

Circles of neighbors

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YONKERS—Awilda Perez never planned on becoming a community organizer, but her co-workers noticed she had a certain spark.

"My supervisor thought I was a good candidate to be a facilitator, maybe because I'm an outspoken person. I'm a people person," said Perez, 38, referring to her role in conducting a six-week set of discussions on her neighborhood around Livingston Avenue in southwest Yonkers.

Perez and almost a dozen other Yonkers residents will help lead six discussion groups scattered throughout west Yonkers as part of Neighborhood Circles, a project launched in September by the Yonkers Early Childhood Initiative. The discussion groups consist of two facilitators and about a dozen local residents. The sessions are designed to help strengthen a community's civic life and empower residents to improve their neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Circles began as a pilot program at the Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church on Walnut Street and the San Andres Episcopal Church on Elliott Avenue. The program initially met with skepticism among residents, said facilitator Areli Nieves, who helped lead the Good Shepherd group last year.

"In the last (discussion) circle, I had people saying, 'Why are we bothering? this is a waste of time,'" said Nieves, who in the second round will help facilitate two circles. One will be at the Arab-American Foundation, and the other will be with day laborers at a still-undetermined location.

The program got off to a bumpy start at first, because some of the moderators did not have experience leading discussion groups.

"Providing extra support for facilitators and making sure they are fully trained, that was certainly one of the things we learned," said Lorelei Vargas of the Julia Dyckman Andrus Memorial, one of the lead agencies in the Yonkers Early Childhood Initiative.

Despite the Circle leaders' inexperience and residents' skepticism, Vargas said the pilot Circles did produce positive changes with the \$500 grants they received to carry out a community improvement project. This year, \$1,000 will go to each Circle group.

At Good Shepherd, the Circle decided to improve a neighborhood library, buying it new books. At San Andres, where there was a Spanish-speaking Circle and an English-speaking one, the groups decided to invest their grants in programs the church runs for neighborhood children.

Vargas said the next round will produce even better results.

"We're providing a space for individuals to come out and talk about their community. That is a huge accomplishment, considering today when people are running around in all directions," said Vargas, adding she hopes participants will remain in touch after the groups conclude to address new issues.

In some cases, the groups are unprecedented events for Yonkers communities. May Annabi, executive director of the Arab-American Foundation, recruited residents who are Arab for the Neighborhood Circle in her office.

"We have so many things to talk about, our children, families and the schools," said Annabi, 57, who lives in northwest Yonkers. "I want the (Arab) community to get involved in all the services available in the city."

Perez, a receptionist at the social service agency El Hogar de los Arcoiris (Home of the Rainbows) at 47 Livingston Ave., will run her Circle group out of that office. She said that she recruited people by telling them it would be good for the neighborhood to address issues such as drugs and the lack of after-school activities for their children.

"It will bring them together," Perez said of the mothers who come to El Hogar, a program of The Sharing Community social service agency. "They will get to know each other, and they will stay together after we finish to try to resolve problems."