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HAPPY NEW YEAR



Doreen Dodgen-Magee (right) with Latrice (a resident of PBMR's Sankofa Home – transformational living initiative for women and children)

The Power of Human Connection Reaches Beyond

by Dr. Doreen Dodgen-Magee, a friend of PBMR

In March of 2020, as the world was shutting down due to COVID-19, I received a call from Sr. Donna Liette. We had met four years earlier when I had sought her out on a trip to Chicago. So many of the mothers I had met doing gun violence prevention work had talked about her as being the person who changed everything for them after losing a child to a gun or the prison system. We hadn't spoken in a while, so when the phone flashed her name, I answered excitedly.

Sr. Donna, however, was not excited. She was heart-heavy and concerned. How would she be able to support the mothers, grandmothers, and other women when everyone was shut up at home? How would they weather this frightening time without the help and resources that their Mother's Healing Circles provide?

Healing circles, for this community, are a lifeline. Many who sit within them refer to them as "therapy I don't have to pay for." For sixty minutes, the circle creates a space where everyone is radically welcome, exactly as they are, to offer what they have and take what they need from a group of others who can uniquely understand their struggles. However, these places required physical presence and shared space, two things that the pandemic rendered unavailable.

As Donna shared stories about the women I'd met in circle a few years earlier, I began to imagine what their experience during quarantine might be like. Cramped quarters with children and grandchildren now confined to home all day. Loss of access to social services and places like PBMR that provided them with emotional and physical support. My heart, knit to Donna's, felt heavy. As we bore witness to the reality of

these women, it became imperative that we find a way to offer them space within their precious circles.

Zoom became our answer. Would it work, we wondered? Could we create a safe and emotionally powerful space in a digital platform? Would the lack of reliable internet and digital devices make it too difficult for people to join, adding discouragement to injury? We weren't sure, but we decided to try.

Our first circle was so powerful that the women asked for weekly circles, and every single time we were gob-smacked by the synergy and love that found us. Sometimes it took people half the time just to get into the Zoom session, but even then they would cheer at having "made it."

Early on a mother shared through angry clenched teeth and sad guttural sobs that her incarcerated son had died of COVID in prison. Other weeks women spoke of the reality of being front line workers in a world where not everyone respected them, wore masks, or offered kindness. Over time, people made their way into the calls with no help at all and the bonds became thick and the circle wide. Some women dressed up every week, donning incredible hats, lipstick, and showing off home-done manicures. Others called in from bed. Everyone was welcome just as they were, and we became a sisterhood sitting together through an unbelievable time. These women became my teachers; their wisdom and tenacity are astounding.

Eventually we dropped to meeting every other week and then every month, but we continued meeting all the way through the pandemic. As the world began to open up in the summer of 2021 I told the group that as soon as it was safe to travel, my first trip (from my home in Portland, Oregon) would be to the first in-person circle in Chicago. I longed to meet these important teachers of mine in person. Then last month it finally happened.

As the mothers trickled into the space, my heart began to pound. When the mother who had lost her son to COVID early on arrived, my tears began to flow. While we had never been together in person, I had felt her agony over her son's death and the resulting rift in her family with real intensity for months. We hugged,



Doreen Dodgen-Magee, Latrice, and Sr. Donna Liette, c.p.p.s.

stepped back, and looked at each other, then hugged some more. She told me how she's found healing in the last few months, how she became a circle keeper herself, and how she sees ways in which her family was in danger of horrifically falling out after her son's death. She shared that as a result of the training and ensuing insights, she had worked diligently and intentionally to address these wounds and make efforts to bring her family back together. She shared that they'd be having their first Thanksgiving together in years, then told me all the details of who was bringing what. We shared like we'd known each other for a thousand years and shared recipes regularly.

The power of human connection cannot be taken for granted. When image bearers (and who isn't one?!) come together intending to support and care for each other, not even thousands of miles or undependable internet can keep it from happening. While the costs of the pandemic were many, the mothers from PBMR found silver linings every week, then offered them to each other as they relished in the goodness of giving love, hope, peace, and every so often an incredible gospel song, to the sisters they found in a checkerboard of faces on screens of all sizes.

Doreen Dodgen-Magee lives and works as a Clinical Therapist in Portland, Oregon. She is a committed friend and supporter of PBMR. ♣