



This month's circle tale comes from Barbara Belknap of Juneau Alaska. Ann and Christina did a one day training in her living room last May for folks working in nonprofit agencies. She joined us for the Circle Practicum Whidbey and went home and applied her skills! And she was not alone; several people from this dynamic week immediately started or continued circle facilitation. Thank you, Barbara for your wonderful tale.

## **Circle Tale #52, August-September 2004 Holding the Circle in Juneau, Alaska**

Less than seventy-two hours after I got home late Wednesday night from a PeerSpirit Circle Practicum on Whidbey Island, thirty-one women gathered in circle with me in Juneau, Alaska.

Before I left for Whidbey, Andrea, a long-time political activist in the Juneau Democratic Party, invited me to a meeting that would "give voice to women." During the Circle Practicum, I chose this upcoming gathering as my example of how I might use circle when I returned home. After the exercise, I decided it was too late to do the personal preparation necessary and that I'd simply go as a participant.

Another message from Andrea waited for me upon my arrival home asking if I would help her come up with a format. She sounded a little desperate. I said I would and that I wanted to use the circle as the process. Thursday afternoon was spent drawing my vision of the meeting on a piece of poster paper. Andrea and I met early Friday morning and I explained how circle works. It took a long time for her to come up with exactly what she hoped to get out of the gathering. I had the mental tools from the training to keep asking the question – "What is your intention for this gathering?"

Andrea had been at the Democratic Convention in Boston and heard Teresa Heinz Kerry speak on the nature of women. She came away inspired and wanted to unite women, but it was tough for her to focus that fervor. In the end, what she needed were four issues for a "women's rally" to light a fire under the women in Juneau and raise our visibility throughout the community, the state, the country, and the world. We would ask the women who came for issues they were passionate about, then use the top four vote-getters as our platform at the rally.

The Agreements we came up were the Circle Principles: to listen with attention; to speak with intention; and to contribute to the well-being of the group. We added that it was to be non-partisan and that we would leave our political affiliation at the door. It took two hours to get that far.

After Andrea left my home, I went to work on the handouts: an agenda with the Intention and Agreements on the back, a sign-up sheet, and sign-up sheets for each of the four issues and logistics. Taking a page from Christina Baldwin, I prepared a scripted agenda for myself.

Saturday morning, we met in the Juneau High School Home Economics Room. The Home Economics teacher had offered the space and was just taking four aromatic quiches out of the oven when we arrived. They were laid out alongside overflowing fruit platters, bagels and cream cheese, coffee, juice and water.

After putting the desks in an awkward circle, I put my wooden TV tray in the center with a scarf over it and placed a plump grandmother figurine from Mexico on it. The stage was set. Eager and excited women started pouring in. I asked them to put on nametags, grab an agenda, and take an index card with them to their seat to write down their expectations of the meeting. At the last minute, we decided to let everyone get their food first even though I was concerned about time (we only had 2 hours). Everyone filled their plates, grabbed their coffee and were seated within ten minutes.

To begin, I introduced Andrea. She was wonderfully inspiring and read a Maya Angelou poem, "I Will Rise." Perfect. Then I explained the process, including my role as Guardian. I demonstrated with my little



bell. (It would have been better to explain the process at the very beginning since a few of the women whispered together during Andrea's presentation, but that didn't happen again after "listening with intention" was explained.) We went around the circle once for a check-in and to hear their expectations. Several women said that this process helped them clarify or change their own expectations. We went around a second time using a yellow highlighter as a talking piece to get their four issues. A volunteer scribe wrote them on the classroom dry-erase board. It was really magical. They were all co-creating a definition of why women are so critical to civilization.

After two hours, we had our issues. Then the circle started to wobble a little as women started making suggestions for the rally itself, for condensing all the issues into four, defending their sub-issues, and behaving like the activists they are. I rang the bell and asked them to have faith that the women who signed up for logistics would do the right thing. At one time during the wobble, I found myself standing inside the circle and it felt sacrilegious to me after my five days at Marsh House. I stopped talking and went back to my place in the circle to speak.

There was no time for a check-out process. I didn't worry about it and felt the meeting was a great success. We had our list of issues, the women had spoken from their hearts and heads, contacts had been made, Andrea was relieved and happy, and the circle held its rim.

A few days later I met one of the women who was there. She said she told her sister she'd been at a gathering of 31 Type A Women and the sister said, "Wow. That must have been an uproar." But my friend said, "Actually it went very well because there was a facilitator who let every woman speak." So...another testimonial for circle.

*If you have a tale to tell, contact the PeerSpirit office and we'll help you share it.*

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