

HOLDING THE SPACE



THE JOURNEY OF CIRCLES AT ROCA

Report on the period
July 2001-June 30 2002

Prepared by

Carolyn Boyes-Watson, Ph.D.
The Center for Restorative Justice
at Suffolk University

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This document is dedicated to our mentors from the Yukon, Minnesota, & Massachusetts:

Harold Gatensby, Mark Wedge, Barry Stuart, Gwen
Chandler-Rivers, Kay Pranis and Don Johnson (mentors for
the journey of circles); and Robin Casarjian (author of
Houses of Healing).

We hope we share what you have taught us “in a good way.”

On this journey of learning about and using circles to bring peace to our homes and to our community, we at Roca have been humbled by the power of people when they come together, listen and talk about hard things. We have been transformed from an organization of assertive activists ready to fight for what we believe, to what we hope is a now a place of invitation, inclusion, compassion for all people honoring all viewpoints and relationships as we try to bring our community together in peace to address hard things in a good way. We would like to thank the many young people, parents, family members, community members and community partners for the privilege of sitting together in circle to bring healing and hope to our lives and our communities.

Special thank you to Carolyn Boyes-Watson for your patience and careful attention to this journey. To the readers of this report, thank you for your time and interest in our stories, lessons, and hopefully never ending efforts to bring a little more peace to the world.

*Molly Baldwin
Saroeum Phoung
September 30, 2002*

Preface

Peacemaking circles are now integral to all that Roca does in its work with young people, families, community and staff. This evaluation shares the experience and lessons of peacemaking circles at Roca, Inc. during FY, 2002 (July 2001 – June 2002). It is based on documentation on the use of circles at Roca and over thirty-six hours of taped interviews with thirteen adult staff and community partners intensively involved in the use of circles at Roca. We wish to share the experiences, reflections, lessons and concerns about peacemaking circles and the influence of circle on the lives of young people, their families and the wider community.

This report was prepared by Carolyn Boyes-Watson, Ph.D. of the Center for Restorative Justice at Suffolk University. The CRJ at Suffolk University is committed to promoting restorative justice practices, principles and values in communities across New England. Interviews were conducted in the spring of 2002 by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Carolyn Edsell. We have been fortunate to accompany Roca on its learning about peacemaking circles and privileged to have participated in numerous circles at Roca and elsewhere. The lessons, challenges, and stories of this evaluation is our best summation of the growing wisdom and understanding among staff and community partners at Roca who have embraced peacemaking circles in their work with young people and the communities of Chelsea and Revere. We are grateful to all those who shared their experiences with such candor and eloquence.

The voices in these pages are those of nine young adult and adult staff from Roca and four community partners who have been intensively involved in learning and using circles at Roca over the past two and half years. Each interview constructed a narrative of the experience with circles beginning with the early training with the mentors from the Yukon and Minnesota followed by the implementation of circles for a variety of purposes with young people, staff, community partners and community members. Respondents shared their observations of young people in circle, what they felt young people liked and disliked about the circle; when and why they believed circle “worked” and when it did not. We asked respondents to describe the behavior of young people inside the circle and their perception of the impact of circles on the behavior of young people outside the circle. We specifically asked if people saw changes in the attitudes and behavior of young people that they believed to be the result of involvement in peacemaking circles. With every question, we pushed for the examples and illustrations that would help us to understand the story. We share these stories in the words of those we interviewed because there is so much in what they say and in the words they choose to say it.

Contents

The report is divided into four parts. Part I provides a description of the learning and training activities conducted by Roca during FY 2002 and a detailed overview of many uses of circles at Roca. It also summarizes seven key lessons and seven key challenges for the use of circles at Roca. The next three sections of the report provide a focused discussion of the impact of circles on three areas important to the mission and values of Roca: voice and empowerment of young people; the development of accountability among young people, Roca and the wider community; and the coming together of peoples to building stronger, healthier communities.

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PEACEMAKING CIRCLES AT ROCA

Peacemaking circles are a crucial strategy that helps Roca stay true to the vision, values and mission of the organization.

- Roca is committed to being vision and value led organization: ***peacemaking circles offer a way to continually create shared visions and practice shared values.***
- Roca is committed to being a multicultural organization and to bringing people together to experience genuine democratic participation: ***peacemaking circles opens a space where all voices are respectfully heard, where shared leadership can emerge and where communities grow stronger promoting inclusiveness, community-building and genuine democratic participation.***
- Roca aspires to “promote justice by creating opportunities with young people and families to lead happy and healthy lives.”: ***peacemaking circles promote restorative justice by opening a space for healing, accountability and redressing imbalances within the community in a harmonious and healthy way.***

TRAINING AND LEARNING

Building Capacity for Circles

The circle work of FY02 builds upon the first year of circle training. (See previous evaluation *Coming Full-Circle: Peacemaking Circles at Roca, Inc.*) During FY02, the **basic four-day training** was facilitated by a second-generation of teachers: members of Roca staff and/or members of the Peacemaking Planning Committee. Roca continues to be coached by mentors from the Yukon and Minnesota in trainings for keepers and other organizational development work but the four-day basic training is now conducted by local trainers from Roca or the PMPC. **Coaching** by Roca staff for various community partners has been a key capacity-building activity along with the basic four-day training. Roca has also held two **Spanish-speaking circle trainings**. **Arts circle trainings** have been added this year. A Roca staff person attended the arts circle training in Minnesota and has adapted that training for young people. The arts training which focuses on the use of non-verbal forms of expression has been conducted off-site at DYS as well as internal to Roca.

Training and Coaching

- 4 day learning (training) circles for 97 people from Roca, community, DSS, and DYS
- Started circle learning processes in Spanish
- Incorporation of 4 day learning circle process in orientation of Youth STAR
- 2-day coaching and workplanning session for 15 youth and adults from Roca, Inc.
- 4 day learning, arts, and discussion circle for 90 youth and young adults for national networking meeting for W.K. Kellogg initiative on race and multi-culturalism (worked with people from MN and Yukon on this)
- Participated in training to incorporate arts in circles and use of arts in circles

Work with the Department of Youth Services (DYS)

- Support for circles work at Pelletier Center
- On-going work with the Day Reporting Center
- Provide two 1-day sessions on circles and arts at Pelletier
- Include representatives in community-based training
- Provide support to personnel at DYS who would like to use circles in Metro Region
- Extensive communication and follow-up Deputy Commissioner of DYS
- Met extensively with DYS personnel about circles, re-entry, restorative justice, and the new VIA Project
- Began relationship with the Lynn DRC

Work with the Department of Social Services (DSS)

- Support and coaching for circles at DSS Chelsea/Revere Office; Area Director is committed to training all staff and using circles with families
- Include representatives in community-based training
- The Chelsea/Revere DSS Office has begun using circles with families and for staff support processes

CIRCLES AT ROCA

All Roca programs are using circles. Hundreds of young people, parents, professionals and community members were in circle from July, 2001 through June, 2002. In addition, circles are regularly held at various community and agency sites by people who have participated in the circle training at Roca. These sites include the Day Reporting Center of DYS; the Pelletier Girls Detention, the Department of Social Services, St. Rose Church, two schools and the Suffolk County House of Correction.

Street Team, Roca Revere Project, Project Victory, Healthy Families, Youth STAR, and Community Building

- Circles with youth and young adults addressing conflict, healing, street and gang issues, and personal leadership
- Circles to learn about, discuss and share on critical issues impacting young people like substance abuse, school, family issues, violence, etc., as well as personal development, life dreams, and learning to live in a good way
- Circles with young people from other countries to talking about transition to this country and the refugee and immigrant experience
- Circles with young people using the arts
- Court based process for two families
- Hosted talking circle on idea of community justice and healing, Columbus Day, Martin Luther King Day
- Circles with parents and school officials
- Latino parent leadership group met in circle
- Use of circles with statewide organization and several groups of service providers for vision, planning and future directions
- Circles with young people and their families

They are many different reasons for bringing people together, thus circles are used for many different purposes. Talking circles, conflict circles, healing circles, family circles, brainstorming and management circles, art circles, court-related circles and support circles are the most common uses of circles at Roca. Each of these are simply circles sharing all the characteristics of the circle process: they begin with an opening, agree on guidelines, use a talking piece and close in good way. And often what begins for one purpose will serve other purposes as well. However, the degree of planning, preparation and follow-up as well as who might be invited to participate will vary depending upon the purpose and intention of the circle.

Talking circles bring people together to share their experiences and ideas about a particular issue: Roca has hosted numerous talking circles on topics ranging from: the refugee experience; why young people join gangs; reasons for leaving school; challenges of parenting; racism within the community; what it means to participate in civic life; what it takes to go to college; life on the street and lots more. For example, a series of talking circles in Revere focused on why people join gangs and what it means to leave the gang and among those who participated in the circle were older ex-gang members in their late twenties who shared their personal stories.

Because the circle process is about sharing ones own experience, these circles often lead to intense honesty and communication about issues that are never discussed. Author Helen Zia was invited to a talking circle that focused on the experience of being a refugee asking questions such as, “Who are you? Where are you from? What would you like to leave behind?” Among those in the circle were many who emigrated from war-torn countries. Sharing about these questions in the talking circle proved to be a profoundly emotional and healing experience for people who expressed deeply held feelings for the first time in their lives.

Conflict circles are held to address difficulty within a particular relationship, for example, a fight between two youths or problems between a young person and a parent or two parents who are having a hard time in their relationship. The conflict circle focuses on the relationship between those persons and on bringing people to the circles who are affected by that relationship and who can offer perspective and support. On occasion, these circles may be spontaneous when a flare-up occurs between two youth within Roca but far more often these are carefully planned with deep thought and preparation by keepers so all those who are present are ready to be there and prepared to deal with the underlying conflict.

Circles with gang members who are involved in long standing conflict with one another are held on an on-going basis at Roca Revere. Sometimes the animosity is between particular individuals, other times it is between the groups themselves. Conflict circles often focus on the transformation of the on-

going relationship helping people shift in their patterns of relationship with one another and helping them form agreements, for example, to avoid insulting one another or engaging in other trigger points for conflict. Conflict circles are rarely one-time events but are usually a series of circles focusing on the issue. There is a great deal of preparation work on the part of Roca with gang members to build trust for coming to circles particularly with members from other crews or sets.

Healing Circles at Roca

In a sense, all circles are healing circles. When people share their story and experiences in a setting where they are respectfully listened to, they (and others) heal. Because this happens so often in many circles, people observe that all circles involve healing to some degree. The opportunity to tell ones story in a space where others respectfully listen is a profound experience that has enormous potential to heal deep wounds within the community. Roca has used talking circles to explore the issue of harm: what it feels like to cause harm and to be harmed; what it means to be accountable for harm caused; and what it means to forgive. The healing work of circles is also found in the capacity to have hard discussions about issues of racism, injustice and violence in a safe space where respect and compassion are guaranteed.

Some circles are consciously prepared to “go deep” in the sharing of trauma and pain .A talking circle was held with Judith Herman, author of *Trauma and Recovery* to share ideas about how to deal with trauma that comes up in circle. The mentors continue to assist Roca through facilitation of the keepers training because the keeper bears a special responsibility in keeping the circle an emotionally safe space.

Within the last year, the Houses of Healing (HOH) curriculum on emotional literacy and emotional awareness has been adapted and integrated with the circle process. Roca has adopted the HOH curriculum in much of its work with young people running the fourteen week curriculum with several young men and young women’s groups both in Chelsea and Revere. Roca has also facilitated HOH in the Suffolk County House of Correction. Roca Inc. has also piloted the development of a juvenile HOH curriculum in collaboration with author Robin Casarjian of the Lionheart Foundation.

