

Heard on the Listening Tour



A Youth Pilgrimage to Ghana



Connecting to Defeat Poverty



Messy Church Attracts a New Crowd

7 Toxic Injustice



On the cover
John and Ruby Laury at their farm in Union Hill, Virginia.

Photo by Robert Dilday.

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Friends with Connections

Churches Build Relationships to Help People Move Out of Poverty

BY NANCY CHAFIN

Darshee Clarke is getting out. Out of public housing, away from shootings on her street, far from the drug trade around the corner. For her, the cycle of poverty ends here.

“I’ve lived like this my whole life. I want something different for my kids,” she says.

What makes this single mother of four so special? She’s courageous, fiercely determined and willing to share her journey with some new friends who want to walk this mile with her.

These recent strangers have a powerful network of connections to share. They come from a wide range of professions, experts in legal matters, finance, housing, education, social services and health care.

These are the volunteers of Circles RVA, a non-profit partnership that includes six Richmond area churches and other organizations. Three of those churches are Episcopal – St. James’s, St. Paul’s and Grace and Holy Trinity.

Together the churches helped to found this local chapter of Circles USA in 2018. With over 80 chapters nationwide, Circles USA empowers motivated low-income participants to permanently move out of poverty, and offers community residents and faithful people with a means to take collective action to remove systemic barriers that prevent low-income participants from achieving economic stability.

Rector Bo Milner of Grace and Holy Trinity says it was exactly what his church was looking for – a way to live out their mission priority to address the overwhelming poverty in neighboring communities. The broad-based partnership of Circles RVA appealed to him.

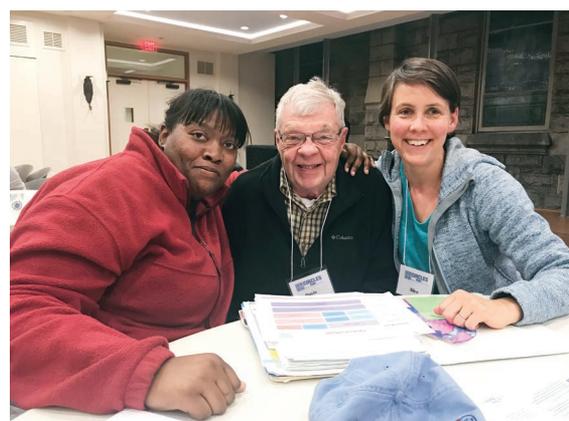
“You don’t have to own everything,” says Millner. “You can do something much bigger together.”

The Circles model centers on a “Circle Leader,” someone living at 150% or less of the federal poverty guideline, who wants to move out of poverty.

They are paired with volunteer “Allies,” whose primary aim is to expand the Circle Leader’s networks – helping them gain access to resources, navigate bureaucracies, and leverage social relationships and networks they might not otherwise have access to. The entire coaching process lasts 18 to 24 months.

Many people don’t realize the role that their social and professional networks play in their life until they meet someone who doesn’t have these connections. Think of the number of times you’ve used a friend or colleague as a reference. Or how often a friend has referred you to the right doctor, lawyer or realtor. Or given you a tip on where to find child care, a tutor or advocate of any kind.

Circle Allies and Resource Team volunteers are trained to build healthy relationships with Circle Leaders and their families. The approach emphasizes



Circle Leader, Darshee, with her Allies, Davis and Alice. Darshee believes transparency is a key component of the Leader/Ally relationship.

Richmond’s poverty rate – nearly double the nation’s

15% of Americans live in poverty.

25% of Richmonders live in poverty.

39% of Richmonders under 18 years live in poverty.

that all relationships are based on mutual respect, where everyone has an opportunity to give back in some meaningful way.

“It’s just a fantastic model for living life. If you’ve been blessed to be born into a circle, expand that circle. How can you bring in others who can benefit from your circle?” asks Kristin Blalock, Community Coordinator for Circles RVA.

Circles leaders are referred by social service agencies, schools, churches, and other groups. To successfully participate, leaders must be motivated people living in relatively stable situations.

“It’s for folks who have a job and stable housing but aren’t yet thriving economically,” says Blalock.

