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Understanding the work of Stride Circles
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Understanding the work of Stride Circles Executive Summary (2005)*

The broad questions this three year study (2004-2007) is addressing is first, how successful Stride Circles are in helping women find a place in the community after being released from prison, and second, what explains the success that the Circles have in this regard. Specifically, then, the research is examining the role and effectiveness of Stride Circles, which are facilitated by Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) of Kitchener, Ontario, in the reintegration of women who are serving or have served their sentences in Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI). It is a multi-phased undertaking which considers the experiences of Circle members and the impact of the Stride program over time at an individual and collective level.

An earlier pilot study (see appendix A) which informed the development of the three year study looked at the experiences of women who had been released from prison, and considered the role played by Stride Circles in the reintegration process. Three Circles participated in the pilot study. These Circles were supported by the Stride Service Coordinator at CJI with sufficient resources to provide regular liaison between members and provide them with support as needed. In each case, the women were very clear in their belief that they stood little chance of successful reintegration without the Circle. Mutuality of caring, learning and growth characterized the relationship between Circle members; a crucial aspect of sustainability of the Circle was trust and reciprocity among members. On conclusion of the pilot study, it was determined that it would be important to conduct a study with a larger group of Circles to consider the processes involved in divergent situations, as well as to further our understanding of the meaning and experiences of women seeking to reintegrate into community following release from incarceration.

In late 2004, we commenced the three year project to further this work and to consider the meaning of connections between incarcerated women and community members in terms of quality of life and health as defined by those women. Since December 2004 and March 2005, an additional three Circles have participated in the ongoing study. Unconditional acceptance between members and a commitment to work toward reintegration was critical to the sustainability of these Circles. Especially important, through their Stride Circle involvement, these women realized notable benefits in relation to enhanced self-esteem, sense of normalcy, and positive self-identity. Initial connections between these Circle members occurred at Stride Night where members engaged in recreation and leisure pursuits together. Additional data gathered from other Stride Night participants revealed congruence between the principles of *Creating Choices* and the women's engagement in Stride Night. Further, they saw Stride Night as something quite distinct from the incarceration experience and instead a reminder of their potential to become contributing members of a community.

Since there is no half-way house in the KW region, depending on the conditions of their release, relatively few women are able to stay in this area on release. Consequently, women who are not staying in the KW area see Circles as something they cannot access, because the program is currently not available in other communities. However, they consistently express at least interest but more often a very strong desire to have the support of a Stride Circle on release. Initial findings suggest that the expansion of the Stride Circle program both within this region and beyond ought to be vigorously pursued. There are, however, challenges that currently exist for service delivery and coordination in the face of increased demand for the program and diminution of funds. Since the potential benefits of the program are very considerable, while the costs of running it are minimal, it would be unfortunate if budget cutbacks were to lead to its demise.

***Postscript**

In 2006-07, in order to investigate factors which help reduce recidivism, we planned to conduct follow-up interviews with existing Circles and any new Circles that had developed. However, just as we were to embark on this work, a moratorium was placed on the Stride Circles program due to funding difficulties. An important aspect of the research we had planned for in Year 2 of this project is the examination of the how the various processes associated with the work of Stride Circles contribute to the broader determinants of health (including the acquisition of housing, employment, education or retraining, recreation, healthy lifestyle choices, etc.). As indicated in our report titled *Uncertain futures: Women leaving prison and re-entering community*, despite the loss of the Circles program in 2006, we were asked to conduct a housing needs study with women in GVI and in that context we examined questions related to the determinants of health as they pertain to women who have come into conflict with the law. Important to note also is that in late 2007, the Stride program received funding to enable it continue operations until 2010.

Understanding the work of Stride Circles Preliminary report – Year I

General Background

This report presents the preliminary findings from year 1 of the study, Understanding the work of Stride Circles. This is a three year study funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2004-2007). Between January and April, 2005, we conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with 28 study participants, as follows:

	<u>Study participants</u>
Individual interviews with GVI inmates	
involved in Stride Night:	14
Stride Night volunteers	4
Focus group with inmate and Circle members:	3
Focus group with former inmates and Circle members	5
Parole officers	2

During the Sept. 2004 to June 2005 period, the principal investigator, Alison Pedlar, and two Research Assistants from the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, participated regularly in Stride Nights. As participants, we also maintained field notes of observations (recorded following Stride Night). These observations, along with transcribed interview tapes, comprise the data from which these preliminary findings are drawn.

In 2002-2003 we conducted a pilot study involving interviews with 3 Stride Circles in the community, comprising a total of 12 study participants (i.e., one staff member, two Circles with 4 Circle members, and one with 3 members including the women around whom the Circles had formed). The findings of the pilot study very much informed the development of the current 3 year study. Certain relevant data from the pilot are included in this report providing important supplementary information which furthers our understanding the work of Stride Circles.

Stride Circles do not exist independently of Stride Night which acts as the vehicle through which women within GVI connect with community and form those relationships which are the foundation of Stride Circles. Therefore, this report will present preliminary findings concerning to the work of Stride Circles (Part I), and as well it will address findings from data gathered from Stride Night participants (Part II). Pseudonyms are used throughout this report in order to protect participants' anonymity.

Part I – Stride Circles

The following findings focus on the participants' experiences with Stride Circles.

