

Sharon: Hello and welcome to another interview on GivingCircleHelp.com, a website where we're compiling information and interviews from people around the country who are running giving circles and our goal is to learn from each and continuously improve our ability to make an impact with our giving.

Today I'm speaking with Navin Moul of the Devata Giving Circle. Welcome Navin and thank you so much for participating in our project here today.

Navin: It's my pleasure Sharon, thank you for having me.

Sharon: I'm real excited to have you here today because there are some unique aspects of your giving circle that I know our listeners are going to love to hear about. Could you start by giving us an overview of your giving circle?

Navin: Our giving circle is pretty unique because we are the only Cambodian American Giving Circle in the U.S. and so our membership, there are 8-11 of us at any one time on what we call the executive council, we are all of Cambodian ancestry. So the giving circles is just for us, we get to make the decisions about where to give out grants. We also try to engage the community we live in whether it's our networks with friends, family and coworkers in terms of trying to mobilize and pool resources that we can then put back into the community and help the community. And we see that as a way to really empower our community. And I think it really speaks to and reflects our values of a community, a Cambodian American community that has come through a really traumatic history and getting to a point where we're not just only just surviving but thriving in the U.S. And for us thriving is being able to help ourselves and not always looking to others for help. So I think that's something that's unique about us.

I think I would also go back and talk about the name of our giving circle. Devata in the Cambodian language actually means female guardian spirit or angle. And we see that in our community everyday. Women are the building blocks, the corner stones of the Cambodian community and they really make the community. And our goal is to support women and build leadership and bring our community to a point where we're not just surviving as refugees or immigrants but that are thriving and contributing to the development of their community. It's something that makes our giving circle unique and really fulfilling to its members.

Sharon: So how did you decide you needed and wanted to have a Cambodian American giving circle?

Navin: Well my good friend, Chivy, and I worked in philanthropy and we were seeing... well our community comes from a very (inaudible) background. And if you don't know anything about Cambodian Americans in the U.S. the short story of it is that there was a genocide that happened in Cambodia and the immigrants that came in the late 70's and early 80's, we all came here as refugees and there are definitely issues that come when you come to a country as a refugee and the trauma, the atrocities that you've seen, actually living in the refugee camps, too. (inaudible) The folks that made it into the

diaspora, they are all survivors in some way. There had to be some kind of resilient spirit in them in order for them to have made it.

What we were noticing was, both Chivy and I, was that there was so much need in our community. We might have survived the Khmer Rouge, we might have survived the genocide, but there were all these things that were happening in the Cambodian American community. We were seeing that our young people were dropping out of school, there was high teenage pregnancy, too few going to college or graduating with a B.A. and even less going for a graduate degree or going into any kind of professional school or career. And, you know, we were just kind of looking around and saying, there were other communities that came from (inaudible) and who are thriving, so what is it? Why can't we get to a point where we feel like we are part of and integrated into society and really thriving as a community so that we could actually help ourselves?

And that's where this whole idea of a giving circle came out of. Because we were both in philanthropy we wanted to figure out a way to pool our resources. Obviously, both being in philanthropy and nonprofit work, we don't have the resources to be giving millions of dollars or anything like that, but we wanted to figure out a way not only to have other folks be giving money, putting money into the community, but to have the community to actually support itself.

The whole pooled giving idea comes from that, and we were seeing that happen in other communities, so this Devata Giving Circle is based out of the San Francisco Bay Area, and there are other giving circles in that area, too. And we thought if other people can do this, we can do this, too. We asked other women who we thought would be interested, too, and that's how it all started.

Sharon: So you mentioned that the giving circle is based out of San Francisco, and it sounds like you have members who are located throughout the country. Is that true?

Navin: Everyone is pretty much in the Bay Area except for me. After we started the giving circle I had to move to New York for work. I'm still very much connected and involved with our circle and try to travel back to the Bay Area as much as I can to make it to our meetings. We have once a month meetings and when I'm not able to make, I Skype in.

Our meetings are really fun, too. We don't see it as necessarily a meeting, but it's potluck dinners and it's a social event and we can check in with everyone and see how everyone is doing. You know we all come from different backgrounds and we all have different responsibilities and in some ways the meetings are an opportunity for us to kind of breath a little bit and really support each other. We see it as a circle and we want to support each other.

For some of the women who don't come from a nonprofit background, a philanthropic background, the giving circle is an avenue for them to learn about philanthropy and even more about the Cambodian American community and to feel much more in touch

with the community, and so I think our giving circle serves a couple different purposes. Obviously, one part is helping the community by pooling our resources and putting it back into the community but another part is the professional development that we get to participate in as members of this giving circle.

Sharon: Is there a larger population of Cambodian Americans in the Bay Area to support the giving circle or is just a few people who happened to be Cambodian Americans and were friends and came together?

Navin: There were a couple of us who knew each other prior, but I think that we've come from different areas so that we've got someone from the corporate world, we've got people from the nonprofit world, people in education, people in academia. We're all kind of different and there are 7 or 8 of us at this point, and we're actually recruiting a few more people in the next month or so.

If you're asking where the largest Cambodian American communities are, the largest concentration of Cambodians outside of a south east Asia really is in Long Beach, CA. The reason that we chose the Bay Area was that we all lived in the Bay Area, and it just made it easier for us to meet.

