

## A Conversation with our Founder, Dr. Mark Bergel

Dr. Mark Bergel recently sat down with A Wider Circle team member Erin Anderson, who first worked at A Wider Circle from 2005 – 2010 before returning to the staff in 2015. The two spoke about the beginnings of A Wider Circle, what motivates Mark each day, and what's next as A Wider Circle seeks to propel the movement to end poverty.

### **Can you talk about the moment when you decided to start A Wider Circle?**

It was the first day I was volunteering to deliver food to low-income families. After meeting people living in poverty - in home after home - I just thought that I had to do something. It was the people - their words, the kindness they showed to me while I was in their homes, and the hope I saw in their eyes - who inspired me.

I was teaching about poverty at American University, in fact, but volunteering showed me I knew very little about it. I did not truly know people in poverty - not beyond stereotypes and sympathies. And my sympathies surely did not run deep enough. You know, true sympathy means to share in the suffering. If we have true sympathy, and we see this suffering, we will not let it continue.



Prior to starting A Wider Circle, I was too self-involved to really engage. To volunteer and see what poverty brought to people - and to see how deep-rooted and unrelenting it was - changed my life.

The more I talked with folks and connected with them in what I found to be deeply human ways - that was it. I remember leaving one apartment and pulling over to the side of the road and deciding I had seen enough. It was time for me to commit.

### **Why commit your whole life to ending poverty?**

I do not think poverty is our greatest social crisis because I work in it. I work in it because I think it is our greatest social crisis. When I saw first-hand how people were living, and I realized that I was letting it happen by my lack of engagement and commitment to people in need, I knew my whole life had to change.

### **When you think back on the beginnings of A Wider Circle, what influences did you have? What shaped the direction of the organization?**

That is a good question because it can be easy to forget about the early days here, but it was really the first year or two - and it was conversation after conversation with people who were living in poverty. That was the education I needed. Unfortunately, not much has changed since 2001, relative to how poverty endures and how those in poverty are living each day.

Those early conversations allowed me to understand what it is that people face each day. The conversations also helped me to understand what I can do and what I should do. The relationships in those early years here shaped me, and 16 years later, they still shape and guide me. Some of my very dearest friends are the people I met 16 years ago and in whom I confide today. And their friendship and support remains the fuel for me.

### **What was some advice that people you were meeting gave to you?**

*Do it!* Everyone who lived in poverty or worked in shelters told me to start the organization and bring the energy to it that I wanted to bring to it.

Even more than their advice was just listening to their stories and having conversations that always came back to, at least for me, what it was they needed in order to realize their dreams or their goals - or to just step forward from living in this abject poverty. And I could see what was most critical if we were going to truly help the individuals and families I was meeting.

### **And what was the most critical thing?**

Support. The kind of support we all needed as we grew up in this world - someone to help with schoolwork, navigate life's challenges, or prepare for job interviews, from start to finish. Often, the people I met had dreams, but they did not seem to have a clear path to realizing those dreams.

When you live in conditions where you have few of your basic needs met, it is tough to actually implement any "life lessons." Maslow's hierarchy is clearly at play here, but even as we began providing basic need items, I underestimated the impact of this. I soon realized what a difference it makes to have a bed or a couch and television - and to then have support from there - for work and other aspects of life.

### **You made a number of personal commitments to the work - giving up your bed, limiting your salary. Can you talk about those commitments and the decision process that led up to those commitments?**

Personally, this work is a vow: a vow of service that I never take lightly. It is a life commitment, and one that I feel fortunate to have found.

I certainly was not going to make this a "job" where I had an income that had to grow in proportion to my educational level, experience, or how successful we were in growing the organization.

I live a simple life by choice, and that helps me stay focused on helping people to rise out of poverty. I do not compare myself to any executives or other people who run organizations. As far as the hours I work and giving up a bed, that feels like the least I can do.

I do not know what we are doing here on this planet if we are not here to take care of one another - to do whatever it takes to help our fellow human beings have a good quality of life. And it has to be much more than just talk.