Value of continuity in relationships

The evidence gathered from all six Circles that have been part of the Stride research to date is very clear – the support and acceptance of the woman by the Circle members has proven critical to the woman's self-esteem and confidence in her ability to remain in the community. As well, the relationship that formed between Circle members prior to release of the woman was important in the development of trust and the ability of the members to focus on the woman's reintegration. As one woman commented after her release:

I think it was like any friendship it was a little...I mean I was a little hesitant because I didn't know exactly how much I wanted them to know. Of course you're there so they know you've done something wrong and if they were even interested in that and when that wall got kind of knocked down, it just kind of flourished, from there where nothing was taboo and we just focused on the plan and how I was going to attain some of those goals in that plan. [16:02]

Through their connections with Stride and relationships that formed at Stride Night, study participants who were part of Stride Circles noted the positive experience of reciprocity and trust in social relations. Of concern for many women involved with the criminal justice system is the fact that they can rarely speak openly about their past and their crime for fear that it will jeopardise their reintegration efforts once they are released. As well, on release they will lose the connection they have had with many of the women they have known in the prison, and in some instances they will want to avoid contact with people they associated with prior to incarceration. All of these discontinuities leave former inmates potentially isolated and vulnerable. When a woman connects with a Stride Night volunteer and when a Circle develops through that association, she has greater stability and is able to receive reassurance of her value as a person through Circle members who know and have seen part of her lived experience. In the words of one volunteer who was part of a Circle that had formed while the woman was incarcerated and provided ongoing support on her release:

... being able to have somebody to talk to inside and form that kind of relationship, that can be something that is comfortable and is a known factor for that woman outside ... they can explore their feelings, they can explore their emotions. Whereas with the general community, they hide all that because it inhibits their ability to get a job, you know, to reintegrate socially, to be accepted into the community. [4:21]

Another woman noted after her release just how central the trust relationship was in her situation and in her survival in the community-at-large:

I need nagging. But it's nice to have someone who you really truly trust and like, even two, three weeks ago, I was going through a pregnancy and going through a miscarriage at the same time and she was the only person I could count on. And I'm so happy for that. Quite honestly I wouldn't know who to call because, I have friends, but I don't trust them that much. [16:04]

A long-standing Circle that formed in the prison was preparing with some excitement for the woman's release at the time of participating in the study. These members knew each other very well and enjoyed a rich and mutually supportive relationship. The woman had confidence that with the support of her Circle members she would do well:

Well I know that, because I have the support for when I get out, when I leave, I know the girls will be here. So that helps and it gives me something like, something to look forward to, some encouragement for when I get out. And you know, I'm not going to be just thrown out there to the dogs and have nobody to help me out you know. So that also helps my time go better. And you know, if I have any kind of questions that are, resources I need to be looked up and I can go to them and ask them you know, "Can you help me look for a job or can you get, bring me a newspaper, a post for apartments?" and things like that. So it just, I find that I'm, they're just supportive all around no matter what the case is, they're supportive. [16:05]

Reciprocity in relationships

Reciprocity is an important aspect of healthy relationships. For the Stride volunteers who were part of someone's Circle, they often felt they received as much from the involvement as they were giving. A Circle member notes:

Yeah, so that's how I look at this, this is my thing for me my it's it's...sometimes it's relaxation, it's also growth, it's it's a bit of everything, it's friendship so that's...this is my thing I do for me. [16:02]

The giving-back to community that is possible from women who have been released was regarded as especially valuable by several of the people who participated in this study. A volunteer who was part of a Circle commented on how much she had gained from her involvement both with the woman who had been released and also with the Circle members:

And with Ruth, I've noticed, I think she has amazing strength, she's like me very stubborn, and I'm a very determined person, that a person can succeed in whatever they do, once they make their mind up and have support and guidance. I'm a firm believer in that and I think Ruth's proven that. I think we've all helped each other, like I said, I've gone back and taken courses, that I probably wouldn't have taken if I hadn't gotten involved, right? You know me, I'm always active. I've learned a lot from you, Ruth, and from Sandy as well. [25:03]

The relationship that existed among members is really what makes the Circle arrangement so distinctive. It is very hard to imagine any support structure which is formalized and in which people are paid to provide support functioning so naturally and effectively in terms of supporting a person while they deal with the many crises which confront people during their efforts to reintegrate. One woman explained:

They had seen my mental and emotional growth, like when I was losing my mind, they understood, like nobody else understood, they didn't have a clue what I was going through, whereas they [Circle members] understood how bad or how well I can be. Like even now, like if I feel I'm just totally out of touch or that I'm losing it, I have them, I can phone them up, they pop in, get together or whatever, it's like a comfort zone. It's just like, I'm not so bad because I can reflect on the past, and they give me pep talks...it's been a lot and even to be where I am today, as emotionally as stable as I am, it's almost a miracle I didn't think I'd ever make it to this point: ... going into the community, they were almost like, um, they were my lifeline, it's like 'cause you're there and the family, whatever, and it's all this crap, nobody understands anything, it just feels that you should go on with your life and everything's okay, well, it's not that easy, right . . . it's made a big difference. I'm facing forward, rather than backwards . . . because where else would I have been able to turn, I didn't have nobody there, you know I would have just walked out and into my old life because I wouldn't have had anything on that side to hold me. [25:03]

