

# **How to Start a Men's Support Group in Prison**



## **Inside Circle Foundation**

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## Introduction

Welcome to the world of men's support groups in prisons!

With this manual, an idea by the late Patrick Nolan (former inmate in Folsom Prison) has taken on a life of its own. This little booklet is an attempt to capture the essence of that idea and give you the reader enough information so that you and other persons of goodwill can come together, form a group and start to share the benefits that the men in Folsom have discovered.

Many voices are represented in this collection of letters, essays, and poems. All of them add something to the flavor of the Folsom Prison men's support group experience. As you develop groups in other institutions, you will come up with other insights and ideas. Please feel free to send them to us at Inside Circle Foundation, so we may incorporate them into future versions of this manual.

A couple of companion volumes have been essential to the success of the Folsom Prison groups. First, is the book A Circle of Men by Bill Kauth. It contains many exercises and discussion topics that are welcome points of departure when a group is new and needs some direction. As the group matures and the men begin the inward journey, we have found that there is so much interior material in the men themselves that there is little need for exterior supplements. A second book that is a mainstay of the groups is Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart, edited by Bly, Meade and Hillman. The poems in that book speak to and for the men. Each week a man takes the book home and selects the opening poem for the following meeting. Both of these books are available from Amazon.com.

We have found that the work of the groups becomes deeply spiritual, but not in a way that reflects any religious or organizational bias. Each man formulates his own expression of the "other" and honors every other man's expression. Because of this spiritual dimension, we have found that the groups feel most comfortable in the confidential atmosphere of the chapel. However it need not be confined to the "chapel program," but can thrive anywhere there is quiet and silence, and confidentiality is respected.

As you gain experience and insight into the processes of the Men's Support Group, please share your successes and problems with us here at the Inside Circle Foundation. We are dedicated to seeing that these groups flourish and that men and women in prison find the answers to the questions and problems that have so far eluded them. We send you our best wishes for a successful group.

**INSIDE CIRCLE FOUNDATION, INC.**

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**California Department of Corrections  
CSP, Sacramento  
Represa, CA 95671**

July 1, 2002

Dear Fellow Chaplain,

For nearly 5 years now, I have been associated with The Men's Support Groups here at CSP, Sacramento. This is simply the most effective program for changing men's lives that I have experienced in my prison ministry.

It was developed as an initiative of an inmate and poet, Patrick Nolan, who died of Hepatitis C in April of 2000. The program is now carried on by the Inside Circle Foundation, which Nolan helped to start.

Most importantly, once started, the Men's Support Groups take little or no time or resources away from the chaplain or other chapel programs. The Inside Circle Foundation has volunteers available in many cities who are willing to come in and facilitate the groups. However, I try to sit in on at least one meeting a week, for the group's benefit, as well as my own. I have come to believe that this is not just another program to add, rather it is a program that has the great potential to benefit any man who participates. If I had my way, I would not miss a meeting.

This work is spiritual at the most fundamental level. It facilitates dialogue across diverse religious, cultural and racial traditions. The response of the men to looking at their woundedness and recognizing they do indeed have worth is nothing short of the presence of God in our midst. The most violent, lost and desperate men come to the realization that they can become loving and compassionate people. These groups encourage healing, trust and the expression of what it truly means to be human. I highly recommend this program.

I strongly urge you to start a group. To aid that effort, the Inside Circle Foundation has prepared this brief manual "How to Start a Men's Support Group in Prison," for your use.

You will doubtless have questions. Please call me at 916-985-8610 ext. 6425 or call the Inside Circle Foundation at 916 482-4027. Other information is available on their web site: [www.insidecircle.org](http://www.insidecircle.org).

Cordially,  
Deacon Dennis Merino,  
Catholic Chaplain,  
CSP, Sacramento



Dear Friend,

The material in this manual is the result of a lot of trial and more than a few errors. I would like to summarize what I have learned in the last five years about what it takes to build an effective men's support group.

1. The groups are all about trust. Before the men can trust themselves, they must trust each other. Before they can trust each other, they must come to trust the person who facilitates the group. Betrayal is a common theme and runs deep in these men, and only patience works while trust is built.
2. There must be trust between one inmate and one volunteer, or between one inmate and one staff person (usually a chaplain) before a group can get started. This trust can only be built upon after a regular program of contacts over several months. This work does not go fast. It takes time.
3. Starting and stopping and starting meetings or contacts again and again, hurts the trust process. If you say you will be there, be there, on a regular basis even if it is inconvenient for you.
4. Once an inmate trusts you he will tell other inmates that they can trust you. In prison this is called "cosigning." In a real sense, he is depending on you to continue to be trustworthy. In prison, all you have is your word. Those of us on the "outside" often have no sense of this level of trust of one man in another. In prison it can be a matter of life and death so trust is not given or received casually.
5. Once a group of 3 or more comes together, the trust building process continues. Often, at first all a man will be willing to say is that "my week was ok." The facilitator has to be willing to model, through his own personal work, what sharing of feeling looks like. He must talk about things that actually "mean something" to him, where personal feelings are strong. This will demonstrate how feelings are expressed.
6. As trust is developed, it becomes safe to express feelings at deeper and deeper levels. It is this expression of feeling, in a trustworthy environment, that allows the men to revisit the experiences and decisions in their lives and to "revision" those experiences in the light of the this newly discovered emotional reality. For many of these men, this discovery is life changing. But it all starts with trust.

I wish you well as you endeavor to build trust!

Rob Allbee, Executive Director  
Inside Circle Foundation

# The Men's Support Group

# What is a Men's Support Group?

Patrick Nolan; D-33947

On several occasions, when I have approached guys about possibly attending our Men's Support Group here at California State Prison, Sacramento, the response I received was a question: "What men's support group?" And each time I always seemed to fumble around for an explanation which, to my ears, sounded lame. I would say, "It's a group of diverse individuals who come together once a week to give each other support" ---which could be translated to mean, a group of weak guys who can't stand on their own feet. I usually try to add that the group is hard to explain, but if they did decide to attend, they would find the experience deeply moving and would have no regrets.

