiative which helps low-resource families build sustainable lives. Reber, a scheduler for Radiology at Newton Medical Center in Newton, came from a business-oriented family. Her parents owned and operated Larry's Drive-In and her mother owned Reber's Fashions on Main Street in Newton.

"Circles is truly a place where I feel I can give back from all the blessings I've received, and I hope I can do that in a way that bears fruit in people's lives," she says. "And getting to know participants in Circles has blown away a lot of stereotypes about 'poverty.'"

"I've learned that people's situations are so often not about what they've done or not done but rather a matter of the hard times and bad breaks in life. I have watched many participants persevere through these tough times, and it is an honor to help them build strength in the face of so much that threatens to tear them down."

Lois Anderson

As Lois Anderson, a retired elementary school teacher, first listened to stories about Circles of Hope from peers at First United Methodist Church in Newton, she strongly sensed God speaking to her and she learned more from others who were already participating in Circles.

Anderson, the daughter of missionaries and the spouse of a longtime pastor, had learned to know the sound of God's voice when it came to heeding a call. And this nudge from the Holy Spirit was beckoning her to take the training necessary to become involved as an Ally to a Circle Leader.

She lived in China until she was 3 and traveled the U.S. with her husband, Jay, who served in pastorates across Minnesota and Kansas. She'd been exposed to many different people in many different places. And yet, Circles—in its mission of helping people to set and meet their own goals in order to build stronger futures—felt fresh and new in its approach.

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someone, without judging them,
and to be open to receive
as well as to give.*

"When I first heard about Circles, I had been praying to the Lord to direct me into a new project of some kind," Lois says. "I had always been involved in ministry, although



Lois (left) with her Circle Leader, Peggy (center) and Nancy, another Ally.

at this time in my life, there was really nothing significant on my plate.

"As I heard about how people who were working to build a better future needed support persons, I knew it was something I could do that would be a real service to the community."

As Lois served God and the community, she received many blessings. For example, she's experienced the joy of watching the transformation of Peggy Gerber, the Circle Leader whom she is supporting in a Matched Circle, as well as her own.

"I feel she gives so much more than I give her," Lois says. "Though Peggy found herself in a season of having low resources, she also is a very self-reliant and resourceful person."

"She's accomplished so much in such a short time. And she's taught me a lot about what it means to build trust with someone who was a total stranger before. I've learned how to be there for someone, without judging them, and to be open to receive as well as to give."

Libby Baumgartner

As a graduate student working toward a master's in art therapy, Libby Baumgartner wasn't sure she had a right to be in Circles of Hope.

However, Libby learned that Circles was about finances and education and also about the entire canvas of her life—emotional, spiritual and social.

She liked that concept and so took the plunge to sign up for the Getting Ahead class. That choice brought her a bigger perspective on how to better handle the fact that as a young adult, her choices had led her into some debt.

Libby works as an art therapist at a local mental and developmental health center. Even so, her income level combined with that of her partner—as well as the severity of his disabilities—does not bring in enough income for them to live without subsidized housing and food stamps.

"On the first day I was touched in a really deep way as I realized that the others in class shared the same feelings I did—hurt, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, depression, worry and uncertainty about the future," she says.

...my allies are helping me to get really clear and to move forward toward financial stability and my other goals. They are helping me to gain the hope, options and resources I need.



Libby (L) with Anita, one of her Allies. Mary Sue and Mel not pictured.

Circles helps people reflect on the entirety of their lives and to establish goals wherever resources are low.

In class, Libby honestly faced her lack of resources in several areas—including being isolated socially and not assertive enough in the business side of her art therapy practice.

"Many of my current clients can't afford to pay me what is parallel with my education, but in the current economic climate, there are a lot of people struggling, just like me and others in Circles," she says.

"However, my allies are helping me to get really clear and to move forward toward financial stability and my other goals. They are helping me to gain the hope, options and resources I need. Working as a community art therapist in private practice, I can serve art therapy clients by walking beside them and being a resource as they make a difference in their own lives.

"At the same time, this helps me move ahead in my own goals."

Mel & Mary Sue Voth

After being engaged in business leadership for over 50 years, Mel and Mary Sue Voth, retired and living at Kidron Bethel Retirement Village in North Newton, Kan., felt they wanted to be less involved with business outcomes and more involved with the personal outcomes of others.

They found just such a focus when they became part of Circles of Hope. As Allies to Libby Baumgartner, they combine lifelong expertise in managing staff and business with the ability to mentor someone in a more personal, one-on-one relationship.

