THE PRIME TIME SISTER CIRCLE

Oral histories

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“The mission of the Black Women's Health Alliance is to improve healthcare outcomes and eliminate and/or reduce health disparities experienced by women of African Ancestry, other women of color, and their families through advocacy, education, research and support activities, programs and services”
BACKGROUND: THE PRIME TIME SISTER CIRCLE

- Created by Dr. Marilyn Gaston, a former assistant surgeon general and Dr. Gayle Porter, a clinical psychologist.

- The founders felt it was important to reach Black women in midlife, their “prime time,” because they are often the center of families and communities.

- “If you can change just one midlife woman’s health behavior, you have a ripple effect. She’s going to change her whole family. She’s going to change her children, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren. She’s going to change the church she’s going to every Sunday, her workplace, her community.” - Dr. Marilyn Gaston

- The first circles were held at a pair of Washington churches in 2003 — 10 women at St. Thomas Moore and 10 at People’s Congregational.

- Nearly 3,000 women in four states and seven cities, including Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, have participated.
GOALS OF THE PRIME TIME SISTER CIRCLE

- 12 week **lifestyle improvement intervention** for Black women aged 40-75 years old

- Serve as support groups to **motivate and empower** Black women to put their health first

- Emphasize the importance of **overall health and wellness**

- Provide resources on a variety of health-related topics, such as **stress management, nutrition, and fitness**
Why is the PTSC Important?

- Black women are typically paid just 63 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.
- Black women are diagnosed with HIV at a rate 16 times higher than white women.
- Black women are three to four times more likely to experience a pregnancy-related death than white women.
- Black women have a 41% higher death rate for breast cancer and a 98% higher death rate for uterine corpus cancer than white women.
- 49% of Black women over age 20 have some type of heart disease.
- The AHA reports that:
  - Only 36% of BW are aware of the fact that heart disease is their biggest health risk.
  - Only 20% of BW think they personally are at risk for heart disease.
  - Only 52% of BW are aware of the signs and symptoms of a heart attack.

- It is important to educate and empower Black women on issues affecting their health.
- It is important to provide Black women with the resources necessary to take care of their health.
- It is important to provide Black women with the knowledge to advocate for themselves in a clinical setting.
THE IMPORTANCE OF PTSC FROM CIRCLE PARTICIPANTS

- “We look at so many things in our community just as broken and we know they’re broken. But we need to start asking the question why they’re broken?” -AJ

- “Considering that we’re ten years later, I would say don’t take any topics off the table. Anything that affects Black women and girls, put it on the table. Because if you hide anything right now, you are doing a serious injustice to them. If it’s something that needs to be learned...that’s what needs to be taught.” -AJ

- “You know people don’t realize what we as Black women go through. And we have a whole community to take on. It’s like an army. We’re struggling. You know I mean there’s a lot of social stuff that’s happening. I tell women all the time, look you have to care for yourself. But you know if you’re not taught that, you don’t know...especially our young women aren’t taught that.” -AJ

- “Black women of a certain age don’t often get our particular health needs addressed. And I guess, you may know that in light of all the research that has come out about us, we are not being taken seriously when we go to report health issues... but here we are addressing our own health needs.” -MS

- “In our culture, we hate to be looked at as stupid. And that one thing that you’re not asking may be the one thing that’s going to save your life.” -AJ

- “The opportunity was given to us as women to build ourselves up. It was spiritual help. It gave me an opportunity to see other women who needed the support and were able to get help.” -PP
CODiES (MAJOR THEMES)

Importance of age
Empowerment through knowledge
Community building
Long-term impact / sustainability
The diversity of age within the groups did not prevent the women from forming lasting relationships and actually **promoted rich, intimate discussion**. Older and younger women interacted with each other and shared their life experiences.

Many of the women also expressed that the resources and knowledge gained through the group would be beneficial to women below 40 and over 75. Many women recommended that the **age range be expanded**.
IMPORTANCE OF AGE

- “Because a lot of people don’t know. A lot of older people. And if you don’t know as an older person then you surely can’t teach the younger generation. Then they don’t know.” - AJ

- “We found a lot of commonalities that we had from young to old...older I should say. It was more like we were sharing life experiences. It was the realization that you are going to go through certain things in life. That things can happen to you at any age. I think for the older women in the room it gave them the perception, or you know the knowledge that these younger ladies may have had it a little harder than when we were younger. So they were seeing that although a lot of things improved, a lot of things stayed the same.” - AJ

