

Winner's 's Circle Peer Support Network

A Personal History

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Due to a growing drug epidemic in the late '80s, Texas Governor Ms. Ann Richards started the Texas treatment initiative in 1991. At the time, there was massive overcrowding in the county jails and prison system in Texas due to their addiction, with many receiving large sentences for possession of a small amount of drugs. It was obvious that these people needed help with their addiction. Governor Richards, a person in long-term recovery, recognized the problem and birthed the Texas treatment initiative to respond to this need. She contracted the Gateway foundation out of Chicago, Illinois to establish prison-based therapeutic community (TC) treatment facilities. She was a great proponent of treatment instead of incarceration, which placed people in community treatment facilities instead of doing time in jail.

At this time, therapeutic communities were peer-driven and person-centered. They focused on the addiction as well as the behaviors that were a result of the addiction. Approximately 80% of those on the counseling staff were in recovery and 90% had been affected by addiction or addiction of a family member. There was genuine care and concern for the person in treatment and the staff understood the value of one peer helping another. Staff also had the ability to learn from each other and maintain the team cohesiveness that benefited the recovering person. As a TC trainer, I learned that early therapeutic communities were founded primarily by peers in recovery from narcotic addiction who did not feel welcome in the AA community in the late fifties and sixties.

The first TC was Synanon, founded by Charles Dederich in 1958. It was operated by peers in recovery. Synanon revolutionized addiction treatment for people in recovery in that it was governed by people that were mirror images of one another, had good insight into one another, and had genuine care and concern for one another. The TC model of treatment was very successful in building self-efficacy and supporting individuals to reach long-term recovery. TCs spread around the country and integrated professionals to help expand and legitimize this approach to treatment.

I personally had two treatment episodes--the first one at the Safari House therapeutic communities in Chicago, Illinois in the early seventies. I was able to remain clean from opiates for two years following this first treatment. However, after continuing to drink alcohol for two years, I began using my drug of choice. Looking back on the experience, there was some success made, but I needed to achieve complete abstinence. After moving to Texas in 1984 and taking

my disease of addiction with me, I was incarcerated for small amounts of drugs. Being on parole, I was constantly violated due to my addiction and on November 28, 1992, I was arrested for parole violation and was sent to the Texas Department of Corrections as a habitual parole violator.

One morning, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice bus came to the county jail in Houston and picked up 100 inmates and dropped us off at the central unit—a Texas prison facility. We all thought we were about to do some major time and have our parole revoked. Nobody on the unit gave us any information for three days. When somebody did talk to us, we were told a treatment unit was opening and that we would be its first clients. After a week, they informed us that they had decided to send 50 men home because filling up the unit at one time would not work. I was selected to go home. However, I wanted to stay. The other 49 men were elated about going home. I requested a meeting with the program director and he sent for me to come to his office. He had read on my request that I wanted treatment and allowed me to be part of the program which lasted six months. I had skills from being in a TC from my first treatment so I was made a department head for the orientation department, teaching the rules and tools of the community. Eventually I became the house coordinator. This treatment episode was different because we worked on more than behaviors. There was substance use disorder education where we learned the disease concept and relapse prevention skills. We attended AA and were able to work the steps if we chose. There was a holistic approach to recovery.

At this time there were new TC programs being birthed across Texas in the criminal justice system. The TC program was a close community. It was suggested that we start a support group and stick together, assisting one another in our recovery. Raymond, my sponsor, was one of the first TC graduates in the Texas treatment initiative. He had graduated from the program eight months before me on a different prison unit. When he graduated, Mr. Robert Shapiro from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Mr. Emmitt Hayes from the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drugs gave him a banner with “Winner’s Circle” on it. They told him the Winner’s Circle is him and what he chooses to do with it. Returning home, Raymond reunited with his brother, Simon, who was now in recovery and a strong member of AA. After sharing each other’s journey, they co-founded the Winner’s Circle peer support network. Simon’s church had a free space and they began to have support groups for the ex-offender population.

What was different about the Winner’s Circle is we utilized tools we learned in the TC community. Many people new in recovery were uncomfortable in traditional Twelve-Step recovery groups. They felt shame and hesitated to share. Many people attending groups would say people from the criminal justice system would only be there to get our meeting sheets signed for our parole or probation officer. This did little to help build self-efficacy. At the Winner’s Circle, you were accepted and could talk about anything. Many people found, after the drugs and alcohol were gone, they still had major living problems. Many of these problems existed long

before their addictions took control of their life. Family problems, co-occurring substance use and mental health problems, housing, employment, and education were all areas of challenge.

I remember one guy came to a meeting and he had got a good job and was abstinent. When he asked his wife to use the car to come to a meeting, she told him, “No.” He was furious and shared this issue at a support group meeting. He also shared that every time he used the car he would be gone for days at a time. The group gave him some feedback, stating maybe it’s time he saved and got his own car and that if we were her, we probably would not let anybody use the car based on her past experience with him. The peer had a light bulb go off in his head and respected his wife’s decision and eventually bought himself a car and appreciated having worked for it.