Even when people have strong family support, there is an important distinction in the sort of support a Circle will provide:

But no, that's just the way the Circle works. And you know what, to be very honest, my Circle probably would not have worked if it wasn't like this. Because I, like I said, I expected certain things and if it couldn't come to pass it wasn't the end of the world for me because I didn't think I needed it. Now I realize how much I did need it to be very honest. The emotional support and just having, just to be able to go away from my family, and my family's wonderful, please don't misunderstand that. And their support has been, I can't even explain to you the level of support. My sisters, my mom, my grandparent, my grandma, you know, my dad, my stepmother, my children, everybody has offered me. But this allows me to go out and interact socially like I used to and not feel like they're judging me in any way or they're pitying me. I don't, like, they don't, I don't know how to put it. Both of them they just kind of treat me normal. It's not like, oh, you've been in jail so we don't want to say the jail word. [17:05]

Circles and the transition to community

It was clearly the case that the Circles we met with had been central to the women's ability to make the transition to community. Many of the women who did not have Circles because they were being released to an area in which there were no Circles, expressed deep concern and, in some instances, fear about their release. They were uncertain about how they would succeed without some support, such as that offered by a Circle. One woman spoke of her confusion and trepidation about her release:

I'm going to Toronto in two weeks and I'd like to know where there's a Circle and where the support is you know. Like again in this place I just . . . but I leave in two weeks and my mind thinks I have support. You know, but I don't think I do. You know, I haven't made the connections totally. So you have to get on the phone and you have to make the connection and have that person there for you to have coffee with and stuff like that or you are going to fall right back in to the same trap and come back here. And they're missing a link. [3:1]

In talking about actually leaving the institution and the fear she had around failing to remain 'clean', she went on to say:

So I'm lifting up those roots and all that scared and loneliness. I don't know, it must happen to everybody. I don't care how strong we are. Do you know what I mean? Unless you have this huge support network or a Circle, you're alone. You're totally alone to walk out there again. And all those feelings of lonely, boredom, low self-esteem are exactly why I'm here. So I'm walking out to them. You know what I mean? They're greeting me at the door and then they're following me to where I'm going and then I start all over again so. And then if you make a mistake or an error, they bring you immediately back here. [3:1]

Another woman who like others moving out of the KW region, felt that she would benefit from the sort of support offered by Circles:

I think if you had somebody to talk to and some support. Because a lot of people that do come in here don't have family and they keep going back to what they know is drugs and alcohol because they don't have anybody to talk to and they're scared to talk to them. So if they had that support while they're in jail and then they have it when they get out, it would be great. I know I'm an addict. I've been clean three and a half years before I even came to prison. I got my one year medallion before I even came here off of cocaine. So I know how it is for some people. If I would have stayed out there and stayed in my program, I would have been a sponsor right now. But I screwed up so I got to go back to square one. Maybe one day I can be a sponsor and help somebody coming out of jail like I did. [2:8]

This woman was released shortly after participating in the study. She has since returned to GVI.

Summary comments on Stride Circles

Notable was the consistency among these Circles – reciprocity and trust were foundational to the relationships between the members. As well, they functioned in ways that helped reinforce positive decision-making and sound judgement on the part of members who may not have made those choices previously. Reintegration was an objective that all members implicitly worked toward and the openness of the Circle arrangement, in that people had the ability to connect with other citizens and organizations, helped the women find their way into the community-at-large. However, equally important was the fact that the Stride Circles service coordinator was available and was indeed called upon beyond the initial formative stage of the Circles to assist in issues that were new, especially complex or challenging to the Circle members. This service was considered by Circle members a necessary aspect of ensuring the sustainability of Circles until such time as they were entirely self-sufficient and members fully reintegrated. When resourced appropriately, the Circle process is extremely effective, but the quality of service will inevitably suffer with diminution of resources. The long-term implications of this for the health of the individuals and the community-at-large would be important to consider before reductions are made in the funding of the program.

In the following section, we shall focus on Stride Night as the vehicle which first brings women from GVI into contact with community members who are potential Circle members for those women.

Part II – Stride Night

Stride Night has been consistently well attended over the past 10 months (2004-05), with attendance in the range of 35 to 45 women per night. Over the course of the year, it appeared that as the women got more and more used to the facilitators who were part of the Stride team, they started to arrive quite early at the room where Stride Nights are held and were often waiting outside the door when the team arrived to set up. As one woman noted:

Like Stride, one of the biggest things, because it's once a week and you know, that's why a lot of the girls will come out . . . And like I said there's basically nothing else that goes on here at night times. [2:19]

Congruence between the Stride experience and the principles of *Creating Choices*

The report of the task force on federally sentenced women, titled *Creating Choices*, identified five principles which it believed to be critical to the success of the Correctional Service of Canada's reform, specifically in relation to the treatment of women. These five principles are: 1) empowerment; 2) meaningful and responsible choices; 3) respect and dignity; 4) supportive environment; and 5) shared responsibility. These principles are incorporated in the overall statement of principle as contained in the report of the Task Force, as follows:

“It is the belief of the Task Force members that through active commitment to these five principles, the Correctional Service of Canada in cooperation with a broad range of other community members will create the choices needed to help move corrections in Canada closer to a community-based ideal. This is an ideal which recognizes and responds sensitively to the diversity of communities in Canada, and to the unique needs of individual federally sentenced women. To further this ideal, the Task Force proposes the guiding statement of principle which follows.

