



LIVES TRANSFORMED

Volume 2

Covid-19 Stories

“My situation isn’t perfect yet, but Circles has perfectly prepared me for my journey out of poverty.”

—Vivian
Ashland, VA

Even though I was born into generational poverty, I knew where I wanted to go with my life. I just didn’t know how to get there. My three children and I were receiving food stamps, and to make ends meet, I was working two to three jobs. It seemed like I was working all the time and there was no end to this pattern.

One day, the principal at the school where I worked told me about Circles. She said it wasn’t a handout, but it could help me get out of my situation. At my first visit, I felt an instant connection. Everyone was personal and friendly. This welcoming atmosphere encouraged me to get started. The matching process connected me with the perfect Allies.

My Allies have supported me as I have worked to meet my goals. Their experiences and expertise were the perfect fit for the kind of financial and educational support I wanted. Since I became a Circle Leader, I’m not on food stamps anymore, and my family and I are living in a newer rental. I started school, and I will finish my bachelor’s degree next summer. My five-year plan includes becoming a homeowner for the first time and completing a master’s degree in school counseling.

Being a part of Circles during the Covid-19 pandemic has been life-giving for me. Even though we were physically apart, Covid brought us closer together because we were

all feeling this crisis in a similar way. Our Circles community met each week through Zoom, and our program leaders delivered food to our homes. Unfortunately, I couldn’t work for three months during the shutdown, so my savings got depleted. Lots of us had financial issues during this time, so our program leader pointed us toward resources for assistance. Circles reminded me that I was not alone in these challenges.

The most difficult part of life during this pandemic was the tragic death of one of my children this past Mother’s Day. My Circles community supported my family in amazing ways. One of the program leaders had gone through a similar death of a child and suggested counselors for my family. She also brought food twice a day for several weeks. This kind of deep support has impacted me tremendously. When I felt like I couldn’t go on, the support from Circles reminded me of my own strength and the strength of our community.

Circles has reinforced generosity as a way of life for me. I have received so much from my Circles family in terms of resources, knowing what’s available in the community, and people who care. I am now passing these things along to other Circle Leaders. My next step is to become an Ally with our next group of Circle Leaders so I can pay it forward.



“My story isn’t special. It’s the story of so many people that don’t have the ability to tell theirs.”

—Amber
Green Bay, WI

virtual during the shutdown, so that helped. More importantly, both our Allies and other Circle Leaders regularly checked in on us—especially since they knew my daughter missed her friends from Circles. Our Circles director and coaches have been creative in orchestrating in-person, socially distanced, outdoor activities this past summer that allowed my daughter to interact with her friends again. These activities are helping my daughter recognize the voices and needs of others.

The last two years have taught me that there are no limits to what I am capable of achieving. I have achieved a lot on my own, but Circles people have helped me recognize capabilities that I didn’t know I had. I did not know that I could stand in front of a crowd of people. I didn’t know that I could be a part of changing the system that has failed me and so many others. I didn’t know that sharing my story could make a difference. I didn’t know that I had enough courage to acknowledge my own actions that brought me into poverty. I’m now involved in local politics and working to address minimum wage and other issues that affect people in poverty.

My story is not extraordinary, but now I’m not afraid to share it. When I started Circles, I was homeless. But I worked hard, started a new career, and graduated from Circles. Now I give back as an ambassador to the community. I am not done with Circles because the system has to change. It is not good enough that I made it. This is a struggle for so many people. People shouldn’t have to work three jobs and be homeless. They shouldn’t have to lose their childcare benefits or fall off any other cliff when something is just beginning to go right for them. I’m doing something about it!

For me, thriving means not living under the anxiety and fear that what I have is all going to go away. I don’t feel that fear the way I used to. Circles has provided people to help me overcome life’s rough spots, which has opened opportunities for me to advocate for others and make lasting systemic changes.

When I found Circles, I was at rock bottom. I was homeless and couch surfing with my two-year-old daughter who has cystic fibrosis. I was working three jobs, had five case workers, and still couldn’t find housing. I was running out of money and resources and looking for some direction. I heard about Circles while attending a required job readiness training class. I liked what I heard, but I also could tell that I would not benefit from this program unless I went all in. And so I did.

I have made a lot of progress, but that hasn’t come without significant setbacks. As of today, I am halfway to where I want to be. I have a good-paying job in a position that I am relatively good at. I have achieved the Circles goal of 200% of the poverty level. But along the way I got nailed with the cliff effect, twice! I got a great job and then an unbelievable raise within two months of being hired. With each increase in pay, I lost benefits that my pay increases didn’t make up for. I felt particularly distraught when I lost medical benefits for my daughter. But my Allies were there for me. They picked up food for me, helped get my daughter to doctor’s appointments while I was at work, and reminded me constantly that I was doing much better than I had been just a few of months before. They provided the support system that I desperately needed.

When the pandemic hit, it felt like just one more blow. I was worried about my daughter since we weren’t able to leave home. However, our Circles chapter decided to go



“I didn’t have healthy role models growing up. Because of Circles, I am becoming the parent I want to be for my kids.”