Houses of Healing and Circles

- Use of Houses of Healing in Suffolk County House of Corrections, Youth STAR
- Worked with Robin Casarjian (author) to provide input and pilot juvenile Houses of Healing
- Facilitated a young women’s and young men’s Houses of Healing for Young People in Revere (average of 10 people a session, 12 sessions each)

- Training for Healthy Families Program in House of Healing
- Shared HOH work DYS, DSS, Court Personnel, and People from other Countries
- Give copies of the HOH book to young adults

Community-based and court-related circles

Roca is continuing to develop capacity for the use of circles for community and court-related processes. All those who have attended the four day trainings: parents, young people, professionals and community members are part of the Chelsea/Revere Peacemaking Planning Committee (PMPC) and are invited to Full Circle once a month. Under the umbrella of the PMPC are two additional projects which guide circle work at Roca: Development Team provides leadership for circles and the Community Involvement Project (CIP) meets to provide support to court and community-based circle processes including strategic development and support for implementation of these circles. Representatives on this committee include community members, criminal justice professionals, parents and young people.

Within the past year, the CIP (Community Involvement Project) has had extensive meetings with Chelsea/Revere District Court Judge to learn about sentencing circles. Court personnel including the judge have participated in talking circles and the four-day learning process along with members of their probation staff. Several judges are committed to partnering with Roca to use circles as a community-based justice alternative for both courts. In preparation for court-related purposes, a series of talking circles were held at Roca on the issue of harm: how it feels to be harmed, to cause harm and what it means to be held accountable for harm in a “good way”.

Chelsea/Revere Peacemaking Planning Committee, Community Involvement Project

- Development Team, which serves as a leadership team for circles work met five times (average of 5 people)
- Full Circle met an average of once a month with average of 15 people a month (range from 6 to 40 people)
- A key partner in this work is Las Hermanas Misionaras de la Corozon de Jesus; they do street work and help with circles and follow-up
- The Community Involvement Project (CIP) met an average of two times a month (average of 10 people attending the circle). Representatives on this committee include community members, criminal justice professionals, street workers, parents, and young people.

Management, strategic planning, workshops and brainstorming are some of the additional purposes of circle. To varying degrees, these circles combine elements of the circle process with other organizational formats by suspending the talking piece and hearing a brief presentation, opening the floor to questions or using a flip chart. There has been and continues to be great deal of experimentation around the use of circle for organizational planning and management, sometimes with mixed satisfaction. Some find the hybrid of mixing the workshop with the circle a great improvement over the traditional workshop format; while others are less comfortable with combining circle with work planning and other organizational business activities.

Organization

- Staff meetings, team meetings, management meetings and the Board of Directors use circles for many discussions, vision work, challenging issues, leadership development, and reflection

SEVEN KEY LESSONS of Circles at Roca

Stage two of circle work at Roca has been about deepening the understanding of the circle itself. Seven key lessons have been learned:

- 1. Circles are not a thing or a program but a way to be**
- 2. Circles are a sacred space**
- 3. Circles are about giving oneself up and sharing to help others**
- 4. Circles foster accountability to self and others**
- 5. No one “controls” circles: they are spaces of collective empowerment**
- 6. Circles are about the invitation: no one can be forced to sit in circle**
- 7. Circle is not about circle, it is about us.**

Circles are not a thing or a program but a way to be...

The circle is a commitment to practice living the values of the circle. The more people sit in circle at Roca, the more they have learned that circle is not about sitting in the physical space but about how to be in circle when you are not in circle. The meaning of “being in circle” has expanded to refer to acting in a “circle way” or holding oneself “in a good way” in ones relationship with others and oneself.

Circles are a sacred space...

Circle is a sacred space unlike many others. This key understanding has emerged with greater clarity as the organization has become more experienced in the use of circles. Opening and closing in a good way, the use of ritual and ceremony such as sage, music and the symbolic centerpiece, are important elements that preserve the circle as a place that is cherished and honored. Maintaining the sacredness of the space is intentional and purposeful by participants.

Circles are about giving oneself up and sharing to help others...

At Roca, the two core values of the organization are generosity and belonging. The circle embodies both of these values: in the circle there is a place for everyone and everyone belongs. The circle is also a space that invites participants to share and one of the deeper lessons is that sharing ones own story is an extraordinary gift to others. Opening ones experiences to the circle is an act of generosity that reinforces belonging: others feel less alone in knowing what others have experienced. The lessons of modeling and giving oneself up to the circle are some of the more personally challenging parts of deeper engagement with the circle process.

Circles foster accountability to self and others....

Circles promote accountability. In circle people have an opportunity to try and meet their own hopes for themselves. Who do they really want to be? The guidelines are a deep lesson in accountability because only when people hold themselves accountable to acting in accordance with the guidelines will the circle be a space that is respectful, caring, honest and so forth. This lesson generalizes to being accountable for actions towards others outside of circle. Learning to be “in a good way” with oneself and others, inside and outside of is a deep lesson that emerges from being in circle.

No one “controls” circles: they are spaces of empowerment and collective leadership...

Learning to “trust the process” is also a deeper lesson of the circle. For those who are keepers, the phrase “letting go” is often used to describe the need to relinquish expectations and the desire to control the outcome. The circle generally takes on a “life of its own” and learning to guide or serve that process is one of challenges for keepers. Sitting in circle often demonstrates the wisdom that “everyone brings gifts” and the power and wisdom comes from the group rather than the “leader”.

Circles are about the invitation: no one can be forced to sit in circle....

An important understanding at Roca has been the work of inviting and preparing people to come to circle without relying upon traditional forms of threat, coercion or pressure to be in circle. Because the transformational model of change is so fundamental to Roca’s work with young people, Roca is familiar with the need to keep the invitation open and to support young people as they take incremental steps out of their comfort zone. Keeping the invitation to circle open without pressuring people to be in circle has been a notable learning experience that has come with the more frequent use of circles.

Circle is not about circle, it is about us....

This insight comes full circle to the first insight: the circle is not a thing or a program but a way to be. The awesome power of the circle is not in the magic of the ritual or technique but in the enormous capacity of people to heal and solve problems when they come together in a good way. Creating that space is what matters, whether it looks like a circle or not. The circle can be one way, not necessarily the only way, to access what lies untapped within the community: the capacity to come together as human beings for ourselves and our future.

SEVEN KEY CHALLENGES for Circle Work at Roca

The following key areas are important areas identified by participants which need attention and learning in order for the circle work to continue effectively.

- 1. Open the circle to everyone**
- 2. Avoid “problemitizing” the circle**
- 3. Keep the invitation open**
- 4. Give time and attention to preparation and follow-up**
- 5. Adapt the training for adults in community and in systems**
- 6. Get more adults involved with the circle**
- 7. Keep the circle sacred.**

Open the circle to everyone ...

One key challenge is to work to find ways to open the circle to the full diversity within the community. For young people and for non-English speakers, Roca needs to continue to find ways to be creative about using the arts and other non-verbal forms of expression. Physically sitting for long periods of time is especially hard for young people as well as for others. People need to continue to pay attention to the physical as well as the mental, emotional and spiritual.

Sensitivity to cultural differences for creating appropriate symbols and rituals is critical. Rituals or ceremonial practices should be neither offensive nor off-putting to a particular tradition or group. For example, young men may prefer not to hold hands or it might be better to use a quotation rather than a prayer for a circle within a government agency. These parts of the circle too should be “inviting” and not exclusionary.

It is essential to continue to build capacity for trainings and circles for non-English speakers.

Avoid making circles about problems...

It is important that circles are not used exclusively as a form of “conflict resolution” or “therapy”. Circles are an effective means to face problems and talk about emotional pain but they should not be reduced to that one purpose. Circles help us find the power in ourselves to deal with the “mess” we have created so we need to deal with problems, have hard conversations and share our deep emotional pain, but that is not the sole purpose of circles at all. Circles are about coming together as human beings in a sacred way for a common purpose. Circles are about celebration, fun and creativity as

well as the hard stuff. It is a grave error to misuse circles to focus on the negative elements of who we are and how we are in relationship with each other.

Keep the invitation open...

There is a powerful temptation to “sit” individuals in circle” who “need” to be in circle because it would clearly benefit them. Obviously, the compulsory use of circles is in contradiction to the spirit of the circle. Learning to refrain from that temptation for young people is a great challenge because it also requires an “unlearning” of our habit of trying to change other people and the habit of telling young people, in particular, what to do. We must be mindful of ways to keep the invitation open.

More attention needs to be paid to **cultivating and recognizing readiness** to sit in circle. Lots of experimentation is going on with one-on-one work and ways of exposing young people gradually to elements of circle, e.g. sitting in a circle or using a talking piece, in order to facilitate readiness to sit in circle. This needs to continue and develop.

Keeping the invitation open means making the circle, its rituals and practices, available to young people (and others) to use for themselves. For instance, Sayra places sage and other ceremonial objects around Roca so they can be used by young people on their own initiative. These kinds of openings allow people to use the circle in their own way. Circle should be a space that young people feel empowered to use on their own initiative rather than at the request of an adult.

Given the prevalence of circles at Roca, it is necessary for staff be comfortable being in circle. Circles are challenging on a personal level and it is important that staff be given the space to be in a “good way” with the circle process. While it is not possible to work at Roca and not participate in circle, staff need to be mindful about their own journey with circles and management at Roca need to find ways to support staff in learning to be in circle in a good way.

Give time and attention to preparation and follow-up...

The early use of circles did not emphasize preparation and follow-up. With greater experience both of these stages are seen as crucial. For any circle, close attention must be given to preparation: talking to the people who will be involved; making sure they know what to expect; addressing questions or concerns; thinking about who else needs to be there; preparing the space; planning an opening and closing and preparing oneself to come to circle in a good way.

More attention is being paid now to preparing young people and community members to come to circle and awareness about an individual’s readiness to be in circle. Follow-up is now recognized as one of the greatest challenges of the successful use of circles: if an agreement is made in the circle, it is important that someone follow-up to see if people are accountable to those agreements. If strong emotions are shared, there needs to be follow up with individuals to see how they are doing and

ensure they are getting the support they need.

Adapt the training for adults in community and in systems...

One key challenge is how to make the four-day learning process fit a workable schedule for community partners such as DYS, DSS, teachers and other personnel who cannot attend over a weekend or for that long period. Various alternative formats have been tried such as spreading the four days over a period of weeks; having the training on two evenings followed by two weekend days; and shortening the training. Some of these alternatives have been found to be unsuccessful while others are workable. Being creative about making the learning process work for different schedules without sacrificing the quality of the training needs to continue.

Open the circle to more adults in the community...

More efforts need to be made to get adults within the community: parents, elders, business owners, clergy etc. involved in circles and open to using the circle process for themselves. This requires creativity about training to make it more accessible for adults within the community who cannot attend a four-day learning process.

Keep the circle sacred...

At first circles were used for “everything” with a great deal of experimentation and learning about the use of circles. As a deeper understanding of circles has evolved, there is concern about the overuse or misuse of circles for other purposes such as work planning or organizational meetings. For some the hybrid of formats (workshops in circles or staff meeting in circles) improves the quality of the workshop or staff meeting; for others, these uses undermine the sacred quality of the circle.

Learning *when not to sit in circle* is an important part of the learning process. People are learning more about how to hold circles “in a good way”. For example, holding a circle on the spot in response to an incident is often not a good idea, people are too angry, people cannot be invited who may need to be there for a good resolution, and there is no time for preparation or planning. On the other hand, there are also times when people are holding spontaneous circles at the moment when feelings are strong and people feel a need to sit in circle. The capacity to assess when a circle can be held in a “good way” so that the space is sacred...is something that is slowly being learned by Roca youth and staff as they are becoming more experienced with the circle process.

