

Through Our Eyes:  
The First Decade of Elder Circle

By Helen Horwitz

On Valentine's Day weekend 2004, more than 100 Albuquerqueans attended "The Tao of Aging," a workshop that encouraged people to explore the opportunities for positive aging. The event was the first of its type sponsored by the then brand-new Conscious Aging Network of New Mexico (CAN-NM) – a group formed about a year earlier and that included Michael Milstein of the University of New Mexico, Phoebe Girard, and Gary and Charlotte Carlson.

Thanks to plenty of advance publicity and word-of-mouth, the event was a big success. In fact, according to Gary Carlson, the unanticipated profits helped to underwrite CAN-NM and keep a positive cash flow for the organization.

In the audience that weekend, five women met and decided to continue the discussions at lunch meetings of their own. Most also attended Gary's course on Conscious Aging that he taught soon afterward. Over the next few months, the five – Nancy Gettings, Carol Glassheim, Keya Horne, Viola Morris and Anne O'Neil – continued to meet, and at Gary's urging, they formalized the group.

Nancy and Anne chose the name "Elder Circle," and the first meeting took place in September 2004 at the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. The rest is history – but includes some very good reasons why the group is celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in September 2014.

"People want to be in a community with others who seem to have the same interest in making the second half of their lives more fulfilling and meaningful," says Gary. "It's also a social time – with food, checking in with each other, and hearing new ideas through the programs and discussions at each meeting."

Anne O'Neil, an adjunct professor at The University of St. Francis – Albuquerque and a former pediatric oncology nurse, says that it's impossible to pinpoint how many individuals who have attended Elder Circle over the years. "Some people come once, and we never see them again," she notes. "Others of us have been coming since the very beginning, or started attending soon after that."

A co-leader since the inception of Elder Circle, she says 74 are on the current mailing list, but "we're a very fluid group, with about 16 to 20 who are regulars."

Programs are as varied as the people who attend. For the first few years, outside speakers were invited to talk to the group – one was a local author who had written a book on planning one's death and funeral. Several members have shared their extraordinary talents: For example, Joanna De Keyser, a gifted cellist, presented a melodic and memorable recital, and Robert Benjamin, a physicist-turned-playwright, has previewed his perceptive, humorous plays about aging for enthusiastic Elder Circle audiences.

Other programs have dealt with having purpose in later life, composing a personal bucket list, the role of happiness, and memories of how each person came to New Mexico. At a recent meeting, members shared their favorite, low-cost activities and places around Albuquerque and the state of New Mexico.

The discussions that are part of each meeting are a big reason why people attend. Viola Morris, a former educator and neighborhood organizer in New York's Greenwich Village, moved to Albuquerque from Maine – inspired at least partly by the budding friendships she had developed through the "Tao of Aging" workshop. Viola puts it this way: "I come to Elder Circle to grow my own circle, and to hear people's stories. I love stories and since, as elders, we've had lots of time to develop plot, relationships, adventures, often mis-adventures, experiences, gains and losses, there are lots of

opportunities.” She adds, “I am very aware that looking back, the most meaningful part of my own life has been relationships – and Elder Circle is about relating to each other through our stories.”

For Elder Circle members Joan Jander and Simon Shima, their own relationship began at the first meeting in September 2004. “We had seen each other at a concert at Robertson’s Violin Store the Thursday before the Elder Circle meeting,” recalls Joan. “At Elder Circle, we recognized each other, and when we spoke I asked him whether he liked chamber music because I was handling publicity for the Placitas Artists’ Series at the time. Simon gave me his email address so I could send him information and when he said he wanted to attend a concert, I invited him for dinner afterwards.”

That was Joan and Simon’s first date – and they were married on Sept 30, 2006. It was Joan’s second marriage and Simon’s first. “Timing seems to be everything,” reflects Simon.

Both agree that what keeps them coming to meetings are the opportunities to meet with and get to know other elders who are lively and engaged with life. “The values of the Sage-ing movement and the Elder Circle members who live its ideals are a constant inspiration to me,” says Joan, a former teacher. Simon, a retired engineer, adds that he “always enjoys listening to the check-in to hear the life processes of our members – as well as sharing various kinds of foods.”

