

“So You Want to Build a Circle?”¹

Introduction

It is with a bit of trepidation that we write about some of our stories and discoveries about circles at all. Too often, good ideas or frameworks are latched onto as the definitive solution. Let us state from the start that *circles are not the answer*. They are not the answer to *any* question that you might ask. They are not the answer to how to find a good place to live for your son or daughter. They are not the answer to how to make sure that your family member is an active and welcome participant in her community. They are not the answer to making sure that your loved one is not isolated and lonely. They are not the answer to your fears of who will replace you when you are gone.

However, many people and organizations act as if circles are the answer to the woes that our often-uncaring society allows to be unanswered.

It has become very popular to hear people presenting and talking about circles at conferences. Many organizations are adopting policy statements that require that vulnerable people of all kinds have a circle. Funders' ears perk up when proposals include promises to build and sustain circles. In crisis, people are often asked, “yes, but did she have a circle?” Stories abound of circle successes, circle failures, and circle issues. Conferences are held about starting circles, recruiting for circles, barriers to circles and offer tips and solutions to common circle problems. Old organizations looking for new mandates and territory begin to offer services to help families develop circles. New organizations begin which promise to help families build circles to protect the future, or which promise to support your circle in the future when you are no longer there.

These are not necessarily bad things. People have indeed used the ideas of circles as a way of safeguarding individuals' lives, offering alternatives, fulfilling dreams, and moving on with ones' life. What becomes worrisome is when a person, an organization, a policy or a funder acts as if the circle, in and of itself, is a service or a technology or a tool which will automatically provide workable solutions to the individual and his or her situation. So when a person has lost a job, or wants a home, or feels lonely and isolated, they are given a circle. Or, rather are given a visit from a staff person who does not have the resources to find them a job, or a home, or a friend, but pledges to find family members and volunteers and other staff who will form a circle and meet every month with that individual. After many months, the person may not yet have the job, the home, or the friends, and may not even have a circle with any genuine relationships. The real needs of the individual are held at bay. This is a circle used as a tool, a technology, the latest “fix” which promises to, but will not, make sure that the individual lives a good life.

Such examples are doomed to failure. ***Circles cannot and will not take the place of members of society who work hard to listen, understand and come to personally care about a person and their circumstances.***

¹ This document has greatly extracted from *Our Presence Has Roots* (2005) by Janet Klees.

What a circle is

A circle is simply one kind of way of holding and shaping the work, the thought, the caring, and the people that are the only ingredients that matter in whatever set of “solutions” are decided upon. In such a circle, when a person loses their job, they are likely to call a friend, who is a part of the circle of important relationships that keep the person well, and meet them for lunch and work out a way to apply for another job, rather than to wait for or call a circle meeting and figure it out with the whole group. It’s not the circle who answers the phone or suggests lunch. It’s not the circle who hears about another opportunity and figures it out with the person. It is another person – a person who has come to know and listen to the one who has lost a job. The circle is the place that these two people are linked with a number of like-minded others to move in a common direction. The circle is one way to hold and invite relationship.

What others say

A great blessing for the families of Deohaeko is to be in an area of the world where many people are actively exploring and experimenting with various ideas about circles – their strengths, their boundaries and limitations, and their varying arrangements. We have learned from many other families in Durham region who use circles to bring relationship more securely into their own and their family member’s lives. Some families do so on their own, some are linked with other families in small groups somewhat similar to ours, and some are loosely linked to encouraging agencies, or a newly-forming provincial body, *Lifetime Circles*. Learning events and time spent with Peter Dill, John O’Brien, Darcy Elks and others have strengthened our thinking and our experiences.

We have been strongly affected by the powerful potential of an effective circle. We have come to understand that the best circles have something to do with listening well and with heart, something to do with personal commitment, something to do with inviting and welcoming as old-fashioned community virtues, something to do with taking thoughtful action, something to do with mutuality, and a lot to do with determination and perseverance in the face of adversity.

John O’Brien has been really helpful in assisting us not to make our circles too rigid. In says that:

Families need containers for their dreams. What is useful about a container is its emptiness, its openness to be filled with what a family really wants. This useful emptiness can be made through the experience of belonging to a web of personal support especially when that broad web of relationships becomes deep and dense as people gather to listen, to share, to shape a powerful way of understanding and to act on their world. (p.22-23 in *Tell me a story of deep delight*)

John further illustrates his ideas with three stanzas from the *Tao Te Ching*:

We join spokes together in a wheel,
But it is the centre hole
That makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,

But it is the emptiness inside
That holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
But it is the inner space
That makes it livable.

Tao Te Ching (in John O'Brien's *Tell me a story of deep delight*)

Peter Dill says that a circle is a journey and the invitation to a journey. It is a place for people to tell their stories and a place for people to dream. This is important in a world where the impact of systems is the loss of dreams and of dreaming. Circles live on the edge of systems. They must do so because listening to the hearts of people must be ever-flexible. (*Friends for Life*, 2002, p.3)

Bruce Uditsky underlines our thinking about not turning making friends into a technology. He has written powerfully on *Natural pathways to friendship* where he states that it is important to stay with natural ways of entering into friendship in these times of professionalism and technology aimed at things that are human. There are no simple solutions to complex human problems. There is, however, the option to look at the ways in which people have naturally always entered into friendship. When we do this we recognize great potential for following the same kinds of pathways together with a person with a disability. Such natural pathways may include meeting through mutual friends, sharing a common experience, seeking out familiar places, being of similar age, culture or neighbourhood, sharing common interests sharing common struggles, and being together out of necessity.