Above all, continue to be mindful about how to balance the four parts of the human being: the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional. This is fundamental to what it means to be in circle.

VOICING THEMSELVES EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH CIRCLES

The circle process opens a space where young people are able to speak and be heard. The experience of being respectfully and fully listened to is one of the most profoundly meaningful elements of the circle process. In an adult-dominated world, young people are marginalized and voiceless; disadvantaged young people are especially “voiceless” at home, in school and in the wider community. The circle process offers an opportunity for participation as equals that does not exist in any other social context. Young people are able to speak, be heard and listen to others in their community. Participation and empowerment are mutually reinforcing: as the circle opens a space for democratic participation, young people embrace the circle process as a healthy and hopeful way to address their own needs and fulfill their own dreams for themselves and their community.

The experience of circle at Roca embodies key lessons about how to open a space for young people to truly feel safe and trusting within the circle process. As a learning organization, Roca has made mistakes in its use of circles and learned valuable lessons from those mistakes through reflection, honest inquiry and dedication to the mission, vision and values of the organization. In its third year of development of circles at Roca, there are concrete and important achievements in learning how to hold circle “in a good way,” a way that holds to the values of the circle itself. These understandings have opened a path for young people to trust circle and to begin to “own” it for themselves. We share some of the stories shared by Roca staff and community partners about young people at Roca and their journey toward using their voice in circle.

Lesson One: Opening the Space

In the non-profit world we talk about youth development but people have a hard time understanding what youth development means....sometimes when we get young people involved or anyone involved from the community, there is no space for them - their voice is not listened to or valued, their being present is not acknowledged and so I think circles allow us to be in a different way. In a circle they have the same right, when they talk people get to listen to them and when people talk they get to listen so there is automatically a space for them....to be accepted, valued and to be respected. To me that is the true essence of youth development and community development because there will always be a space for anyone who is willing. (Saroeum)

Kids love to tell stories....with circle, obviously, that is what you're trying to do....kids love to be able to claim their voice which circle allows you to do....kids love to relate to one another....if its safe enough to do that which circle allows you to do....and I think kids like to think, if given the opportunity which circle allows you to do.(Gregg)

Circle give people a voice....it gives them an opportunity to speak....in this society we are so used to having these forums where things are set-up classroom style or workshop style....If you raise your hand and you speak the loudest, that how you get your voice across....(Victor)

For kids from the street....not too many people stop and ask, "how you doing?" Circles help to do that....for once in their lifetime they sit in a circle and there's a check in: "how you doing?"...."how you feeling?"....young people got so much to say but they've been neglected for so many years....just left out on the street. People don't understand them, parents don't understand them...and they're just left out there and they want to talk to people and they want to share their stuff but they don't know how to do it in a good way and that's what circle do. (Vichey)

All of the staff and community partners who have been doing circles at Roca over the past three years agree that young people are strongly attracted to the opportunity to talk and be listened to in circle. It is also clear that re-arranging the furniture and passing a talking piece does not create a circle. It is a learning process to create the circle as a space where everyone can genuinely be heard and express what they might need to say. It is also a learning process for young people and others to trust the circle as that kind of space. Young people do not automatically or instantly open up to the circle especially if the circle is dominated by adults doing a great deal of talking using a lot of big words and abstract concepts. Trust and familiarity with the circle appears to develop over time.

I've noticed, maybe, the first couple of circles, a young person might not talk but by the third or fourth, they are really talking and expressing themselves and I think that also translates to when they are outside circle. The circle plays such a supportive role...like...ok I'm valued...I'm respected....and even if I'm outside of circle....if Victor and others in circle can listen to what I have to say, so can others. (Victor)

It is the context of equality that makes the circle an opportunity for participation and empowerment. The genuine opening up of a space where young people can feel empowered to participate as full and equal members of the community requires the deeper understanding of the circle process that characterizes this second stage of learning for the staff, young people and community at Roca. Creating the space for participation is not achieved by requiring young people to sit down and "talk" at the behest of adults even if they use a talking piece and have set chairs in a circle. Nor is circle about "talking" or even being in a circle: at Roca where circles have become powerful spaces for youth and community development, the learning journey has involved far deeper lessons about equal participation and voice for all members of the community.

Lesson Two: Agreeing to Values: The Importance of Guidelines

Many young people are not being heard - as far as Cambodians go - traditions says you listen to your elders....and pretty much what elders say goes and you don't have much say in it....(Vichey)

....in school people are never flexible and the young people are never given the space to decide for themselves what the rules are or have the idea that they can change those rules....Wow! To say, "I don't agree to this..." and to know that they would change for me! or that I can challenge that. I think that the opportunity for us to be flexible with the guidelines with them is crucial because.... if it doesn't work, what other choices do we have? And they don't experience this in the schools or their homes or anywhere in their lives. (Liz)

All our conversations in our society with young people are about how to follow directions and make sure you do it right or else. And the "else" for a lot of the young people that we have here is that they don't belong or they end up in jail.....In any organization, it is really easy to get into a place where you think of young people as needing policing. In the open space here, where we refused to put metal detectors, we still think of young people as needing policing. Young people don't need policing, they need relationships. And they need to feel connected. And so circles is the one thing that holds promise of true participation as human beings for young people that I know of. And that's what speaks to me about it. (Sayra)

In every circle, the group must come to an understanding about mutually agreed upon values, which will govern their treatment of each other within the circle. The creation of the "guidelines" is one of the integral parts of the circle process, which signifies the profoundly different nature of this space from other social spaces. The guidelines are a set of values identified, discussed and agreed upon as part of the circle process. Unlike "rules" which can be broken and are enforced by those in authority, guidelines represent how the group wishes to be with each other. One of the deep lessons of the circle is that the choice to follow those guidelines is a power held by each person in the circle and the guidelines can only be upheld when people decide to hold themselves accountable to themselves and to each other.

Creating and holding to guidelines have proven to be profoundly important experience for young people at Roca. Young people are given few opportunities elsewhere to engage in genuine democratic participation. What are standards or rules we should live by? Why do we want to live this way? What do these values mean really? Having a say in the standards which govern behavior is foreign to young people who experience the world of rules as established by adults with little flexibility, explanation or input from them. Typically young people are told about the rules with the main emphasis placed the consequences of failing to abide by those rules. As Sayra notes, young people are primarily expected to conform "or else".

It is not unusual for a circle with young people to spend hours and even days discussing guidelines. In the first series of circles Saroeum kept for thirty young people at Youth STAR, the group spent two whole days, four to six hours each day, *just talking about guidelines*. At Roca Revere, in the talking circles with gang members, the guidelines discussion will focus on particular values: what does respect mean to you? What does love mean? What does confidentiality mean? The guidelines involve a genuine discussion about the meaning of these words and the concrete implications of living those values. This may be the first time young people are asked: what does it mean to feel “respected”, what does it mean to “love” someone?

The deeper lesson of the circle is that these guidelines are values which are shared by the people in that particular circle: they can talk about them and come to an understanding about what these mean but only when people decide to live those values, will these guidelines have any power. The lesson of the guideline is that our wishes for our community and ourselves will only be real when we, the people in the circle, choose to live those values in our behavior with each other. Unlike most social contexts in our society in which there is a structure of authority charged with enforcing compliance with rules, the circle is a context of shared power and shared leadership. It is a profound lesson when young people (and adults) come to the realization that if living in accordance with these values is something they wish for, it is also something that they must be responsible for.

In the circle they have the choice....the choice....its not like they have no choice and are told - here this is what you have to do: these are the guidelines and that's that you have to do, abide by them now. No, they have a say as to the meaning of it and at the same time, the they can change them and challenge them. (Liz)

....when we first thought about... fifteen guys coming together....I just figured they would not share anything really and it would be a hard time for us to get through to them....but I guess I underestimated them..... They created a culture and called each other, “the brothers keepers” cause its all young men. and they come in with their own little thin. In the beginning to check in. We all stand up in circle and they have their own little thing going on - they step in and say, “Am I my brothers keeper? Yes I am.” People will say, “So what are your commitments as a fellow brother keeper?” And they will repeat some of the guidelines: “I will be respectful...” and everything else. Its been amazing how they take charge cause as far as that goes, me and Rick [adult staff] is keepers but we never felt like we kept that circle. That's been amazing. (Vichey)

It gives them more of a leadership role too because they are able to model some of the things as they are also holding each other accountable so its an agreement on the guidelines that we all come up with...its not like I'm sitting in front of a board and saying, “So and so you're being disrespectful...” When we are in circle, everybody's accountable and I rarely have to say, “Oh so and so you're not respecting the talking piece” cause a kid'll say that before I ever go there. (Victor)

Lesson Three: Widening the circle through the arts

What do young people dislike about the circle....that's easy....sitting for long periods of time....talking all the time is really hard for young people. They resist circle because they think they are just going to sit for a long time and just talk, talk, talk....cause that's how they've experienced it. (Sayra)

Circles tend to be very verbal....we need to be more creative and think of ways of presenting things and discussing things...Circle is not just sitting in chairs in a circle but the space we hold...so we what are some others ways to do that.....we need to incorporate the medicine wheel and make sure those four parts of the human being are being addressed. (Victor)

I always ask, in each circle, what can be better, what do you need from us? How can we make this circle fun for you guys cause we don't want to make you sit down for three hours and make you guys talk. We don't want to do that. We want to have you talk or want you to be talking because you want to talk not because we're making you talk. And so, someone came up with the idea of drawing and then another one came up with the idea of singing, another one came up with the idea of dancing. Of making everybody dance, somehow, so we are incorporating what everybody said. (Angie)

The structure of adult dominated circles that emphasize verbal communication and abstract analytical thought does not offer young people an opening for genuine participation. Circles that are long with little opportunity for physical activity and a heavy emphasis on verbal expressions are alienating, boring and unappealing to young people. Verbal communication through elaborated codes of speech is a form of communication privileged by the dominant culture. Those who speak English as a first language, are educated, professional and adult use verbal communication to express power, position, and dominance in most conventional social spaces such as school, courts, politics, work organizations etc. The use of art, music and other forms of expression is key given the importance of the circle for allowing people to genuinely participate as full human beings. Young people find the circle a space for communication not just through words but through drawing, music and other ways to share.

The progression toward the use of the “art circles” is a direct outgrowth of the importance of the circle as a vehicle for “voice” for all people especially young people. As Angie points out, this is an on-going learning process. Staff ask young people: what do you want? What would make it work for you? On the other hand, opening up to the arts has not been easy. The arts training in Minnesota attended by Victor was powerful but the adaptation of the training to young people and to other cultural groups remains a challenge.

It is very important for communities that have been silenced for many years and if there is a language barrier....[to use arts in circle] If you use a picture for a check-

in, you can just show people your picture and you don't really have to talk so its really good for those people who are less verbal.....Or you can check in with sound. But in order to do some of this stuff there's a lot of trust building that needs to happen....Our first arts training here was very hard because arts are not really supported here in our culture and here in Chelsea, especially for young men...its seen as such a weakness to express yourself artistically unless its through rap or graffiti. (Victor)

The discovery of ways to be creative and use music, movement as well as the visual arts for expression is a challenge for the next stage of the learning journey. Trust is a key issue for the use of other forms of communication and expression. The teaching of the medicine wheel and its attention to the four parts of being human is key to widening the circle beyond the habit of sitting and talking. Increasingly people at Roca recognize that being in circle is not about sitting in a circle and talking but about being in relationship in accordance with a set of mutual values. Thus the journey is to find the many ways to be together and hold a space that is "circle-like" whatever that might look like.