"Being an Ally to a Circle Leader is a lot like being a grandmother," says Mary Sue, grandmother of ten. "When your grandchildren are born, they are in your heart the minute they come into the world.

"And that is how it is with Libby. The minute we became part of her Matched Circle, she became part of our hearts, and we became a part of her. We support her. We mentor her. We pray with and for her. We experience the joys and sorrows of self-discovery—on both sides of the equation."

*The minute we became part of
[Libby's] Matched Circle, she
became part of our hearts, and we
became part of her.*

Mel agrees. "It sounds like an old cliché, but the Matched Circle really does function as a team," he says. "Libby, along with her



Mel and Mary Sue join with Anita as Allies to Libby Baumgartner.

Allies, is working towards her growth. We don't tell her what to do. She cues us on how we best support her goals."

The Voths bring a range of expertise and wisdom to their Circle. Mary Sue worked closely with managers and other staff in banking and other businesses. Mel put his business and accounting degrees into practice as CFO for a number of corporations and has taught accounting and finance for several universities. Together they offer a practical and seasoned approach to setting and achieving goals.

"Libby reaches her goals by smaller increments, rather than by giant leaps forward," Mary Sue says. "People don't get into poverty all at once, and they don't get out all at once. But with mentors by their side, they can persevere one step at a time."

Peggy Gerber

When Peggy Gerber first saw the article in *The Kansan* about “Getting Ahead in a Just Gettin’ by World,” she was working five part-time jobs.

The exhausting scenario was a necessity. She had been laid off from a fulltime job during the economic downturn. That reversal, for the first time in her life, left her unable to provide enough resources for herself. She felt frustrated and scared.

The article renewed her hope that she could heal from the emotional and financial devastation of the job layoff. In March 2010 she joined the class, which gave her tools to rebuild her life.

“The class gave me some much-needed insight on how to better utilize my resources,” Peggy says. “It taught me that life is one big set of choices. I learned that I can make choices with the options available to me due to my particular circumstances.”

Circles is a very non-judgmental and accepting place. This acceptance has helped my self-esteem. Circles is a place where people value my opinion and value me as a person.

And her Circles’ experience—which has included both the class goal-setting and community support from her Allies—has helped Peggy to make some new choices and changes.



Peggy (left) signing up for the first Individual Development Account (IDA/CASH) in Harvey County.

One of her five jobs has turned into a part-time job as an administrative assistant at the St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Newton. From this office she also serves as a part-time employee in the church’s administration of the Representative Payee Program, which administers disability benefits for those in need of those services.

But even though Peggy’s work life has stabilized to provide a sustainable wage, the heart of Circles for her is not about the increase in her financial resources. For Peggy, a former abuse victim, it’s about the increase in her trust in others.

“Circles is a very non-judgmental and accepting place,” she says. “This acceptance has helped my self-esteem. Circles is a place where people value my opinion and value me as a person.

“I know of no other program like Circles, where in one place you can both set new goals and gain emotional support from others to help meet those goals.”

Toni Thompson

When Toni Thompson moved from Wichita to Newton, the mortgage on her new home was more than her job at a local child welfare agency would sustain. So she took a second job at a nursing home to make ends meet for her household—which included an adult daughter and two grandchildren.

Because she worked long hours in a new community, she often felt isolated and alone. That changed when she became a participant in Circles of Hope and found more community and connection than she ever thought possible in such a short time.

She graduated from the 15-week Getting Ahead class that helped her examine her life and set personal goals. And today, she is a Circle Leader who for 18 months is striving to reach those goals through the support of several Allies in a Matched Circle.

Circles has given me tools and new options for knowing how to accept where I am today while at the same time reaching for a better future.

“I felt overwhelmed by all the new financial demands and having to be responsible for a family of four as a single person,” Toni says. “But after being part of Circles, I feel so much more a part of the community.

“I have learned to open up to others more and to trust them to help me sort out the tough areas of my life,” Toni says. “And



Toni (second from right) with her Circle: Roger, Jay and Vicki.

I have met people I never would have had the opportunity to meet before.”

Along with community, Toni has also gained a newfound sense of self. She is learning to set good goals and to make good progress toward those goals. Recently, her increased self-confidence empowered her to apply for a promotion at work, and she was hired for the job.

The promotion is allowing her to quit her second job and to continue to build a more solid future within supportive community.

“Circles has given me tools and new options for knowing how to accept where I am today while at the same time reaching for a better future,” she says. “I have the increased self confidence to envision goals and dreams and to reach for them, one step at a time.”