*The Correctional Service of Canada with the support of communities, has the responsibility to create the **environment** that **empowers** federally sentenced women to make meaningful and **responsible choices** in order that they may live with **dignity and respect.**” http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/choices/choice11e_e.shtml#6.*

Retrieved June 17, 2005.

Listening to the voices of the study participants, it became evident that many of these principles are reflected in the experiences of the women who spoke with us about what Stride Night means to them. Here are some of their reflections.

Principle #1 -- Empowerment

Empowerment is not something that can be done to or given to a person. It has to come from within, reflecting a person's own actions, choices, and decisions. Hence, it was not simply that the Stride Night staff or volunteers empowered the women, but instead the experience was such that the women were empowered. The positive outcomes that went along with that empowerment were noted by several women.

For me it was very relaxing as well, something to look forward to, and it helps the time go by so even if you've been stressed out all day, you know, you go to Stride, you do something fun, and you have some good conversation with the volunteers, it it's relaxing. However, for other people I've noticed, for some people, they get frustrated with the tasks but then, as I say, it's voluntary so they can leave if they feel like it, but then at times it presents a challenge and it's good for your mental health, physical health, hand-eye coordination, you know, all that stuff. So if you thought you forgot, you know, how many of us thought we forgot how to draw, and then you come to Stride, hey, I can do this. So it's a booster as well for your, you know, your ego too. [4:18]

The following comment points to the ways in which empowerment can be both a process and outcome of people's involvement in Stride:

And I went with art because it's got something, everybody can do arts. Everybody, do you know, even if you think you can't do art, whatever you do is art. And everybody's, if you go around in the Stride room and look at everybody's stuff, everything is different but everything is got a beauty to it of some sort. You know what I mean? And whatever it is. But when you are placed in places like this and you feel that you're not worth much which is about how we come when we get here, we're so broken. That day when you complete something, a project of some sort, so simple as a picture that you can take home and hang on your wall, it starts to build some self-esteem. You know, it's just that tiny little core. [3:1]

Principle #2 -- Meaningful and responsible choices

Being able to choose to come to Stride Nights was an important aspect of the experiences of the women. The fact that they are not required to attend as part of a program meant that they were able to exercise an option and take something valuable away from the choice they made.

Because all these things that I've done, like when we made those picture book things that you can try, I'm going to go home and I'm going to show my great nieces and nephews that. Like I'm going to go to, what's that place? White Rose? and buy all the stuff and I'm going to show them how to make stuff. Everything that I've learned at Stride, I'm going to teach them when I get out of here. ... because now it's not the nieces and nephews, it's their kids and I want back in the family so this is my in. [Stride has] given me an in to the little kids, right. [1:11]

Other women discovered aspects of themselves that they hadn't realized were there previously:

You know, on the outside I would never have done arts and crafts. I would never have done anything like that. And it's really nice to get hold of, you know, a pen or paint brush and do all the crafts that we do, that I just love. You know it brings out a different side of you that you just, you know, you're there just because of your own will and so you just go and do your own thing. Yeah, I love it. [1:25]

Principle #3 -- Respect and dignity

The words of the women themselves leave little doubt that Stride Night fosters a sense of pride and dignity, which goes hand in hand with the respect that people experience from other women within the facility as well as volunteers from the community.

I always look forward to this day. Women all do because one, it gives us something to do, it's productive, and not only that, when you see your work done, you have dignity and pride . . . And it's not, there's not many events to do here, so we all look forward to [Stride] coming in, very much so. [5:18]

This woman went on to say:

I love it, yeah. So, but not only that, but it's nice because all the women here know that I am artistic. So when they come to me they can ask me for advice and stuff like that, so I can help them. But I enjoy it, so yeah, because you can get some amazing things. And the nice thing is sometimes you can see other women actually, although you [Stride] bring in one thing, they can take that one thing and make other things from it, so it doesn't have to be, you know, everybody has to make the same thing. And it, and also I find that the women look at other people's stuff and that encourages them to do it and be even more creative in what they're doing. [5:18]

Principle #4 -- Supportive environment

People consistently mentioned the value of the support of the community as manifest in the presence of volunteers.

There's a lot of women coming now because they're learning more, they're making friends. You know, and they, seeing is believing eh? That's how I look at it. And a lot of these women are the same way as I am. They have to see it to believe it that people actually care. Volunteers with no dollars. They're coming here on their own on time when they could be out there with their families you know. But there's, they still come in here and give their companionship and they're friendly, you know their caring hearts to the women. And that makes a lot of difference to them. That's why you have more people coming. They tell their friends, "Come out, come on over." I hear them talking all, "You going to Stride? We're making this. Come on." [3:17]

The sense of belonging was important and actually being engaged in a leisure activity with a woman from the community was something that was considered unique to Stride.