I believe deeply that as one of us goes, so go all of us. I believe deeply that the mom at the street corner asking for money is my mother, and the kid who got shot last night just because he lives in poverty is my kid. I think we are all connected enough to be able to see that, so these things that you may see as sacrifices, to me they are baby steps compared to what I should be doing - what we all can do, given how much suffering is correctable and needless.

### **Who are your role models?**

I definitely look at history. Gandhi is the closest. We know his story is true; it is hard to know what truly happened hundreds of years ago. I like studying major social movements, and that was close enough to my lifetime. It certainly happened before my lifetime, but knowing that an individual started a movement and that movement freed a country. It did not solve all the problems for everybody who lived in it, but I look at someone like Gandhi; I look at the Civil Rights Movement, and I look at the leaders of Women's Suffrage - and that is where I get my inspiration. That is what we need here. Poverty is insidious, and allowing it to continue will destroy our nation.

I also get a lot inspiration every day from my team members. There are some people with whom I work closely - many, in fact - who are role models for me.

### **What would you say to someone who wants to engage but may feel like their existing obligations preclude them from making the same level of commitment? They may have a full-time job, or they may be raising children. What would you say to them about how they can make the level of commitment that you feel is necessary?**

Do what you can do, but really *do* what you can *do*. You are capable of so much more than you think. There is no limit to the amount of love you have to give to others. To think you do not have time is also too small of a thought process.

Deep down, I know that making my life as simple as it is allows me to work as hard as I do - and relationships and families do require time. But I still think that we have placed too tight of a restriction, of a box, around what is possible.

### **What's the next step for someone who says, "I want to increase my connectedness to people outside of my immediate circle"? "I want to start to see people living in poverty as my family"?**

The next step is to find an organization that is doing something where you can have a significant impact. At A Wider Circle, for example, you can come and be a part of Wraparound Support. You can also volunteer to help in the Neighbor-to-Neighbor Program, or you can be a job coach or teach a class. Or join a committee or Board. We have all those opportunities, and the good news is that there are organizations across the country that have these kinds of opportunities. And if you do not find one, then you just start doing something good yourself. This is about your humanity.

### **What would you say to someone who believes that it is not possible to end poverty?**

If you do not believe that we can end poverty, we still need you. Do what you can do. And just keep an open mind, because you will see it start to happen.

I do not think we can reasonably say poverty will be in this country in thirty years and still feel good about who we are as human beings. That seems crazy to me. We know we have to end it.

How can we let somebody born today in poverty, grow up to be an adult, and have a kid born into poverty? We have to put an end to this generational poverty. Or else we have to say that we do not care too much about others.

Our task must be to remove any limitations to our compassion and any limitations to our belief in what is possible.

For those who do not believe we can end poverty, I would also say that you are not alone in history. If you went back to the 1950s and you talked to many people who lived in the South, regardless of their opinions, they were saying, "There is no way a black man and a white man will share a job, will share a classroom, will share a vehicle." Right? Many others were actually saying, "I will lay down my life to block that from happening." And, of course, it happened, and it happened pretty soon after they said that.

Another example: in 1905 former President Cleveland said, "The wise and sensible woman will not want to vote," never thinking that women would vote. Just fifteen years later, the nineteenth amendment was ratified.

We often doubt, but I encourage others to not let that block effort. And if you can let go of that doubt and start believing, your effort will increase and increase. If we saw the finish line - if we said, "Ok, poverty will end in 2035 if we do the following" - we would do so much more to make it happen. That is why we need you and everyone here at A Wider Circle to paint a really good picture of how it happens - to inspire that drive.

### **What would you say is the biggest obstacle that you face?**

The biggest obstacle we face in this work is belief and commitment. There is not enough of either to get this done. We need more commitment and we need more belief from all of us that we can end poverty. And not until we have those two things will we succeed.