This kind of thinking underscores our initial impulse not to use circles as a uniform way to “help people get friends and relationships in their lives”. We try to think about helping individuals to meet people and enter into relationships as key, and as circles (in the ways Peter Dill and John O'Brien talk about them) as one helpful way to bring together some of the people and the thinking that might help us get there.

What we've learned through and with circles

Early on in Deohaeko history, we decided that we needed to find out how to help make home with people who had never done so and who were generally not expected to do so in any real or significant way during their lifetime. In much the same way, we came to understand and take on the task of building strong, flexible and personal relationship networks with people who had lost many of the formative years and typical experiences upon which most of us begin building our relationships. Circles have been a good way for the families and friends of Deohaeko to learn good lessons about building relationship.

Circles, when they work fairly well, are the place in which people can begin to experience the belonging, the mutuality and the magic of relationship first hand. People can learn some valuable lessons about relationship with their circle, and about faith and trust and dreaming. In a world where relationship is the number one safeguard, circles may offer a beginning place for relationship to take place.

As we prepare this document for press, we worry that many readers will skim through the introductory paragraphs, and settle on the experiences of our group. These items will then be added to their list of ingredients for their own "recipe for circle development". The recipe will not work. It will lead to people no longer seeing the possibility of circles, to funders not funding work related to circles, and eventually to individuals being hurt and deceived in the name of circles.

Circles will not guarantee results – relationship or otherwise. However, with thought and care, a circle may be an opportunity for people to come together and explore and rediscover some of the gifts of relationship. A circle is just one way to do so, but in this world of technology, the ways of the past are fast disappearing and maybe a few circles will help a wider range of ordinary citizen recapture the meaning and heart of one-to-one relationship.

Over the past eight years, we have worked hard at thinking about circles in many different ways. Today we know much more about the possibility of circles, their potential and also their limitations.

Eight years ago, we were at a time when all individuals were involved in a circle of some kind. These circles seemed to work well enough for some of the things we were working on at the time – helping people to establish home, finding jobs and work, maintaining a presence in the community. Since then, as we have turned to a focus on meaningful community connections and developing deep relationship we have had to look at our circles in new ways. The following are our current thoughts on many facets of circles and our role in their development.

Our circles are not perfect

All of our circles are imperfect and need constant energy and attention. Our work and attention to building, maintaining and re-working our circles has led us to some

wonderful places. At the same time, we struggle greatly with our day-to-day challenges. Some of these challenges include the following.

Donna's circle has been especially wonderful at times that have called for intensity and commitment, like during her pregnancy, her baby's first few months, and the death of her mother. But we worry that the circle consists of several Deohaeko members at the very core, and very busy others just beyond that. It will need to share the accountability across newer members if it is to move well into the future.

Brenda stopped having regular circle times because they felt too Supporter-driven. Some of the new formats have been very hopeful, but we have not re-gained the momentum of regular meeting times. Jon's full circle rarely meets because it is so hard to find common meeting times. Large annual gatherings help somewhat, but a dedicated core needs to get together more often. A meeting of Supporters happens more regularly, but we know this is not a circle. It has become clear to us that John does not like the group meeting and talking aspect of most circle times. These have been phased out in exchanged for very casual living room conversations, but we feel that important people are being left out. Tiffany's circle meets regularly but we struggle to have the same friends and neighbours come out each time. The continuity is hard to maintain. At the same time, Tiffany holds wonderful annual events such as a summer barbecue and a Christmas Tree Trimming Tea that remind everyone how good it is to be together. Rob's circle gatherings are very regular and good information and planning happens. However, despite many attempts to increase circle membership the group remains very small. Some newer events lead us to hope once again that this may change. Caroline Ann's circle has had some great ebb and flow. At times, Caroline Ann's circle has been large, lively and creative, effectively working together in many ways. It has also struggled with people losing commitment or being led away by the rest of their lives. Recouping has been a struggle.

This list is not meant to discourage families from beginning a circle, but as a way to say that even with the struggles such as those outlined above, we have achieved some of the wonderful things described below. Struggle is just a part of life.

Not everything happens within the circle

Life is busy and it is complex. It would be contrived and constraining to require that all decisions made and new directions enacted through the circle. Circles tend to meet on a fairly regular basis, but never often enough to meet the spontaneity and speed with which we need to make decisions about our lives. So, outside of our circle gatherings, for each person, much of life happens. When a person takes on a new work or volunteer role in the community, they begin to meet and develop new relationships with others. It is usually not the right moment to begin to invite such new people to circle gatherings. Interactions with neighbours might be positive and genuine, but this may not be the person to be invited to circle gatherings, either.

Circle members collectively hold the picture of the person's life in their hands, hearts and minds. However the circle gathering can only deal with one piece of it at a time.

Sometimes the circle instigates. Sometimes, it broadens and deepens the issues at hand. Sometimes it trouble shoots and problem solves. Sometimes it reacts and judges events and roles in play.

Essentially, circle times might capture a moment in time of a person's life and members are able to react to, plan and think ahead from that moment (based on previous history and experience, of course). This is the time to reflect, enjoy past and current successes, deepen our understanding, make plans for some of the time ahead, ensure that the individual continues to have a voice about her life, and enjoy the relationships among circle members present. We have little time for such oases of reflection, renewal and true community in our busy lives. There is great value in these gatherings for these reasons. In between circle times, the rest of life happens in its haphazard, rushed and ever-changing form.

Learning to listen

Caroline began to tell us in many ways that she was not fully happy in her Rougemount home about two years before her true dreams of home were realized. At first, friends and family both outside of and within her circle, thought she was requesting small changes be made to deepen her sense of home. We diligently made plans to involve Caroline in some additional roles in the co-operative office to increase her sense of belonging and purpose. We helped her move from the front of the building to a quieter apartment facing the back in order to meet her concerns for fire truck sirens that would pass her windows. We worked hard at a relationship within the building that would occasionally give her great stress. We tried to maximize visits with her sister Barbara and new nephew Terry. We talked about Caroline moving to the first floor in order to have immediate access to the outside gardens. At some point, however, a courageous and sensitive circle member being consulted about priorities for circle discussion said, "what Caroline really wants to talk about is actually moving out of Rougemount and into another place to call home."