Lesson Four: Honoring the invitation

The language around here is, "We need to put them in circle" "they need circle". "This person needs to sit in circle...." Yet who are we to tell somebody else what they need? (Sayra)

I think that when you introduce circles it can't be a thing where they [young people] perceive that they are in circle because they are in trouble or something's wrong....or because something has happened, that's why they are in circle.... (James)

Willingness [to sit in circle] is the single most important factor to consider....you can't force someone to be in circle....(Anisha)

Now we are not doing so many circles just for the sake of doing circles but we are doing a lot of preparation work to bring people into circle..... (Saroeum)

With all the best intentions, the work at Roca has involved a hard push to get young people and staff to sit in circle. With all the best intentions, many at Roca first used the circle process as a place where young people "needed to be sat down" to "talk" about themselves. During the first year of circle learning at Roca, many staff felt "pressure" to use circles and to "sit young people down in circle" and staff sought "leverage" to get young people to come to circle.

The dilemma is a hard one for many of the staff at Roca. On the one hand, it is clear that many young people might benefit from being in circle and it would be greatly beneficial for them to experience circle. Without trying it first, it is difficult to know if they will like it or not or even understand what it is about. Many of the staff and young adults

who embrace the process now, first attended the four-day training because they were required to attend by a supervisor at Roca. Without that leverage, they freely admit they might not have attended the training. For staff too it is clear that learning about and participating in circles is necessary for working at Roca since circles is so much a part of everything that Roca does now.

Yet the nature of circle as a place for genuine empowerment is undermined when young people are “required” to sit in circle or when circles come to be viewed as response to “trouble” or “problems”. Circle is not a space where people should be “sat” since the choice to be in circle is one of the decisions important for young people to decide for themselves. This is easier said than done because, at times, young people, (all people), may need help making healthy decisions. But one of the deeper lessons of the circle is that “holding the space” requires patience. Keeping the invitation to circle open requires persistence, tolerance and love along with patience. When young people trust the invitation, they will come to the space.

Several of the staff this year felt a need to slow down or withdraw from the heavy use of circles because they were concerned young people were experiencing circles in a way that usurped the free choice to sit in circle. The choice to say “no” to circle is an important one. Yet the invitation remains open. Roca understands this stance in the transformative relationship model which continually extends a hand of belonging towards those who are in a process of change. Honoring the invitation is a challenge for the organization as it embraces circles more and more in its programming and organizational structure. Yet the understanding is clear: for circles to be genuinely democratic, they must be open to young people to choose to participate.

It's a funny balance with young people cause a lot of decisions they can make for themselves and sometimes they just need somebody to make it for them, ...don't we all though....But I think when it comes to circle, they really need to make those decisions. Around circle, I really think they need to make their own decisions. (Sayra)

Lesson Five: Circles are about solutions not problems

At Roca a lot of people are trained....and people do circles and use it in different ways and that's a good thing. But every time something bad happens you cannot just sit em down in circle....you just cannot....cause then, I hear, like “oh what did we do now?” you know. We need to have the conversation again, what is circle then....you gotta go back to that. (James)

I decided not to sit in circle [for an issue in Youth STAR] because they are used so much for conflict and for hard things just because there is a lot of conflict and a lot of hard things in this community so we use circles cause circles are a really good way to try and deal with these issues. But I get concerned because I think young people sometimes feel like that's all we are doing it for....like, oh now, there's a problem we have to go to circle or oh no, it's circle, there must be a problem. (Anisha)

....once young people are allowed to be themselves, they grow....they do it themselves....if we keep getting in their way, they'll grow the less for it.... so its really how we hold ourselves in a place where we allow them to be themselves in this world in way that's ok....that doesn't make them look like there's always something wrong with them..... (Sayra)

The habit of using circles as a response to either some bad behavior by a young person or to a conflict or problem reinforces the dis-empowering and negative stereotypes towards young people within our society. As Sayra notes, young people are often viewed as a problem as if there is something wrong with them. To limit the use of circle to “problems” or “conflict” loses the “essence” of circle that is about bringing people together for what is positive not negative. In our society, in our work with youth and communities we tend to focus on the negative rather than the positive.

Circles cannot be about the “problems”: it is important for circles to be about coming together for celebration and for fun as well as for having difficult conversations and for dealing with the hard issues. To reduce the use of circles to a problem-centered process profoundly threatens the capacity of circles to be open to all and to be used by young people and community in a self-directed and empowering way. As a space for genuine equality, the circle process must be a voluntary choice for young people to participate. Young people must choose the circle rather than be asked to come to circle by adults only when there is a problem or conflict.

We should teach young people and young adults how to use circles where they feel comfortable enough to run their own where it could be more sacred for them....(James)

....there is so much wisdom in the day to day struggle and the day to day issues that we are trying to fix as grown-ups but they [young people] bring so much wisdom to the table and so much strength....And that is what we have wanted them to do....to be a solution to their own problems cause they are the ones that can fix it....we can't fix it....cause they are in it, they know the way out. (Saroeum)

Youth Empowerment: Using the Circle at Roca

So, now its working...they're saying, if we have a circle coming up, they say, hey Angie lets go, lets do this. Or they ask, can we write in the circle.....They are finding ways for circles to happen in their lives.... (Angie)

Young people are using circles for themselves. They are finding ways to make the circles do for them what they need them to do. It is a tribute to Roca's learning journey that young people are seeking ways to use the circle in their relationships with adults in their lives, with each other, for their own healing and to celebrate their own life, dreams and future. It is a tribute to the deep lessons of those engaged in the circle work at Roca that they are learning to hold the space for young people and for others in the community to come together in a good way. In Project Victory, young people are asking for circles to help them have important and difficult conversations with adults in their lives.

....ever since then, its like, "Angie can I talk to you.... can we have a circle with my mother, can we have a circle with this, can we have a circle with that?" And then I have a kid who, one of the girls who used to hit her mother....all the time....and this time, she went crying to Roca saying, Angie, I feel like I'm gonna hit her again....you know, I need a circle for me....I need a circle....In terms of growth, in terms of how has circles impacted their life.....I mean... they'll ask for it now....(Angie)

One of the most moving moments for the Roca staff was when young people at Roca organized a circle for themselves in the wake of a tragic death of a young person. Last summer, Desi Kimmon, twelve years old was killed in a hit and run auto accident. People at Roca were devastated and staff felt overwhelmed dealing with the loss. In the words of CLP director, the adult staff simply did not know what to do for the young people at Roca already facing so much loss in their lives. Exhausted and emotionally drained, the best the staff hoped for was that not too many young people would show up at Desi's wake. But they did show up, all of them. And when it was over, a group of young women, age thirteen, headed over to Roca and demanded a circle so they could talk about Desi and grieve together.

So then when Desi died, everyone from Project Victory decided to go to room 233 and have a circle about death and about appreciating people before they die and how you say, I love you to somebody before you die and not while they are lying in a casket. After the funeral, they came straight to Roca. "Sayra, Angie, we want a circle, we want to run a circle. We want to keep a circle. Give us the candle and a space." Sayra was, like, ok but you need to have an adult there so they said, Angie can you come, and I said, ok, I'll go with you guys. They ran the circle. They put Desi's picture on the floor, they put all these sacred things....one of the girls put a special thing that was hers because her mother passed away and they used that as the talking piece. It was really good. And these kids are thirteen....running the circle. They did guidelines on a flip chart with markers, different colors. They burned sage, they took Desi's picture and put the sage around it and smudged it. Then they started with an opening and a closing...I didn't have to do anything...they just did it. (Angie)

Young people are attracted to the ritual and ceremony of the circle; over time they become comfortable with the talking piece and over time they come to trust the opening it offers to them. There is a moment when the circle becomes a genuinely safe place to express deep or difficult emotions and experiences. At this point, the circle becomes a process valued as an opportunity or tool unlike any other: young people recognize this and begin to use circle themselves for their own reasons. Empowerment and voice go hand in hand. Young people turn to the circles themselves or ask for circles to address their own needs for healing, communication, problem-solving and so forth with people in their own lives.

Because we left circles alone, young people felt like they could do something around it. I think it had a lot to do with the space we created for people to do what they needed to do. People pulled the circle together for themselves....If we had said to them, lets go sit in circle, it would never have happened.... (Sayra).

CIRCLES AND ACCOUNTABILITY: BEING IN CIRCLE OUTSIDE OF CIRCLE

Sitting in circle begins a deep journey of accountability to self and community that is far reaching in people's lives and relationships. The circle is about practicing a different "way to be" in the world based on values. One key element of accountability is practicing the values expressed in the guidelines. Over and over being accountable for one's actions is modeled within the circle process. Acting in a good way is understood as a gentle process of continually trying to be in "harmony" with others and self and continually trying to act in alignment with your values. Rather than a "state of perfection" used to castigate and beat down young people, accountability becomes a part of everyday life as adults (especially when they are acting as keepers,) model their own daily struggle to be accountable to values.

Sitting in circle has taught participants at Roca a great deal about the many kinds of accountability that young people and communities need to thrive. Justice requires accountability to self; to others; and to the wider community. In circle, the lessons of accountability have been demonstrated in concrete changes in behavior, attitude and interaction within the organization and within the community. "Being in circle" at Roca is less about the physical act of sitting in circle and more about a "way to be" in relationships with self and others. The more people sit in circle, the more they are aware of their own accountability for their actions.

Lesson One: Accountability begins with self

There's already accountability in coming to circle....of how you're gonna be....and there are all these values that you always have to hold and try to live by....so there's already accountability there. (James)

What I have found when I have circles with young people is that when people don't hold the guidelines, there is always somebody else to be like, "Well, we came up with this..." and they hold each other accountable and we've been able to take that and use it in the center. (Victor)

The first "lesson" in accountability comes with the awareness of one's own accountability to the guidelines of the circle. Most young people experience the "rules" of society as being imposed and enforced by adults. At school and at home they are generally told what to do or "else". For young people, accustomed to being held accountable through threats and punishments, the first powerful lesson of circle is that it is up to them to decide upon and follow the guidelines. In circle, the guidelines only "work" when people in the circle choose to "be" that way with each other: the circle is a place of respect if people are respectful; it is only confidential if people preserve confidentiality; everyone will be heard only when others listen. This is a powerful revelation and an extraordinary lesson in accountability to self and others.

Saroeum recalls one of the first circles at Roca that had a powerful impact on him and everyone else as well. There had been a fight between two girls in the Youth STAR

program in which one girl assaulted another and the conflict escalated generating enormous tension within the group. They decided to sit everyone, about thirty young people, in circle. Saroeum's only thought at the time was to "trust the process", they did an opening and began guidelines.

We went about six round on guidelines....there were probably close to a hundred plus guidelines - respect, love, no swearing, no yelling, no racial comments - everything - and it kept going and going and in my head I am saying, "How the hell are we gonna live these guidelines?" and one young woman was so opposed to circle, she said, "Well, how in the world are we gonna respect these guidelines because there are so many of them and I don't think the circle thing is working." So she keeps pushing that this circle thing is not working....and by this time, I'm almost ready to give up thinking, can't we just go back to dealing with things in the usual way you know....just talking trash to people and threatening them to resolve issues.

So somewhere, somehow, I was just humble in that state and I just got up and said, "Well, who is it in this room feels so uncomfortable about any of these guidelines?.... and can we talk about that?" Then I just gave the feather away and it just went and went and went....and I think that it started to shift from that moment. Cause, instead of people saying general stuff they started saying, "Well, people are fighting already and I don't know if we can respect each other...." and there was talk about, "well I don't know about this no swearing cause if people are swearing at me...." and it took the whole day - I mean four, five, six hours just to talk about guidelines. (Saroeum)

The young people, at that moment, began to take those guidelines seriously: what would it mean to act respectfully toward one another? How can you do that if you are angry or if others won't be respectful toward you? Rather than empty words on a page with little impact on real behavior, the young people in the circle discussed what it would mean to really practice these values with one another. They realized that no one was able to enforce those values except themselves: it was up to them.

