

The Joy of Philanthropy

My Giving Circle Friends and I Find That You Don't Have to Be Oprah to Make a Difference

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In the past two years, I have become a philanthropist.

I used to associate that word with Oprah Winfrey or Bill Gates. But you can be a philanthropist, too. It isn't difficult. I did it by joining two dozen black women who had formed the African American Women's Giving Circle.

We are lawyers, college professors, nonprofit administrators, consultants and business owners who committed to donating \$5,000 over two years to the circle. That's a pool of about \$60,000 per year. It's not Oprah- or Gates-like money, but it can make a difference. It's certainly made a difference in my life, by reminding me of my good fortune and allowing me to respond, with my Giving Circle sisters, to some of this city's enormous problems, particularly those confronting women and girls.

In the summer of 2004, a friend invited me to join the circle, which is sponsored by the Washington Area Women's Foundation. The timing was perfect. My son had recently graduated from college, and I had extra money that I could use to help women and children.

Before I joined the circle, I had managed to write relatively small checks to my church, to schools I am affiliated with and to nonprofits whose missions moved me.

The circle has encouraged me to do more. We didn't start by just handing out money. Over many months, the two dozen of us met to plan our giving for 2006. We gathered in homes, in offices or sometimes at a restaurant one of us owned, not unlike a book group or an investment club. It was important for us to come together as a group and to hear the ideas of each woman. We worked by consensus and were concerned about the relationships we built with one another.

We were committed to connecting with black women and girls in our community struggling to make it. *You cannot turn your heads from the need*, we tell ourselves. *As black women, we are so linked emotionally.*

We decided to focus on nonprofit organizations working to effect change in one community and stay in the work for the long haul. We interviewed representatives of nonprofits to find the right fit. We'll do the same thing again this year.

In the end, last year we decided to give most our money to Facilitating Leadership in Youth, which works with about 40 young people living in the Barry Farm public housing community in Southeast. Our grant supports FLY's new mentoring program for girls, helping them build positive relationships with adults. Many of the girls are being raised by single mothers. Helping moms and kids is precious to me, as I am a single parent myself.

We donated a large portion of the money, \$25,000, to FLY. That dwarfs the \$50 or \$100 checks any one of us might have written in the past. We have found great joy in the philanthropic experience. We're hardly alone. According to a study by New Ventures in Philanthropy, there are more than 220 giving circles around the country, and they have donated more than \$44 million since 2000.

That's still not Oprah or Gates money, but it's a dramatic statement about the desire of people to help their communities. The African American Women's Giving Circle has taught me that giving generously is the most empowering act of all.

-- Claudia Thorne

Cheverly

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