At that moment, I learned that strong, vibrant circles help people enter into relationship with others, and when effective, they listen in order to bring about the changes that are yearned. This is not as easy as it sounds. John O'Brien talks about "listening with an open heart" but we are quick to judge and offer what we think is right or good.

We, in Caroline's circle, came to learn to listen to the yearnings of her heart. We listened and tried to put aside our mixed emotions – sadness that Rougemount was not able to be home for her, excitement that we were on a new and uncharted path together, fear that we would fail her in this bid altogether, worry that there would be so many new questions ahead.

Caroline's mother, Helen, talks about that time in a different way. "I think that I knew ahead of others that Caroline would need to move, and slowly it came to me that a move back to our family home, in her own separate apartment would be a good move. I had some concerns about voicing this option because it might be seen by others as a step back. At the same time I felt the exhilaration of doing the right thing for the whole family –

Caroline would be newly returned to the very midst of our family – always for those spontaneous moments. That felt right.”

Learning to walk with Donna

The story of Donna's circle which she has drawn around herself and little Matthew is one to be told. It is so rich with the various perspectives and the joys and difficulties all at the same time. At the same time, it is a story of learning to walk with a woman whose life is her very own.

Donna was just turning 30, when she told us she was having a baby. In retrospect, this should not have been a surprise, but it was because most of Donna's circle members thought that we had a pretty good handle on the events and priorities in her life. Indeed we did – sort of. We were, in fact, all very clear that Donna dearly wanted to be married and have a family of her own. To that end, we were all frustrated by our lack of success in introducing her to the sort of men who might help make this dream become a reality. However, we did not count on Donna making the sort of conclusions that many women seem to make these days and decide that if she were to wait for the right guy to come along, she might have to give up the dream of having a baby altogether. Furthermore, no one counted on Donna deciding on involving no one but herself in this important, life-defining decision. Her way was clear, and she could imagine what range of conditions might be put in her way if this came to be a group decision.

All of our personal values, beliefs and ideas were put to the test. Could we help Donna walk the path she had so clearly chosen? It took discussion, prayer and a wise and welcoming grandmother to help us focus on the wonder of the events: a child would be born. And we would all hold him in the embrace of our love and caring for Donna and Marje to make sure that his life was as right and good as Donna's. It was a challenge and a test.

Eight women stood up to the test – a combination of other Deohaeko parents, friends, and Supporters. Together, we figured out the medical issues, the baby supplies, and social assistance implications. We figured out how to provide the one-to-one learning that would help Donna best to learn the many things that lay ahead. We used ourselves, friends, and family. In the end, we even helped Donna to hire a doula, (a woman specifically trained to provide care for new moms and babies after birth). The doula, too, became part of our group and has stayed on for the three years since!

Suddenly, “walking with” Donna had less to do with circle discussions, planning, implementing solid plans and evaluating the aftermath. “Walking with” had to do with a baby arriving in 4 months and what to do about medical check ups, her congenital heart condition, the size of her apartment, and finding all the right baby stuff! “Walking with” had to include listening carefully and hearing the joy and excitement in Donna and helping organize an impromptu “Celebration of Life” party within the co-operative. “Walking with” Donna was a matter of thinking through Children's Aid Society concerns and the baby's best interests, and coming to firmly believe that Donna could be a good

mother with guidance and support. We worked through a complex after-birth support plan. Donna was, of course, front and centre of every decision and every plan that we built. Then, we met with the CAS so effectively that the record shows that "there is no role for CAS in this situation".

Donna entered a downtown city hospital at the highest possible level "high risk pregnancy" care programme available, and was immediately labelled "mentally handicapped". She nonetheless forced an unsuspecting team of doctors and nurses to radically change their perceptions of what this label might mean. She and three circle members (including proud Grandma, of course) worked through a planned induction where Donna was later described by hospital staff as "grace under fire", and managed a completely natural delivery of a fine 7 pound 12 ounce baby boy. Donna then went on to stay for a full six days on the ward, fully supported by family and circle members at all times, to work hard at establishing breast feeding with constant assistance from an admiring staff ("if only all of the Moms here would work this hard at getting it started!").

We also learned to deal with the unexpected. To Donna's delight, her sister-in-law who lives out of town, came to stay with Donna for the first week home. While this was mostly very positive for Donna and Matthew, it came with some unexpected curves for Donna and her circle. It became clear, that due to distance, time and perspective, our way of organizing and supporting was not familiar to this family member. It took some time for the sister-in-law to trust the complex arrangement of supports that the circle had arranged for Donna, and some time for the circle to move back from these plans during her visit. It took a fair bit of time after that visit, for the circle to fully re-instate their original plans and for Donna to feel comfortable with those plans again. We all learned that family is important. Circle members are important. When time, distance and circumstance do not bring these two together we need to create bridges and ways for people to trust each other to work effectively together in times of need (usually the only times when they might come together). Walking with Donna opened us to honouring chosen family that we had not yet come to know.

Today, Matthew is an active, engaging, loving little boy. Donna works hard at keeping up with all of his new skills and demands, as all parents do. At this time, Erin, her doula, spends about three visits every week with Donna, one of those is attending the local YMCA Child Drop In programme. Often, Erin manages to bring her own three-year old son along. She also helps Donna with planning and learning to prepare healthy meals and snacks, with planning her time and her money, and with coping through Matthew's childhood illnesses.

