



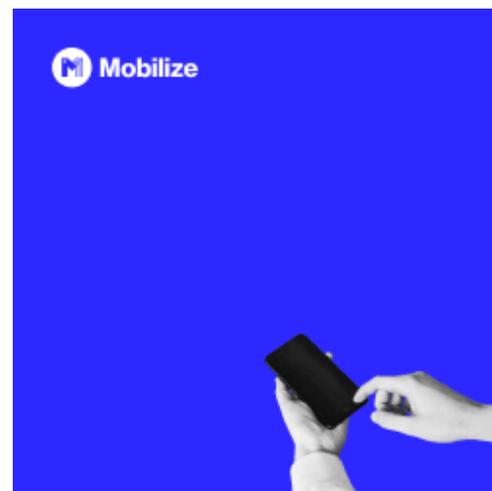
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New Effort Spawns Dozens of Giving Circles, as Interest and Diversity Grows

Michael Kavate



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With #DefundthePolice trending and protests filling the streets in recent months, Alayah Glenn has been thinking about the organizers she knows in the Deep South whose work seeded the current national reckoning on police brutality and systemic racism.

“The folks who are championing and leading the movements that are salient in this moment are the very folks who are seeing the least investment,” she told me. “They don’t have enough money, for example, to fix their cars.”

Over the last couple months, Glenn took a small step to addressing that gap by co-founding Rushing River Giving Circle, which seeks to mobilize a cross-race, cross-class community of young people to support Black LGBTQ+ activists and artists. It is one of an impressive 36 giving circles, many with similarly progressive visions driven by lived experience, that launched following an inaugural five-week online training by a new national initiative, [Philanthropy Together](#).

Catalysts for Giving

With giving circles around the country reporting surging interest, this effort and Glenn’s graduating class offer a window into the changing face of giving circles, the dynamics that are driving more people to t
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“In this moment, everything is so uncertain, and things change every single day. There are so few things that you control, but giving is something you can control,” said Sara Lomelin, Philanthropy Together’s executive director.

Giving circle networks of all types say more people are getting involved. To take one example, over 350 people are on a sign-up list to start new chapters with the [100 Who Care Alliance](#), an international network of more than 700 circles in which members typically give \$100 four times a year, according to Traci Richards, the organization’s founder and president.

“We are seeing an increasing interest in people wanting to make a difference through giving,” Elizabeth Fisher, CEO of Amplifier, told me by email. Her organization, a support network for Jewish-related giving circles, is part of the coalition that [launched](#) Philanthropy Together.

COVID-19 has shown people around the country that small, grassroots organizations—the kind that most benefit from giving circles’ typically small-scale donations—are lifelines in times of crisis. Some have responded by launching giving circles or ways to facilitate their support.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, for instance, launched a giving circle pandemic response fund that “generated incredible interest,” Patricia Eng, the group’s president and CEO, said by email. The fund has already awarded more than

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LaunchPad, the training program, was another product of the pandemic. Originally planned for December, Lomelin and staff moved it up by five months after COVID-19 left people stuck at home, looking for ways to give back. That meant sessions were taking place at the height of the uprisings sparked by George Floyd’s killing. They started each day with check-ins on how everyone was feeling. “There were a lot of raw emotions,” Lomelin said.

The Changing Face of Giving Circles

For a long time, the **typical** giving circle member was an older, wealthy, married white woman. But in recent years, new members are more likely to be younger, people of color, and from diverse class backgrounds, as Inside Philanthropy **has reported**. Membership remains less diverse than America as a whole, but more varied than the average foundation. Philanthropy Together—whose mission seeks to “democratize and diversify philanthropy”—aims to accelerate that trend.

Based on the first training cohort, it’s going well. For every 10 participants in the course, which was called **LaunchPad**, about six were people of color. In all, roughly 31% were African American, 11% were Asian, and 9% were Latinx, among other categories. Ages ranged from a 17-year-old high school student to participants in their 70s, with strong representation from all segments. People joined from 18 U.S. states, as well as France, Germany and Mexico. (Gender representation, on the other hand, was exactly in line with typical giving circle rates, with 70% of

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This diverse new graduate class builds on long-running efforts by identity-based organizations to foster new giving circles. Lomelin previously worked at the Latino Community Foundation, and in 2015, she helped launch what is now the largest Latino giving circle network in the country, with 22 circles around California that have given more than \$1.5 million. In 2011, AAPIP launched a five-year campaign that **resulted** in the formation of 50 new giving circles, an effort that remains a part of their work.