Breaking Bread Together

Circles RVA Leaders and Allies meet for dinner every Tuesday at Grace and Holy Trinity. Circle Leaders and their Allies spend time together focusing on the Circle Leader’s life plan and goal fulfillment. Many Leaders bring their children and child care is provided.

Initially, Leaders and Allies attend mixers that allow them to get to know one another. Leaders can identify Allies they have a connection with or who have skills that will support their goals. From there, they are matched and the work of building a real relationship begins.

“When they first assigned me to my Allies, we didn’t have any connection,” Darshee recalls. “I needed my Allies to know my world, so I invited them to my house to see how I live, sleep, eat. They were so appreciative. They were able to walk in my shoes and see how bad I want this.”

Lasting Results

Circles focuses heavily on tangible goals and tracking tangible results.

Darshee’s primary goal is to secure safer housing. Prior to joining Circles, that seemed impossible.

Want to Launch a Circles Chapter in Your Area?

To find out how a single church can launch a Circles chapter, check out Circles Ashland at circlesashland-va.org and contact St. James-the-Less, Ashland at 804-798-6336.

To explore a model that involves many regional partners, contact Circles RVA at 888-447-2787.

Circles RVA Needs You

Circles RVA is actively recruiting leaders, allies and other volunteers. If you know someone who could benefit from the program, please refer them to Circles RVA’s Helen Rai at 888-447-2787 or hrai@circlesrva.org. If you want to volunteer as an ally, resource team member, or provide child care, transportation, or meal preparation for weekly meetings, contact Circles RVA’s Kristin Blalock at 888-447-2787 or kblalock@circlesrva.org.

“Every time I approached the housing situation and was denied, I gave up” says Darshee. “My Ally pushed me to fight it. We put together a plan. We got a letter from the judge, tons of character reference letters, and gathered everything we needed for the appeals process.” These efforts helped Darshee to get on a waiting list for a program that offers an alternative to public housing. She’s also done some hard work to improve her credit score from 574 to 617.

Another Circles Leader had a stable job but couldn’t make ends meet. Rather than leaving a secure job, her Allies successfully coached her on how to ask for a raise. “Some people just don’t know you can ask for a pay increase,” says Circles Coach Helen Rai.

Exposing Systemic Barriers

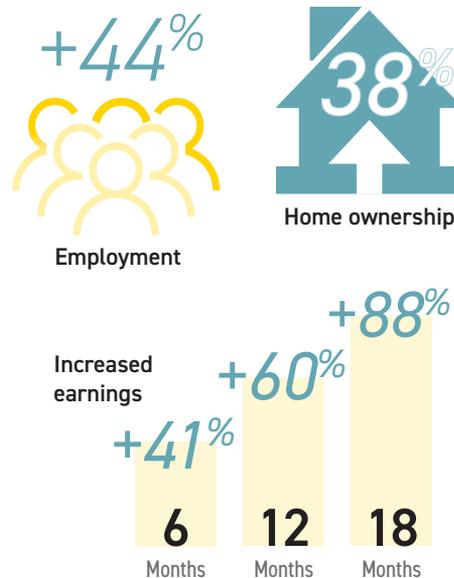
Along with building relationships and sharing your circle of connections, removing systemic barriers is a core component of Circles RVA.

“The system is designed to keep people where they are,” laments Millner.

So once a month, Circles RVA hosts an event called the Big View. This event takes on a specific topic that represents a barrier for low-income families, such as child care or lack of public transportation. Experts and service providers are invited to attend these gatherings to hear from Circle Leaders about the roadblocks they experience and that the providers may not be aware of. It’s also an opportunity for more volunteers to participate in advocacy, including legislative advocacy, to change systemic barriers.

Is it Working?

Circles USA measures success in concrete ways. According to the recent Circles USA 2017 Impact Report, Circle Leaders achieved increased employment, income and home ownership.



With the help of her Allies, Darshee is breaking down systemic barriers that stand between her and the future she wants for her four children. Her school-age children attend St. Christopher’s School and St. Andrew’s School, two excellent Episcopal schools in the Richmond region. She hopes to move to a neighborhood nearer to her son’s school soon and begin training in the health care field.



Nancy Chafin is the Minister for Communications for the Diocese of Virginia.