Other circle members have taken on other roles. One member offers rides and company when Donna wants to take Matthew to the doctor unexpectedly (she goes a bit more often than many because she does not want to make a mistake around his health). Another member drops by regularly to help out with whatever is going on --a bath for Matthew, watching Matthew so Donna can throw some laundry in, figuring out a healthy snack, or getting Matthew outside to play.

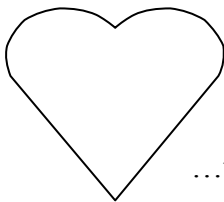
After a period of focused searching, we also managed to introduce Donna and a young mother who lives about 20 minutes away and who now spends some spontaneous, fun “mom” time with Donna and Matthew. This new friendship provides Donna with a new outlook on family, raising children, and being a home-based Mom.

At the co-operative, Matthew knows many people well, and happily spends time with one neighbour or another when Donna needs to attend a co-operative meeting. He loves to play with the other kids in the hallways. He adores his Uncle Bob, who gives him treats and returns his affection quietly.

Matthew is a bright and happy three year old who is truly a child of the Rougemount community. Donna is his proud, ever-learning, competent mother but in the way of her true nature she shares him unstintingly with all members who reach out to him. We have learned a lot in three years. Our expectations of Donna have been stretched time and time again. We have had to all stretch ourselves in building good life situations for both mother and child, but we have done it well and all feel a sense of accomplishment in this achievement. By walking with Donna and not telling her what to do, we have re-discovered how a community might work together to raise a child.

A circle is not a focus meeting

For Tiffany, when some members come together every six weeks or so, it is called a focus meeting. So for Tiffany and her family, the circle is not an event, but rather a description of the web of relationships in Tiffany’s life. Some of the people who make up that circle may be invited to a focus meeting but many others would be unable to come. The members who come for the focus meeting are used to help the day’s discussion evolve, to raise relevant issues, to brainstorm ideas. These members, who may substantially but not completely change from meeting to meeting, help to hold the vision of Tiffany’s life but they are not alone. Typically, the people who seem to make it to the focus meeting are people who live in the co-operative, close family members (mother, father), Deohaeko members, one or two current Supporters, and friends of long-standing who live near by. Other people are considered important people in Tiffany’s life, but cannot make it to focus meetings most of the time. These people are still a part of her web of support. They include her two aunts and uncle in Nova Scotia, her father’s family in Belleville, a most recent room mate of five years, the rest of the Deohaeko Support Network, at least ten or more Rougemount neighbours who know Tiffany well, one or two neighbours from her old neighbourhood, a couple of previous Supporters.



Tiffany’s Circle: the people to hold the vision of a life that Tiffany wishes to have...

...to listen with heart

...to deepen the dreams with understanding

...to brainstorm the details with joy

...to evaluate and re-work the outcomes with love

Learning to see the circle

Being part of the experience of Tiffany's circle, we learned to see the web of relationships rather than just a meeting. This was valuable to us as we became very involved with learning how to truly see Donna's evolving circle.

In the winter of 2002-2003, Donna's mother, Marje discovered that she had bone and lung cancer and she probably had three months to live. She was visiting her older son in Ingersoll at the time and it was subsequently decided not to move her back to Pickering. This was a difficult decision for Donna and her brother Bob, also of Rougemount, to live with and manage. Donna's recognized circle at the time essentially included now eleven women who had supported her through the birth of Matthew and their first two years together. The task ahead of us was demanding. We need to figure out meaningful ways for Donna and Matthew to spend quality time with Marje in a hospital setting in an unfamiliar town, more than two hours away.

Tiffany's experience allowed me to sit down and really contemplate the next evolution of Donna's circle. Slowly, it became clear to me that it was not I, or even the current circle who was re-inventing this web of relationships. It was clearly a process in which Donna was the dynamic centre. I only had to recognize it. I asked myself: who are the people to whom Donna is reaching out in her grief and distress and from whom she is able to derive some comfort.

To varying degrees all of the Deohaeko families were on this list, as were her two support persons. Important others who came forward included Gaytri, a co-operative member with two young sons who provided many cups of tea, a listening ear, and a solid co-operative presence. Arlene, a previous co-operative member and neighbour to Donna and Marje, came forward to look after Matthew, call and talk with Donna, reminisce about Marje. Bob, her brother, was there in new and very supportive ways for Donna and Matthew and began to be very much involved in day-to-day ways. Cathy, Donna's fairly new friend who was also a young mother provided lots of listening time, some get away with the kids time, and some babysitting while Donna was in Ingersoll. Theresa, who lives in the building and is a long-time friend, was there at all times. Pat was always there to answer questions. Kathy, a friend from school days began to visit more regularly and sometimes stayed over during a long night. Many other co-operative members were clearly there for Donna at all times. Donna held a candle light vigil when her Mom was in the hospital. She held a luncheon together with the families of Deohaeko after the funeral. She recently held a small tea in memory of her mother's birthday. To each of these events came a solid, dedicated number of neighbours and friends (from 10 to over 60 people per event) who stood by to pray, add memories, provide affirmation, and offer support. This is a brief outline of Donna's web of support. I am only grateful that I learned to see it.

On a smaller scale, we have learned to look for and see the circles of support that reach out to people on a daily basis. I am reminded of a Wednesday afternoon a few years ago, when Brenda had been having a rough week – dental surgery, discomfort from eating too many bananas another day, and an upset with a Supporter which could not be well resolved in her mind because the Supporter was sick the next day. By Wednesday,

Brenda was disgruntled and pacing out on her first floor patio, unhappy with her world. Across the parking lot a few neighbours sat at the picnic table under the maple tree, and noticed her. "Come and join us," encouraged Ann, Jean, Bob and Barb. Brenda didn't reply but someone saw a small smile while she hesitated in her pacing. Barb suddenly asked Brenda if she could come in and use her washroom. Brenda agreed, and when Barb returned, Brenda followed her outside. That was at 1:30 in the afternoon. She was still there talking and laughing under the trees an hour and a half later. At 4:00, she walked inside with the last neighbour remaining.