—Eve
Derby, KS

I grew up moving around a lot because my dad was a drug dealer and both my parents were users. At the age of 10, my mom died from Hepatitis C. My dad got remarried when I was 11, but I never felt accepted by my stepmom. I attempted suicide and ran away from home for my own safety. Unfortunately, I kicked a police officer who thought he was helping me by trying to take me home. This resulted in me being charged with battery of a law enforcement officer, and I was put into foster care.

I bounced around different homes—some within my own family — but I was so traumatized from my young childhood that I tried to take my own life again. At this point, my dad completely abandoned me, and I spent the rest of my childhood in a group home for children. This was the first place I experienced stability.

When I was 17, I tried to go back to my dad, but my stepmom wouldn't allow it. I then met a 29-year-old and married him. We had three children and divorced when my youngest child was just 2 years old. I met another man who seemed amazing but started abusing me within a year and almost killed me. Two more abusers were part of my life after this, and I lived in fear for several years. I lost job after job due to PTSD and constant worry about someone coming after me.

My sister helped me move to a different city and got me connected with a case manager. I thought I was doing OK because my kids were fed and my bills were paid, but the case manager pointed out that I was getting help from the food bank and local churches. She ultimately helped change my life because she introduced me to Circles.

I was learning how to rebuild my life as I worked my way through the Circle Leader training. After I finished the training, I moved to another city and contacted the Circles chapter there. The director asked me, “What do you want for your life, Eve?” And this helped me take the steps needed to move out of a roach-infested apartment and start saving enough money to buy a house. Circles has given me the strength to hope for something better for my family and gain the tools and connections to make it happen.

Getting my high school diploma was one of the goals that my Circles family wouldn't let me give up on even though there was a pandemic. I had dreamed of what it would be like to wear a cap and gown, and when my graduation ceremony was canceled, my Circles family hosted a ceremony just for me. I wore my cap and gown! It was better than I imagined and all the more special because I was celebrating with the people who had cheered me on all along the way! I started college in August, 2020. I have been clean and sober for over six years and now serve as the Coach for my local Circles chapter.

Circles has provided a place of stability for both me and my children. Even though I didn't have loving and supportive parents as a child, the director of my Circles chapter has modeled the kind of care and concern I want to give my own children. Now I have the opportunity to do that for my kids and other Circle Leaders.

As the Circles Coach, I have a special bond with each Circle Leader because I have something in common with each person. Childhood trauma? I experienced a lot. Addiction? I've been there. Abuse? I am a survivor. That connection with our Circle Leaders has been really valuable during Covid-19. I call my Circle Leaders every week to check in and encourage them, to make sure they keep moving toward their goals. It has taken a lot of extra work, but it is worth it. It helps me keep going on my goals too! I want to encourage others who are experiencing the same challenges I had.



“Circles opened the door to finding my passions and following my dreams.”

—Alyssa
Clearfield, UT

My family never worried about money until 2013 when my parents divorced. I was 14. This created some big changes for my mom, my brothers, and me. We went from a six-figure income to living on government assistance of a thousand dollars a month. It was hard for my mom to ask for help, but one day while at the local food bank, she heard about Circles and decided to give it a try.

My mom and I were both pretty shy, so when we first started going to Circles, we tended to hide in the corner and didn't really talk until someone talked to us. I wasn't old enough to be with the adults, so I played games with the kids. After awhile, I started to see a change in my mom. She saw how everyone at Circles was friendly and welcoming. Because everyone really cared about each other, she believed it was worth it to keep going. Once my mom completed the training and was matched with an Ally, she really started coming out of her shell—and so did I.

I wanted to make Circles a better experience for teenagers like me. So I talked to Lamont Hampton, our chapter director, and he encouraged me to start a program for teens. I began with the financial literacy curriculum used in my high school and quickly adjusted it to address trauma caused by homelessness or significant

financial changes. I wanted teens to understand how credit works and how to get a loan or even buy a house. I looked for other teenagers who were passionate about these issues and asked them to become Allies for our youth in Circles. We even started a podcast, “Poverty from the Mindset of a Teen,” and recorded three sessions before Covid-19 struck.

Even though life during the pandemic has been tough, our Circles chapter has kept going. We have actually helped our community grow closer despite the need for physical distance. Part of that included “Circles Invasions” where we offered Zoom sessions five days a week using a different theme each day. We connected online and even did yoga together. We didn't stop with virtual connection. People from Circles dropped off fun snacks and organized surprise birthday messages in chalk on sidewalks and driveways for our Circles family. There has been so much caring and encouragement throughout this time.

Last winter, my mom became the first college graduate in her family when she graduated with her RN. She became a licensed nurse this past September. I am so proud of her! I'm following her lead and have started college. I am going to be a lawyer and advocate for the wrongly accused. But just because I'm in college doesn't mean I have stopped going to Circles. It may be a 45-minute drive, but I'd drive a lot farther than that for Circles. Circles has changed me. I'm no longer the shy kid hiding in the background. I have found my voice and know that I can be a part of creating something positive for other youth. Circles has opened up opportunities for me to lead and helped me heal from the trauma connected with poverty. I can think of nothing better than to do the same for other youth like me!