The lesson of the guidelines, (which is repeated in every circle,) created a powerful opening for individual accountability between the two girls who had the fight. The elusive shift toward the active responsibility for the values opened a space for each girl to share their feelings honestly and without anger. It created the opening for understanding and ultimately reconciliation.

So we created that gentleness and that place finally to a point where it was comfortable to talk with each other.....And the young woman who first punched the other, she's the one who first apologized to her and to everybody.... the woman picked up the talking piece when it got to her and she said, "Look, I'm really sorry about what I did....that I physically punched you in the face.... cause I was having a hard time with my Mom....she is so sick to a point where she might not make it and my baby was really sick at the same time and I didn't get enough sleep and you kept harassing me and I told you about ten times to stop what you were doing....and now my Mom is even sicker." So she was very courageous in coming forward and so everybody started apologizing to one another as we went around and then it gets to the woman who got decked in the face....and she says, "Look, Jesus, I'm really sorry....I didn't know your Mom was really sick or that your baby was sick cause we always play around like that and I thought it was ok." Well, my eyes was tearing up, and it just keeps going around and someone got up and gave someone a hug and someone else got up and then it was a big group hug and a big group forgiveness and closing people said we should help each other make it through Youth star....It was really positive....that was my first experience keeping a circle and it was really scary but I made it through but it was a big humongous lesson about circle....about how it is so different than how we are used to deal with issues in this organization. So that was the big shift. (Saroeum)

Lesson Two: Accountability is about an incremental shift in habits with a little help from your friends.

And....then there's accountability outside the circle....lets say a young person, we might talk in the circle and he expresses that he wants to go back to school, to use an example, there's that accountability of...ok....we come to agreement in that circle that he's gonna do certain things so he can go back and school and if he doesn't live up to what he's supposed to do....then we need to talk about that in that circle....and why....and what we can do to make him get back to school....It does hold each individual accountable and that's the beauty of it because everyone has their own responsibility in some sense....but that responsibility is shared by everybody else....I don't think you can get that anywhere else. (James)

The circle helps people in the change process because its helps them both understand what they want to change about their lives and makes that statement in a group that is willing to help them. The circle gently holds people accountable because it opens their desire for change to a wider group that helps hold people accountable to what they have agreed to do for themselves. The circle is a place of support and non-judgment but it is also a place where participants are gently challenged to be "who they really want to be".

I think circle helps people see a lot about themselves....some young people might not speak loudly in words but their actions speak much louder themselves....they drop out, are heavily into gangs. Circles help them start to see what they need to do for themselves.And when people start sharing, they start to sort of click in their head: oh

wow! What am I doing? This is so ridiculous. What do I need to do? What do I need to do to be accountable. We are just asking the questions....and everybody goes around....we are not telling them what to do, we are sharing about we think we need to be accountable and responsible for. (Liz)

At Roca change is understood to be a process: one step forward and several steps back, the process of transformation is a gradual shifting of habits and patterns. It takes a great deal of support and encouragement and the circle offers that in a gentle way. As James says, everyone has responsibility in the circle and nowhere else do we offer that kind of help to people in the process of personal growth and change.

We have a young man.....he is going through so much....he's going through that change process right now....he sat through a circle about three or four weeks ago....it was a circle about street life and the about difference between you and the street....what's the difference, is there a difference....how can you make your community better.... And after the circle, he says, I have to change....I'm gonna get locked up if I don't change....I know it, I know it, Angie... I have to go back to school, you have to help me get out of it....(Angie)

Lesson Three: The only person you can be accountable for is yourself

We are used to telling the whole world to change but not us, not me. The circle is a holistic accountability process. Much more effective than "you need to change and I don't" or "I need to hold you accountable for your actions" because then we get to the same thing - blaming and accusing each other but then we go nowhere. (Saroem)

I look at myself two or three years ago and I'm handling myself better and that's because of circleAnd I know its ok now to live cause life can be positive and be ok and be allowed to make mistakes and forgive and forgive yourself....And at the end of the day to know that the only person you can change is yourself....I think circles have helped me understand that. (James)

The lessons of accountability brought forth through involvement in circle have had a powerful impact on Roca staff and their understanding of what it means to be accountable to young people and the community. With all the best intentions, Roca staff embraced a confrontational, in-your-face style of interaction with a variety of agencies in the community and, at times, with young people who were putting themselves in harms way. Yet the circle teaches accountability for ones own pattern of interaction with others and the professed values of respect, tolerance, understanding, compassion and listening are too often discarded in a passionate effort to fight for what one believes is right. The lesson that one is accountable for one's conduct and that it is not possible to get to a good place through negative or disrespectful conduct has profoundly impacted Roca staff beginning foremost with the behavior of Molly Baldwin as executive director. The visible change in Molly has deeply impact other staff and young people who widely attribute these changes to being in circle.

The one that strikes me the most is Molly cause if anybody was immediately at the "I've gotta be in people's faces to make sure the changes that I want to see happen happens - that's the way she was...and now its about modeling and believing that I gotta be the way that I want others to be."

(Michael)

I saw some real changes in Molly's demeanor and her ways of handling herself in the space so I began to trust it [circle] because I had seen the changes she was going through.....(Sayra)

I believe circle has changed people and the organization itself especially Molly....I've seen how she was and how she is today and she's more....forgiving, humble...and more....she holds to her values so strong now and she brings that to the table.... (James)

As Liz noted, when the adult staff in the circle talk about accountability and responsibility, they are not lecturing young people about what they should be accountable or responsible for. Rather they are sharing their own struggle to be accountable and responsible. As Liz says, young people may think adults have never done anything wrong. And too often in the world, adults are reluctant to take ownership for their own negative behavior. The most eloquent lesson of the circle is the opportunity for modeling the constant struggle to act in alignment with values and "be in a good way" within and outside the circle.

Thus, at Roca, the circle process has deeply impacted the adult staff as well as the young people. One of the most important changes has been in the behavior of the staff: in circle, outside of circle, with young people, each other and community partners. The change offers to young people a model for their own development. More than anything else, modeling: being the way you want others to be, has been the means for teaching the true meaning of accountability to young people at Roca. And for many of the adult staff at Roca, the changes that they see in Molly's own conduct inside and outside of circle, has been an inspiration and a guide for their own journey of personal transformation.

One key aspect of the keeper role within the circle process is to model behaviors and attitudes for others within the circle. The keeper takes special care to be open, listen respectfully, be compassionate, non-judgmental and present because they feel a particular responsibility to serve the circle. But the importance of modeling runs much deeper just as the responsibility for upholding the values is shared among all the participants of the circle. Molly, Saroeum and all the other staff interviewed recognize that all they really can do to influence others is to hold themselves to values of the circle. By changing themselves they open others to change. There is also the understanding that this not a process that is done once and for all, but a way of life: constantly working to "be in a good way" with oneself and with others. This lesson, more than any other, has led to a profound shift within the organizational culture at Roca.

Whether we are in circle or not, we can still practice those values and to me that the big shift about the work that we do and our pattern and the way that we usually do things. So we have created relationships of honesty and trust even though we are not in circle because we can still practice it outside of circle. (Saroeum)

....once you learn circle values, you can't just go back....well, you can go back but we always catch ourselves... "I'm not being in a good way so now I'm gonna have to go back and apologize cause I was such an ass." Before we learned circle we could be such asses and we were like, alright its cool, cause we didn't know any better. (Saroeum)

Lesson Four: The real challenge is to be in circle when you are outside of circle

To be in a good way with yourself, is really to practice what you say in the circle. (Vichey)

The more you are in circle, physically sitting in circle, the more you get to be in circle when you're not in circle. (Michael)

Gwen [Chandler-Rivers, Roca mentor] talks about being in circle outside of circle, and for me, that really stuck. So even though we weren't promoting circles as a thing with young people, we could create a circle-like environment in the town center and in our relationships in such a way that young people would model after it. So even though we weren't doing circle, we were in circle. (Sayra)

Changes in behavior among young people and staff in general interactions within Roca and in their own lives is very noticeable according to all of the staff interviewed. Staff notice that young people are more respectful in their speech with staff and each other, they are more open to listening, they are more likely to own up to negative conduct and admit their mistakes. Staff are also aware of profound changes in their own behavior: they feel they are more patient, less judgmental, more disciplined about keeping their temper in check. Among the staff there is a sense that conversations are more respectful, more joyful and more appreciative of each other. For everyone concerned, the reason is there conscious awareness of being in circle when they are not in circle. Accountability to the values of the circles extends far beyond the physical space of the circle process.

I see young people being more respectful of others, more open to what others have to say...more patient. Circle is tied to a vision so people are thinking more about the well-being of everyone....interactions and dialogue is more respectful which usually leads to a positive conclusion. (Victor)

I've seen young people learn how to be gentle with each other....when people have a conversation its much more gentle...much more inviting where people

would normally scream at each other with the community partners or with young people or with families.....(Saroeum)

In the Chelsea Leadership Program, staff detect a difference in the behavior of young people within the town center that they believe is because of circles and the attention to values it brings. In fact, the physical use of circles is irrelevant: it is the holding to values that has created an environment that Sayra calls “circle-like”. Being accountable for being in a good way is becoming a pattern among young people.

The town center expects certain behaviors from all participants. In the past staff have found themselves needing to act as “police” to enforce standards of conduct. The goal has always been to have young people uphold these standards for themselves. According to several staff members, they observe that young people are far more willing to hold each other accountable for meeting those standards than in the past. Victor describes how six young people responded to an adult staff member who swore during a basketball game in the gym. The most notable aspect of their behavior was the respectful way in which they spoke to him about his transgression for which he duly apologized. They are holding each other accountable with their “values in mind.”

...something we try and promote among the youth is : if you guys see something that's not right, don't wait until an adult staff comes and says something, you guys can say it too cause this has to do with all of us. And I think the circle promotes that particularly because of the values that it holds, people go about it in a good way....they are holding each other accountable but they are also holding each other accountable with their values in mind.....I don't want to say that circles brought that about but it started happening in the Center about the same time circles started happening. (Victor)

Lesson Five: The circle can help us hold those in power accountable in a good way.

..... I have a kid who wants to have a circle with his teacher because he feels like his teacher isn't any help to him. The kid was in a gang and jumped out recently and feels "he [the teacher] looks at me like as if I was a street kid...he asks every other student, 'how are you doing today' and he never asks me, how am I doing today.....and I really want a circle Angie". So I said sure.... ok...let me call the teacher up right now. I spoke to him yesterday morning...I said one of the kids is really interested in sitting down with you so that you can experience what circle is....I want to explain to you what circle is....I want to explain to you what it means for this young person to come to Roca and feel important and then go to school and feel like no one is listening....(Angie)

A key challenge for accountability is how to hold those in positions of authority and power accountable for their own behavior. Young people, as Sayra notes, have a keen sense of justice and injustice: they are quick to call people on things they see that are wrong. The frustration of witnessing injustice by those in power is a source of anger that is often dis-empowering leading to negative or self-destructive behavior. The circle process offers a way to speak the truth about injustice in a way that does not undermine the values of the circle.

When a young person in Project Victory asks Angie to arrange a circle with his teacher at school, he is using the circle as a healthy way to hold an adult accountable for his own behavior. The young man felt that the teacher treated him unfairly ignoring him and stereotyping him for his prior involvement in a gang. The circle offered a respectful way to share those feelings with a powerful adult in an environment where the young man believed he would be fully heard. It also offered a safe place for the teacher to acknowledge the young man's feelings without being attacked, accused or blamed. The "we" of the circle process and the recognition that everyone is accountable for a positive future, shifts the process from one of negative finger-pointing, and opens an avenue for mutual accountability.

