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Giving circle pioneers - a new way of giving

By Allison Arthur of The Leader

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Ruth Merryman (far left in back) stopped in at the Jefferson County Public Health Department to chat with Shena Kellewea, Yuko Umeda, team leader Quen Zorrah and Kelly VonVolkli (at the computer) on a project Merryman and 12 other women are helping fund through the first giving circle in Jefferson County. Photo by Allison Arthur

Giving circle:

See jccfgives.org or google "giving circle."

A good conversation led one woman to act. And then another. And then another - until 13 women who didn't know each other had joined in the conversation and created Jefferson County's first giving circle.

They hope it will be the first of many.

"The birth of the circle came from a conversation I had with my sister-in-law in California," explained circle co-chair Anne Schneider, also a founder and president of the Jefferson County Community Foundation (JCCF), an organization that supports and oversees gift giving in the community.

The Women Who Care Giving Circle that Schneider also started is using the JCCF as an umbrella nonprofit organization under which to operate.

"We were not a group of friends," said Ruth Merryman, co-chair of the circle.

"I didn't know anyone really well," admitted circle member Marilyn Staples.

While the women weren't in the same social circle, what they did have in common a year ago when they started meeting was the ability to pledge $1,000 a year for three consecutive years to a charity they would choose together.

"What attracted me to the group is that I would often give $25 here and there. I'd write the check and go on and have no idea where the money would go," Merryman said of being a frequent contributor to good causes.

For those unfamiliar with giving circles, the women explain that giving circles have been formed by women, men and groups of often different people who share a common interest and want to pool their resources to give to organizations that share their values.

In Jefferson County, the giving circle pioneers are Schneider, Merryman, Staples, Rachel Gaspers, Gay Eisenberger, Teri McComas, Darlene Durfee, Jane Henery, Teresa Goldsmith, Kay Goetz, Mary Ann Verneuil, Gail Boulter and

Carol McGough.

In the beginning, the women didn't know what cause they wanted to help - only that they wanted to make a difference and help the community.

"This group of women all came together with the desire to make a difference, but none of us really understood the journey on which we were embarking. We were all from very diverse backgrounds and interests. Some of us knew one or two people in the group, but none of us knew everyone," wrote Carol McGough of her experience.

At the first meeting, the women wrote down the various interests and causes they already supported with contributions. The list included children's programs, the arts, social service programs, environmental groups and education.

With the help of consultant Kris Mayer of the JCCF, the women started to talk more about the needs of the community than of their individual desires or specific programs.

The women also agreed to "do things by consensus," said Schneider.

"There were no egos. No one was going to be the leader," said Staples.

The group asked prospective nonprofits what were the "emerging issues - and children and families kept coming up more and more," Schneider explained.

The women opted to interview various groups and went outside their interest areas to learn more about organizations they hadn't given to in the past. A social worker interviewed educators, for example.

"And there was no preset agenda. We agreed to put it all aside. I don't think any one of us, on her own, would ever have given money to the health department," said Schneider.

First of three

Ultimately, the Jefferson County Public Health Department was the one that won the first $13,000 grant.

The health department's proposal is a mouthful to pronounce - Jefferson County Public Health Family Support Programs Assessment and Analysis Outcomes Project.

What the health department wanted to do is what the women ultimately wanted to do - make a change, sustain the change, make a difference.

The program provides screening to pregnant women and families but hasn't had a way to identify priority areas and patterns to ensure the people who might need help down the line will get it.

"The long-term results of this grant will be both a better understanding of the community of families with young children and a strategy to allocate resources and improve program efficacy," said Quen Zorrah, the lead investigator for the health department who will be collecting and using computer data about families to refine what services the department provides.

So the grant, then, funds something that is both "systemic" and "sustainable."

Merryman said she had an "aha" moment mid-presentation when she realized that the women weren't talking about how the agency would spend the money but how the money would be used specifically to meet the needs of the community.

"I worked in social services here, and I thought I knew the needs [of the community]," Merryman said of moving the conversation from money to needs and ensuring the money is used for what it is intended.

In fact, several women in the giving circle said the process of getting to know the groups seeking funding opened their eyes to how much need there is in the community.

"There are enough issues for a dozen giving circles," said Staples.

Affordable housing was one several of them suggested. Schneider says her sister-in-law started one based on social

justice issues.

Or how about a Men Who Care group or a Kids Who Care group?

Merryman noted that National Public Radio recently did a story on a 12-year-old boy who set an example in his community by raising something like $8 million for a cause dear to him.

"Right here in Jefferson County, there are so many needs," said Merryman.

After studying many of those needs for a year, Merryman said she recently wrote a check to an agency she would never have known about before had it not been for her work - and learning - with the giving circle.

The women also say they got to know each other, often through emails.

"I think this whole thing stuck together because of emails," Staples said of the conversations.

The women also note that there is an accountability provision. The health department will report back to the women in six months to share its progress.

"It isn't just about giving money," McGough wrote in an email. "It is thinking about what the needs are, and how to provide support in a way that can really make a difference. Not many people can give a lot, but many people can give a little."

"We chose our amount to give and the number of people we wanted in the group, but that is flexible and completely dependent upon the giving circle members," she wrote.

A conversation about the first giving circle seems to end with the women suggesting there are many more causes in Jefferson County worthy of giving circles.

"Why don't you start a giving circle?" is a question the women often end up asking someone they meet these days.

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