So, what is the Men's Support Group, and why would you want to participate? The CSP-Sacramento Men's Support Group took shape after the 1996 riot that occurred on the B-Facility yard. Several inmates were seriously hurt during the melee, one fatally. To witness the madness of this event as it unfolded had a profound effect on me. During my first month of lockdown, I could only feel the pain and hopelessness that weighed heavily upon the environment---so much hate and ignorance. I resolved to wash my hands of ever trying to bring about any positive change here, for what was the point? No one seemed to care, so why should I? During my second month of lockdown, I started getting angry---angry at those I am forced to serve time with at the prison for allowing this madness to continue (I felt at the time, they were indirectly encouraging it by turning a deaf ear).

When I was finally released after several months of being confined to my cell, it was with an intense determination to continue on this path I had set upon long ago. I met with Dennis Merino, the Deacon for the Catholic community here at CSP-Sacramento, and asked him if we could start a support group---at the time not having had any experiential knowledge of what such a group was about. All I knew for sure was that a forum was needed in this environment, a neutral group, where inmates of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds could come together and openly communicate what they think and feel.

Dennis gave me the "green light" to go ahead and gather together a group of interested participants. My starting point was to seek out guys from various groups that compromise the prison environment. I instinctively went to older cons I had grown to respect over the years, not really thinking that they themselves would want to participate. But to my surprise several did, and it is to these individuals I am most grateful, for in stepping forward, they took on roles of leadership and drew the attention of our younger cons.

Initially the Men's Support Group was a forum of communication, but in the year following our first B-Facility meeting, it has become so much more. A typical meeting held in the facility's chapel, begins by lighting a candle that is mounted on a wooden log that, if viewed from above, resembles the shape of a heart. The log is placed in the center of a rug that looks like a Persian tapestry. A circle of wooden chairs is formed so that group members (usually between 15 and 20) sit facing the flickering flame of the candle. Leadership of the group passes from person to person each week, with each leader

opening the meeting by speaking about the events of his week and his thoughts and feelings, whether good or bad. Then each member is given five minutes to do similarly, which completes the first round of the gathering. The leader then opens the floor for discussion, usually with a topic in mind. If one of our brothers says something during his five minutes that has made an impact on someone else, or has asked the group for support or feedback on an issue of concern, members respond freely and the circle becomes a well of experience from which all draw. Respect and confidentiality within the group exists at all times.

No two gatherings are identical, but what never changes is that the group belongs equally to each participant, and it is commonly agreed that we each get back what we bring it. Even with all this said, I have barely scratched the surface of what a group meeting is like. The atmosphere is sacred and spiritual, there is a high charge of energy within the parameters of the circle. Somehow, the language of long ago, buried in the recesses of our psyches, has found a means of release, of expression. Although consciously we are aware that we sit in the confines of a chapel located on the sterile gray grounds of a prison, this reality melts away and it is as if we are sitting in a dark cave around a raging fire, sharing stories of times past: personal defeats and successes; stories of love and loss; stories of fear, rage, hate, self-hate. Although these stories are personal in nature, they are also transpersonal, for they are experiences we all have in common.

Stories once validated the existence for our now-forgotten ancestors; cultural myths contained within these stories gave lessons in a rich language that stirred their dreams, and directed their actions. And just as these stories validated life's meaning in those times past, so too do they validate our stories of today---stories that are a reflection of our lives on both personal and collective levels. By sharing these stories we honor the experiences we have each endured, for within them can be found, if one would only dare look, some form of meaning---a lesson that was experienced but, for whatever reason was lost in the depths of one's unconscious. As prisoners, we keep hidden (for the most part) the experiences we have endured because of shame. I think back to a night several years ago, while lying on my bunk here in my cell, of an image of myself as a three or four year old boy being lured into an alley and molested by an adult neighbor. This image, when it surfaced, hit me with so much shame that I instantly batted it out of my conscious thoughts, buried it, and left it buried for several years. It was only through writing that I was able to dig it out again and begin to hold it up to the light, in a letter I shared with a friend I had grown to trust. The fact that this friend continued to accept me and even respected me for the courage to reveal something that was in my mind so disgusting was the first major step in restructuring myself. Until this turning point, I was a shattered mess of tumultuous emotions, caught in a snare of unconscious complexes of which I was totally unaware.

In recent years I have found that those experiences that had always filled me with self-loathing and shame, no longer possess me as they once did. Some of my personal stories are still difficult to speak about, like how I felt as a young teenager being blamed for my mother's suicide, because I didn't tell my stepfather she had left the house one dark and cold night, after he beat her senseless while drunk and enraged by his own personal demons. She had stood out in front of the bedroom window, and looked for the last time at my brother and three sleeping sisters. I was awake. She motioned me to

silence and said she loved me, then made her way to the sands of Nova Scotia's Bay O'Fundy, to be found dead the following morning by my brother and I.

Not all stories have a moral, but most—the significant ones—do contain those feelings of grief and isolation that we believe are ours alone. When one is able to let go of one of these stories into the circle of a men's group, the common threads that unify all human beings are quick to reveal themselves. Beneath our skin of whatever color we realize not the differences but the similarities. We are not alone. We discover that true strength is to be found not in our capacity for tolerating senseless pain, but in our ability to weep openly, to be embraced by or to embrace another brother. We are secure in our masculinity, in our compassion, empathy, and love for a fellow man.

As a "Lifer" I have always felt a certain amount of responsibility. In taking a man's life, I feel I owe a life---which in this case is my own. Years ago, I realized that how I go about this life of mine would be determined by how I approached each day, with its many given circumstances and situations. I could chase the dope bag or become lost in the yard politics that never seemed to go anywhere, that always seemed to result in unresolved conflicts that would then wane, only to be rekindled at some later time down the road. This barren hopelessness, the feeling that life has no meaning, is what pushed me over the edge to murder. I no longer cared. It was the existential void that was a catalyst to most of the violence that has marked my life.

I'm just a dude doing a life sentence, one of the countless thousands shelved away in institutions statewide, who will probably die here on the inside. I accept this. But just because a guy is serving life doesn't necessarily mean life is over. The quality of our existence, even under the worst conditions, can still be determined by us in how we approach this road we are on, and in our attitude and the way we deal with each new day.