Another circle brought together a high school principal with young people many of whom had dropped out or been expelled from the school. In that circle, some young people expressed the view that the principal rarely praised or talked positively about students at the school. Sharing this criticism in a good way without blame or accusation allowed for a positive outcome: the day after the circle, this particular principal went on the school public address system and publicly said, "You guys are doing great."

I've sat in on many conversations between school administrators and young people or parents and often I find them to be really dismissive of what is being said....you know....like, that doesn't really happen or it used to happen but not anymore. [In the circle] students expressed to him that they understood that he really cared about them but they felt he didn't show it....that there wasn't enough celebration of the hard work they were doing. So the next day, at announcements, he went on for maybe five or ten minutes about how great the kids were. He later said that being in circle really changed his way of being a principal. (Jessica)

Lesson Six: Circles are about a different kind of justice

If we look at a crime...victim and perpetrator....we look at the perpetrator and say lets hold him or her accountable but we as a community have to be responsible as well. How do we help that person be accountable? And ourselves? (Saroeum)

In its preparation work for holding court-related circles, the Community Involvement Project held a series of talking circles about harm. These began by sharing people's experiences as victims of harm opening up what it feels like to be harmed with each other. Then a talking circle was held which focused on what it feels like to cause harm to others. In these circles, people shared deeply about their own victimization from serious harm, to losing loved ones to suicide, to the guilt of causing harm, in some cases, serious harm, to others. It was only after these circles that the group turned to questions of accountability - how can we hold people accountable for harm in a way that does not itself violate the values of the circle and what does it mean to forgive and to reconcile.

The criminal justice system - the agencies of the police, courts, probation, the department of youth services and the jails and prisons - are powerful institutions in the lives of many young people, their family and the community in general. Often the

interactions between young people and the community are negative: young people and the community mistrust the police and police feel under-appreciated and isolated from the community. Roca has made huge strides in building trust and relationships with these agencies shifting away from a head to head stance towards these systems. The capacity to partner with these agencies so that the response to young people who cause harm in the community will not create even more harm to them and the community is a long term goal and hope of the CIP.

The whole circle process stands out in my mind cause its more humane....it affects people on a more human basis than the system we have now which is just a system or a non-system or a non-functioning system. When you bring people who have an interest in not only the victim but also the perpetrator into the mix, and you show them the value of not only teaching the person who did the wrong how it affects others, it also breaks down all the other barriers - particularly the barriers between adults and kids so adults don't view all kids a punk and both are able to show their humanity and its mutually beneficial. (Terry)

In my experience what most people who come into the system as victims, what they want is they don't want people locked up. Most people want them to understand what they did was wrong and how they harmed me and I want them to change....I want to see them get help....is so often what people say....cause they want something to happen that will ensure that harm won't happen again. (Michael)

Lesson Seven: Accountability is a part of transformation and growth

Vichey's journey

One of the Roca's coming of age staff, now a young adult staff member participated in a series of circle dealing with the serious harm he had caused to people in his life. At the age of 21, Vichey was charged and convicted of assault with a dangerous weapon. For this conviction, he served time in the Suffolk County House of Correction. In addition to the formal justice process, Vichey agreed to be accountable to himself and his community through a circle process. Before the sentencing hearing, Vichey participated in a series of circles to address the harm he had caused to others and to himself.

Vichey's willingness to offer himself and his experience to others was a profound learning experience for all who witnessed his growth toward accountability for his actions. The capacity of the circle to sit with the truth of harm and simultaneously support people with compassion and respect as they seek to make amends is the greatest hope for bringing justice to the community. Accountability in the context of caring is an important part of journey toward justice.

I had a circle myself before I went to jail....circle didn't lessen my time or help my case. I was meeting with the circle just on my own and that is the circle I really didn't want to be in very much cause it was so hard....you yourself acknowledging the harm...what you've done and the need to talk about it....who I've harmed, what ripple effect it

had....To be able to be in conversation about that stuff, then to understand and be aware, and then you yourself, hold yourself accountable. (Vichey)

Within the circle were members of Vichey's family who shared much of the same painful history and who had also struggled with their own journey away from negative ways of dealing with their own pain. Vichey's older brother, Saroeum, served as a role model for Vichey in his youth . Like his older brother, Vichey aspired to being the tough gang leader on the street.

Sitting in circle with Vichey, my brother, was the big mindblower for me. I've known my brother for many years, I grew up with him and helped raise him in some ways and I think he is the most shut down and most reactive individual and his involvement in the gang was pretty intense and I was not surprised that he did that because I'm sure he watched me a lot in my early years on the street. And we talked a lot during my early years on the street. He wanted to be like me and he was proud of me for being a gang member and being the most vicious son of a bitch in town....so he is proud of me and that was really inspiring for me from him then....and he was always concerned about me....So for him to be willing to work with Molly and the group to take whatever risk....to take that journey and that path to the point where he was so highly accountable and responsible that he was willing to go to jail for his own harm that he caused and to hold himself accountable for that....and to be in a public arena to do that....I think I am so humble and he is more gifted than his brother. (Saroeum)

Within the circle process, Vichey shared his own pain and stood up and courageously confronted the pain he had caused others. Accountability in the context of caring supports growth and transformation. Accountability in the context of caring means that others acknowledge their responsibility to offer support and encouragement to the one facing the challenge of personal growth. Accountability in the context of caring means that the person is seen in all their many dimensions and all their actions, good ones as well as the bad ones, are acknowledged. The circle embodies the intricate web of mutual accountability that allows each individual to step forward and take responsibility for a healing journey.

The court, by comparison, is a place where the "offending" individual comes before the judgment of the community without an opportunity to express themselves and without the compassion, caring or support from those who know their struggle and pain. In New Zealand, family group conferencing has replaced courtroom encounters for juveniles because of the Maori belief that such condemnation and isolation is degrading and inhumane. When Vichey stood before the judge at the sentencing hearing, the traditional courtroom discourse was deeply disparaging of Vichey as a human being. For those who know and love Vichey, this characterization was painful to hear.

And I think Molly and I in the courtroom, because we love him dearly and respect his growth so much, got angry at the judge. I was thinking...you don't know this young man....cause he said something about, "well, he's a criminal, he shouldn't be on the

street....he should be going to jail...I don't know why he is working at Roca....how can someone so negative work with youth." We tried to tell him (the judge) that Vichey helped young men on Shirley Avenue stop fighting....and for me and Molly to hear that from the judge....I had a burning desire to go up there and grab him by the neck....and say, You don't know this young man well enough to talk so negatively about him...and you don't know what he has done. But at the same time, Vichey, said, Its ok....I'm gonna go to jail and it'll be fine...he accepted that....that was the most humbling cause he had talked in circle about wanting to go to jail for his own actions...in the circle he said, I wouldn't feel good if I'm was not going to jail....so for him to do that and come out....he's more human than ever. (Saroeum)

In court, Vichey was sentenced for his crime but in the circle Vichey took responsibility for the crime in his own heart. In circle, Vichey chose the hard path of honestly confronting the consequences of his behavior on people in his life and within the wider community. The full impact of his actions was revealed to him, he understood what he was responsible for and why he was being held accountable.

Most offenders never acknowledge or fully comprehend the impact of their actions on others. Nor are they offered the kind of support that would give them the courage and the self-respect to stand up and be accountable to a community that passionately believes in them and wants them to succeed. For most people in our nation's jails and prison, punishment is a passive experience imposed on them by the powerful criminal justice system. Most feel only anger and resentment toward the system for punishing them; few feel responsible for what they have done. And few are given the opportunity or the means to begin to change. For Vichey, his time in jail was a act of genuine accountability that has been part of a life-changing transformation. The circle opened a path toward healing and accountability that has truly changed this young man's life. And his changing has opened a path for many other young people to begin their own journey of healing and transformation.

I think the most powerful circle I had was in the circle with Judge Gailey when the talking piece came to Vichey, he said, "you know, I went to jail for what I had done....I done some pretty serious stuff" and he went into details...."and when I got to jail, I was the only person there who knew why I was there. I went to court, I didn't talk....the lawyers talked, the judge sentenced me....and I went to jail. And everybody in jail was either innocent or wrong place, wrong time. But nobody really owned what they did. I know what I did. I knew why I was there." If the judge heard nothing else [about the power of circle], he had to hear that. The circle moment I carry with me the most is that one. (Gregg)

I think circle helped me become who I am today. (Vichey)

THE COMING TOGETHER OF PEOPLE BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH CIRCLE

The circle is way of communicating profoundly different from the way we meet, talk and attempt to build coalitions, partnerships and relationships. Circle brings people together in a way that creates trust, intimacy, and good will that fosters a sense of belonging, generosity, trust, mutuality and reciprocity. This bond forms the building blocks of community. The circle helps to build community *because* it brings people together in a way that allows them to see one another as human beings and allows them to talk about what matters.

The lessons of circle have created a significant shift in Roca's approach to community partners. Circle encourages participants to listen with respect, to seek common solutions rather than blame and assume good intentions even when one might disagree. Rather than engaging in zealous advocacy on behalf of those who are disadvantaged, the circle opens a path toward genuine collaboration with all people in the community. Being in circle encourages people to take collective responsibility for constructive action rather than demand others act to fix a problem. It helps focus on shared values and on common purposes. In so doing, the circle opens people to a sense of themselves as a community because it brings an awareness of shared values, interdependence, shared destiny and collective purpose.

Lesson One: You can't get to a good place a bad way.

Circles are an invitation to come in a different way....

.....we [at Roca] had been organizing one group of people to fight another group of people... and we've been very good at that and we are so furious....we are so righteous, we are so angry with how so many people are treating young people, and the community especially the poor community....that we become the negative aspect of that as well. So circles shifted us: now we say we need everyone because if we say the community, we need to include everyone.
(Saroem)

Circles create a space where people can talk about whatever they want...not just that....it helps us understand each other....cause a lot of times when people come together, they need to argue and fight so circles help you do it in a good way....me getting to know you a little bit...part of the check-in...I get to know you a little bit better....without circles, you come to sit at a table...really just to get that done and over with whereas in circle you come and be in relationship and at least try and understand and know each other a little bit. (Vichey)

.....the bad part about this job [as police officers] is you lose your connectivity to the community. You always see people at their worst, they call you when things are bad and as a result of that, a lot of times, when they think about bad things,

they immediately relate....well the cops were there, you're just part of the whole bad scenario, you know what I mean? So there is kind of a negativity towards the police to begin with....A lot of people do not see us as their knights in shining armor...so that's always tough....so just the fact that [in circle] you are able to interact with the community other than just showing up, doing your job then going to your next call and that makes a big difference to the victims, the kids and the community itself that you are really trying to effect change. I think a lot of the police officers see that and that's why they don't object to the concept of circle...(Terry)

Within our communities, there are longstanding conflicts and habits of mutual distrust, recrimination and misunderstanding. Police versus youth, schools versus parents, youth versus adults, youth advocates versus courts and so forth. These conflicts are rooted in painful realities of racism, economic inequality, political and cultural exclusion and the impact of war and violence in the lives of young people and their families. Communities have a profound experience of dis-empowerment and exclusion from the systems that are assigned to address the needs of the communities. Even with the best intentions, meetings are characterized by conflicting agendas, emotions of anger and blame, time constraints and patterns of mis-communication that reinforce barriers between people. Structures of power are solidified into painful patterns of silence among those who are dis-empowered. It is often too hard to speak honestly about the painful issues within the community much less come to mutual agreements about how to work toward common solutions.