Of course, the history of people getting together to support one another is age-old. “Many, many different communities across the world have been doing some kind of giving circle,” Lomelin told me. “But it hasn’t been recognized as philanthropy.”

If the program’s graduates are any guide, this movement could not only change who considers themselves philanthropists, but also bring more resources to the causes their members have lived first-hand and that traditional philanthropy often overlooks. While giving circles’ gifts are small by foundation standards, giving by individuals overall **accounts** for roughly four times as much as institutional grants, totalling nearly \$310 billion in 2019 alone.

LaunchPad graduates have launched giving circles focused on more traditional topics, like education or children’s health, but also to support indigenous communities in the Southwest affected by COVID-19, refugee women in the Midwest, and gender equality in

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Glenn's new group, the Rushing River Giving Circle, for instance, has sent \$5,000 to three bail funds and given to support the "real-life needs" of organizers at two Black-led organizations, she told me. One of their goals is to engage people who could not see their role in the current racial justice movement.

"Philanthropy can look very different. It can honor our values. It can reflect our political values. It can be a vehicle for creating community," said Glenn, who in her professional life works with the [Donors of Color Network](#).

Another graduate, Chris Torres, wants to create a national version of the California-based [Latinos in Tech Giving Circle](#) he helped found five years ago with Lomelin's help. He's still looking for the right fiscal sponsor and hopes to launch by November.

Going Virtual

Giving circles have traditionally depended on getting everyone in a room together—and having fun. Torres recalls that early events at Latino Community Foundation always featured wine and a hearty encouragement to bring a friend. "It never felt like work," he said. Given those dynamics, national circles, like those being launched by Glenn, Torres and other graduates, are less common.

"If you had asked me a year ago if giving circles were good for the virtual world, I would have said 'no, definitely not,'" Lomelin told me. "We had seen that giving circles that were purely virtual fizzled after a few

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Indeed, some of the 350 who had signed up to start new giving circles through the 100 Who Care Alliance have paused their efforts due to COVID-19. “They don’t/didn’t believe launching in the past six months would create a shared experience that would make them want to come back,” Richards told me by email.

Yet for existing giving circles around the country, **adapting** to a new virtual existence hasn’t been a problem, said Richards and Lomelin. “No one skipped a beat,” the latter told me. “We have seen groups that are not even familiar with technology, period, that are really embracing the unknown of this.”

The fortunes of circles launched during this time—and existing circles forced online by COVID—could shape whether more national groups form in the long run. For now, Philanthropy Together is trying to ensure they succeed. The organization will hold monthly office hours and is putting together a community forum where graduates can post questions and learn from each other’s work. The team is also working on the next generation: A second training will run in October and a LaunchPad for institutions and community foundations is planned for December.

As a means of change, it’s a slow process—or at least runs by a different set of metrics. Some giving circles raise only \$500 or \$1000 in their first year. Once running, the typical circle member gives about \$400 per year. Certain community foundations, which typically serve as giving circles’ fiscal sponsors, have said it’s a heavy investment in staff time for a modest

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“It’s not about where the giving circle starts, but the root of the seed that is planted,” she said.

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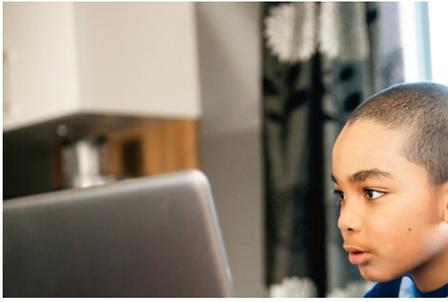
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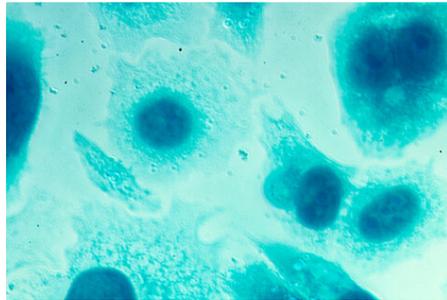
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