



After serving churches as a United Methodist clergy in Tucson and Patagonia, Arizona, Shirley Montoya decided to return to her tribal home among the Dine', the Navajo Nation. She moved to Shiprock, New Mexico, and as there were no UM churches to serve, she took early retirement and immersed herself in volunteerism, addressing especially the needs of Native American women. Thank you Shirley, and the Navajo women of the Dine' for sharing your stories with us.

Circle Tale, May 2011

Navajo Sisters in Circle

I founded the Sisters in Circle, Women's Leadership Revival in March 2009. I am located in Shiprock, New Mexico and am Dine' (Navajo). We meet in Circle every first Wednesday of each month and have additional support Circles, every Wednesday in late afternoon.

Circle is not a new idea, of course. Our traditional homes, the *hogan*, are circular in shape, and families traditionally ate in circles with the food shared from a common bowl in the center. But a lot of our tribal meetings have become a boardroom setting, or rows of listeners with speakers up front. All the meetings I hold happen in circles—and sometimes people are uncomfortable because sitting in a circle really puts you on the spot. Everyone is encouraged to have an input and participate. Well, that's the point—especially of the Sisters In Circles.

The Sisters that meet once a month are working Sisters who want to share their gifts, talents, and experiences to better themselves and the lives of other community Sisters. We take turns hosting and creating a center, sacred space. This work got started in partnership with Elarina Nakai, program administrator for the Navajo Nation Family Violence Prevention program. They supported our first conference and have offered the Sisters space to meet and office support. Once this space became available, we began our monthly meetings. I didn't want an ordinary women's group where people sit in their mental ruts and recite their problems, I wanted to tap into the skills and gifts of the Sisters, to encourage and develop leadership, and train facilitators who could host other circle conversations and create a grassroots movement.

One day, my sister, Karen John, a Health Promotion Disease Prevention Program Specialist with Healthy Native Communities Partnership, Inc., forwarded me information on PeerSpirit. Karen is a core member of the Sisters who share with us her 17 years of experience in group facilitation and planning. With the new found Women's Leadership Revival Circle Kit, which includes the *Guide to PeerSpirit Circling*, we began using that structure, and the movement is growing.

The Sisters that meet weekly are in need of more support as they struggle to find employment, housing, education and seeking ways better their lives. I host those circles, and assign people to work with me, define topics, do research on the computers at the drop-in center, and work together. Right now we are starting a meditation garden, building a path with garden benches in an enclosed space where people can pray and make offerings.

I have found a way to combine Christianity with Dine' spiritual tradition. I also host a Community Spiritual Gathering, on Sundays, an inter-religious gathering with a focus on prayer, meditations, readings, rituals, sharing and learning of beliefs and the many ways and paths to connecting with the sacred, creator, holy beings. We have hosted two "Celebration of Women Conference", both well attended. We are hosting a Healthy Woman's conference on June 03, 2011. We host all events based on volunteers and donations. A core circle of 17 Sisters do the planning. We take turns facilitating the group sessions and some workshops.



There are many social programs that deal with the negatives, how to overcome the social issues, etc., so the emphasis of Sisters In Circle is to bring out the possibilities, recharge our inner strength and reclaim the empowerment of Circle. The Circle is helpful for a lot of our young women. At their strategic planning meeting on Feb. 02, 2011, the Sister adopted this vision statement, "*To mentor women/sisters as we walk the path to self-sufficiency, self-awareness, and self-leadership for a positive community and a better future*". A priority is to be mentors to our daughters, granddaughters and other sisters.

In the one-day conference, we have two keynote speakers and a series of workshops with topics that teach traditional parenting, clan roles, and ways of being strong women. At the end of the day we form circles with a host and focus question, and what happens in the uniqueness of these circles is awesome. We learned we need two and a half hours for these circles so that women could really share their stories. We had 290+ attending our last conference and our Guest Speaker was writer and artist Ms. Gloria Emerson, a Dine' and native of Shiprock. She gave a wonderful power point presentation on her work, her art and its interpretation. Comments were very positive from women at these conferences and attendance keeps increasing as people understand what we're doing.

At a time when our clanship and family systems have been taken apart and identity nearly destroyed, the idea of Sisterhood and the practice of circle is helping us rebuild our families, communities and Tribal Nations. So I thank you for what you have so thoughtfully put into book form. Your writing gives us ground work from which to build and even look at perspectives that we have but didn't know how to put into words. We are building the garden as a sacred space around us—and the experience of circle is building sacred space within us.

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 and subscribe to our monthly Circle Tale newsletter. Your e-mail address will **not** be shared or used by anyone other than PeerSpirit, and you can unsubscribe yourself at any time.*