The other programs that like I'm involved in is just basically the school and church, I go to a lot of church. This [Stride] is basically I believe the only program that we do crafts and work with the community, people from the community. ... so people from the community come in for church and stuff like that but it's not actually hands-on doing stuff. ... I think it's great getting to communicate with people, people that are still on the outside. It's just more of a feeling of belonging. Like if you can come in and if ladies can come in from the outside and work with us, then we're not that bad people, you know. [2:11]

Principle #5 – Shared responsibility

Stride Night provides an opportunity for an exchange of ideas and development of skills that the women would take home with them on release, and the volunteers and women in GVI recognized the mutual responsibility for the learning that happened in the Stride Night setting.

Because they don't have too much activities and stuff here for women in GVI. And [Stride women] come here and try and help us out when we're having, sometimes a lot of women here have a hard time and the only way that people can deal with it is by coming to Stride Night. I think it's good for us.

Researcher: And in what way is it good?

That we get outside of the house and we meet new people and we learn things for our children. [2:8]

Commenting on the feedback she received from other participants at Stride Night, one woman said:

But when someone can pat you on the back and say, "I'm proud of you," or "It looks good," you get all warm and fuzzy inside. You know, just that little tiny bit of you. And from there, each time it grows and grows and next time to you go to Stride, you actually bring more effort. You know, and each time you bring a little bit more. And when you know what events are happening, you start to pre-plan what you're going to do. You know, like sometimes you have to take a picture in advance or something. [3:1]

Summary comments on Stride Night

The consistency of program delivery is crucial to the success of the initiative. A considerable degree of support for the program comes from the work of students and other Stride Night volunteers who do excellent work in assisting with the facilitation of the program. It is critical that human resources beyond the student contingent be in place on a consistent, ongoing basis to maintain the level of care and quality service to which Stride is committed. This service is extended by CJI to the women in GVI, to the Stride Night volunteers, and to Stride Circles within GVI and Stride Circles in the community.

Over the course of the study, there have been volunteers who could be regarded as “regulars” who added to the consistency of the program. The women seem to come out looking for certain regulars among the volunteers. These volunteers are wonderful in terms of providing support to the program and in connecting with the women. Again, CJI staff support of the work of these volunteers on an ongoing basis is an important aspect of the Stride program.

A critical aspect of Stride Night and its success is the way in which it is simply a night for women, no matter what their status, to come together. When women from GVI and community volunteers are involved, it becomes essentially impossible to tell who is who, except that the volunteers wear a badge with “V” identifier. When people are seated at tables working on crafts, one often cannot see the “V” badge and then the volunteers along with the inmates are simply a group of women working together. Whether it be a craft night or volleyball or a coffee house evening, Stride Night offers *women*, (rather than inmates and volunteers) an opportunity to have an enjoyable evening together. This point is perhaps best captured by one woman who said:

So when Tuesday night comes, it's like an outing, you know, it's, it's a reality check that you are still sane and that, you know, there are real people out in the community and, you know, that you are still human so, in that sense it's a break from the normalcy that goes on. You're now after supper so what do you do for the evening . . . it's just a different bunch of people and the women here are more humane under the same roof, when we're all together [at Stride] it's sort of like a lot of women together. You know, it's not what crime you did or how, what ticked you off today or what have you. Everybody sort of focused on one thing and we work together. You know what I mean? And it's fun. It's fun. I think it's a great asset to GVI for sure. [1:25]

As suggested by the women who attend Stride Night, part of their ability to think beyond the present and beyond the behaviours which lead to their incarceration in the first place relates to the separation of the Stride program from a correctional service. While expressing appreciation for the programs that they do access which are under the jurisdiction of CSC, Stride was considered importantly distinct and separate from the mandatory activities they engage in while serving their sentences. The presence of non-Correctional staff and volunteers was an essential aspect of their participation.

The foregoing comments (part II) have focused on Stride Night and the ways in which the involvement in and experience of Stride Night parallels the guiding principles of *Creating Choices*. These data represent just a very small sample of a much larger data base which supports the preliminary findings regarding the experience of Stride Night for the women in GVI.

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**Summary findings of pilot study --
The work of STRIDE Circles
for federally sentenced women**

The three Circles that have been part of the pilot study were purposely selected by the CJI/STRIDE Coordinator, Jean, to give us something of a cross-section of Circles in terms of the length of time they have been functioning Circles. Participants included the first Circle to be formed out of GVI some four years ago, the second which has existed for approximately two years, and the third for just over one year. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identity. The three Circles are named for the woman who had served her sentence in GVI, as follows:

Circle Crystal (1.4 years)

Members: Crystal, Susan, Judy and Barb

Circle Penny (2 years)

Members: Penny, Eli, Gloria, Jane

Circle Ruth (4 years)

Members: Ruth, Adrienne, Sandy, Janice

In order to be as unobtrusive and non-invasive as possible, the decision was made not to pursue information from the women as to what their crime or how long their sentence had been, unless they voluntarily provided this information. Crystal did not provide information on her crime. She had been incarcerated for six years and she served the full sentence. Penny and Ruth had both been sentenced for substance abuse and related offenses including drug trafficking. For both of these women addictions were central aspects of their lives and presented them with ongoing challenges. Penny and Ruth were released on parole and Ruth, who violated the conditions of her parole, was returned to serve another term of just over one year. Aside from the addiction issues, other extraordinary challenges faced all three women, as will be discussed in the findings below. The findings are presented in accordance with the three major themes that help us understand the experiences of these women and their Circle members—*the crisis of*

leaving the institution, friendship as a site for resistance, and empowerment-in-community.