What is important to understand that when Brenda was low and upset, she ended up spending an afternoon with friends and left feeling better. Neighbours noticed her distress and responded to her natural and caring ways. No one thought to call "staff" or family to solve a problem that was not theirs. They simply saw a neighbour feeling low and believed that their invitation to join them would be a comfort. They even persisted in finding a creative way (asking to use her washroom) for Brenda to join them when a simple invitation did not work. This does not make them the close, intimate circle members who help Brenda with the large decisions in her life, but it does mean that there are supportive people around her who take part in helping her live well and feel safe and included.

This aspect of community life was captured in one of the early Rougemount Friday newsheets in a small musing written by Linda Dawe.

Communities are Circles of People. Sometimes these circles overlap. When people are gathered around a common purpose you see the meaning of life: people talking to one another, joking as they get tired, helping each other, caring for one another. What is most valuable about this is that it creates community where it doesn't matter at all what you earn, how you dress, what your politics are, you just work and laugh together anyhow.

We believed that this could happen and that it would happen. What was new was learning to see it happen in very ordinary ways.

Trying out ways to include sisters and brothers

Rob has two brothers and a sister. The other three are married and have young, busy children and full work lives. They live some distance from Rob's home. Rob's formal circle which meets regularly is small and at times, seems somewhat resistant to efforts to grow. Harriet and Orest have spent some time thinking about this, and have tried some interesting variations to include Rob's busy brothers, sister, nieces and nephews in his life. They felt that Rob was busy and contributing in his own meaningful ways, and that the typical family gatherings were inadequate for anyone to truly understand Rob and his current life. One attempt to change this is referred to by Orest as the "mobile circle". Since these young families' lives were filled with activities, schedules and responsibilities that did not allow for a regular participation in the formal circle, Rob would come to them.

So, on Saturdays for a few months, Rob began to make the tour of his brothers and sister's homes. He brought photo albums and information outlining what his week and time looked like. A Supporter who knew him well and could assist in talking about Rob and his life accompanied him. He was also to spend some time on his own with his brothers and sister and their spouses and children so they could know him more personally than at family gatherings.

This mobile circle was a short-term effort that spanned several months. It has helped us to identify the problems that distance, young family life, and full time jobs can have on developing typical relationships among sisters and brothers. It has helped to see that Rob's inclusion in family gatherings only develops a certain level of intimacy and relationship and that a different approach is needed for a different level of relationship. Finally, it has caused us to recognize the vital role that a Supporter might play in these visits and in developing these relationships. The Supporter must be friendly and outgoing without taking over. He must be a model of respectful support (words, manner, topics of conversation) for the sister or brother. He is teaching by his very presence and attitude. He must be able to convey information but do so in such a way that the sister or brother do not worry that their own support will not be specialized enough. This work requires a very sensitive Supporter and much pre-planning.

Another recent attempt at including sisters and brothers and their families was the planning of a Sunday afternoon tea and open house in the beautiful Big Room at Rougemount overlooking a part of the Rouge Valley. Harriet and Orest, together with Supporters, put together large, themed photographic displays outlining Rob's interests, roles, and current involvements, including the friends, neighbours and acquaintances that he encountered during his week. Family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances were all invited. Although the turnout of newer acquaintances from the community was lower than Harriet and Orest had hoped, Rob's sister, brothers, nieces, nephews and cousins came out in full force. Their interest, surprise and admiration for Rob's achievements were plain to see. They learned a lot about him that day. They learned from the themed posters which depicted him so actively involved in valued ways in the whole community. They learned from the other 30 or so neighbours and friends who came by and obviously knew some aspect or other of Rob so marvellously well. And they learned from Rob himself, in his obvious delight of being in the midst of so many familiar faces.

Learning to harness the energy and potential of the larger circle

Jon and his family also found it difficult to bring the many people who know and care about Jon into his circle on a regular basis. As an alternate approach, we decided to invite a wide range of people who know Jon in some capacity to join us for an evening gathering in order for Jon's parents to talk about his life and to help others begin to think about the bigger issues in Jon's life. We have since gathered such a group together three times for Jon. The first time was around his 21st birthday and was an invitation to help figure out work options in these transition years. The other times were more to remind participants of the importance of relationship to Jon, to give them some details about

parts of his life with which they were not familiar, and to think of deepening some of his roles.

The people to respond to these invitations have included: Jon's sister and two aunts, Jon's grandmother (and grandfather to one event before he passed away), neighbours from his old neighbourhood, friends of his sister, co-operative neighbours, his small business customers, family members of a farm he stays at from time to time, family members of supporters, past teachers, past Supporters, and Rougemount neighbours.

These gatherings have been helpful and practical in several ways. The quality of the ideas and brainstorming, with resulting contacts and connections has been wonderful. Due to the wide range of people who come – typically 20-25 people attend – the discussions about typical expectations and dreams for young men in Durham Region have been full and genuine.

The gatherings have increased the information that people have about Jon. Although the information is not very detailed and is not first hand, it at least allows people to imagine what Jon's life currently looks like. It motivates a few people to ask more questions and get to know him a little bit better.

