



Peggy Tyus, left, Claudia Thorne, Dionne Tyus and Vivian Rouson at a meeting of the African American Women's Giving Circle, which was formed two years ago. The group awards grants, mostly for health-care programs in Southeast Washington. "We just tap into the souls of each and every woman present as sisters," says Thorne, a co-chair.

A Circle With a Deep Center

Black Women Pool Resources in Grass-Roots Effort to Alleviate D.C.'s Social Ills

By PHILIP RUCKER
Washington Post Staff Writer

About two dozen women, in bright summer dresses and bare feet, formed a circle around Claudia Thorne's dining table and held hands. They were there to enjoy fellowship and to feast on Thorne's signature salmon, curried shrimp salad and mango ginger ale.

The women of varied ages and backgrounds make up a sisterhood of philanthropy working to change the lives of the District's women and girls by confronting the city's social ills. On a recent Sunday, they gathered to give back.

As members of the African American Women's Giving Circle, they pool their charitable dollars, debate their passions and award grants. Like a book club, they meet monthly -- at their homes, in offices and even during yoga classes held in parks.

"We just tap into the souls of each and every woman present as sisters," said Thorne, 54, who runs a nonprofit social services agency and co-chairs the giving circle. "To have 25 African American women -- strong, professional, independent, opinionated -- come together and move as one has been a wonderful process."

Some members are lawyers, consultants and business owners. One recently lost her job as a real estate loan counselor, yet she still gives. Most contribute \$2,500 a year; some give as much as \$10,000, and others as

little as \$1,000. Together, they share a voice in championing their causes.

"I'm not a wealthy woman, but all of us together are wealthy," Nadia Mitchem, 31, a development professional in the District, told her circle sisters. "You go into a museum and you see a plaque on the wall and you see a '\$100,000 Club.' You know what? We can do that."

The women chanted back, "Yes, we can." The circle, founded in 2006 and administered by the Washington Area Women's Foundation, represents a grass-roots phenomenon in philanthropy. Across the country, from Idaho to Manhattan, hundreds of giving circles have formed in recent years.

The informal groups -- some of which are composed entirely of blacks, Asian Americans or Latinos -- are a powerful force in charitable giving. Collectively, giving circles award tens of millions of dollars a year to community-based causes, according to the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers.

This month, the members of the African American Women's Giving Circle squeezed into the living room of Thorne's Cheverly home. They shared stories and laughed. They also described what the circle means to them.

"Through the grace of God, I have been pros-

See GIVING, A9, Col. 1

From Page One

Giving Circle Widens Philanthropy's Reach

perous, and I can give a helping hand," Thorne said. "I've never thought of myself as a philanthropist. But now, I know there's Bill Gates, there's Oprah -- and there's Claudia.

"I am a philanthropist."

When Thorne and her "sisters" founded the circle two years ago, they were strangers. They were from poor, urban neighborhoods and rich suburbs, coming together with different passions: improving education, expanding access to health care, eliminating poverty.

"Through our regular meetings and the fellowship that we shared -- getting to know each other, eating together, making decisions together -- we came to trust each other," said co-chairwoman Paige Cottingham-Streater, 47, a lawyer who lives in the District.

The women have elected to focus most of their energies on health-care programs in Southeast Washington. Their biggest grant to date went to Satira S. Streeter, who at the time was the District's only licensed psychologist east of the Anacostia River.

In 2004, Streeter founded Ascensions Community Services, a nonprofit organization that provides therapy to needy residents, which she operated out of her home in Ward 7. The giving circle's \$50,000 grant helped her add two therapists and open a clinic near the Anacostia Metro Station. The grant also allowed her to start drawing a salary.

Ascensions offers programs for single mothers, and it also helps victims of gang violence, rape and drug abuse as well as people with low self-esteem, anger issues and broken relationships.

"These are the roots of all of the problems that bring Anacostia so much negative attention," Streeter said.

"The women's giving circle has helped us focus on this. Not only are these women giving us money, but they've said, 'Hey, how can we be helpful to you?' They said they'd be available to come and speak to the girls. One woman offered to teach yoga to the mothers I work with."

Variations of giving circles have spanned generations and geography, starting decades ago in African villages, said Christine Grumm, executive director of the Women's Funding Network. Their popularity has risen not only because of growing wealth in some households, but also because of a desire, particularly among women, to become more involved in their communities.

Giving circles help engage people who are not active in philanthropy, said Phyllis R. Caldwell, president of the Washington Area Women's Foundation.

THURSDAY, JULY 31, 2008 A9



BY SARAH L. VOISIN — THE WASHINGTON POST

Tracey McNeill of the African American charity. Giving circles have become a powerful force in philanthropy.

"As their income and assets grow so that they can give more, they are more educated about the needs of the community in which they live, and they can become better givers," Caldwell said.

It would have been easy for the African American Women's Giving Circle to cut a check to Ascensions or its charity of choice. But the giving circle is about more than donating money. It's about creating a sorority.

Tracey McNeill is a new recruit. When she arrived at Thorne's house for her first meeting, the 39-year-old lawyer said she wanted to get more involved in philanthropy but did not know whether the giving circle was the right vehicle. Two hours later, she signed up.

"I was really impressed, not only by the fact that they were willing to make such significant financial commitments, but also just by the down-to-earth nature of the women there," said McNeill, who lives in Prince William County.

"There is an old saying, that sticks together tied in a bundle are much stronger than one stick alone," she said. "Being able to take my little stick and combine it with all of theirs is a much more effective way of giving."

As the meeting at Thorne's house ended, the women again stood and joined hands in a circle. Each sang a line from a song that reminded them of the circle.

"Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends," one said. "I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman," another said. Then, together, they all sang a McFadden & Whitehead classic.

"Ain't no stoppin' us now,

"We're on the move.

"Ain't no stoppin' us now."