For me, the Men's Support Group is an ongoing source of nourishment that leaves no room for the existential void. Words can never fully convey the depth of meaning the Men's Support Group holds for me personally. I do know that because of my involvement with this group, I am a better man for it. The scars and tattoos I wear were once the badges of my struggles through life. They told a story about a life I didn't understand or have any control over. Today they speak of a hard life that has newfound meaning---skin and bone that one day I will discard for something more enduring. Life is the ultimate initiator of men, and although I don't see myself yet as an elder in the long-ago sense, I do see myself as a guide and friend to my younger brothers---which is something I was denied early in life. The Men's Support Group is comprised of young and old who are learning to become positive leaders.

With all this said, I hope I have answered to some degree, what the Men's Support Group is about. We live in dark times, both out there beyond these walls and here on the inside, and if we can't be there for each other, we can't expect someone outside our environment to be there for us. So in closing, consider these words and if you do have some interest, however minimal, in what our group is about, direct any questions you may have to Deacon Dennis Merino, Catholic Chaplain for CSP-Sacramento.

Patrick Nolan died April 7, 2000



# Men's Support Group

## Weekly Meeting Protocols

### OPENING

- Gathering of the men in a circle. Exchange greetings, handshakes, etc.
- By way of opening the circle, a poem is read or recited, or some other focusing piece is done to indicate that we are stepping into "another place."
- Mood check: Each man gives his name, his "Spirit Name" which was determined at the intensive training, and a one or two word description of what he is feeling in his body at the moment; i.e. mad, glad, sad, scared, ashamed, etc.

### DISCUSSION

- Question: What happened this week where you were aware of strong feelings (the goal is to find an incident where strong feeling was involved and to look at the incident and what feeling accompanied it). Some instructional piece on the "Question" is answered for the purpose of the next circle discussion. For instance, "When this week, were you aware of betraying yourself, and what was the feeling connected to the incident?"
- Men go around the circle and speak to the question. The Volunteer Facilitator focuses the answer on the feeling state that accompanied the incident. For instance, does that feeling happen often? When do you first identify the type of feeling connected to this type of incident? Is there a habitual feeling that precedes incidents of this sort?
- If necessary, one or more men come back to their "work" of identifying the "trail" back into a habitual behavior pattern and the accompanying feeling. The "work" is being willing to look at a pattern of feeling and behavior that are related to each other. There is usually a sequence or "trail" that repeats itself, usually so quickly that one is unaware of the repetitiousness of the pattern. If one is able to slow the sequence down, a definable feeling usually precedes the behavior. By becoming aware of the triggering feeling, the behavior can change.

### CLOSING

- When all men who choose to participate are complete (that is when they have identified the feeling, and the related behavior), there is a discussion around the circle of what the "work" of one man may have triggered in another man. Each man speaks to his own feelings in turn. Often a pattern in one man will be recognized as a pattern in oneself.
- When all men are "complete" (i.e. when no man has a residual "charge" of feeling that has not been explored to his satisfaction,) then there is a checkout round, where each man again says in one or two words, the feeling now resident in his body.
- Often a poem or other reading is brought forward by one man to close the meeting. Farewell greetings are exchanged among the men and all depart.

## **THE MEN'S SUPPORT GROUP**

**RULES: These six rules must be agreed on by everyone in the group, no exceptions. If a man cannot commit to these rules he cannot stay.**

1. WHAT IS SAID AND DONE HERE STAYS HERE!
2. Tell your truth.
3. No violence.
4. Everyone has the right to pass and not have to explain why.
5. If you decide to leave the group or drop out for a period of time, process this decision in the group.
6. Do not come to the group high. Some groups have decided that if a person comes high they must agree to say so at the beginning of the group. This rule is the only one that has this flexibility and must be decided to as a group at the beginning.

### **AGREEMENTS AND GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATION:**

1. **SPEAK FREELY AND OPENLY:** Men need not ask permission to speak, move around or contribute in any fashion. However, only one person speaks at a time and no interrupting. When a man is finished speaking do so by saying, "I'm in."
2. **TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOURSELF:** I am not here to "fix" you and you are not here to "fix" me. Each man will get to his own work on his own time, if he ever does at all. Some men may come and listen for years, not saying hardly a thing and that is his right.
3. **SPEAK DIRECTLY TO ANOTHER MAN:** Instead of "Brother X seems sad", speak directly to him, "Brother X, you seem sad to me", or "I'm feeling like you are really pissed right now and trying not to show it."
4. **BE AWARE OF FEELINGS:** Try to express them. Because avoidance of feelings is so ingrained, give special attention to how men feel and encourage feeling statements. "I'm getting a visit tomorrow and I feel happy", or "I'm afraid."
5. **BE HERE-AND-NOW:** Emphasize the present. As much as possible stay in the boundaries of the here-and-now by describing present experience.
6. **USE "I" STATEMENTS:** Rather than using the editorial "We" or "You", speak for yourself. Instead of statements like, "When someone disrespects you, you gotta handle it." say "When someone disrespects me I gotta handle it."
7. **AVOID QUESTIONS:** Before asking a question (or answering one) consider the statement behind your question and express the direct statement. For example: "Why are you looking at me?" (Question) "I feel fear and my armor come up when you look at me like that." (Statement)
8. **AVOID ASKING "WHY?":** "Why" leads to analyzing, mind-tripping and often leads one away from full experiencing.
9. **AVOID JUDGEMENT; BE DESCRIPTIVE:** Describe the Brother's behavior and your response. In this way you do not lay a trip on someone else, and you take responsibility for your own reactions. Instead of: "You're really tripping." Say: "When you ramble on I lose a sense of where you are going, and I start to feel anxious and lose track of what you are saying."

10. COME PREPARED: We often walk through life in half-dazed state unaware of others and ourselves. Group requires you to be alive and attentive. Come prepared to work and to be supportive of your Brothers. This is your life. Commit yourself as if your life depended on it...It does!

### **MENS WORK INSIDE THE CIRCLE**

My name is R. ( name withheld). I'm doing Life for murder and robbery. As a 39-year-old lifer who has been in prison for 14 years, I have done many SHU terms. I have had many fights in my past. I have called shots that have made many men bleed. I'm also a lifetime member of a motorcycle club. I'm all of these things. However, 3 years ago, I met a man who changed my life: Patrick Nolan. He was the strongest man I have ever met. I was so impressed with the way this man carried himself, I wanted some of what he had.