### **When you compare this movement to other social movements like civil rights or suffrage - each of those movements was met with great resistance. Where do you think the resistance comes from in the movement to end poverty?**

I think classism and racism are at play, and we do seem to levy a lot of judgement on people who live in poverty - whether in urban, suburban, or rural settings. Perhaps more so, I think the issue is disconnection. I think the answer to poverty is human connection.

We love our friends and family, right? We would do anything for our friends and family. Why would we stop? Why would we say, ok, 15 people, that's how much love I've got. Maybe 25 people? No, put no limit to it, then you will realize that a person who lives in a low-income community deserves your love just as much as your own family member or friend.

### **You have said in the past that your work at A Wider Circle is a spiritual endeavor. Can you expand on what that means to you?**

My spiritual experiences - and truly all of my life experiences - have revealed to me that we are a deeply connected species. In fact, I believe we are all one organism, moving in some ways independently and in other ways so dependent on one another that to miss our interconnectedness is to miss the essence of our existence.

We are so much more similar than we are different, yet we focus so much on the latter. My spirituality leads me to focus on the former and to try to live in accord with that.

Once I began to think about the possibility of doing this, I prayed about it. When I pray, truth is hard to miss. But this was a big decision, so I prayed and prayed - and I listened. It became clear that the way I could help the most people was to start this organization and be uncompromising toward the goal.

Prayer continues to help in this work - every day. Whenever things get challenging or whenever I feel like I have to do something for the 20th time or the 50th time, and I wonder if this is truly the best way for me to help bring about needed change, I pray about it. And always, prayer allows me to see how fortunate I am to have A Wider Circle and the people who work here. And I continue to row to shore.

**Following that, can you talk about your fundamental understanding of how the universe “works” and how that shapes the philosophy of A Wider Circle?**

I do think that is what may be a little different about A Wider Circle - our fundamental philosophy about life and how we exist. In that regard, I like David Bohm's theory of the implicate and explicate order:

If you took a cup that had glycerin in it, and you put a drop of ink in the glycerin and you spun it, that drop would thin out - and thread out - and soon, once you spin it enough times, you cannot see the ink at all. It looks like the ink is a part of this glycerin.

If you spin that cup the exact number of times in the opposite direction, then that inkdrop comes right back together, reappearing exactly where it was at the start. That is a great explanation for how we exist. This universe is all spun out. You are over there, I am over here, somebody is in Beijing; somebody else is in Baghdad; and somebody is in Ottawa. We think we are all separate because we are all in these different places. Heck, we think we are separate because we are sitting across the table from one another. But we are deeply connected.

So I do not worry about space and time with regard to that. As one of us goes, so go all of us, and that is why I think we work the way we do here. Because when someone comes in and is living in really difficult conditions, we do everything we can do to help. We do not tell them about a variety of rules. Our only limitation, at times, is the amount of stuff we have. Otherwise, we are all-in for that person, every time.

Those who have written about love being the answer, love being the solution, they were correct. Erich Fromm, for example, wrote a book in the 1950s called *The Sane Society*, in which he wrote about love as the only solution to the problem of human existence. I believe that. I also believe that what we think is right or wrong or what we say we care about - or what we actually care about - does not matter. It is action that counts. Philosophy is great, but it is really action that matters.

These thoughts have been a part of my life for quite a while - and they came together to form A Wider Circle.

**You have talked about ending poverty as opposed to mitigating it. What do you think is the fundamental shift that needs to take place for all of us in order for that to happen?**

Asking ourselves what is acceptable. What you would accept for your child? What kind of life would you accept for your child?

And what does it mean to say something is unacceptable?

It means you change it - whatever it takes. And that is why A Wider Circle is here.

**A lot of the work of A Wider Circle is about instilling a sense of urgency about poverty instead of thinking about it as the status quo. How do you think we maintain that level of urgency in the long term, given that it is a crisis, but it's a crisis that will endure for some time before it ends?**

We can no longer normalize poverty. There is nothing normal about it - especially in a country where we have so much - and so much creativity and innovation.

Poverty is fatal for *many*. So we may just have to get over ourselves. We need not worry if we can stay intense enough. We can do that. What would you do if your kid were living like that? Whatever it takes?

