

Circles provides support, hope

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On Thursday nights at 5:30 p.m. a group streams into Blue Ridge Community Action for a Circles meeting. Children hop from table to table, food is served and there is a lot of talking, sharing and laughter.

Circles is a nationwide initiative that strives to transform communities by building relationships that inspire and equip people to end poverty. It began in Burke County in 2012 and operates under Blue Ridge Community Action.

The meeting starts and each individual is asked to share something from the past week, a "new and good."

As the conversation moves around the room you hear positive news from Circles Leaders about doing well on a test or picking up extra hours at work.

There are follow up questions, clapping and shouts of encouragement. The meetings are meant to give participants a sense of family.

Although the 30 individuals in the group aren't family, they often think of each other in this way because they support each another and share in each other's triumphs and struggles.

In the room are Circle leaders, who are low-income individuals who



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Crystal and Jeff Roberts are Circle leaders for the program.

have made a choice to transform their lives by becoming self-sufficient, and allies, who are community volunteers who engage in an intentional, befriending relationship with Circle leaders.

With a \$900 grant from the Burke Women's Fund, an affiliate of the Community Foundation of Burke County (CFBC), Circles was able to purchase books for the Circles Leadership Training Class, which allowed individuals like 27-year-old Crystal Roberts to prepare for this life-changing endeavor.

"We knew of places we could go to get assistance, with food and other things, but we didn't want to do that forever," said Crystal, who began Circles

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in August 2012 with her husband. "We didn't want to take away from someone else who needed that help. We wanted to be able to do it on our own."

The Circles training focuses on building financial, emotional and social resources, as well as an Economic Stability Plan, that sets goals unique to each Circles leader's own needs and dreams.

"When we started, we didn't have jobs and we were about to lose our house," said Crystal. "Now, everything has changed. We have an income, a

home and a car. But we also have better self-esteem. We're healthier, we're happier. Even our kids are happier."

As the Circles meeting winds down and everyone begins their goodbyes, there are hugs and people saying to each other: "Call me tomorrow," "I'm glad you're signing up for that GED class, and "See you next week." And it becomes clear, it isn't just a feeling of family in the room, it's something even better — it's a feeling of hope.

Contact Nancy Taylor, executive director of CFBC, to learn more about Circles, the Burke Women's Fund or the Community Foundation of Burke County.