



# Together We Give

**In today's world where individual giving often means writing a check, giving circles offer a more participatory form of grantmaking.**

The world is changing quickly, and philanthropy—its practices, its goals, and its participants—are changing to meet it. In this new climate, a broader array of people, not just those with individual wealth, are finding ways to be involved in philanthropic activities. Giving circles stand as an entry point for people looking to participate who may not have had a vehicle to do so previously in the way that they might like on an individual level. These groups provide a platform for broader impact by combining the resources of their members and are also a space for strengthening and

building community. “Giving circles are for people who want to be hands on, who want to be actively part of making the decision and who may feel that they don’t have enough personal resources to do it all by themselves,” explains Luci Dabney, executive director of Program to Aid Citizen Enterprise and member of Sankofa Fund of Southwestern Pennsylvania. Sankofa, a giving circle that dedicates their contributions toward initiatives that transform African American communities in the region, was started in 2006 after members learned that individual giving in their community wasn’t

strong. These individuals had a desire to contribute to change, and so gave from their personal funds to create a shared pool of resources from which they could give grants to community organizations.

“One of the benefits of giving circles,” Mark Lewis, president and CEO of POISE Foundation and Sankofa member, notes, “is that they can pretty much define themselves.” This means that people from a variety of lived experiences can join together under whatever unifying characteristic feels most appropriate. For some, geography is the coalescer, for others, a shared passion for an issue area. As Mark explains it, “the beauty and flexibility of a giving circle is that you can have ten giving circles in a geographic location and they can all focus on different things.”

While many giving circles pool monetary resources of members, Mark is quick to mention that it isn’t just about the money. “The other aspect of the giving circle is not just the treasure piece, but your time and talent.” He advocates for really taking the time to look within the community and determine what the relevant issue areas are, then acting in whatever way best addresses those issues. This could be writing a check, but could also manifest as a volunteer or advisory role.

At the beginning, Sankofa spent a lot of time organizing the circle in a manner reminiscent of more traditional philanthropy. The members defined their structure and practices, and they sent requests for proposals out into the community. Essentially, they functioned as a traditional foundation would. One day, however, a member brought an initiative to the table for consideration they had

discovered through social media, but had not surfaced in the proposal gathering process. Sankofa participants realized then that they were missing something by modeling themselves to mirror the approach taken by many foundations in the area. “In Pittsburgh, there are a lot of grassroots organizations or initiatives that are not on the radar of institutional philanthropy and that we thought were very worthy in the community,” Mark notes. Sankofa decided to leave the more formal process of traditional grantmaking behind so it could most effectively support these types of efforts.

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Giving circles allow their members to feel the power of their collective giving and, since the donors are the participants (who function as “staff”) and also the board, are able to act more quickly than many foundations. Because of this, Mark believes that giving circles shouldn’t “try to imitate formal philanthropy, especially if you have formal philanthropy in your community.”



The founding members of Sankofa Fund of Southwestern Pennsylvania, a giving circle dedicated to making “contributions that transform African American communities in Southwestern Pennsylvania.”

Giving circles can fill a different role, a more flexible role, and as Mark says, “depending on what’s happening on a given geographic area, they have the flexibility to morph to be most productive in that area.” Essentially, they are able to react to community needs “in a much quicker way than institutions can.”

For example, when a low income housing area was in crisis and many residents were facing eviction, Sankofa was able to turn around \$5,000 of funding in a matter of days for a nonprofit heavily involved in protecting those tenants. “For us the benefit was not looking like an institution,” Mark explains. “Chances are this crisis was so small and off the radar of our bigger foundations that funding would not have been provided or wouldn’t have been as quick to be granted.” Mark sees “giving circle[s] and institutional philanthropy as two different vehicles to connect and provide funding and assistance to the community,” each with their own part to play.

Mark has taken learnings from the giving circle model back to the POISE Foundation. Giving circles, at least in Sankofa’s case, work closely with members of the community, investing their time and energy, as well as their money, to develop relationships with what Mark calls, the “in users”—also known as the members of the community. He notices that formal philanthropy tends to interact more with just the nonprofit community and is inspired by the giving circle experience to “really begin to develop stronger relationships with the community itself through the foundation.”