Findings

The crisis of leaving the institution

The participants talked about both the elation and the fear that accompanied their release. Knowing that their Circle was there for them at that time was particularly important. As Jean, the CJI/STRIDE coordinator described it, the establishment of a Circle well in advance of release is critical in terms of the women's return to the community:

The time in G.V.I. before leaving, especially if the woman's going to another community, again that goes back to bonding, but the more time that the Circle has to get to know the woman and for the woman to get to know her Circle before and then to establish this relationship before she's in the crisis of leaving, the more likely that Circle is to be connected and for something that she actually reaches out to.

This was not consistently the case, but for Crystal, the four members of her Circle were actually able to meet her as she left the prison. Crystal, who had served her full term was not going to a half-way house (which is what she would have been doing had she been on day parole for instance), but instead was headed for 'home'. Both Penny and Ruth had been released on day parole which meant they had to move out of town for a period of time immediately on release since there is no half-way house in the GVI region. The fact that they were out of town and in halfway houses with fairly stringent rules around non-association and in-coming phone calls, meant that they were unable to go out of the house with other residents, and they were virtually cut-off from their Circle members. Ruth's Circle was very new when she was released (they had been connected for just three weeks), but the members were nevertheless entirely committed to supporting her. Her release came almost as a surprise to the Circle members and once they learned that she had gone to the half-way house they tried, without success, to reach her by telephone. She described that experience:

I made a few friends at the halfway house, but I couldn't go out for coffee with them or anything because that was against the rules, I could associate with them in the house, but going out on my own, I couldn't cope with that, it didn't make any logical sense to me. Basically, once you were there on your own. ... My job I worked till 11 o'clock at night, curfew was 11, but by time you cashed out and did all your paperwork, 11:30 you get home about quarter to twelve [past curfew].

Within three weeks of that release Ruth had violated the conditions of her parole and she was returned to the prison.

Crystal's situation was considerably different in that she had the support of her Circle immediately upon release. Where the two situations are similar, however, is that they both met huge challenges, one having to do with the absence of emotional support which was so essential to her ability to cope, and the other, Crystal, having to do with the practicalities of life in the community. These related to the fact that when she left prison she had no health coverage and no money to speak of. She had moved from another province to be placed in GVI and so had no OHIP. She needed medication which she couldn't get without OHIP. Crystal described how this impacted her release:

Well one of the frustrations was over my medication and I had finally run out for two weeks...I'm telling my parole officer "oh hang in there maybe next week I can help you out I can help you I can help you I can help you" ...finally Barb took me to the OHIP and Jean ended up taking me to a clinic...four hours later we got a a prescription... stuff like that is not that's not a joke, and these three women can tell you, I was not in good shape.

Crystal talked at length about her efforts to get employment after release. In GVI she had been active working in administration, specifically finance. Upon release she approached a local public library to see if she might volunteer sorting and stacking books. She was refused because of her record. With no money she could not take a bus, and had to walk her resume around to prospective employers. She did not have suitable shoes and the results of her efforts were entirely demeaning. In the focus group, Circle members reflected on this:

Crystal: If you can't get A BUS TICKET to go to an interview...(laughter)

Judy: Like how many miles do you want me to walk you know. Like you said with the shoes Susan, like you know that her feet were so raw, sort of thing, from the bloody shoes she had...had been promised shoes, by I think it was [xxx community organization] never ever got them and still hasn't got them.

Penny's Circle members were equally vocal about the challenges she faced on release. They were a strong support for her, but societal attitudes and expectations, given that Penny had a record, were particularly difficult to overcome or shift. As one of her Circle members commented:

I don't think the women coming out are forward enough, the women are in there for whatever reason and the amount of money spent in keeping them inside, they are not prepared for coming out. We are a very cold unfeeling society, I'm afraid, but they're

scared too, they're looked as criminals instead of you know people. I could end up inside, why am I so lucky? There must be something inside of you because look what you're doing with yourself. She didn't have a chance in hell

It was evident that in each of these three Circles, there was determination to resist the forces that consistently seemed designed to have the women fail in their efforts to integrate into the community. This resistance was present in all members, and as strong if not stronger in the STRIDE Circle members than in the woman herself. In resisting these forces, however, the collective strength of the group grew more pronounced. Tied to this was a deep sense of commitment to each other, which was embedded in the friendships that had developed among members. These friendships are explored below.

Friendship as a site for resistance

In each of the three Circle discussions the issue of friendship came up as being significant to members. For the women who had come together to form a Circle with the FSW, it was obviously important that the relationship had grown into something well beyond a volunteer activity. This is perhaps not surprising given what we know about the role of friendships as potential sites for power and resistance in women's lives (Green, 1998). But at the same time, it is not necessarily predictable that friendship would evolve out of the Circle structure because friendship is generally associated with serendipitous connections, not intentional relationships such as is the case when Circle members are brought together with a very specific intent, i.e., helping the woman in her transition from prison back to the community. The fact that these friendships have developed may also speak to the matching process that takes place through the CJI/STRIDE coordinator's activity. She knows when people are seeking a Circle, and she knows the Circle members well from the involvement in the fairly intense and extensive STRIDE night volunteer training exercises. Hence, she is able to gauge to some extent likely compatibility of potential Circle members. That said, the friendships that had formed between these women were strong and able to withstand adversity of a sort that most do not have to face, again supporting the proposition that these relationships were sites for resistance.