I will try to tell you what the Men's Support Group has done for me. I started going to the newly formed Men's Support Group in B-Facility New Folsom (California State Prison – Sacramento). I found that it was the most real place I'd ever been in. The strongest men in prison were here telling their truths, looking at the sadness, anger and shame of their lives. I found I wasn't the only man here who wanted more from life, or who was looking for peace in this crazy world, or who wanted more than blood and acting like someone I wasn't. I found that I wanted to be trusted, loved and more, I wanted someone to see past what I pretended to be, and someone to know who I was really.

It's been over three years now and in all truth, I can say I found all of these things and so much more. I have forgiven myself for all my wrongs. I cannot undo them, but I have forgiven myself, and in doing so I found the peace I needed. My life has gotten much easier - things seem to come to me now and my family who hated me is now real close to me. The fake tough guy crap is only stupid to me now. Men who once feared me, now look to me for help. I have become a leader who is a caring man, and I like who I am now. I know that by now, without the Men's Support Group, I would be doing an indeterminate Special Housing Unit term.

I will try to write what a Men's Support Group is. It seems easy in truth, but it's hard, for whatever I write will fall short of what it is. Please keep this in mind as you read.

- I will start with the basics: The rules of "our" group are limited to the following:
- 1) WHAT WE SAY AND DO IN OUR CIRCLE, STAYS IN OUR CIRCLE.
  - 2) WHAT WE SAY IN OUR CIRCLE WILL BE THE TRUTH.

This first rule is a MUST! This is not negotiable. Each man must commit to these rules when he joins the circle. In order to build trust within the circle, each man must understand he can speak his mind and not worry about being betrayed. This trust will grow as long as this one rule is practiced. Sometimes it is best if this rule is mentioned at the beginning of each meeting.

The second rule we have is, what we say in the circle will be the truth. This was not always the case, we grew into that. It's good to keep in mind that most of the

men start out in the circle as strangers. There will be years of anger, fear, and misunderstandings to come to terms with before the full truth will be openly spoken. Even so, I suggest mentioning it even if only as a goal. What I have found is all of us share more and more of our truths as the trust grows.

Committing to the circle, to keep everything in the circle, is a way of building trust. The way our group has done this is to form the circle with all men standing then, the first man says: "I commit to keeping what is said and done here in this circle, in the circle". He stands before the man on his left and looks him in the eyes. He doesn't say anything, he just looks into the man's eyes and lets him see the truth of his commitment. There is no set time limit, however you don't want to just "look and move". You stand there and give the man before you the chance to read your eyes, then you move to the next man and repeat until you're back where you started. Then the man on your left commits and does the same things and so on, until every man had committed. Also, all new members to the circle must make this commitment before being allowed to participate in the circle.

In prison, having someone stare at you is an act of aggression, demanding that you confront it or bow down to it. Before asking the men to do this commitment it is good to state "this is done without any aggression. Its done out of trust, hope and peace".

After these commitments, the circle may begin. A circle is formed with chairs. Men seated may begin by "checking in", with what you're feeling (e.g. fear, anger sadness, shame, joy, etc.). For example: "I'm John and I'm checking in with fear and happiness, I'm in with that." Then the man on your left checks in and so on, until all men have checked in. This is the first check in round.

The second check in round gives each man the opportunity in approximately 5 minutes to tell how his week was. If no one seems to have much to say, you may try by saying: "the best part of my week was..." or "the worst part of my week was..."

At first you can expect everyone to keep it safe, like: "my week was okay." This will change in time. I myself kept it real simple for six months. Each man must understand this is their group, and not CDC's or some doctors, trying to get information from them. I would suggest that everyone refrain from trying to fix anyone, or asking the question – WHY? You will find that "WHY" doesn't matter, what matters is: how did you feel?

After the second round is over and everyone has had their time, there may be someone who seems to need more time and is willing to look deeper into the subject. Let him do it. We never know what needs to be said or done, it just happens. If nothing came up during this round, start the next round with a question that all men are invited to reply to, and they may pass if they do not want to respond. Not everyone will want to take part at first and that's okay - in time they will. Some basic questions for this round are: "My greatest accomplishment has been", "My life has begun to", "I have really decided that I've had enough of", "I shall," etc.

This round will be informative, especially to the man speaking. Let him speak, don't judge him. If you or any member of the group has questions, wait until he has finished. Do not ever interrupt. In group it's very important that the men feel they can speak their truth without interruption, so they feel heard and not to be judged and thought less of.

After everyone has addressed the subject of the day for this group meeting, if time allows, you could ask what each man hopes to get from the group. Open the floor for discussion and let everyone speak freely. You can say: "any man can start". If no one wants to start, you start. When you're finished speaking, close with "I'm in", so the group will know that you're finished speaking. This will let the next man know that he may begin or pass - whatever he wants to do.

At the close of the group meeting, the last round is what's called the "check out" round. Men say what they are now feeling, for example: "I'm John and I'm checking out with, hope. I'm out." This is the basic format of a Men's Support Group. However, it does not provide you with the power a Men's Support Group provides. This power comes from the men and from you, as well as from the spirit that comes into the room when truth and hope is spoken.

In closing let me just say, a Men's Support Group is like a tree - it starts out small and fragile, needing much care. In time it becomes strong and independent, providing growth and shelter, but someone has to provide the first seed...In this case it was my friend Pat Nolan.

Writings

About

The Groups

May 10, 2001  
New Folsom

I've been asked to write a "testimonial" about the significance and impact the men's support groups have had on my life as a prisoner serving a robbery/murder sentence of life without the possibility of parole.

In the spring of 1998, Joe told me that Pat Nolan, who was at this time in B-facility, requested that Joe start a "Men's Group" on C-facility. Joe agreed. He asked me to join, especially because it was very important to Pat, and Patrick had been my friend for the past 6 years.