As for the influence of formal philanthropy on giving circles, Mark says he thinks that giving circles are made stronger when “there is less

formal philanthropic experience” present within the circle. At the outset, Sankofa had several members who were involved in formal philanthropy. Mark believes, however, that when the membership is more diverse in their philanthropic experience, the circle might be able to have a broader understanding of organizations that are doing important work, but aren’t noticed by formal philanthropy. This also might allow them to leave behind the “processes” of traditional philanthropy for a

## TO GIVE HERE, OR NOT TO GIVE HERE? THAT IS THE QUESTION...

Giving circles don’t always direct their attention and resources to their own geographic location. While it is possible to focus outside of members’ home region, doing so requires more background research to truly get a grasp on what is happening in the target community, what the needs are, and what the function of formal philanthropy is. Mark notes that it would be much harder to invest the time and talent aspect if a giving circle wasn’t stationed in its target community and says that, while possible if one really “spends time in that community learning what the specific issues are and learning where you can focus your resources the best,” most likely the strongest giving circles are “those where you have individuals who are on the ground in that geographic location.”

more “grassroots view of how to help causes and issues happening in their community.” Although some Sankofa members work in formal philanthropy, this ratio is changing as a result of their community involvement. One grant they made, to Love Front Porch Project, resulted in the project’s founder giving back to the giving circle. Mark says that she is in the process of becoming a member.

Participating in a giving circle also has personal benefit that spills into professional work. “We are becoming, as a society, more isolated, and we’ve lost a sense of community. A giving circle like Sankofa becomes a community.”

Giving circles are important for growing local knowledge and supporting the continuation of existing local partnerships. They also nurture new collaborations with local entities to create change by helping members investigate their local community’s needs, develop understanding of existing local organizations that are trying to meet community needs, and form new connections with other civil society members and community-based organizations who are interested in serving the public good. “It’s a great vehicle to build relationships. It’s a great vehicle to have dialogue to understand what we think is important to each of us. And then, a great vehicle to turn that from discussion to some type of action.” Those relationships and action also represent new knowledge and experiences that consequently influences thought and action professionally, too. “I like to call a giving circle an investment club and a book club kind of on steroids,” shares Luci.

Like any small community, Sankofa has faced its own set of challenges, primarily “trying to find time, be intentional about

coming together, and continuing to develop relationships,” Mark shares. Another challenge inherent to the model: consensus-based decisionmaking. And, both challenges become more prominent as the number of participants in the circle increases. There’s also a need to be nimble, as members’ life circumstances change regularly. As with other giving circles, Sankofa must accommodate changes in commitment from its members. “It’s a process,” notes Luci, “so we lost a few people along the way.”

***“You don’t have to be a multimillionaire to be a philanthropist.”*** – MARK LEWIS, POISE FOUNDATION

Sankofa’s members have worked to model flexibility, community building, and engagement both within and outside of the giving circle, and they don’t want to keep their learnings all to themselves. Mark shares, “We definitely have a vision of helping other giving circles grow and being a mentor to them. It’s an accessible model, and we want to show the community that you don’t have to be a multimillionaire or involved with a large philanthropic institution to be a philanthropist.” Giving circles provide a way for individuals to maximize their personal impact, to send ripple effects out into their community and to form connections in the process. “There’s a lot that can be accomplished when individuals in the community come together and invest a little bit of their time, talent, and treasure. Major things can happen.”



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This case study was written by Maya Pace. Photos provided courtesy of the POISE Foundation.

*This case study was developed as one of five companion pieces to stories shared through the [Pittsburgh Philanthropy Project](#). The Pittsburgh Philanthropy Project, in association with the University of Pittsburgh, showcases the rich and varied narratives of giving in the region through comprehensive storytelling techniques, giving insight to the philanthropy landscape and approach for residents, researchers, and practitioners. Please visit [storyline.gspia.pitt.edu](https://storyline.gspia.pitt.edu) to explore further.*