.....we have all these expectations from everybody and we have high expectations from ourselves also....and there's so much judgment, there is so much hurt and anger in the world that there is not really a place to figure all that out....."ok I'm right, my opinion is my opinion, who cares about yours...." in circles the opportunity is to do that but in a different way....more of listening.....you find much of appreciation of humans around you and understanding that they hold the same values as you, its just that everybody grows up differently and everybody carries themselves not as who they not really are... but in the circle it gets to who you really want to be. (James)

Often when agencies bring people together to try and build a collaboration, all too often its about people trying to impose their views and say, "well, we are all gonna come together and we're gonna collaborate and then I'm gonna tell you why what I'm doing is right and you should see the light and do things my way" (Michael)

The circle allows us to have different conversations around growth and change and that been helpful cause nobody likes to be blamed or be accused. So we don't have to go head to head now, we say, "hey can we talk about this" So this organization shifted the conversation which has created other shifts and changes, like the voting....we can't explain it....the ripple effect of it....there are many great gifts that come out circle. (Saroeum)

The circle process creates an opening for a different kind of coming together within the community. Speaking from the heart, speaking for oneself and about one's own experiences equalizes everyone in the circle. Space is created for people to be listened to; people are asked to talk about things that are often not articulated within a public setting such as their hopes for their children or their struggle to survive and belong within American society. This type of exchange creates an opportunity for understanding and opens a bridge between people to feel solidarity with one another. This sense of solidarity (trust, mutual recognition, feeling of belonging) is the foundation for building community. The building of trust creates the foundation for having the hard conversations about the painful realities in our community without defensiveness, blame and judgment.

Lesson Two: Come as Yourself

In circle don't come as anybody else but yourself....

.... in circle you don't come as anybody else but yourself....for example....police officer, or mayors in the community - don't get to come as mayor really but just as a concerned citizen - really to voice your opinion as that....cause all the time we come to meet we separated from one another by titles... we come as this or that.... but in circle I don't care if you are this or that, you sort of leave that outside the door and really bring yourself and its really about bonding and getting to know each other. (Vichey)

It absolutely opens up lines of communication previously non-existent.....you are able to connect with people other than on a professional basis...they see you for who you are...a human being....you are not just a cop or just a social worker....it brings it down to a much more personal level. (Terry)

.....you could be the judge but you gotta come as a human...you could be non-educated but you be alright cause people will respect your feelings. So no matter what age, ethnicity, gender, whatever, you get to come to the circle as human and there's always a place for you. (Saroeum)

The circle brings people together in a way ordinary meetings do not because the circle invites us to attend as whole persons. In many community contexts, when people come together systems participate in their "role" as "police officer", "youth advocate", "probation officer", "school principal" and community members participation are reduced to voicing their discontent and concerns. What we don't realize is that we focus on all the aspects of our identity that divide us rather than those elements that we share in common. By concealing the things we care about as human beings: our desire for love, respect, health and safety for those we love; our hopes and aspirations, we make assumptions about one another's motives and intentions which are based on patterns of mistrust and suspicion.

Circles create a space where people can talk to one another as human beings and begin to build trust with one another based on shared values. The police officer is also a father, son, husband, has faced certain difficulties, lives with some fears, has hopes and dreams. The young person on the street is also a son and often a father, is also facing difficulties and has hope, fears and dreams. Maybe a member of a church or dance troupe, - as a person, that officer, like all people in the community, has values, hopes, fears, dreams, struggles and so forth. In most our encounters within the community, these parts of who we are as human beings are kept apart from the public discussions about the community and its problems. In the circle, we come as “who we are” as human beings.

Lesson Three: Building Trust

A little connection you can't take away

The experience of being in circle creates connections between people within the community that extends beyond the circle. The circle process brings people together and opens a relationship between people who are profoundly separated from one another within the community. The experience of being in circle with those who are often thought of as the “enemy” is extremely powerful. At Roca, circles have brought together youth and police to talk. For many young people this is profoundly different experience when they see police as humans and in turn feel that they are being seen as human beings and being listened to as well.

Youth and police...if they don't understand each other, there's no hope....youth, they don't like the police... when they come, they come in their uniform and everything....but they are just a regular person trying to do their job....they express what their job is and their difficulties and that is very hopeful...its really about understanding each other and when people understand each other and be in relationship, its hopeful. (Vichey)

....and it was funny because.... the first day [in circle] I think I sat next to a cop...and I didn't realize it until like, the feather went around and I looked to my right and I said, oh wait!.... oh this is the first time in my life I'm sitting next to a police officer.....it was hard but it was worth it to hear some of the coppers what they say and at the same time, they listened to us.... And I finally seen something there....like I could see....this could work...just off that circle alone, to this day, I say.... this could work.... (James)

Being in circle creates a “little connection you can't take away”. Because we come as humans we find that we are far more alike than different. Beyond the role we play in society, we discover that we share similar values and similar needs. That is a powerful form of recognition across this socially constructed barriers: the street youth sees the police officer as a father worried about getting home at night to his young kids; the officer sees the young adult longing to feel worthy and respected and worried about his future and struggling to be a father.

This connection as human beings is the start of a relationship that extends beyond the circle itself. It creates a sense of trust and connection that people feel when they see each other on the street or pass in the hallway. Quite simply, the circle deepens relationships based on trust which improves the ability for people to co-operate and work together positively within the community.

.....you see somebody else who has been through the circle process, there's an acknowledgment, that if I see George or somebody I might not associate with much if we weren't both in circle, there's that bond between you.....there's an instant recognition, and a lightness to seeing themthat I don't have in any of my other professional encounters or nonsocial encounters. (Greg)

You meet people and they talk from their heart and you see that they are not whatever your preconceptions of them were before you were in the room. Not only that....but there were other people from various parts of the criminal justice system....DYS, DSS...juvenile probation, juvenile corrections and you see that people are people and they may have these jobs and work for these monolithic institutions but nevertheless, when it comes down to it, they are still people so for that fact you make a lot of friends instead of thinking about how you can make an end run around this one.... (Terry)

I got a better understanding of them and they got a better understanding of us and it was funny cause I joke around with one of them...he still says hi to me and stuff...and we never really talked you know.... now he says hi, you know. I joke around sometimes...I laugh and say, I know I stole you the doughnut...so when I see him in the square or on the street.....I say, I'll buy him a doughnut or a coffee....I still joke around with him about it.... But I don't know...it was like a little connection there...that you can't take away. (James)

Lesson Four: Building Capacity for the Hard Conversations

To be honest and truthful in a most gentle and good way

Parents, young people, community and institutions even policy makers, politicians, law enforcement....we are in relationship more than ever, (maybe more than we wished to be!) Its still a lot of work but at least we can have honest conversations and that to me, is a big shift and a big change.Like we can have conversations about education and be truthful and honest about it but in a most gentle way so we don't have to be yelling and screaming - we can say, look whatever you are doing is not working and whatever we're doing, is not working so how do we work together to make it work. So the relationships in the last two to three years - have been a kind of preparation phase - to go to another level of work, in deepening the work we are trying to do around healing. So more and more we are in relationship in a most honest way. That's a big shift. (Saroeum)

Another thing is that there are people here, that for us, and maybe I'm speaking just for myself, but I think, they owe us answers for what we saw in our lives. Not just family, I'm talking city-wide. When we talk about community and corruption....I want a couple of them police officers to be sitting there and say this is what you did. You can't blame only us. Cause in society, we take the blame. And in the end, yeah we are responsible but damn, you know, if we really talk about values of a community, we're just the last people standing, surviving the past. No one really dealt with us. And I learned that. And I was very surprised about that like why hadn't people ever talked to us and apologized to us. We were children. (James)

Roca has learned that the capacity to talk honestly about the painful realities of racism, war, inequality and injustice must be slowly and carefully created. In dealing with individual trauma, the circle can offer a safe place for talking about harm and the sharing of deep emotions. On a community level, the same principle applies: talking about the deep wounds of social harms, its impact on people's lives and the possibilities for moving towards a more just way of living together as a community, means that we must find a way to be together that will "hold" those painful realities without being overwhelmed by the negative emotions of hurt, anger, defensiveness and blame.

Through using circles, Roca has experienced a greater capacity to have "hard" but honest conversations about the failures of the systems to educate children, the harms and injustices of the criminal justice system, the unintended damage brought by social services on families, and the pervasive racism facing minorities within the community. Having these conversations "in a most gentle and good way" requires being together in circle over time. Again, the wisdom of the circle is that building trust and relationship requires patience and being in "good way" with one another. As Saroem points out, "no one likes to be yelled at" and yet these things must be said, they must be talked about.

The challenge is to create a space where we can have these hard conversations "in a most gentle and good way." Saroem sees the past three years as a kind of preparation phase for having these kinds of dialogue within the community. As James points out, the reality of social injustice is painful and difficult to talk about. The capacity of the community to hold powerful systems and institutions accountable to them in a way that is respectful and constructive is an aspiration of the circle process.

And that was a very inspiring and humbling moment for us cause we know that our community is coming from a place of hardship but there hasn't been any space to create that dialogue or that conversation and to do that in a most gentle and good way. So that was the big shift from the circle process. (Saroem)

Lesson Five: Coming Together for a Common Purpose

...we were finally “together” ...and it felt like community. (James)

Usually we are there in a negative way for each other.....because all our lives we grew up in a city that was corrupted and I grew up with them and I knew what they went through and I knew some of them, their family issues for some of them were different than mine but we all could relate. And it was so powerful and to me it just hit home more....and I think for the first time, I felt finally like we were a part of something that we were finally “together” on something that was powerful...and it felt like community. (James)

The circle brings people together to focus on what they have in common, what they most want for themselves, their family and their community and how they can work together toward those goals. It is a profoundly hopeful process. When James organized a circle within the community to support a young man going through a difficult crisis, he and others in the circle realized that it was one of the first times that the community had come out to be there for each other in a positive and supportive way. That, in and of itself, was a powerfully moving experience for the community to just to see their capacity to show up for one another.

The circle brings people together for a purpose that is positive. The essence of the circle is to harness the energy of the people in that circle for a collective end. As a process, the circle is not controlled by an agenda, but guided by a keeper whose primary responsibility is to serve the process rather than direct it. Unlike most other meetings that bring people together, the circle is a space for shared leadership and genuine collaboration. The circle fosters shared leadership: the circle enables us to come together and recognize our common values; it helps us build trust so we can have the hard conversations “in a good way” without blame and without destructive anger; and it creates the opening for finding solutions. The circle creates a sense of “we” that is empowering and hopeful.

..... I think it’s the opportunity for people to be positive about what they’re doing and what they want to see happen...that people really like as well. Often times, so much of our dialogue...about how we solve a problem...is negative and most of the time our dialogue in everyday life about everything is negative because we’re trying to fix this or fix that and that is what we are focused on rather being focused on positive stuff and I think its an opportunity to be positive even about fixing problems.The beauty of this is that people are coming together trying to find common purpose, believing in the same things, building trust and relationships. People don’t get to spend time together in common purpose. (Michael)

Lesson Six: Showing up for ourselves - the power of community

...the hope is that they can go and champion their own life...

