

# Get Off the Couch: Local giving circle helps those in need

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November 19, 2009 Ever since hearing about giving circles, Anne Sudduth had it in the back of her mind that she would like to start one.

"For years I had saved an article I had read about giving circles," she said. "I always thought, 'Someday I'll do this.'"

And do it she has.

Since creating the Seacoast Women's Giving Circle three years ago with 12 women, the group has grown to 60 members from all around the region.

Women who, in the tradition of giving circles, have pooled their charitable donations, their resources and their talents to give to organizations in need in the local Seacoast communities.



Erika Taylor, left, and Margaret Witham, right, of the Seacoast Women's Giving Circle, get the pillows ready for residents who soon will be staying at the new Cross Roads House Shelter. By Rachel M. Collins

"You live in a community but you don't always know what the salient issues are," said giving circle member Erika Taylor. "This way you learn about it and then you do something about it. It's so simple but it's so meaningful."

That is because the Giving Circle is built upon a "three-pronged approach" — learn, give and then act.

First members on the LEARN committee research the issues through reading materials, hosting guest speakers and discussing topics at monthly meetings. Then they identify a specific, critical social cause on which they'd like to focus and finally, after reviewing proposals from local organizations, they select one nonprofit to receive the Giving Circle's annual gift.

For example, in 2009 their target for investment was "preventing risky behavior among teens ages 11 through 18," while in previous years they had tackled the environment and affordable housing and homelessness.

But charitable contributions are only a part of the Giving Circle's objective.

Volunteer projects are another major focus of the group, which includes women from all around the New Hampshire and Maine Seacoast region.

Throughout the last year, members served 10 meals to their neighbors at Cross Roads House and Seacoast Interfaith Hospitality Network. They also collaborated with **The Housing Partnership** and Fair Tide to sponsor a holiday drive for 13 families living in affordable housing, collected goods for troops serving overseas, celebrated Earth Day by reclaiming park land and helped the New Outlook Teen Center clean and organize its basement.

Just last week, members also spent two days helping the Cross Roads House Shelter move into its new quarters.

"There are a lot of opportunities to be involved," said Mariela Ciani. "You find yourself joining the group to donate some money and do a little good, but then you realize how much potential there is as you recognize all of these great causes."

In fact, Ciani, a stay-at-home mother with three small children, who said she initially signed on for the Giving Circle because it would offer her some "intellectual stimulation," has made giving a family affair.

"It's allowing my entire family to participate more in the community," said Ciani, who has had her children — ages 7, 5 and 2 — not only help with beach cleanups but assist in preparing meals at home for Cross Roads. "They understand that there are families in the community that are in need."

And it is through giving circles like ones cropping up here and all around the country, that more than an estimated 12,000 Americans have funneled in excess of \$100 million into communities.

"I wanted to know more about the community and develop relationships with other women in the community who wanted to use their skills to make a difference," said Sudduth, who started up the local group when she moved to Portsmouth at the same time she decided to take time off from her career after having a baby. "It turned out a lot of people had a similar desire. Many who had lived here a long time said before this they didn't feel like citizens so much as residents."

Though the Seacoast Giving Circle limits the number of "active" members to 30 — those who attend monthly meetings, pay annual dues and vote on issues — any woman can sign on to be a "backer" — designed for those who would like less of a time commitment or more flexibility. The third category of membership is the alumna, available to anyone who has been an active member for at least a year.

Each member is required to give a minimum \$200 donation toward the pooled annual charitable contribution and all members are encouraged to help out with any of the Giving Circle's volunteer projects.

"It's so powerful," Taylor said. "It's amazing what can happen when a community gets together."

Certainly the 60 women who are part of the Seacoast Giving Circle know.

To find out more about the Seacoast Women's Giving Circle, visit [www.seacoastwomensgiving.org](http://www.seacoastwomensgiving.org) or e-mail [info@seacoastwomensgiving.org](mailto:info@seacoastwomensgiving.org). If you have an idea for a good profile for "Get off the Couch," e-mail [Rcollinsme@aol.com](mailto:Rcollinsme@aol.com).