The Winner’s Circle is a group in which you can put anything on the floor and receive feedback or you can just vent if that is what you choose. Although there is a topic at the meetings you don’t have to stick to the topic especially if something is bothering you. Many people at the Winner’s Circle work a Twelve-Step program and participate in peer support. Winner’s Circle peer support network is a vehicle which peers can share in a meeting and get suggestions for housing, employment, training, and other supports that can be of benefit in early recovery. I have had many peers share they were looking for employment and I was able to get them hired at the construction site where I worked. People in recovery make the best workers. Most people in recovery that were hired at my site came to work on time and did not take off. We shined and eventually were the biggest population hired. In my own case, I was looking for a nice apartment and after paying three application fees and being turned down because I had a criminal record, I shared my struggles with this issue in a meeting and one of my peers shared with me about her apartment and how the landlord gave her a chance. Being able to get an apartment there, soon we had several recovering people staying there doing well and proving to be model tenants. The power of peer recovery is so awesome and very strength-based.

I joined the Winner’s Circle around January 1994 at a time the group had been meeting for about eight months. Raymond and Simon had people from TC programs around Texas beginning to come home and attend the meetings. After my first Winner’s Circle meeting, I knew I was at home because I felt comfortable and was able to talk to people. The Texas Department of Corrections referred people to Winner’s Circle. However, it was not mandatory that they attend. Many people attended Twelve-Step meetings to meet their requirements with parole and probation. Winner’s Circle grew very fast so we had to move from the place we were meeting to a bigger facility. Raymond, with his peer support knowledge, and Simon, as a great recovery speaker, exerted a huge influence on people in recovery.

The Winner’s Circle was peer-driven and peer-supported. Raymond had taken the banner and successfully created a vehicle for peers in recovery coming out of the criminal justice system. We created a structure at the Winner’s Circle: a president, vice president, treasurer, and hospitality roles. We had a men’s structure and a women’s structure. I was the vice president of

the men's structure. The peers in the structure basically ran the group and put on functions and fundraisers. We were peers supported by our own contributions. There was technical support from Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Ms. Madeline Ortiz, who is the Director for Programs in the prison system, allowed us to come back in the prisons and chair Winner's Circle meetings. She made provisions that someone who had been out for two years could bring someone inside the prison with at least six months sobriety to participate in meetings. After two years of its inception, the Winner's Circle began to go back to the prison units to conduct meetings in TC programs. That's how the Inner Circle and recovery rallies in prison began in facilities across Texas.

There was a unit I would go to once per week and facilitate a meeting. Mr. Philander Moore, who is with the Department of Health Services today and currently oversees the State's recovery-oriented systems of care (ROSC) initiative, also provided technical support for Winner's Circle. A certification was created called, "Criminal Justice Peer Intern," where peers in the program could get the certification after attending 100 hours of class toward their counselors' license. Raymond Davis was the first peer intern in the state. I received a peer internship in 1995 and eventually continued to become a licensed chemical dependency counselor in 1998.

By 1996, there were other Winner's Circle groups starting up around Texas in Dallas, Tyler, Port Arthur, and other cities. Houston Winner's Circle is known as the mother ship for Winner's Circle. Simon served as chairman of all the Winner's Circle groups until 1999. His motivational speaking made him a strong advocate for the peer support community. Today there are twenty Winner's Circle groups around Texas and they have Inner Circle meetings in many of the prison units. Eventually I became president of the Winner's Circle and then Administrative Director. We traveled around the state assisting other groups and building a strong social network for peers in recovery in Houston. Each Winner's Circle was responsible for holding rallies for the groups back inside the prison treatment facilities and units.

Our meetings had standing room only and we had a strong family component. There were family members getting in recovery and also family members being supportive of recovery and participating in the Winner's Circle. After returning several times, Steve Shapiro was very pleased with the growth and sustainability of the Winner's Circle groups. Emmitt Hayes, who was the Director for Youth Probation, and Philander Moore, who was with the Texas Department of Health Services, both were pleased and supportive of the progress being made. We also had the backing of Mike Giniger of the Gateway Foundation, along with Madeline Ortiz from the Texas Department of Corrections. Mr. Shapiro met with me and Simon, informing us of the Winner's s community and how he wanted to model the Winner's Circle groups around the country. Hollywood Henderson, the ex-pro football player and some other prominent people in recovery were with him. Simon walked out of the meeting because he believed that Winner's Circle was being exploited for money, and he did not want any part of it. Raymond often sent me

and Simon to represent Winner's Circle and he focused on the Home group. He was alright with Simon's decision.

I was following the leadership of Simon and Raymond and never thought twice about the decision. Today I have mixed feelings. Money has a tendency to change things, and I think the purity and fidelity of the group could have been tarnished. However, it takes money to function and we made it strictly on fundraisers and passing the basket. Because of the numbers of participants, each group was able to survive.