Perhaps most importantly, this format allows us to bring up the larger context of Jon's life. We have been able to talk about planning work options with Jon, by looking to what other young men are doing in the area. This helps to ensure that this is the measure by which we gauge success in his life – not by looking at what other disabled young men might be doing, which is a different comparison altogether. We have been able to stress the importance of relationship in Jon's life. We have been able to hold up a standard of the kind of home life, choices, control, work and recreation that Jon now enjoys. While there are still many areas to fill in better ways, this large group of people, all in all, have a very positive view of what Jon's life is like. We can only hope this is a standard that they will strive to maintain over time.

The other benefit of this form of gathering is that it is a community kind of event. People like to come. Their ideas are welcomed and they feel good about contributing to make a difference. They are enriched by the experienced, I believe. That is one of the reasons that they returned to each of the three gatherings.

Learning to take support issues away from circle times

Brenda is a woman who makes her demands for a good life filled with genuine people clear in direct ways. Figuring out good support takes much time, energy, observation and guidance. Large challenges arise regularly and require discussion and common problem-solving. Brenda taught us that while such concerns are valid, and at times even vital, they do not belong in her circle.

We noticed that Brenda was becoming less involved in circle discussion, and in fact, would roam around her home for quite awhile before settling in to become part of the

circle gathering. After some discussion, her mother Elizabeth and I thought a few things were going on. First of all, Brenda has a lot of support people in her life. They are all free to come to the circle, and even if half of them attend, they may constitute half of the group. Secondly, in their attempt to take part in the discussion, they often misunderstood the goal of the circle and raised their own issues for brainstorming or problem solving.

We are admittedly slow in our attempts to broaden the circle and outnumber the Supporters who attend. However, we felt that we could immediately address the second issue. We began to institute monthly Supporter meetings away from Brenda's apartment, and have the circles on the alternate month. At the same time, we started to let supporters know that when we meet for the circle, this is Brenda's time and as much as possible, she would decide what to talk about. This has led to much greater participation from Brenda. We have learned to be comfortable with lots of small talk, tea and waiting while Brenda figures out what kinds of things she would like to talk about that day. We have found she really wants to tell us about improvements that need to be made to her home, night disturbances that bother her sleep, and the kinds of things she has been doing with her time. She likes to talk about and remind us of her favourite people in the co-operative. She likes us to use the time to remind people that her journal (for communication) should read like a story of her week that she shares with her mother on the weekend. She likes to know that something good is going to happen for her at the end of the gathering time, so there is not a mass exodus and she is left on her own. These agenda are very different from the ones that we used to have. They are Brenda's and tell us a lot about what is important in her life.

No cookie cutter circles

It doesn't have to look like a circle (whatever that is) to be a circle. Caroline Ann had several circle times in the cozy Member's Room in the co-operative before she moved, where her sister brought her beloved nephew, Terry, along and a friend, Sharon brought along her young son, William. Suddenly half of the circle was on the floor playing with babies, snacking and feeling very relaxed. The tone was very relaxed and Caroline Ann talked about many things quite easily when the main focus was no longer on her.

In an effort to include a few different people, we organized a tea at Brenda's park site in the late Fall. The Watershed Rehabilitation Project coordinator, Angie, came to join us as we sat on folding chairs, sipped tea and admired the view over the bay. To Brenda's delight we talked about nature and birds and things she knows about much more than we do within the confines of her apartment. A few months later, a slightly different group, including several neighbours and a couple of their children, gathered in Brenda's apartment to make Christmas decorations, eat goodies and chat.

These are not the typical ways that we think about circles, but the outcomes are solid enough for us to realize that we should not put circle formats into a box and expect wonderful things to happen. Although Brenda's gatherings do not yet constitute a conscious circle, they are an important beginning to having some new people in Brenda's

life see her in relaxed and positive ways, in a context in which she shines. These events remind us to find ways to allow the person to define the circle and not vice versa.

Not letting circles get in the way of relationship

Caroline's circle has been meeting a lot less often lately. Typically, Caroline calls to her a wonderfully diverse group of family, friends and neighbours. Focus meetings, as she calls them, are not always her favourite times, but people have worked on making them work for her. She is never put on the spot. We often meet at restaurants and make it a social occasion. The agenda flows from Caroline's life. For example, it was the members of her wide circle who managed to pull off a fantastic 40th birthday celebration one year. Another time a few members of the circles met in order to help out with a Supporter interview.

In speaking with Helen, Caroline's mother, about this latest development, she said to me that many of the most important people in Caroline's circle lead very busy lives and had limited time to devote to Caroline on a regular basis. They were keen and they care greatly for Caroline, but in the stress of their daily lives they felt like they would rather spend some time alone doing something together with Caroline than attending a focus meeting. Put that way, it seemed important not to let circles get in the way of relationships happening. Caroline's time is currently better occupied by having a number of dates with circle members, than it would be with one focus meeting attended by many members.

The circle still needs to meet. There are still important parts of joint discussion that need to get done. But this is the wise, temporary action of a mother who is sensitive to the priority of rhythms of relationship over formal circles.

Every circle is a learning and teaching moment

I have learned that there is no such thing as a circle gathering for which you do not prepare because it is easygoing or unimportant. You must always be prepared to address values and principles issues as they come up. During most circles there is little spontaneous time to address values issues as they come up. We often choose to talk about one chunk at a time, and in very practical ways. The concept of devaluation, which is very important to our understanding of why things are so and what we must do about it, can be initially dealt with in a few statements: *"As we know, society does not value or treat all of its members equally. Society tends to value speed, productivity, richness, beauty, newness. People who are not perceived to hold these qualities, or indeed are perceived to hold the opposite, are not valued. At a glance, this person is not seen by most of society as holding these qualities. We need to do something about this."* If such statements bring about discussion and debate, or arise a few times, we might plan to take a larger chunk of time in the future to have a fuller discussion.