Doing time consists of secrets and prison espionage. The secrets of who's doing what, such as: who's using dope, who's selling dope, who's making wine, who's selling wine, who's hustling this or that, who's clicked up with who and who's not, who has smut on 'em, who can be trusted, who cannot, so on and so forth. Now I'm asked to sit in a circle of men I know, men I know of, men I don't know, men I suspect, men I trust or don't trust, and learn the language and behavior of trust, sincerity, honesty and truth, by admitting my faults and exploring new ways to mature, by giving up *my* secrets about my feelings. This is to be done by crossing all the strict prison lines of race, politics and type of crime, (i.e. informant, molester, etc.) - to be non-judgmental and see each man as a human being. This is insane and dangerous, but by the grace of God, it works, it heals, it inspires, and creates love!

I began attending the weekly men's group meetings starting in the summer of 1998. Sitting in the circle, I slowly learned the language, the process and new methods to deal with this new way of thinking. I became aware of my emotions, why I feel a certain way and how to acknowledge and nurture my healing process.

I witnessed the circles slowly build trust between blacks and whites, confidence between strangers. Race became a non-issue, politics were respected but quietly ignored and most of all, human beings stretched themselves to build sacred bonds of affection, trust, love, honesty, refuge, truth and faith that encourage the development of mature growth.

During the almost 3 yrs. of weekly meetings (when the facility wasn't locked down for race riots, stabbings, slashings etc.), men learned to brave their fears and work. I've cried in front of my circle, and the first time it scared me deeply, but I was accepted and encouraged. It's was safe to cry in a men's group circle, even in prison.

I've learned that I have personal medicine that heals, eases pain and inspires health. My medicine is recognizing the many forms of love, and trusting and accepting that love in all its innumerable forms. I've also learned that if I do not listen with my heart, but reject without trusting, it's poisonous to me. I've tested this repeatedly and it works! As an example, I will and do encourage, and gladly accept handshakes and hugs form any member of any men's groups anywhere: yard, building, visiting area, regardless of race, politics or faith. Being in my medicine, I help build community in my prison and my example is manifested in other, men's group men, in their behavior. I witness it everyday now.

Personally my faith and spiritual practice is deeper, richer and more fulfilling than at any other time of my life. Now I have a much closer personal relationship to my creator, my savior and scripture. My heart has never been more open to my community of men in blue – and to all men!

Whoever hears or reads this testimonial, I urge you to open your heart and hear the truth of my feelings and my joy. This program teaches men how to get in touch with all their emotions, not just anger, but love and joy too, and to be a real human being.

With sincere love and gratitude,



## **The Loss of My Soul**

The loss of my soul never was my goal. In a dark lonely place I reach for emotion, but find not even a trace. I feel my heart beating within my chest, so what happened to my compassion, understanding, and all the rest?

At one time I was a man who had enough feeling to freely give. Now I seem to be nothing more than a shell that somehow continues to live. I look into the sky and search for a feeling of peace, comfort or joy. When was it that all my tenderness was thrown away like a child's broken toy?

I possess an active brain and the same blood still flows through my veins. I still long for a gentle caress, its absence bring such burning pains. I know where I am and I know what I have done. I forfeited freedom and let down my wife and son.

I still possess one emotion; it's a growing fear that I will become an uncaring zombie like so many others in here.

The loss of my soul never was my goal...

## **If I Was To Bare My Soul**

If I was to bare my soul to the world, surely the world would turn on me.

If I were to once more become the innocent child I once was before time and life imposed it fucked up expectations, peer pressure, prison rules and the "hate what you don't understand" concept, how would I feel?

I'm forced to live on the razor's edge where every act and move must be well thought out before execution. If I were to dance with joy, the razor would destroy me. If I stomp too hard, or move too fast, I get cut...

I'm one of the lucky ones. I have found a place were I can bare my soul to my brothers without them turning on me. In this place, my pain is welcome and they understand it. They feel it; they all know pain on an intimate level and are stronger because of it.

In this place the innocent child I once was, runs free. Without expectations, peer pressure, prison rules don't apply at all in this world and "hate what you don't understand" has no chance in hell here. In here it's RAW, it's real. I'm not only allowed to be me, but it's demanded. How could I be anything but me, when only the truth is spoken? These men, every one of them, are an asset to the world, and the world is so fucked up it threw us away. Now we heal and love each other.

I sometimes have this profound thought that maybe crime does pay.

## **My Brother**

Desperado, outcast, outlaw, renegade, scoundrel, murderer, robber, thief, con man. junky, alcoholic, dope fiend, abuser, prisoner.... If you can see your face in any of these, you are my brother.

Hated, despised, not trusted, misunderstood, degraded, thrown away, lost, dying, dead, lonely, homeless, poor, humiliated, suppressed, exiled, shunned, unwanted, tragedy, misery, sick diseased, broken, prisoner.... If you can see your face in any of these, you are my brother.

Seeking, teaching, learning, growing, hoping, changing, understanding, loving, sharing, helping, wanting, touching, accepting, tolerating, praying, prisoner.... If you can see your face in any of these, you are my brother.

Black, white, yellow, brown, red, Catholic, Protestant, Jehovah, Baptist, Muslim, Native, Pagan, Atheist, prisoner.... If you can see your face in any of these, you are my brother.

Because I am all of these things and much more, I am human.

## **Lost and Found**

A funny thing happened to me the other day while I was walking the prison yard. Just for a brief moment, a warm feeling came over me.

The only way I can really describe it is it's kinda like brushing up against a tree. It's there for a second and then it's gone.

It doesn't happen very often and has only happened since I've been locked up in prison, which has been ten years now.

There is something very familiar about the feeling... like it is part of who I used to be. So why does it feel so strange? And why can't I put my finger on it? And why is it only with me for so short a time?

Wait a minute. There it is again...that feeling. What the hell is that sensation I keep brushing up against?

Hold on...I think I'm beginning to understand. It's something I lost many years ago and I didn't even realize I had lost it until I started looking for it.

That thing I keep brushing up against and that feeling that only touches me for a moment.....It's happiness.

## Vessels of Transformation:

### Poems and Circles of Trust

By Bell Gale Chevigny

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#### Finished

You know,  
A person spends their whole  
life  
Searching for something  
And all the while,  
That something is within  
You waiting to be  
discovered.