I would ask any parent out there, "what would you do if your child were in that situation?" I doubt you would say, "I'm going to help you, but I only have enough love or energy for a couple weeks. I hope that's enough, I can't maintain that intensity."

No, a lot of the questions we ask one another about poverty are couched in a paradigm of "I want to help, but I can only help so much." Or "Can you tell me how I can help without overcommitting myself?" "Can you tell me how I can help but still have work-life balance?"

I always think: Let's get everybody to work first, and then we can think about our own work-life balance. If you can just get over yourself and stop thinking about "what do I want?" or "what do I need?" and start thinking about what does the world need you to do, then you will find that doing this work is more fulfilling than anything you could do that would be self-focused. We will also then respond to this like the crisis it is.

We are so - you and I - so lucky. So how do we show our gratitude? I try to make sure that everybody else gets what I was lucky enough to get. And I am far from accomplishing that yet, so I am not worried about endurance. I am worried about my brothers and sisters.

**We are now in our 16th year. If you had to identify some things that you know now that you wish you had known when you were starting out, what would those be?**

I think one of the toughest things for me has been the staffing of this organization and this movement. I have failed at leading and guiding team members more often than I expected. I would try to be better at that from the start.

At the same time, seeing the toughness and skills in team members, and then providing opportunities for them to lead have been among my favorite moments. We have great leaders here who are still young but have a chance to do some outstanding work at a young age. That mostly comes from them, but I do like that I have adjusted our efforts and tweaked things to propel their leadership.

Of course, this is not intended to be a job in the traditional sense. We pay good salaries - and we ensure that nobody, not even a part-time high school student, makes less than \$15/hour. We also have good health and retirement, and we do a lot to support our team. But this is still intended to be a movement to end poverty, and it can be a challenge to find individuals at any age who are eager for that kind of commitment.

I would have also liked to have built the Neighborhood Partnerships, Workforce Development, and Wraparound Support programs earlier. I tried, but we just got inundated with demand for furniture. So, to do it all again, I would start those programs closer to the beginning.

### **How do you face disappointment? What is it that keeps you from getting jaded?**

It is all in the spiritual. I believe that I am a spiritually optimistic person, and I feel lucky that I am. I also feel that hardiness is a key. I do not know exactly how hardy I am, but I feel like I have a high level of “gonna do whatever it takes.”

Maybe a real life example helps with this question about disappointment. Let's say we help someone for a month to get a job, They finally get it and then lose it right away. Do we give up or feel disappointed? Not even close - we just go to what is next. What if your son lost a job, would you give up on him? That is why this is all about love and compassion, and seeing everyone as your family member.

It is also about not allowing self pity to enter into it. Am I going to worry because something I worked hard to do did not work out as planned? I would be long gone from this work if I let what some may call disappointments get in the way. I have failed more times than we can count - and you know many of these failures. The question is simply, “What are my failures teaching me today?” And I go from there.

### **Can you talk about your vision for where you would like the organization and the country to be in 15 years?**

I will try. But, really, one year is where I am more comfortable. Oftentimes, people ask me about our five-year plan, and I tell them that plan; then I watch as the team here accomplishes that five-year plan within one year. That has happened several times since we started this work.

But, since you asked so nicely for a fifteen-year plan, I would say that in 15 years, we ought to be staring at successful programs around the country and replicating them - in urban, suburban, and rural settings. Of course, we will have to live with no limitations or restrictions on our love, and instead say “this is unacceptable and I am ‘in’ until it happens.”

If that shift occurs individually, great progress will result.

At A Wider Circle, the next year will be one where our efforts and impact expand - and then the next 15 years we ought to be a country that says "look at what is possible when you truly care about other people."

I have seen so many people change inside from doubting or not caring to actually committing. I love getting out of their way as they lead - whether they are realtors doing drives or groups coming for a huge day of volunteering. And the individuals who are here being helped often tell me how much that means to them.

That gives me hope.