In almost all circle gatherings, we find the occasion and take the opportunity to remind people to focus on two things – achieving the vision (working on positive roles and

initiatives based on dreams and personal goals) and protecting vulnerabilities (decreasing negative roles and image issues). This is a chunk that can often be easily held by a group.

Occasionally, I will work with family members to provide a time during a circle meeting for a larger chunk of learning to happen. We might look at the life experiences of the person and the impact of those experiences on their current life, hopes and dreams. It might be focused on how to keep relationships front and centre of our thinking and our work (may be based on information in Chapter 7). It might be drawing out a visual diagram of current positive and negative roles that the person holds for a discussion of what to minimize, what to accentuate, and where to go next.

There are many opportunities within circle times to seize upon ideas that will help to focus all members on the various issues that support or suppress the building of relationships. Each five minute discussion is an investment in our vision. These are some of the entry points that we have discovered:

- Supporters need to focus on their role – they are not the friend; they are the bridge to friendship with others.
- We cannot create friends, but we can build good opportunities in which friendships may flourish – we call this designing a context for relationship.
- Committed relationships will keep people safer than rules, laws, or policy.
- A chance to reflect on what all circle members gain from the person with a disability, followed by a talk on the mutuality of relationships.
- Where and how people typically find their friends. Make comparisons and design similar conditions for this person. Circle members who didn't think they have anything to offer begin to understand their role.
- How other circle members have helped this person to engage with others, encouraged friendships, etc.

Everything matters within a circle time

Everything counts. Everything tells a story to the participants. How you, the main family member, and others respond at every step of the way changes the course of action. We have found that serving a cup of tea and allowing time for chat and catching up is a good use of time at the beginning of most meetings. It sets the tone that the circle is about relationships more than it is about meetings.

We think about using time well in other ways, too. Take the time to tell stories. Tell old and well-loved tales to newcomers to the circle. Tell new stories with a bit of history to relate old and new achievements and events. This solidifies the roots of why we are looking for this kind of job, this kind of role, or this new hobby. Use the time to look at the person's week as a whole and teach how to evaluate it. Use the group to brainstorm all kinds of ideas. Brainstorm all the roles that typical 30-year old men hold in your region. Brainstorm all of the activities and relationships associated with being a gardener. Use the time to ask for all kinds of things that may be easy for circle members to provide: who can send her an e-mail once a month? Who can pop in while I am in Halifax next

week? Who knows of anyone who might provide support on Monday nights to go to the gym? What can we do to celebrate her birthday next month?

The circle agenda should fit the person and the situation

When *The Tiffany Touch*, Tiffany's baking business, was in high gear the details of the business were not dealt with at focus meetings. The circle was informed about the general profile of the business, and certainly any new achievements. However, for effective decision-making we struck a four-person advisory group. This group was small enough to convene as needed and act quickly. In many respects this group acted to give direction to Tiffany's Supporter. Among other things the group was able to meet with a bank manager to understand more about business planning, to find an affordable, commercial-type kitchen, and to approve an intense pre-Christmas sale. It was also able to make the difficult decision to slow down the level of the business in light of poor profit prognosis (together with less time to fully involve Tiffany in enough aspects of the business).

This short term advisory group was, in effect, a sub-circle for Tiffany's business. It was the right place for deeper discussion about decisions and direction. The creation of this group allowed the focus meetings to deal with the things that the people gathered could comment on or contribute to.

In a similar way, there are times in people's lives where important aspects must be dealt with but it is not comfortable or appropriate to do so within the whole circle. This happens when there are serious medical issues that may affect the parent, or when the parent is struggling with other serious issues in their lives. People who are especially close to the parent may meet in a much smaller grouping to try and figure out the implications for the son or daughter, personal support for the parent, and a myriad of other details.

Sometimes, the whole circle is too cumbersome or too complex to get together for all the decisions that need to be made. This past year with Donna's circle has shown us this. Donna needs someone to talk through many important decisions. When Marje was still alive, she took on the role of assisting with this daily decision-making. Now that the circle has come to fill her role, we have come to understand that it is impossible for us to meet as a group whenever decisions need to be made. Instead Donna figured out a way of talking to one of an inner core of five people who know the overall balance of her life well enough to help Donna make the decision. Circle times are then a time to update each other on news, to review bigger decisions, strengthen the ones that work, and troubleshoot the ones that don't.

The circle can lead the way in a community that is uncertain

When Donna let people know that she was having a baby, the reaction of the community was uncertain and mixed. Some people immediately started counseling her on abortion or adoption. Some people were worried about how her mother might view this event. Some people were happy that Donna was clearly so pleased to be having a child. Once Donna's

circle gathered and talked with her about her plans and hopes and dreams, we really felt that she had a good chance to fulfill her dreams of motherhood. We also understood that the co-operative community seemed uncertain about how to respond to Donna. We decided to have a party for Donna and invite people to come and have a “Celebration of new life”. It turned out to be a wonderful way for neighbours and friends to come together and pledge their support for Donna and her baby. We found that once we had set the tone, most people responded to Donna with joy and good wishes. We also found the evening provided some neighbours a way to express their worries and concerns, which in turn provided us with ways to help them see that we did not ignore these practical issues, but had a plan in place for most of them. During that celebration, several people turned their concerns into a concrete offer of help. This also set the groundwork for concerns that arose over the following three years. People came to understand that there was a whole group of people looking out for this young family. Even today they bring concerns forward when they are still small enough to be easily addressed. They have become partners in keeping this family well.

Late in Donna’s pregnancy, she received a call from the local Children’s Aid Society, asking that she come down to their offices so they could assess her situation. Circle members quickly turned the invitation around so that a worker came and met Donna in her own apartment, where she is comfortable and clearly at home. All eight members of Donna’s circle were at that meeting. We talked freely and openly about Donna’s strengths, experience with children, and our plans to help Donna become a good mother to her child. The CAS worker ended the meeting by saying that no file would be opened on Donna, and if that other young mothers got the kind of support that Donna was now getting, there would be very few mothers on her caseload at all.