Circles can bring people together.... can help them to understand each other, to heal on the inside, to accept themselves and their lives as they are, to walk in their ways. When I say to walk in their ways, I mean to accept reality, not to cover the world with powerlessness, to grab for a star that's out of reach. To have their identity and with that identity to struggle for themselves. I believe the circle also helps people to value themselves, to believe in themselves and know they are capable of accomplishing many things that they wish. Many times, for looking in other places where they won't find anything, they lose what values they have. (Sister Josefa)

*And the **we** need to fix it, is really where the lesson is. And so we've gone from Sayra you've gotta do something about this town center to "you don't swear at Roca and this is no acceptable and you need to stop" directly.... from making decisions about what is in the workplan, to holding their own Thanksgiving dinner and so the lessons are across all we've learned - self care, care for others, care for community - this we see all the time because of the combination of those three things - holding the space, modeling and circle....its about relationships.....they are really all the same thing. (Sayra)*

Systems have made it that you need special training to actually fix things and I think that people buy into that all too much....that people who have law degrees and everything else, are the ones that can fix things. (Michael)

In the world we are learning to fix problems and I think that we forget that if people are not willing to change and not willing to adjust or not willing to see or deal with their own issues, we can't fix it. So the hope is that , the most we use circle process, the more we bring willingness out of people. We bring this whole idea of spirit, of dreams, of hope because I think humans have so much will that if we can create a space where people feel comfortable to deal then it brings that out in people. So the amazing piece of the circle is that people have so much wisdom and we listen to it and we can help them look at themselves a little bit by sharing ourselves. Then the hope is that they can go and champion their own life. (Saroeum)

The circle process is about recognizing the power we hold collectively. By creating a space where all voices can be heard equally and where people can recognize their shared values, common interests across social differences, the circle opens an opportunity for a sense of "we" that seeks solutions rather than demands others to fix or correct problems. Sister Josefa talks about the power of the circle to help people to know what they are capable of; Sayra talks about the shift among young people from asking staff to respond to negative behavior to taking responsibility themselves for holding one another accountable; Saroeum talks of the willingness of people to change: the power of the circle lies within the people in the circle.

James organized a series of circles for a young man whose facing a serious crisis in his life. He invited family members, friends and others in the community who had known each other all their lives. Many shared similar difficulties in their lives and came from places of hardship and struggle. In James's view, these circles marked the first time this community came together to do something positive for one another. Despite all the challenges involved in bringing people together, the simple fact of recognizing their willingness to show up for one another, was powerful emotionally. It "felt like community".

...so it was a group of men and women, there was about twenty or thirty of them in the circle and to me.... that was another one that was emotional cause for the first time...and I grew up with a lot of them...that they finally see themselves coming together for something that was.... important and they were there for each other....They didn't even get to speak and they got emotional and a lot of them started crying already....you could tell, their voices were breaking, a couple went to the bathroom and I had to go and check in on them.....and we didn't even really get to any kind of conversation...it was just showing up that was... an impact. (James)

The lessons of the circle for building community is that we must include all members of the community: whether you are staff person, resident, teacher, young person or mayor, you are a part of the community whose contribution is part of the solution. The circle invites us to shift toward seeing one ourselves and one another as accountable to each other as equal participants. The circle process is about being accountable, to oneself and to others (see article on accountability and circles). In circle, the guidelines help participants to view one another with respect and to focus energy on being constructive rather than expending energy on accusation, blame and anger.

Circle helps people come and talk about certain things and their differences and yet be in a good way and be in relationship with each other....and help find out what is wrong in our community and understand each other....like the mayor will come and talk about certain things (in circle) and the community will talk about certain things that need to be changed or need to be done or whatever the case...but the Cambodian community doesn't understand that they have to vote to be heard...and like he'll say that he'll do anything as long as he gets those votes....and its just that...to understand the communication where you do one thing and I do one thing and we help each other....immediately they were like, "they don't pay attention to us" and this and that but then they got to know why they're not being paid attention to: cause they're not voting! Communication brings understanding. (Vichey)

At Roca, four talking circles were held between Cambodian elders and the mayor of the city of Revere. One outcome was the realization by the Cambodian community that the mayor "hears" their voice through the act of voting. As they shared their sense that no one in city government pays attention to them, the

mayor was able to share the perspective that he needs their vote to stay in office. By voting, they are meeting his needs to remain in office and he feels it necessary to listen to them and meet their needs to get elected.

The logic of reciprocity in the democratic process was never adequately communicated to the Cambodian community. Although voter registration drives are a regular feature of community organizing led by Roca and other community agencies, there has been mixed success in getting people to register. For the first time, this year, the voter registration drive was enormously successful. Was this due to the experience of circles between the mayor and the elders of the Cambodian community? No one can say for sure, but it is this kind of growth in participation, collective voice and community empowerment that is encouraging for the use of circles as a hopeful and fruitful approach to building community.

.....if we do the long term thinking, if we use it in our community with the youth and young adults and with other organizations....if we use itnot just for everything but for things that will bring people together...I think that it will hold its own place and it will live up to what its supposed to be as a sacred place.... and an opportunity for people to come together. (James)

APPENDIX 1

Circle Evaluation

Structured Interview Questionnaire

Purpose:

The purpose of the structured interview is to document and understand the unique impact of the circle process on the goals of building community and the promotion of generosity and belonging. Key themes to be explored are issues of justice; healing; participation; **competency** development; and the coming together of peoples.

Section I: Background

(These are open-ended questions.)

1. Tell us about your work with young people and/or community members. How long have you been doing this work?
2. When did you first learn about the circle process? Why did you go to the training? What did you feel about the circle process after the first training? What did you think about the usefulness of the circle process for yourself and what you do after the first training?
3. When did you first begin to use the circle process? Do you remember the first time you kept a circle? Tell us about it.

Section II: Current Use of Circles

1. For what purposes do you use the circle process now? What factors do you consider in deciding to use a circle?
2. Once you have decided to use a circle process, can you describe what you do to plan and prepare for the circle?
3. Are there situations when you have decided against using a circle. If so, can you explain why?

Section IV: General Experience with Circles

1. Can you tell us, in your view, what the circle brings to your work with young people or the community that is unique or different?
2. Have you had an experience with the circle that you felt was particularly surprising or powerful? Can you tell us about that experience?

3. Have you ever had a circle that you wished you hadn't had? Can you tell us about that experience?
4. In your experience, what do young people like about the circle? What about the circle in your experience do young people and others dislike?

Section III: On being a Keeper

1. In your view, what is the role of the keeper? Can you say what you think is the most important aspect of the keeper's role in the circle process?
2. What have you found to be most challenging part of being a keeper of a circle?
3. What element of the keeper role is easiest for you?

Section V: Connecting Circle to Specific Goals (democratic participation; healing; empowerment; justice; hope)

1. Can you tell us about your observations of young people and others in the circle. *(Interviewer will prompt for specific stories or examples.)*
 - a. **Participation.** How does the circle impact the participation and voice of young people when they are in circle?
 - b. **Healing.** In your experience, does the circle process promote healing ?
 - c. **Accountability.** In your experience, does the circle process promote accountability in ways that are different from the other processes? Can you explain what you mean by accountability.
 - d. **Justice.** In you experience, does the circle process promote justice in ways that are different that other processes? What you mean by justice?
 - e. **Coming together.** In your experience, has the circle brought different people together to talk who wouldn't normally be in conversation? Has the circle brought people together to talk about things in way that wouldn't otherwise talk?
 - f. **Hope.** In your experience does the circle open up a space of hope? If yes, can you explain or describe what you have experienced?

Section VI: Impact of Circles Beyond Circle: Community Building/ Deepening of Relationships/Competency Development

1. In your experience, do you see changes in the behavior or attitude of young people or other participants which you believe is related the experience of being in circle. Can you describe those changes? Why do you feel they are related to being in the circle?
 - a. Do you see changes in competencies of young people which you think is related to being in circle? For example, sense of belonging; voice; purpose; generosity.
 - b. Do you see changes in relationships among young people or within your community which you believe is related to being in circle?
 - c. In your experience, does the circle process build or strengthen community? What do you mean by community? Can you give us an example or illustration from your own experience?

Section VII.: Personal Transformation with Circles

1. Now I would like to talk about your own personal experience with the circle process.
2. Do you feel that being in circle has changed you in any way? Can you describe or talk about those changes.
3. Do you experience any changes in yourself when you are not in circle which you believe are connected to being in circle? Can you describe those changes?
4. Do you feel that being in circle has changed the way that you related to young people? Your co-workers? Your community?

Section VIII.: Future use of circles

1. Do you wish to use circles in any way that you are not using circles? Do you intend to stop using circles in any way that you are currently using circles? Why?
2. What hopes do you have for the circle process? What concerns do you have?

APPENDIX TWO

RESPONDENTS

ELIZABETH BA is director of the Lynn Leadership Program at Roca. Liz has also served as director of Roca, Revere Leadership Program. Before coming on as staff at Roca, Liz was involved in the Roca Revere Leadership Program. Liz is Cambodian and is bilingual in Khmer and English.

ANISHA CHABLANI is director of Youth STAR. Before coming to Roca, Anisha worked with youth committed to the Department of Youth Services in Chelsea, East Boston and Revere. Anisha also coordinates with DYS to introduce Peacemaking circles to DYS youth and staff.

MICHAEL GLENNON is a victim witness advocate with the Suffolk County District Attorney's office. Michael is a founding member of the Chelsea/Revere Peacemaking Planning Committee and a member of the Development Team and Community Involvement Project. Michael is a key community partner in the development of circles at Roca.

GREG LEWIS is an educator with extensive background working with young people. Gregg teaches Peace and Justice at the high school and college level and works at the Chelsea Day Reporting Center with DYS youth and with families for DSS. Gregg is also a founding member of the Chelsea/Revere Peacemaking Planning Committee as well as a member of Development Team and the Community Involvement Project.

SAROEUM PHOUNG is Director of the Community Restorative Justice Initiative at Roca. A Cambodian refugee and former gang leader, Saroeum has dedicated his life to reaching out to young people who are street and gang involved. He directed and founded Roca Revere Leadership Program to provide on-going leadership development, street outreach, gang intervention, community organizing, and human rights work with young people and families. Saroeum is bilingual in Khmer and English.

VICHEY PHOUNG is streetworker in the VIA Project. Before joining VIA, Vichey worked as a outreach and street worker in the Roca Revere Leadership Program. In addition to streetwork, Vichey has also facilitated Houses of Healing with groups of young Cambodian men in Revere. Vichey is a Cambodian refugee who has grown up in Revere.

SAYRA PINTO is VIA Project Director. Sayra is a founding member of Roca and has been involved with Roca since she was fourteen years old. Fluent in Spanish, Sayra is an experienced youth worker and community organizer and is of Native American heritage from Honduras.

TERRY REARDON is the Chief of the Revere Police Department. He began working as a police officer in 1986 and has been involved with Roca since it opened in Revere in the mid-1990s. Chief Reardon has extensive experience working with young people in his capacity as supervisor of community policing for the city of Revere.

JAMES ROCHE, Street Team worker. James is a white male who grew up in Chelsea and has been involved with Roca as a youth for two years as a member of Youth STAR. In addition to extensive circle work, James has facilitated Houses of Healing with young men incarcerated in Suffolk County House of Corrections.

ANGIE RODRIGUEZ, Project Victory Coordinator. Angie is a former youth leader at Roca, and has appeared in a variety of English and Spanish print, radio, television media speaking about issues of teen pregnancy and education for youth. She is involved with Roca for seven years and is bi-lingual in Spanish and English. Angie also directs Essencia Latina, an award winning Latin dance ensemble based at Roca, Inc. Angie is bilingual in Spanish and English.

VICTOR JOSE SANTANA, Project Victory Program Manager. Victor José has more than 6 years experience working with at-risk, multi-cultural youth through arts programming, theater, youth leadership development, peacemaking circles and dance. Victor is Dominican and bilingual in Spanish and English.

SISTER JOSEFA is a member of the Hermanas Misioneras del Corazon de Jesus located in Chelsea. She grew up in the Dominican Republic and moved to Chelsea as an adult. She is forty two years old. She currently serves as the parochial assistant to the Hispanic community of Chelsea.

JESSICA TURNER, Administrative Executive Assistant. Before her involvement in administration, Jessica worked on the Education Organizing Campaign for the Community Building Team. Fluent in Spanish and French, Jessica was involved with circle work at Roca and with the Chelsea/Revere school system.