This is how it is  
When your whole life  
Has been blown out  
Of the water before ever  
Setting out to sea-a night  
Sea journey with no rudder  
And high waves.

My whole life was sinking  
Before it ever thought  
To rise-trees  
Have been replaced  
By sleepless nights in prison,  
The sky framed in a sealed  
Window cut into the back  
wall.

Patrick Nolan - 1993

#### Gold

I have tasted  
The explosion  
Of my father's  
Knuckles, in youth.

I am the boy  
Staring at the sun;  
Only, my intensity  
Is real.

I want to please.  
The salt on my lips  
Is red. His creased  
Face my pain.

By the hand.  
I was raised  
By the hand  
Of my father.

Patrick Nolan

Patrick Nolan anticipated his death in verse.

On April 7, 2000, in California's medical prison at Vacaville, Nolan died of Hepatitis C. Shortly before, he wrote a spare, but unsparing, account of the time-table of cirrhosis: "one minute you could / feel good, sitting alone in / the sunshine smoking a cigarette, / and in the next be puking up tumblers / of blood." Already "the biggest killer of prisoners," he noted, by 2010 Hepatitis C "will have stacked more corpses than AIDS."

Though Patrick Nolan had only a 6th grade education, writing helped him to find himself and rebuild his life behind the wall. Growing up in Toronto, he had often fled from a violent stepfather to the streets or the custody of the state. His beloved mother was driven to suicide by her husband, and Patrick crisscrossed Canada and the U.S., desperate, unstoppable until he'd killed a man. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he was still wild; his reckless assault of another prisoner in California State Prison-Sacramento won him nearly two years in the hole. There he lived among the racist convict heavies who said "who lived or died," but he began reading and "fell in love" with works of Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr., and he wrote to sort out his reactions. Nothing illuminated his experience more than Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl, a man who had learned in the death camps that we can choose to make any experience meaningful.

Before committing murder, Nolan wrote later, "life was meaningless, my life was meaningless. It took taking a man's life to make me realize just how priceless life truly is. I don't lament that my life is sentenced to confinement. I owe a man my life." Nolan turned the logic of capital punishment on its head. If he had killed himself, he wrote, "nothing would be settled; rather, two lives would be wasted." Instead, he sought ways to locate and make meaning.

He would find two such ways, the first in a workshop taught by the poet Dianna Henning. The discipline of poetry reoriented his life. By containing feelings he had never dared to face, poetry enabled Nolan to bear them. Writing let him "sit in the fire," re-experience pain he'd given and taken to articulate its meaning, rather than be overwhelmed or return to violence. Many poems bear witness to the sorrows and deaths of men around him. Others revisit scenes of conflict, humiliation, or grief-as if to diminish their power over him or to uncover a bygone capacity to care. "I knew a face once," he wrote, "freckled innocence / with red curly hair . . . Who is this skull / with eyes ringed in darkness?" Another poem, "The Family Outing," won an award in the 1977 PEN Prison Writing Contest.

In preparing *Doing Time*, a collection of PEN prize winners' work, I contacted Nolan for permission to publish "Old Man Motown," a poem about a disciplined and vigorous old con, a type once respected by young prisoners, but now their prey. Nolan wrote me that Motown had been assaulted during a 1996 race riot. During the long lockdown following the riot, Nolan felt hopeless, then angry. Finally he resolved to continue on the path he'd carved-but this time he would take other men on the journey.

With the Catholic chaplain's help, Nolan created a forum initially designed for men of all races to "openly communicate what they think and feel." Circled around a candle in the chapel, the group became something far richer. This was after Rob Allbee, poet, biker, ex-con and ex-heroin addict, visited prison to read his poems and talked about his experience in the men's movement outside. Allbee told me he'd sworn never to return to prison: "The place was filled with rage, hatred, and violence, and there was nothing that could be done about it-the place was broken. But Pat said we didn't have to live like that." Nolan pressed him to facilitate poetry workshops and men's circles until Allbee agreed. "It was as if I'd never left," Allbee says. "There were different faces, but the same violence and hatred." Nolan rekindled Allbee's belief in helping a young man "touch the sacred inside himself for the first time in his life," and the two launched several interracial circles together. Such rites of passage reversed and healed the toxic initiations of fathers, gangs, and prison life. Even men who will never be released take heart, says Allbee; for them, "self-exploration is all that's left. The rest is gone--there's no family, no world."

Like poems, the men's circles become what Nolan called "containers of trust where they feel safe enough to explore together how they feel." Within prison walls, poems and men's circles paradoxically become vessels that protect the growth of humanity and challenge the prison culture, in which antagonism and racial violence rule. Telling each other "the truths in their lives," Nolan wrote, they confided their anger, fear, and shame. The healing effect of "being seen and trusted by other men," who then "father and brother and mentor each other," Nolan wrote, was amazing. True strength, he found, lies "not in our capacity for tolerating senseless pain but in our ability to weep openly," to embrace and accept the embraces of brothers.

Imprisonment had prevented Patrick from escaping himself and he encouraged others, shaped by "the same painful intensities that cooked me" to recover and build on earliest longings for acknowledgment and love. "Pat talked to me, but I used to give him the shoulder because he was white," Smiley, a Chicano prisoner told me. "I didn't open no doors." But when he joined the circle, "Pat would say something quietly, looking off to the side, 'You should write about that.'" Because of the circle, Smiley said, "I've been able to make changes."

In fall 1999, Nolan's enlarged spleen got him transferred to Vacaville, where I visited him. He knew he would never get back to his friends in CSP-Sacramento, but he said, "There are so many people suffering here. It's a part of life. I think it's important for me to see it and to know it." He continued to write, to bear witness, "to appreciate life's sanctity," till the end.

Allbee keeps Nolan's legacy of creativity and brotherhood alive. With Don Morrison, one of Patrick's closest friends and his literary executor, he formed the Inside Circle Foundation ([www.insidecircle.org](http://www.insidecircle.org)), which draws facilitators from the Mankind Project, a network of men committed to living lives of integrity, accountability, and connection to feeling. Since Patrick's death, 40 outside facilitators from all over the U.S. and England

have conducted intensive training sessions with men inside. "I can't stop coming now for as long as I draw air," Allbee says. "I've found my people and my home again."