Speaking of her involvement with Crystal's Circle, Susan said:

Yeah, so that's how I look at this, this is my thing for me my it's it's...sometimes it's relaxation, it's also growth, it's it's a bit of everything...(Judy: yeah)...it's friendship so that's...this is my thing I do for me.

Crystal's comment suggests some caution in the initial stages of the relationship, but illustrates that once the friendship was clear, the determination to work and reach toward a different life on the outside grew stronger:

Gosh...(pause)...I think it was like any friendship it was a little...I mean I was a little hesitant because I didn't know exactly how

much I wanted them to know. Of course you're there so they know you've done something wrong and if they were even interested in that and when that wall got kind of knocked down, it just kind of flourished, from there where nothing was taboo and we just focused on the plan and how I was going to attain some of those goals in that plan.

It was evident in each case that the women had to get used to the idea that somebody cared enough for them to choose to connect with them and seek out involvement in their Circle. The issue of low self-esteem and low self-worth was very prominent for Crystal, Ruth and Penny. Crystal explains how she processed this:

It was just, you know what, these guys are really neat, they really just want to be because of ME, not for anything else or nobody is forcing them to come to see me.

An interesting tentativeness was suggested by some comments from Ruth. Ruth seemed reluctant to assume friendship was present in her relationship with her Circle. This contrasted quite clearly with the views of her Circle members:

Ruth: *Where are we now? When do you get beyond a Circle.*

Adrienne: *I think we're friends*

Sandy: *Yeah, I think we're beyond a Circle now*

Ruth: *So I can stop calling you my girls, like I don't know.*

. . . because I don't know. It would probably change the way I see our relationship, or maybe it's still kinda like institutionalized, you know what I mean . . .

Ruth: *Four years, you think you'd get beyond, but then I didn't know how you guys felt about it. . . it's always been on like a if I could change that over, that we're friends, and maybe I'll be more able to tune in and stuff, and instead of just looking at you like you're a support, that you're there to fix me. [laugh]*

Ruth's initial reticence to view this relationship as friendship was interesting. She seemed to equate their involvement with some sort of institutional structure that was put in place or that developed as part of the institution. As well, she commented that she had had to really come to terms with the fact that these women actually cared about her and accepted her as she was. At the same time, she talked about being in a safe world when she was with her Circle. She wanted her Circle members to stay safe and she expressed concern that if they were friends, they would be potentially exposed to that part of her world that was not safe. In her mind, it was as though becoming friends put you in a different space, and part of her fear seemed to be fear of exposing them to her other world—a world that was not safe and that involved people in conflict with the law, violence, drug associations.

A little later, Adrienne commented,

And like I said I hope that we continue to be friends, and you not think of us as just an institution.

Sandy contrasted her experience as a member of Ruth's Circle with the experience of *volunteer work* and commented that often with volunteering it is treated as work, which spans perhaps a specific period of time with fairly clear expectations about what is going to be involved in that volunteer activity. In contrast she felt that the STRIDE Circle "is about relationships" that are not envisaged to span a particular period of time. Maybe they will be permanent, and this is what distinguishes friendship from merely a volunteer commitment.

Empowerment-in-community

With some very slight variation between these Circles, there was extraordinary consistency in what they reported and what emerged in terms of the significant factors in their return to the community and subsequent life there. A not infrequently voiced perspective on empowerment is that it is something that is given to a person, rather than something that the person develops within and from their own actions and human relationships. As well, empowerment sometimes is discussed in a way to imply that in order for a person to gain power or become empowered, another must give over or lose power. Part of the mandate of STRIDE Circles is to provide support in ways that empower the women. As the relationships between the women who participated in this study deepened and friendships took hold, there was a keen sense of reciprocity and mutuality among the members of the Circle. Adrienne put it this way:

And with Ruth, I've noticed, I think she has amazing strength, she's like me very stubborn, and I'm a very determined person, that a person can succeed in whatever they do, once they make their mind up and have support and guidance. I'm a firm believer in that and I think Ruth's proven that. I think we've all helped each other, like I said, I've gone back and taken courses, that I probably wouldn't have taken if I hadn't gotten involved, right? You know me, I'm always active. I've learned a lot from you, Ruth, and from Sandy as well.

As suggested earlier, Crystal encountered extraordinary obstacles. Without Susan, Judy and Barb she doubted she would have had the strength to continue.

At the OW [Ontario Works] office when I got out I went to apply for OW and I took a friend of ours who works with the John Howard Society and the intake worker was just horrible...He wanted copies of my parole papers, he wanted to know why I wasn't going back home, why I didn't have my daughter, why what was my crime, how did I only get six years, who was I living with da de da de da...just you know 'Do you have any skills?'

and just making flippant comments to the person I took, like you know "people like her" ...people like me what? and ahhh he just felt that I wasn't ...a candidate to receive Ontario Works or Community Start-up... You know the literature clearly stated what a community start-up was--anybody leaving an institution--and I said "How can you tell me I don't fit that criteria? I got out Saturday I'm here Tuesday....so...