Today the Winner's Circle groups in Texas lack the ability to keep up because everyone, including Peers in Recovery, is getting paid. This has many people into peer support for the income, but most Winner's Circle peers are involved for their recovery. I believe this is what makes this group so unique. Those that become members end up in the maintenance stage of their recovery and freely give their recovery away to keep it.

In 1996, Houston Winner's Circle became involved in recovery housing as part of the recovery peer support services we provided. The housing need was more than the funding we had to provide beds. Also in 1996, the Winner's s Community was formed. Winner's Circle groups across the country were formed and modeled after the Houston Winner's Circle. The first group was from Baltimore. They received a grant from SAMHSA. We had peers from our group visit them and they came to visit us to learn how we operated Winner's Circles in Texas. This first group ended up mismanaging their money and was dismantled. They failed to follow any directions from Winner's Circle. The second Winner's Circle group was formed in Chicago, Illinois. Leo Hayden, a former pro football player, and Jerome started a group that was modeled after the Texas group. At the time, both of these guys worked for an organization called TASC. They were instrumental in keeping the fidelity of Winner's Circle and making sure it was peer driven. They also had a grant, but the money did not interfere with the peer network they built.

There were also groups that received a grant and began a Winner's Circle in Ohio. They also kept the fidelity of the group and followed the format of the Texas Winner's Circle. These three states—Texas, Illinois, and Ohio--made up the original Winner's Community. We had a convention in Houston in 2004 and all the Winner's Circle groups around the country were there participating and networking with one another. Although each Winner's Circle may have a different style, the basic concept and fidelity of being peer-driven was the same. It was awesome for all of us to come together. Today, the Winner's Circle is still around in Chicago. However, when the Ohio group lost its funding, they disbanded.

In 1998, Simon Bartie, the co-founder of Winner's Circle, moved out of state, leaving Raymond Davis, the founder, to oversee the groups. Although all the groups wanted him to take over as chairman, he nominated me to fill Simon's position and Raymond remained as the Executive Director of the Houston group providing housing and recovery supports to the community. At this time there were Winner's Circle groups popping up in cities all around Texas

and in the prison units. The Houston group had more peers than room. They had meetings seven days a week; some days had meetings twice a day. Houston Winner's Circle also had a strong family component which allowed families to re-unite, and often had many family members to enter recovery based on how well their family members were doing,

Modeling recovery has proven to be one of the most effective tools in peer-driven recovery. Dillon served as chairman over the Winner's Circles of Texas for eight years and was very active as the Administrative Director of the Houston group. Raymond Davis, the Executive Director of Winner's Circle, also served as Administrative Director for a huge transitional treatment facility in Houston named New Directions, The positions served at the Winner's Circle are volunteer, with all revenue going towards paying the bills of the Winner's Circle building. At this time, the Chicago Winner's Circle was also flourishing. In 2006, Bobby Wheeler was named the new chairman of the Winner's Circles of Texas and is currently serving in this position. Dillon West became the Program Director of a treatment facility in the state jail system. Raymond Davis continues to work for an outpatient treatment facility, and Leo Hayden is Director of a Criminal Justice Treatment in New Orleans. Due to lack of funding, the Winner's Circle groups are not advancing at present to keep up with the need for such groups. It is still serving the ex-offender population in Houston, where Raymond Davis continues to run groups in two Houston locations and is involved in three new locations held in recovery community organizations.

The Winner's Circle groups visited CCAR in 2008 with Steve Shapiro. I was very impressed with their model and returned and enrolled in the recovery coach Training of Trainers and became one of the first coaches in Texas. Raymond Davis made sure that people in the Winner's Circle groups were trained, and now we have recovery support specialists among us. Leo Hayden came to Texas and received the training to help his population. I then became a state trainer and trained groups to train others in this new skill. Many of us were doing this work before but did not have a name for it. I later opened The Center for Recovery and Wellness Resources in Houston, which has two locations that have Winner's Circle groups meeting in them. There is another recovery center, Unlimited Visions, which Ian Gage, a member of Winner's Circle, coordinates. Mr. Davis participated in these three groups also.

We are working to re-ignite the fire of Winner's Circle and build leaders to carry it on. There are some lessons learned from our experience, and it's our hope we can utilize those lessons to maximize a worthy initiative. Because of the Winner's Circle, each member involved became productive members in society. Those who stay with the Winner's Circle have been blessed with a great life in long-term recovery.

For additional information on the Winner's Circle Community, see the following Links:

<http://www.houstonWinner'scircle.org/>

<http://www2.centerforhealthandjustice.org/sites/www2.centerforhealthandjustice.org/files/publications/Winner's%20Circle%20flyer-61713.pdf>

http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/announcements/2009_vol_gov_awards/announce_2009_Gov_CJ_VS_A_Winner's_s_Circle.html