The coordinator cannot “hold” the circle indefinitely

In the event of a crisis, our model is that the coordinator will work with the family to “hold” the circle. This may mean assist in calling the circle together, facilitate the work that the circle must do in order to get through the crisis (schedule support for awhile, work on a funding proposal, recruit Supporters, keep communication going, etc.), or providing some direct support. This is especially the case when the crisis is happening to the parent, rather than to the supported individual directly.

However, even with the luxury of a group the small size of ours, it is physically and mentally impossible for one part-time coordinator to “hold” this role for more than one person at a time. For this reason it is imperative that such situations be seen as short term crisis interventions alone.

Furthermore, it is not in the interest of our long term goals and dreams to rely so fully on a paid person over a long period of time. We need to work to develop and rely on the personal, committed relationships that we believe make the real difference in people’s lives. When the coordinator slips from being a bridge to those kinds of relationships, to actually being the relationship, then we have slipped into a paid-for service world. This is not the one on which we believe we can rely.

Circles and Relationship

Circles are therefore one way to focus on bringing mutual relationship into people's lives. We want to touch on some of the outcomes of our work and focus on relationship. What difference has all of this made in the real lives of the sons and daughters of the Deohaeko families? It is all just fancy words if we cannot point to some real relationships that have brought life and enrichment to people. The relationships below have not come about solely because of circles in people's lives. However, we have used circles as a way to hold a vision of a good life, as a way to invite some people into the lives of individuals, and as a way to remind ourselves of the importance of relationship. Circles have helped us to make sure that people are leading lives where they are more inclined to meet people. Circles have reminded us all that these individuals are loving, interesting and worthy members of our community, in short, pretty decent folk to be holding up one end of a relationship.

This is a sampling of what this focus has brought to us:

- **Tiffany** has had a warm and loving relationship with her five-year old half-brother, David, since birth. David lives at Rougemount and sees Tiffany daily. Sandi, once a room mate of Tiffany moved out six months ago, but their friendship is finding new ground. Sandi works nearby and finds ways to visit Tiffany almost every week. With the birth of her first niece, Britney, Tiffany is entering into a new relationship with her brother Joel and Lisa. Important friends at Rougemount include Janice, Gaytri, Lynn and others. Through her work in the Rouge Valley, Tiffany has warm collegial relations with several of the other environmental staff and volunteers.
- **Brenda** continues to share tea most days at 4:00 with her dear friend and next-door neighbour, Hilda. Although she usually avoids young children, Brenda has developed a great fondness for Matthew, Donna's son and buys him treats and small gifts often. Brenda has a great working relationship with the man, Dave Ryan, who helped her get to council to petition for her park site. She does not see him often, but he looks out for her at the annual Volunteer Awards Dinner. He has also recently become mayor of Pickering, so Brenda knows some people in high places. Brenda has a quiet friendship with Gaytri who lives at Rougemount and a number of neighbours who come to her rescue at various times. She has become closer to her sister-in-law, Barb, and brother Martin over the past year.
- **Jon** had a wonderful working relationship with the police sergeant at a local station where he had a shredding contract for several years. He has great work relationships with several of his shredding customers. He has a special relationship with Carol, who used to support him, and her whole family. They all live in the building. He continues to spend time with a family in Uxbridge. As always, he loves his time with his sister Rebecca, his aunt Maureen and his Aunt Brenda, and his Gran.
- **Rob** has a good relationship with his neighbour Carol, with Hilda, as well as with several other neighbours. He travels frequently with his Supporter John and his

nephews. Rob has work-related friends that he encounters through his volunteer work at the nursing home, wildlife park, and his courier business. He has forged good recreational links with people through his interest in the local orchestra and his swimming club. Several people have become friends and then have moved out of his life again – a bittersweet experience to be sure.

- **John** has a close and wonderful friendship with George who is the chef of the nearby restaurant. He has a good working relationship with Kim, Stella and many other of the wait staff there. John has a longstanding hockey friendship with an elderly neighbour, Art, from an old neighbourhood. He also is still busily spending time with the many members of Jeany's family.
- **Caroline Ann** has a long and close friendship with Cathy, whom she has known for many years. She keeps in touch with Nicola, the principal of the Montessori school across the street from the co-operative and stops in whenever she is at Rougemount. Theresa and Donna are two close friends for her at the co-operative, and she keeps in touch with Kim from the nearby restaurant. Several close and important friendships have changed quickly and painfully for Caroline Ann over the past two years. These are difficult blows to overcome. Her nephew Terry has brought very special dimensions to her life, especially since she has always shared a warm relationship with her sister, Barb.
- As outlined above, **Donna** has a wide and elaborate circle of friends. She also has good neighbours in Susanna and her family. The depth and breadth of Donna's circle is a testament to the priority she places on people in her life.

And from where do these relationships come? The answer to this question is an important one, and one that we delve into more fully in our other writing (see *Our Presence Has Roots chapters 6-7*). For now, let us understand that the deepest relationships described above have come about through family connections (sisters and brothers having children, nieces and nephews growing up and seeing this aunt or uncle in a new way), determined personal efforts of single circle members, parents recognizing and personally encouraging new friendships, and regular, intense presence in familiar community settings (within Rougemount, at a nearby restaurant) day after day after day. One or two connections may be directly attributed to a keen, creative Supporter, but the majority stem from family, from long-time friends, and from the individual's own personal attractions once they are assisted to be in the same valued setting on a regular basis holding a familiar and valued role.