Our first grant went to an Oakland based organization, but we trying to branch out and really meet the needs of the community so we're looking into organizations in Long Beach that we would also consider for grants, too. We'd like to do it nationwide, too, but we realize what our capacity is and don't want to over extend ourselves too fast and regret that later. So we're taking it slow at this point.

Sharon: Yeah, I could tell from your website that you're a newer giving circle recently established, and you had one grant cycle that you've done so far. I guess I'm kind of curious how, if you guys weren't friends how did you come together to form this giving circle?

Navin: You know, we knew a couple people and people were recommended that we should talk to and we would meet with them and talk with them about the giving circle. If there was interest, we would talk about what it is we were looking for and what we were trying to do, and we would invite them to try it.

In some ways, our giving circle is kind of fluid, too because we are so new, and we don't have these rigid structures in place just yet, which also works to our benefit. We're a little bit more nimble and can do a lot more. But that also means that there's more fluidity and we have people coming in and out sometimes more than we would like. But because we are nimble, we're able to work with that.

But, like I said, we're recruiting for new members, and people have actually heard about our giving circle because it's the only one in the U.S. and so people have contacted us about potentially joining.

Last May we had what we called our public launch and we wanted to spotlight our giving circle and spotlight the grant we made. We invited a lot of people from the community-- whether they were Cambodian or not. And people came. There was definitely an interest, and people were really excited. From that event we had a handful of people come up and want to join the giving circle. So, we'll be taking it from there and recruiting new members, and we'll see where it goes.

Sharon: And you have a rule that in order to be on the executive committee you have to be Cambodian American but otherwise membership is open to anyone.

Navin: Yes, to be on the executive council. We call it the executive council and that's the membership. But we have what we call allies, friends, and supporters. The idea behind this is... It's a really great example of empowering the community. At our event we had our grantee come and talk to us about their project, and the girls, it was an organization that works with young women who are at risk of being sexually exploited, we gave them this grant, and it wasn't much at all, but it really had a huge impact on them because it came from Cambodian women like them.

The director of the organization asked the girls, "What do you think of when you think of a donor?" And they said, you know, "a white man, middle aged, in a business suit with a briefcase". And that's what they think of when they think of a donor. For them to get a grant from us even though it's significantly smaller than maybe a foundation's grant that could be 40 or 50 thousand dollars. For it to come from people in their community makes them think that maybe they can be part of the change, too, that they can be women as role models, be engaged with the community and do and make change in the community.

I think that's a huge thing that we really want to acknowledge and understand the impact of. I don't know if that answered your questions.

Sharon: Yes, so the executive council are members and you're looking to keep the executive council rather small?

Navin: Yes, we decided to keep it small because the executive council gets to make the most decisions about where to make grants and we feel that because we are from the community, we are learning about the community, have done the research, and will actually be going out and doing the due diligence, that we have a better grasp of the organizations and what the needs of the community are than someone who is just randomly giving a thousand dollars or 5 thousand whatever it may be.

But we're asking our friends, allies, and supporters to trust us and really put faith in us that because we know the community pretty well that you can know that the funds that you give to us will go to an organization that will need it and that will actually benefit the community.

Sharon: Can you foresee a situation of having more Cambodian American women involved than you want to have on the executive council and so than they would become friends or allies?

Navin: Yes, Well I don't really think I answered your question fully. The reason why we decided to keep it small is because we do get to make those decisions, we thought it would be really hard to have 30 people on the council and making these decisions and really have those 30 people understanding what those organizations are about, do the site visits, read the financials, stuff like that. We try to do a really in-depth review, because it's not just scoping out the organization, but part of it is the professional development and leadership development of understanding how to do the due diligence, seeing what's going on in the community, and getting to know these organizations that are supporting the people in our community, building those relationships, and we just didn't think that with 30 or 40 people on our council that we would be able to get that. We went with small and we'll see where that goes.

Sharon: Ok, well very interesting. Given that you've just gone through this process of starting a giving circle, do you have any advice for anyone wanting to start a giving circle.

Navin: I think that if you have the desire to help your community, giving circles or this kind of model isn't anything new. We have different communities doing this pooled giving, and it's not a novel idea. So if you're thinking about doing something like this, I'm sure there are models within your community to look at and then go for it.

Specifically, for communities of color you're making a big impact because you're changing this whole idea of what giving means. It isn't just from a corporation or from someone out there who looks different than you. Giving can be within your community, too. That's really powerful. That's something we don't recognize enough, tap into enough. When you ask people to be part of the pooled giving, what you're asking people to do is to change their community and empower their community. And I think that's a beautiful thing and an amazing thing that we do and maybe the best thing that we can do given our lack of resources and constraints that we have.

I think that a giving circle is a great way to make in-roads into our community. So if people want to do it, they should totally do it. A giving circle can look like anything, you know. There's not one way to do it, and it should be tailored to the group of people who are part of it. And that's the nice thing about giving circles.

Sharon: We're approaching the end of our time. Is there anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to share with us now?

Navin: I think you pretty much asked everything. If people are interested in the Devata Giving Circle, we have a website, and I'm sure you're going to list the link and people can go see that or email us for more information. We're happy to talk about our work and we're happy to see other people start giving circles because we really believe in

this grass roots movement in giving and we think that giving circles are a great way to do it. Thank you for taking time to talk to us and letting us be part of this.

Sharon: Thank you for participating. Now your information is recorded for posterity and maybe in a couple years we can talk with you about your experiences and how you've grown.

Navin: That would be great.

Sharon: Thanks again, I really appreciate it.

Navin: Thanks, Sharon