- “And like I said, the young women learned from the older women and the older women learned from the younger women. Everyone was hearing what everybody was going through and was able to hear like I’m not different from you. I may be a little younger than you but the things in life that you go through, I go through too. Or you may be older but considering that I had to go through xy and z growing up, I’m probably a little more mature than you at 65.” - AJ

- “I think at the beginning when everybody was first coming together, like I said the older women don’t understand the younger women and the younger women don’t care to understand the older women. It was put aside once people saw that everything that was going on was something that happened to us all.” - AJ
“I would say the impact of the program was for a certain age level. I think PTSC was great I loved it and I think they should open it up to younger sisters, maybe in their 20s because we’re older and we got some younger sisters out here who are going through some things and if they had like a fellowship of women older than them and could talk to them not as a mother figure. Like I’m not talking to you as a mother I’m talking to you as friend to friend you would understand that what you’re going through is not quite that bad because I’ve been there done that so open it up and get some of the younger ones in there. Because everyone needs someone to talk to and this can encourage them to come and be focused for 12 weeks to come to some stability for 12 weeks.” - PL

“I can imagine many of the women that I deal with everyday are women about your age or a little older but they will probably thrive with something like this. And just have a sister that is older more seasoned to come and have a chat and you know..exchange some things. “ - MS

“There was a lady who was into exercise and she came and she talked about aerobics and doing exercise. I don’t remember her name, but she was a little lady and she was middle aged. But she was fine, fit, and fabulous. And when you see somebody fine, fit, and fabulous and you remembering where you were? That made me say I need to get there.” - PP
Because of the knowledge that they gained from the circle, many women felt empowered that they could **advocate for themselves and speak up for others**. PTSC provided the women with the resources to be able to take care of themselves in a holistic manner, **prioritizing overall wellbeing**.
“You are getting taught at the Prime Time level and now you can use that knowledge to go ahead and activate actionable plans. That’s how I see it as and I think that’s what [Brenda] wanted. She didn’t want it to be something that was stagnant. But now what are you doing in your community? Even if you don’t mention Prime Time Sister Circle all the time, what are you doing in your community to help better it from the knowledge that you did gain? Prime Time is giving you the knowledge to activate.” -AJ

“Yeah I think I speak out more. And going to this for 12 weeks again you learn to speak out more and again whatever you think you may know, you know more so you can speak about it a little bit more." -PL

And it was kind of important at the time...it really was and a lot of us Black women over 40...a lot of us had health issues that were addressed directly...like what to do for self care” -MS

“We had a couple(of speakers) that talked about you know...about healing trauma...she didn’t call it that at the time...I’m paraphrasing. And so a lot of us in there acknowledged past traumas and how to move away from that to be your better whole self” -MS

But now I learned and now I’m older, so I’m trying to continue to reduce but it’s harder because I’m not the active person I was the energy level like I was. But a lot of that is all in what you eat! Your energy level can be picked up. You eat positive things; you eat the right things your energy levels will soar. And I’m learning that now, I learned it. Sister circle really gave me tidbits of powerful information; I call it pearls of wisdom.” -PP
COMMUNITY BUILDING

- Within each circle, the women created **strong communities and lasting relationships** with one another. Many still keep in contact and/or speak fondly of their circle members.

- Many women shared the knowledge and resources they gained from the circle with other women in their communities. After being in the circle, many women felt the desire to **continue sharing the knowledge** and helping other women.
COMMUNITY BUILDING

- “And I see some of these women from time to time and I may forget a name...which I don’t want to do...but I will never forget a face.. And we are like “hey sister” because we have a relationship. And it was kind of important at the time” - MS

- “…overtime cohesion built and it grew and it came to a point where we were supportive of each other in ways that were unexpected to me. Like towards the end and we were talking about nutrition. We started cooking for each other and people would try to bring nutrition dishes...And you know...the sister circle part of it really became a self-fulfilling prophecy.” -MS

- “It taught you how to reach out to other women to help you take care of yourself as well. How to care for myself so I can continue to care for others.” -AJ

- “You know like I said I speak for a lot of women that are afraid to speak up, really can’t speak up, and you know women that just feel that they have lost their voices.” -AJ

- “I see them giving out the information and actually building on the information that we learned. Such as myself as well and then sharing it in the community with other women. Because one of the things that I know that I had did and a few of them do, at the community centers, I would give information sessions on whatever topic.” -AJ

- “But then when I found a bunch of women that were in the same situation, had been through some of the same things, some were either going through the fire, in the fire, or coming out of the fire. And I was able to say wow I’m not alone.” -PP
COMMUNITY BUILDING