Bob Long joined when Elder Circle was forming. He had retired in 1995 after a long career as an aerospace physicist and was looking for opportunities to “explore new vistas” and learn how others deal with the issues of aging. Unfortunately for Bob’s Elder Circle friends, in May 2014 Bob and his wife moved from Albuquerque to Fountain View, Ariz., near Phoenix, to be near their daughter and grandchildren. He says their new location also offers them easier access to more doctors and specialists – as well as the lower altitude which both he and his wife require. Now residing in a seniors community,

Bob says he hasn't tried to find an Elder Circle type of group. "I have plenty of contact with seniors where we now live," he laughs.

Bob is not the only Elder Circle member to move elsewhere this year. Billie McAnally, a retired physician, and her husband left Albuquerque this summer to return to their native Texas and be closer to their children.

Co-leader Steve Poland joined Elder Circle shortly after the group started – he had learned about it through his involvement with Conscious Aging. Virginia Burris, Steve's partner, then joined as well.

"Elder Circle contributes to my maturity through sharing and listening to people's stories and adding to my sense of hopefulness that people continue to grow and develop as they get older," Steve says. "As a still-practicing psychologist, I work with people who aren't doing that." He adds that the friendships and connections made through Elder Circle are another plus, and it's "almost like having a family when visiting other members."

One of relatively few male members in Elder Circle, Steve thinks that reflection is a less usual thing among men. "It's more common for women to share their emotional lives together. In our culture and society, it's just easier for women to talk about their feelings than for men to do so."

Pat Leonard, a registered nurse, joined a few years ago and is now a regular at meetings. "I had noticed an announcement on the UNM web site for a presentation on Conscious Aging," she recalls. "I didn't attend, but I searched the topic, discovered Elder Circle and went the first time out of curiosity." She notes she was "a little leery" it would involve a self-help guru's recipe for dealing with aging – and stayed for the people. "I wanted to tap into the immense wisdom, intelligence, life experience, humor, creativity, honesty and compassion within the group," she says. "Elder Circle is like a

good green chile stew. Each of the ingredients brings its own special flavor and texture, but when combined they produce delicious nourishment for the soul – a kind of recipe after all.”

One of Elder Circle’s newest members is Sandra White, who learned about the group from Gary and Charlotte Carlson. Sandy first attended in May 2014. “It’s obvious that most who attend are thinkers and are involved in worthy causes, who care about society and who want to make a difference,” she says. A group like Elder Circle is important to her because it’s an opportunity to meet people who are interested in learning and sharing. A licensed professional counselor in Texas, her previous home, Sandy views Elder Circle as a chance to share some of her experiences and knowledge that may be helpful to others.

Trying to gather comments from Elder Circle members during the summer has been a challenge; by nature, our Circle is a peripatetic group, constantly traveling to new places, visiting family and friends, and seeking out new adventures. But I believe the remarks in this history represent the feelings of any of us who have attended a meeting – and have returned again and again as members.

“In my wildest dreams, I thought this group would last six months – maybe two years at the most,” says Anne O’Neil.

To her remark, Gary Carlson adds that Elder Circle has been “wonderfully successful” and he gives much of the credit to Anne.

But after ten years as co-leader, Anne has announced she is stepping down – and as of January 1, 2015, a new leader – or two co-leaders – will be needed to handle the responsibilities of coordinating the group.

Steve Poland has observed that Elder Circle has evolved to what he describes as “self-authored leadership.”

“Someone will still have to get meeting messages out, but dealing with issues about keeping the process going shouldn’t depend on just one person,” he says.

“I’m struck with members’ sense of common ownership of the group,” Steve continues. “When we began, we depended on formal presentations by others with special knowledge or training. But over time, we shifted as a group to choose the topics and lead the discussions ourselves. Anne’s departure is another opportunity to take shared ownership of the group.”

He observes that Elder Circle’s current concern with handling discussions in a civil fashion despite different points of view can be another example of the group’s evolution.

As for me, the writer of this very informal history of our group, I look forward to being part of Elder Circle for more years – and to learning, sharing, caring and growing with as many of you as possible.

Happy 10th Anniversary to us!