



This month's circle tale, written by long-time public school teacher and PeerSpirit teaching colleague, Sarah MacDougall, is a celebration of all that is good in public education. This is the story of Sarah and Ann Linnea's recent training at New Jersey's Ridge and Valley Earth Charter School. To all teachers and students — have a wonderful summer vacation! Thank you, Sarah.

## **Circle Tale, June 2006**

### **Circle in the Public Schools**

Children are getting off school buses, jumping out of cars, running to get into school. Many parents accompany them to morning community circle. The energy is electrifying, everyone talking, greeting friends and Guides (teachers), as they sit on the floor of the community room, getting ready to greet the day. Their principal (Guide's Guide), Dave, dances into the room, stands in the center, and shouts good morning, first in English, then in twelve different languages. The 100 students echo his greeting . . . "good morning, buenas dias, guten tag," on and on in languages I don't even recognize. A parent volunteer moves to the circle center holding a drum and four beaters. She chooses three students from different areas of the room and the four of them kneel around the drum as they start a rhythmic beat in unison. Everyone starts to chant in a Native spirit language greeting the directions, east, south, west, north. It is obvious to me this is a ritual of beginning that brings the entire school community together that has happened every day prior to my arrival in late March. As a retired public school teacher, I sit against the wall witnessing this extraordinary happening with tears running down my cheeks, my heart bursting with gratitude that such a school exists.

I am in Blairstown, N.J. at the Ridge and Valley Charter School (RVCS), a K-8 public school whose mission is to educate children "who grow into adults who love the earth and who are passionate about its ability not only to survive, but to thrive." The birth of this school, which is a prototype for the future of education, was not an easy one. The parents who caught the vision and volunteered their time, energy, and expertise as Board of Trustee members called on PeerSpirit in 2003 to help them use circle as a way to sustain their spirit and move through the maze of regulations, community meetings, negotiations, and resistance from various segments of the community to bring the school into reality. In the fall of 2004 RVCS opened its doors in a temporary setting while the permanent site was prepared to receive the students several months later. All through this birthing process, the Board continued to practice circle and in 2006 again invited PeerSpirit to Blairstown to provide circle training for RVCS guides, administrators, students, parents, and other interested community members.

It is Sunday morning, the last day of our 5-day PeerSpirit training at RVCS. Cars begin to pull into the school parking lot bringing students, parents, Board members, guides, administrators, and others interested in RVCS to a community visioning circle. People are busy setting up chairs in a circle for the 30 or so people who have arrived, laying out breakfast foods, getting cups of coffee or tea, and mingling together in a spirit of expectancy. The ringing of the Tibetan bells signals everyone that circle is about to begin.

As we move from social space into the more intentional setting of circle, we pause, focus on the center, and settle in to collectively develop a vision of the qualities, characteristics, and knowledge RVCS graduates will possess. First we review PeerSpirit circle process. People call out the components of circle and tell us what they mean. Suddenly a door to a side room opens and in walks our future RVCS "graduate" decked out in hiking boots and outdoor gear, pockets filled with calculator, compass, Leatherman tool, and maps, holding a laptop computer, math book, earth ball, and numerous other objects symbolizing her/his capabilities. As our "graduate" walks around the circle talking, there is much laughter. I can feel everyone relaxing, moving into a spirit of cooperation.

After a brief "popcorn" exercise during which people randomly call out words describing things they feel RVCS grads should possess, we form groups of four or five and go off to prepare skits portraying several



of the “popcorn” characteristics mentioned. The skits are entertaining, informative, and delightful. The children perform a choral response rap, echoing words they chose as important for grads. Another group treats us to a game show with categories for questions such as "academic" and "social." The game show contestants shout out answers that bring forth gales of laughter. In other skits we watch RVCS "grads" solve real world math problems with ease, grow food and prepare a meal, and espouse values that honor earth and its resources. Within the circle container, members of the RVCS community are weaving their collective vision.

After a break, we reconvene, and with agreements and a guardian of group process in place, we pass a Talking Piece around the circle giving each person a chance to share one or two characteristics from the collective list that she/he feels is most important. Talking Piece council, a PeerSpirit practice, provides the opportunity for divergent opinions and ideas to emerge. The circle "container" holds difference respectfully and invites everyone to listen deeply, withhold judgment, and seek understanding in a collaborative process. As we close the community circle, there is a feeling of connection and joy in the room. One person captures the feeling in these words, "I see things differently now."

RVCS Board's vision is to have the entire RVCS community working in circles that are interconnected. Circle is a foundational cornerstone for the entire community. Communication rests on having agreements, common practices, a guardian of process, and stated intention. RVCS and PeerSpirit are in a partnership designed to restructure public education, providing schools based on caring for earth and each other. As a teacher and PeerSpirit practitioner, I rejoice at this collaboration of school and circle.

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

*For more information on many applications of circle, visit our web site at [www.peerspirit.com](http://www.peerspirit.com) and subscribe to our monthly Circle Tale newsletter using the subscription mechanism at the top right of the page. Your e-mail address will **not** be shared or used by anyone other than PeerSpirit, and you can unsubscribe yourself at any time.*