“If there was a problem you were having, you could share it and not feel like oh this is the worst thing possible because we all were going through it. You think your thing was a mess, somebody else had something else just as bad if not worse. So as sisters we were able to come out and be honest of what was bothering us.” -PP

“There are people that are going through the same things, have either been through what you’re going through going through what you’re going through or been out of it and were willing to share things that had helped them. That was the key. Always having somebody to be accountable and they’d say hey, this experience happened to me and this is some of the things that I did. And we would discuss like what things would be positive. And people would give feedback, like what happened to them and okay that was something that they needed to hear because I’ll try that next time.” -PP

“And that support it was almost like counseling each other, but using life experiences. I might not be at that point yet but your life experience showed me that if I didn’t do certain things then this may have happened or vice versa if I did, that might have prevented such and such from happening” -PP

“The support you got from people who have been through different trials... what happens is everybody is going through something in life at different times, and what you learn is that bonding, that support, no matter what it looks like, it could be the worst thing possible. No matter what it is, there is somebody.” -PP

“Something that I think everybody or every community needs to do. It was a time of sharing, giving back, a time of listening to what is actually happening to people and knowing that you have a buddy in it- that you’re not alone. It was deep. I enjoyed it... it was the best thing honestly. Powerful powerful group that helped set me free and helped me understand that I was important.” -PP
LONG-TERM IMPACT / SUSTAINABILITY

Although it had been numerous years since the women had participated in the circle, they all spoke very positively about their overall experience. All the women continued to utilize the knowledge and resources they had gained from the circle in some capacity in their present lives.

What stands out about the PTSC compared to other programs is that it emphasizes empowering the women by giving them the tools to advocate and take care of themselves. The women received resources that they can utilize for the rest of their lives. PTSC also emphasizes using the knowledge you have gained to create a chain reaction in your community.
LONG-TERM IMPACT / SUSTAINABILITY

- "As you can see I kept my book, a lot of people probably haven't kept their book" -PL

- "Sitting here with these women and then when something comes up in your life whether food or life, you're like oh okay maybe I should do it this way or maybe I should read that label or maybe I shouldn't go over there so yeah. There are things to read and discuss so you're like oh okay. So yeah it changes you a little bit that's why I say you should stick with it, you got to stick with it." -PL

- "They kept you wanting to come back..." -PL

- "I had, to be honest, thought that it was going to be just one of those groups that I would sit in and listen on. And just really not learn anything more than what I knew at the time. But it turned out that I didn’t experience any of that.” -AJ

- "There are lots of women and girl programs. You tell me “oh I've started this organization” but what is your organization really doing? Are you going to come until you get your grant satisfied or is it going to be something that is longstanding? Because we are letting our communities down. You come in and do what you have to do to get paid. And then once you get paid it's like now what?” -AJ
“The nutrition part of the class was very powerful because I think growing up we got used to, at least my family got used to, eating junk food. It was a quick fix. You’re hungry? You get a tasty cake or you get a pie or a piece of cake or something. And we got used to that. Or you got a soda, you know soda pop, that was it. Drink a Coke, Pepsi, takes away the anxiety, you’ll be fine. And so when the nutritionist came and talked about it, she actually had samples of how many grams and milligrams that was in these products. And when she told us it was a cup of sugar or something in a bottle and she actually was showing us exactly, you got visual. And I’m a visual learner but I think when you see something it becomes more real.” -PP

“This program helped me to be able to understand that I am what I eat. So if I want some energy, I better eat energetic foods and not put a lot of juices and sodas. I don’t drink soda anymore. I’ll drink water, I may drink juices. And usually the juice I’ll try to drink 100% juice. But I can’t drink the sodas anymore. I realized that those things that I was eating was unhealthy. And they were keeping me in a cycle of destruction of not being able to see life clearly.” -PP

“When I finished the class I was like I hope they have another one of these going on.” -PP
**Connection to Course Material**

- **Bridges Argument**: Constructing a “high-risk” population is framed in a negative manner by describing it as a mechanism through which **biopower** acts upon.
- **PTSC Women** found this program beneficial when a specific population was constructed using the demographics of **race, age and place**
  - Grouping of Black women while at the same time **acknowledging the diversity** (age, situation, knowledge) within the group - heterogeneity
  - PTSC is described as a **culturally component support group** - race is not ignored and experience therefore is not generalized.
THANK YOU TO THE WOMEN FOR SHARING THEIR STORIES WITH US!