



Our Circle Tale this month is by Robin Caruthers, a married mother of a 12 year-old boy and a 9 year-old girl living in Chesterfield, MO. A physical therapist by training, Robin now spends her time ferrying her kids and volunteering her time at church and in the community. She is an avid reader and loves to write and converse about the many ways we are connected. Thank you Robin, for sharing this story.

## Circle Tale, June 2010 Circles with Middle Schoolers

Where can you find conversation as deep as a well and as wide-ranging as a prairie? Where can the topic boomerang from bullying to **Twilight** to the meaning of life in the space of an hour? Quantum physics or Facebook, anyone?? All this (and much more!) has been explored in a circle filled with 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls.

Last October, at the United Methodist Church of Green Trails in Chesterfield, MO, a circle for young girls was formed. The idea began as a glimmer in my mind after hearing some youth leaders at church voice the idea that the middle school age girls needed a small group experience. Having participated in several circles over the years, and having watched some adults struggle with the concept of being in circle, mutual leadership, and the honoring of all voices, I thought that middle school might be the ideal time to start introducing our young people to this form of conversation. I felt they needed a safe space to talk about the pressures, the joys, and the paradoxes of ensuing teenager-hood. Working with young people was a new experience for me and I quickly learned that the spirit of these girls was far more complex than I had imagined.

Three adults agreed to facilitate this group and we began by forming the circle, explaining the purpose of circle and asking the girls to introduce themselves. We formed our behavioral agreements on the first night. In a very unfortunate coincidence, there had been the suicide of a high school freshman girl the week before our first meeting. However, we were able to discuss this tragedy and process it a little very early on in our circle experience. Perhaps, it led to a more rapid bonding experience.

As time moved on, and we met every week, the group seemed to become familiar with the check in and check out process and with the need to let others speak without interruption and without judgment. One issue we discovered almost immediately was that it is basically impossible to keep this age group on one topic for an hour. We have at times, begun with the check-in and then within one minute of introducing the topic, someone has made a connection with something else and off we go. In a chain-like fashion, we have at one point, moved from the everyday issues of a middle school girls' life to the physics of the universe and the location of heaven. After a week or so of mild discomfort on my part, I realized that this type of conversation is a beautiful way for the participants to engage in the way we and the universe are connected, and also how things in one person's everyday life had connections with someone else's everyday life in a profound way. We are truly learning how our lives are interwoven, whether it be through the place we meet, the community we inhabit, or the greater world in which we live.

We also have some issues with fidgeting and general restless energy. In order to keep the circle in an actual circle, we provided some "worry stones" and small mandalas for the girls to color. One or two evenings, we made simple wire and bead jewelry while talking. We've created personal mandalas to represent ourselves and shared them in circle. Once, we used the first and second books of the **Twilight** series to talk about subjects such as healthy relationships-romantic and platonic, about teenage freedom, about the fear of the "other" that we sometimes experience and how to deal with that. I found these early teen girls to be very open and mature about these subjects. On another night, we watched the movie, **The Secret Life of Bees**, and talked about mothering, sisterhood, and caring for the "other". We also had a good discussion of the civil rights issues of that movie, since none of these girls had any experience



with segregation and the generally decreased rights of all women at the time and in particular, black women.

The girls themselves come back to the circle week after week because, they tell me, the circle is a safe place. With the first few weeks, some girls had revealed some very painful issues they were dealing with and the other girls responded with the grace and caring that only occurred because we had deliberately cultivated a respectful and open environment. They felt safe enough to share things about themselves that in other areas of their lives, they may have feared ostracism or ridicule. I don't know how the girls perceive this mode of communication and support, but as an adult leader, I am frequently filled to the brim with the poise, courage and grace they exhibit. I feel like a proud mama watching her brood grow more mature in this setting. There are so many more subjects to explore and discuss and I hope this experience helps these girls (and adult women who are sharing this process) discover the many circles in their lives-- and the value of calling their circle to help support them through the joys and challenges of the journey called life.

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

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