At memorial services held in Nolan's old yards in CSP-Sacramento, people who'd been encouraged by Nolan to open up, to write, and to sing, now did so in his name. One after another marveled to learn that Nolan was only thirty-six, he seemed so like a wise elder. "Pat had a poetic heart, he had a poetic mind, he had a poetic soul," said a tall African-American. "He'd come a hard road, yet he was able to identify with everyone. He could bring people together from all factions. He was deep. He touched me. He was a man in the fullest sense. I keep him in my heart."

*Bell Gale Chevigny is a retired professor of Literature, a Soros Justice Fellow, and member of the PEN Prison Writing Committee. She edited Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing, a PEN American Center Prize anthology. She is currently writing a book centering on Patrick Nolan, poetry, and men's circles.*

The  
Inside Circle  
Foundation



## **INSIDE CIRCLE FOUNDATION**

*Helping prisoners and parolees discover their destiny*

*Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*

### **What Is It?**

The Inside Circle Foundation (ICF) is a not for profit organization dedicated to the personal growth of men in prison. We teach emotional literacy and personal responsibility. Contributions are deductible for federal and state income tax purposes.

### **Our Goal**

ICF has existed since January 1999 to create environments and train inmates to explore, work with, and resolve issues that have prevented them from living up to their full potential as human beings.

### **Current Activities**

ICF conducts Men's Support Groups and 4-day Intensive Training Workshops.

### **Our Future**

ICF is growing to lead more groups and conduct more intensive trainings in the prisons we currently work in, and to expand to other prisons.

### **Our Need**

ICF has been sustained by the volunteer service and donations of many people. To expand our services in we need significant corporate and foundation support, as well as individual donations.

### **To Help**

Please contribute to our necessary and meaningful work; in person, by mail or at our web site. Thank you for your support.

Inside Circle Foundation  
5150 Fair Oaks Blvd. #237  
Carmichael, CA 95608  
Phone 916-482-4027  
[www.insidecircle.org](http://www.insidecircle.org)





## **The Inside Circle Foundation**

*“Helping prisoners and parolees discover their destiny.”*

### **Who are we?**

- The Inside Circle Foundation (ICF) is a California not-for-profit organization dedicated to the personal growth of men in prison with the net result being a reduction of prison violence within the facility and lower recidivism when inmates parole.
- ICF provides emotional literacy and behavioral change trainings and weekly support groups for inmates as a component of the prison ministries of the California Catholic Conference. The purpose of the ICF is to help inmates take behavioral, emotional and spiritual responsibility for their lives. The ICF creates environments in which prisoners can safely work and explore the issues that have prevented them from living up to their full potential as human beings.
- The founders of ICF have been working with inmates and establishing weekly support groups within Folsom State Prison and CSP Sacramento since 1997. There are currently one hundred inmates participating in seven weekly men’s support groups inside both CSP Sacramento and Folsom State Prison. In addition, approximately perhaps three hundred other inmates are former group participants who have now been either transferred to other prisons or have been released from custody. While these numbers are encouraging, bear in mind that there are approximately 9,000 inmates in this one prison complex and California has more than 30 such prisons.
- In 2000 the ICF was formed with an Internal Revenue Service designation as a Sec. 501 c), (3) educational organization. This and the public support for the program resulted in expanded support group activity and three intensive trainings being conducted.

### **What do we provide?**

- ICF provides weekly support groups and periodic intensive trainings that allow the inmates an opportunity to discover how to take full responsibility for their lives and their behavior.
- The volunteer ICF staff creates a safe environment where the inmates can tell the truth about their lives and discover the true motivation behind their destructive behavior, and the gifts and medicine that they bring to the world.

## **How is ICF different from similar programs?**

- The ICF groups and trainings provide the inmates with the opportunity to re-experience, heal and reframe the life traumas that have burdened their lives.
- Inmates participating in ICF programs are there by choice. No "good-time" merits are awarded to the men for their participation. No letters go into their files. Their only reward is the knowledge that as they change, others will witness the change and have to deal with the consequences of their new choices.
- ICF has a working relationship with an international network of men's support groups (the ManKind Project) outside the prison and across the country that will, as the program develops, "catch" the inmates upon their release from prison and invite them to participate in similar support groups on the outside that will support and encourage the new choices that they make in life.

## **How did this get started?**

Some four years ago the late Patrick Nolan, a former inmate at CSP, Sacramento, felt the need for the inmates themselves to honestly and openly confront the ever-increasing violence in the environment in which they lived. Out of that need, the original Men's Support Group was formed with the help of Chaplain Dennis Merino. Chaplain Merino and Inmate Nolan soon recognized that experienced facilitators were needed to help the rapidly forming groups.

Inmate Nolan and Chaplain Merino approached Arts-In-Corrections instructor Robert Allbee, knowing that he had extensive experience in men's group processes, and asked him if he would help facilitate the groups. Allbee, himself a former convict, agreed to participate and quickly discovered that he needed additional outside volunteers to facilitate the increasing number of groups. Allbee, through his association with the ManKind Project (MKP) an international network of men's groups, started to recruit men from the Sacramento MKP community to assist with the weekly group facilitation. Once the weekly support groups were firmly in place, planning began for the first intensive training that would be held inside Folsom State Prison. Allbee enlisted the services of Bob Petersen and Don Morrison, both experienced support group and training facilitators, to help create the program and organization for the first intensive training. The first step was the creation of the Inside Circle Foundation to handle the business aspects of the program. The second step was to gather the very best facilitators from around the world to help conduct the training.

Based on the success of the first training, a second and third trainings were planned for CSP, Sacramento, "B" and "C" Yards. These trainings were conducted in October of 2000 and April 2001 and again were extremely successful. It has provided 54 inmates, and the facilitators, an intense spiritual and healing experience. Not enough can be said about the dedication and service of the many volunteer facilitators who participated in the three trainings. These men, some 58 of them, from 14 different states and the United Kingdom and Australia, were uncompensated, paid their own way to get to Sacramento, and have donated their time to come and assist the inmates in taking responsibility for their lives. Since 2000, there have been a total of twelve intensives.

