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23 March 2007

Women's Giving Circles Combine Socializing with Philanthropy

Groups of women pool their money, even small change, to help neediest

By Carolee Walker
USINFO Staff Writer



Impact Austin's first grant recipient, LifeWorks, along with Impact Austin members at 2004 check ceremony. (Photo courtesy of LifeWorks)

Washington – Small -- and large -- groups of women in the United States are changing the way some Americans give to worthy causes. As members of giving circles, women are finding that by meeting together socially and pooling any amount of money, even loose change, they can make a difference in their communities and beyond.

“Ordinary women ... extraordinary impact.” If this sounds like a slogan, it is. Impact Austin, co-founded in 2003 by retired IBM sales representative Rebecca Powers, who was moved

by the efforts of a women's giving circle she read about in Cincinnati when her brother was dying of cancer, now has 416 members. Powers' group has raised more than \$1 million, supporting culture, education, the environment, and family and health projects in Austin, Texas.

“I loved the idea of getting women to pool their financial resources to make a significant impact in the community,” Powers said in an interview with *USINFO*. “I decided that focusing on a positive project like this would help me cope with my grief and, at the same time, provide an outlet for women to get involved in our community in a meaningful way.”

A giving circle is a group of individuals who pool their money and decide, collectively, where to donate the money. They vary from small, casual groups to large organizations with staff and committees. The circles are often described as social investment clubs, according to the New Ventures in Philanthropy initiative at the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, and can be organized around a particular issue or area of interest. The participatory process, especially, has strong appeal for many members, who also gain an understanding of philanthropy, finance, grant making and community issues.

The number of giving circles in the United States has doubled in only two years, according to Daria Teutonico, director of the New Ventures in Philanthropy

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according to Dana Teutonico, director of the new ventures in Philanthropy initiative, which recognizes 400 giving circles today. Although some giving circles involve a mix of men and women, most only include women. The mixed circles tend to have younger members, Teutonico told *USINFO*, and they often target their giving to address social issues. As of 2004, more than 5,700 donors had given more than \$44 million through giving circles, according to the initiative, which plans to publish updated figures in May.

"The appeal of giving circles is that anyone can start one or join one, and you don't have to be wealthy. All you need is the desire to give and a passion to make the world a better place," she said.

"The best part about the giving circle is that it brings a diverse group of women together around substantive issues – becoming more knowledgeable about finances and supporting other women," said Ana Gloria Rivas-Vázquez, vice president of Hispanics in Philanthropy and co-founder of Smart Women with Spare Change, a women's giving circle in Key Biscayne, Florida, that collects coins, bills (and now checks) in a jar at the beginning of monthly get-togethers.

The giving circle invites financial professionals and community leaders, including Key Biscayne's police chief, to keep the women up-to-date on important issues so their financial support can have an impact on the local community, Rivas-Vázquez told *USINFO*.

Today, some women's giving circles, like Impact Austin, are formalized with minimum donations and grant-making guidelines, but most are informal and require low minimum contributions from members, according to Teutonico. In general, giving circles are hosted by established nonprofit, charitable organizations, but some, like Impact Austin, have their own nonprofit status.

Because food is a universally popular way to bring people together, Dining for Women, with chapters around the United States, is one of the best-known women's giving circles, Teutonico said. Members contribute a dish for all to share at a dinner and donate what they think they would spend for a meal at a restaurant. Some Dining for Women chapters, including the original Dining for Women giving circle in Greenville, South Carolina, founded in 2003, support international projects. Marsha Wallace, founder, told *USINFO* in an interview that more than 800 members belong to 70 registered chapters of Dining for Women. In 2006, Dining for Women raised more than \$50,000.

"Dining for Women has developed a unique approach for identifying issues and organizations to fund," according to a report by the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers. "They pick a world region and examine the issues affecting women and the potential solutions." The giving circle has supported projects in India, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Tibet, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Vietnam and is currently doing research in East Africa before earmarking grants to the region.

Giving circles that support a single cause, such as preventing domestic violence, are becoming more common, according to Sondra Shaw-Hardy, co-founder of the Women's Philanthropy Institute, a program of the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, and a giving circle pioneer.

It is the connection and collaboration with others to make changes and make a difference that is the heart of the women's giving circle concept, Shaw-Hardy said in an interview with *USINFO*. Because so many giving circles operate casually, Shaw-Hardy said there could be as many as 800 in the United States.

Additional information on women's giving circles is available on the [Forum's Giving Circles Knowledge Center](#) and the [Women's Philanthropy Institute](#) Web sites.

More information about [Dining for Women](#) and [Impact Austin](#) is available on the giving circles' Web sites.

For more information on U.S. society, see [Women in the United States](#).

(USINFO is produced by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)

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