

You Don't Have to Be a Zillionaire to be a Philanthropist

"Giving Circles" are a great way to have a positive impact on your community.

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No longer shocked by her comedian daughter's antics, Maggie Griffin is comfortable in her role as a Hollywood mom.

Denise Wheeler does not have a charmed life. She's a single parent with a fifteen-year-old daughter and a sixteen-year-old son, and a dual diagnosis of breast cancer and HIV. She gets chemo every three weeks, and is on disability for a recent hip operation. "I didn't have money for food, or for my phone, electric and gas bill to keep my service on," said Wheeler.

She has no credit, no relatives and no friends to turn to for financial help, except one: Womenade.

Washington Womenade is a group of women friends in Washington, DC, who get together once or twice a year for a large potluck dinner to raise money for others in need in their community.

"Womenade has literally kept us from sitting in the dark. They have been our blessing, our answer to the question: 'Oh my God, what am I going to do now?'" Wheelers says.

Washington Womenade was born in January, 2001, when six friends got together for dinner on a wintry night in a deserted restaurant.

Amy Kossoff, a doctor for the poor and the homeless, was venting to her friends that her patients often spoke with her about critical needs they could not meet, which required relatively small amounts of money. Kossoff said she was providing \$10,000 of her own money each year to pay for patients' groceries, medicines, security deposits and even metro cards to help recently unemployed people get to their new jobs, but she needed more support.

Kossoff's girlfriend, Lisa Herrick, a clinical psychologist, had been hosting large potlucks for her girlfriends for years. With a smile of mutual understanding between six women around a table in a Washington, DC, restaurant, Womenade was started. Herrick's potlucks would help women raise money for women. She even came up with a name and a motto in a dream: "With Lemons Make Lemonade—With Women Make Womenade."

Growing Philanthropists

There is a new and exciting movement to grow the number of philanthropists and you don't have to be a zillionaire to do it, thanks to a new philanthropic trend called giving circles. Giving circles, like Womenade, are similar to investment circles, but with a social bent. People get together to pool their individual donations for charities in order to have a greater impact on community problems. Giving circles enable participants to learn more about issues like education and mental health, and make collective funding decisions based on what they learn and the priorities they choose. Members become more involved in the giving process than just writing a check to a favorite charity, and they have fun in the process. Many members volunteer at nonprofits that receive their donations.

Giving circles aren't small potatoes in the philanthropic world. A national study, just released by New Ventures in Philanthropy, a program of the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, showed that giving circles have exploded from 200 to 400 in only the last two years, and have raised \$100 million to support diverse charitable causes.

For example, the Giving Back Gang in Shaker Heights, Ohio, is comprised of couples 50 and over who primarily focus on local environmental issues. Dining With Women is a giving circle, started in Greenville, South Carolina, that provides international support to women and children in developing countries, and now has over 100 chapters.

Giving circles tend to attract more women than men, with more than half (57%) of giving circles being women-only or mostly female; however, the number of men participating in giving circles is growing rapidly. There are all types, shapes and sizes of giving circles ranging from a handful of neighbors hosting "parties with a purpose" to some as large as 400 members who create a new nonprofit organization to facilitate the giving circle's activities.

Washington Womenade has 75 to 80 people attend each potluck. They bring food and friends, and new people come each time. "It's a revolving guest list and you don't have to be a member; you just come to the party," said Herrick. Womenade raised \$3,500 at their first potluck and doubled it at their second

potluck. They tend to raise \$6,000 to \$7,000 at each potluck. Every dollar raised goes directly to people in need, and Washington Womenade has inspired the creation of 42 other chapters throughout the United States.

“When it started it was a no-brainer. It was so concrete. It was so satisfying. It’s really easy and fun and doesn’t require any bureaucracy. Our mission is simple: to enjoy our women friends in wonderful, warm and lively parties, while bringing money from those who have, to some who have not,” said Herrick.

The money that Womenade gave to Denise Wheeler was a modest donation which created a proportionally larger impact. Once Wheeler gets back on her feet, she wants to go back to school to become an HIV counselor. I guess that’s why they call it a giving circle.

Click on the following links for more information about giving circles:

[Washington Womenade](#)

[New Ventures in Philanthropy](#)

[The Giving Circle Network](#)

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