In all regards, the ICF has received an overwhelming response from the men of the ManKind Project. They have responded generously with contributions and as volunteers.

The work simply would not have happened without this support. There is strong enthusiasm for this important work, and many men come to learn how to introduce this work to the prisons in their own communities.

**What you can do:**

First, you can indicate your interest by getting on our mailing list. Second, you can make a contribution to our work either on-line at our web site or by mail to our address below. Send contributions and correspondence to Inside Circle Foundation, 5150 Fair Oaks Blvd., # 237 Carmichael, CA 95608, 916-482-4027 or [www.insidecircle.org](http://www.insidecircle.org), or e-mail to [info@insidecircle.org](mailto:info@insidecircle.org).

# Inside Circle Foundation

By Patrick Nolan

## Mission Statement

The Inside Circle Foundation (ICF) is a not for profit organization dedicated to the inner personal growth of men in prison. The goal of the ICF is to create environments in which prisoners can explore and work the issues in their lives that have prevented them from living up to their full potential as human beings. In these environments, the ICF primarily utilizes self-help discussion groups to achieve the inner development necessary to become healthy contributing members of our society.

## The Self Help Discussion Group

It is believed that since before recorded history began men have been gathering in circles around campfires to discuss the day's events and the important issues in each other's lives. It is also believed by some that since men, for the most part, have lost access to these circles, they have consequently lost access to a shared collective wisdom that has left them isolated and out of touch.

It is this sense of loss that has inspired men from all over the world to once again seek one another out. It is this shared collective that men are so seriously attempting to tap into that has resulted in the so-called men's movement of the past twenty years or so. These circles are the very backbone of the current men's movement.

With the primary focus of these groups being on personal growth, and having very little political agenda or organized affiliations, the men are gathering virtually unnoticed in nearly every city throughout the country. As a consequence, their successes go virtually unnoticed as well. It is only through the personal testimonies of those individuals involved, that the mainstream population would ever hear anything at all about these groups. As well, because of the respect of the confidentiality of each member involved, very little is said of these groups outside the groups.

None the less there is testimony unto itself as to their viability. Perhaps for the first time in a long time, men from all walks of life are finally stepping past their ethnic, religious, and political differences and gathering around a common cause: the exploration of what it means to be a healthy adult male and what it takes to be a man.

Many people feel that one of the failures of our modern society is that we, both men and women, have become isolated and that the burden of satisfying all of an individuals needs has fallen totally on the shoulders of our spouses. Many feel this is too much to expect of our partners, and has contributed to the tremendous numbers of failed marriages and partnerships that we see in our societies today. It is too much for example,

to expect a woman to be able to handle all the responsibility of dealing with her husband's rage or feelings of inadequacy (and vice versa). Many now feel that it is the responsibility of other men to deal with this man's rage, as well as his many other emotions and problems. This man needs to be able to go to other men with the feelings he has been living with, in isolation all of his life, and be able to be heard and dealt with. His circle of men needs to be strong enough to be able to listen to anything this man brings to them, and that he can in this way relieve some of the burden he has up until now placed on his spouse.

What goes on inside these circles is no great mystery and in some ways is quite simple. Men are simply telling each other the truths about their lives. They are telling each other about their anger, how and who they love, what they fear and what they are ashamed of. They are telling each other what gives them joy and how they have been hurt. Put simply, they are building containers of trust where they feel safe enough to explore together how they feel. Many, perhaps for the first time in their lives, are developing relationships with other men based not on competition, but on trust

It has been shown in these circles that there is tremendous healing simply in being seen and heard. Many men have stated that being seen and trusted by other men has had an amazing impact on their lives. Men from all walks of life can father and brother and mentor each other in ways that they did not expect. They have been able to tap into that collective wisdom and carry it back into their daily lives.

The Inside Circle Foundation believes that the introduction of these circles into prisons has had an amazing result. As word of mouth has spread, the request for groups has far outnumbered availability. One of the primary reasons for the successes of these groups is that these circles carry no particular agenda, their direction and efficiency is totally dependant on the individuals involved. The techniques employed depend on the needs of the collective individuals. Under the guidance of an individual who has previous experience in the process, each group is encouraged to explore and develop systems that will fit their needs. This gives them a feeling of pride and independence crucial in their success and recovery.

Another reason for their success is that prisoners can start on their path by first learning to trust "one of their own", so to speak. Most of these men have big trust issues to deal with. Most have difficulty in being able to feel like they can trust anyone. They especially have difficulty trusting anybody that they feel is "part of the establishment." In these groups they can begin by learning to trust each other, which is no small feat all by itself. Then perhaps, they can begin the task of learning to trust the outside world.

The single most important reason this program has had success in prison is that it is strictly voluntary. The inmate gains no "in-system credentials" by participating. As a result, the only people who get involved are those individuals who are already serious about trying to see if there is any part of their lives that is salvageable. Many of the participants are lifers, some with no chance of ever getting paroled. They understand that there is only one world left for them to explore, the one inside of themselves. They are consequently, quite serious.

## Conclusions

Using these techniques the Inside Circle Foundation has seen men change. It doesn't happen overnight when it happens at all. The key element in this whole effort is that it is all entirely dependent on the men himself. A man will get out of it only what he puts into it. The ICF can only present him with the opportunity. It is up to him to take it. And when he does it is truly a miraculous thing to witness. To watch a man honestly go down into the depths of his own sometimes tortured soul, take on the demons he has perhaps been wrestling with for a lifetime, and emerge with wisdom and insights necessary for authentic and lasting change, is an inspiration to all who have the privilege of witnessing such events. It is for this reason that the ICF is deeply committed to this challenge.

## History

The Inside Circle Foundation was officially formed in January of 1999 by Rob Allbee, and was incorporated in California on March 28, 2000. Rob, a former convict himself, had been offering his experience and expertise as a men's circle facilitator on a primarily volunteer basis in the California State Prison, Sacramento in Folsom California. As the request for circles grew, taking more and more time away from his capacity to earn a living as a carpenter, he began to explore ways to solicit funding for this program he felt so strongly about. Rob recruited the help of his friend Donald Morrison, a local accountant, and together they formed Inside Circle Foundation.