Later she added:

I think it's fair to say we were all stressed out to the max. I mean I even felt guilty because I was pulling everybody down yet I just had to tell somebody...I had to get it have somebody to cry with.

Throughout the discussions with the Circle members in the focus groups there was evidence of unconditional acceptance and support for the women. During her focus group, Penny noted that "when the Circle member accepted me I felt the community accepted me". She went on to observe that she in turn feels she is giving something back to the community by going into schools to talk about her life as an addict and to engage children in an educational process that will make the community a better, safer place. One of her Circle members felt this contribution to community was especially valuable in helping to breakdown the preconceptions of female inmates as well as in Penny's reintegration into the community.

As indicated above, Ruth used the occasion of the focus group to explore openly and question whether what her Circle members had was friendship. She also expressed a deep trust and benefit from the understanding these women demonstrated in their involvement with her:

They had seen my mental and emotional growth, like when I was losing my mind, they understood, like nobody else understood, they didn't have a clue what I was going through, where they understood how bad or how well I can be. Like even now, like if I feel I'm just totally out of touch or that I'm losing it, I have them, I can phone them up, they pop in, get together or whatever, it's like a comfort zone. It's just like, I'm not so bad because I can reflect on the past, and they give me pep talks...it's been a lot and even to be where I am today, as emotionally as stable as I am, it's almost a miracle I didn't think I'd ever make it to this point: ... going into the community, they were almost like, um, they were my lifeline, it's like 'cause you're there and the family, whatever, and it's all this crap, nobody understands anything, it just feels that you should go on with your life and everything's okay, well, it's not that easy, right . . .

it's made a big difference . . . I'm facing forward, rather than backwards . . . because where else would I have been able to turn, I didn't have nobody there, you know I would have just walked out and into my old life because I wouldn't have had anything on that side to hold me.

The reciprocity and equality in relationship that characterized these associations was similar to the conditions that exist when empowerment is mutually reinforcing. We have witnessed this in support Circles that exist around persons with disabilities (Pedlar et al., 1999). Where empowerment exists among members, there is a condition that we have described as empowerment-in-community. In other words, empowerment and community hold together and are mutually enhancing and mutually supportive. For the members of the STRIDE Circles, it became a defining characteristic that they gained strength, and in turn power, from each other. As well, the value that they placed on one another and the experiences they shared provided a coherence and collective memory among the group, which is one of the defining characteristics of a community.

Conclusion

The women who were part of this pilot study of STRIDE Circles have in significant ways taken on the work of what might be considered the responsibility of formal support systems within our society. They have no mandate to do that, but ultimately they have no option but to not only advocate but also provide practical assistance to the women as they face the crisis of leaving the institution and seeking reintegration and acceptance in the community. There are minimal resources for these women and as Judy said, the systemic challenges are so enormous that it is almost as if “the punishment continues after release”. The Circles have become the surrogate family in terms of the support more generally associated with family care. They serve, in the words of Ruth, as a life line.

The commitment, not only to the woman who is leaving the institution, but also among the Circle members to each other is also striking. There is a genuine caring and trust that is foundational to such commitment. Examples of this care were evident when members of Ruth's Circle and Penny's Circle became concerned about their wellbeing at different times after not being able to get in touch—in each case, Circle members came together and traveled around the city to find them. Clearly, as Jean, CJI/STRIDE coordinator pointed out, “Circle members must care about one another on an emotional level, otherwise it won't work”. This was in her mind the “biggest single factor” in whether or not a Circle was going to be effective.

Without the involvement of the Circle members in their lives, these women's support systems would be particularly fragile. Through the work of the Circle, however, their situation becomes somewhat more visible than it might otherwise and it is with this visibility that they can collectively work toward improving the woman's prospects of integration into community life. As Crystal observed:

I just think they forget that we are Canadian citizens. I think that's the thing, the organizations and government agencies, just, you know what, you . . . you're no longer kind of a value to society.

The work of the Circle further enabled deconstruction of the oppressive culture of community and the bureaucracy, enabling them to become agents in (re)constructing their own lives. Hence, collectively the women became active agents and not simply passive beings, constrained by structural obstacles, barriers, and forces (Green, 1998, p.172).

A final reflection on the role of friendship in the lives of the women who have been part of this study. Green and others have brought to our attention the relevance of women's friendship as a possible site of power and resistance. The conversations with these women illuminated this potential. The talk, the intimacy, the humour, laughter and tears that were shed in the focus group discussions demonstrated the depth of the relationships. As well, in their friendships they find a place to trust, and determination to redefine self identities that had been reduced to the marginalized stereotype of 'the female offender', particularly if she is a mother—collectively there is space to resist and redefine what has been deemed socially unacceptable behaviour for a woman—motherhood and female offender. In this space, the Circles became expressions of empowerment-in-community and began in the friendship process, reconstructing their identity. Perhaps Susan's comment to Crystal best illustrates this:

I just think you start out this way and have made such a difference...(Judy: yeah)...when you get everything working the way it will be you're going to be an amazing role model you're going to be an amazing community citizen; you're going to be able to meet all those goals that you kept talking about inside...(Judy: yeah)...

References

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