

White, W. L. (2014). The history of Winners Circle: An Interview with Raymond Davis, Leo Hayden, and Dillon West. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com.

The History of Winners Circle:

An Interview with Raymond Davis, Leo Hayden, and Dillon West

William L. White

Introduction

The modern history of addiction recovery in the United States is marked by the growth and diversification of recovery mutual aid groups and the emergence of new recovery support institutions. The mass incarceration of unprecedented numbers of people with drug problems in the 1980s and 1990s set the stage for the rise of recovery advocacy and support movements within the U.S. prison system. This included the growth of secular, spiritual, and religious recovery mutual aid groups, particularly 12-Step groups, but it also involved the creation of new mutual aid structures to address the special needs of people seeking recovery while incarcerated and while transitioning back into community life. One of the more dynamic of these new recovery support structures is Winners Circle. In December 2014, I had the opportunity to interview Raymond Davis, Leo Hayden, and Dillon West about the history and current activities of Winners Circle. Please join us in this discussion.

The Birth of Winners Circles

Bill White: Raymond, could you take us back to the early days and tell the story of the beginning of Winners Circle?

Raymond Davis: Yes. I was in one of the treatment programs that Texas Governor Ann Richards had started and was getting ready to transition out. Mr. Shapiro from SAMHSA and Mr. Hayes from the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drugs came to the program to see if there were any problems experienced by people who were transitioning out. They brought up the Winners Circle. I asked where the Winners Circle was and they said, “The Winners Circle is you.” I was kind of confused for a little bit until I figured out they were challenging me to help start such a support group.

I transitioned out of treatment and came to Houston. Once here, I tried to find a Winners Circle group, but I couldn’t find one. In that process, I ran across my brother, who was involved in a local 12-Step group. I explained to him my predicament, and he said, “Well, let’s just start a group.” So he and I basically started writing up the program based on our experiences within a therapeutic community. That’s how the group got started in 1992. Then, we started getting some of the graduates coming out of treatment joining us. That was when Mr. West came along. He jumped right in. Winners Circle was not your traditional AA or NA group; it was a group that you could come and you could talk about anything that was going on with you and you could find resources to help. In the traditional groups, you couldn’t just go in there and talk about regular, everyday problems; you had to stick to a topic. So the formula that we based Winners

Circle on was that you could address any issue that individuals experienced coming back out of prison and out of treatment. We got more and more members. Mr. West chaired most of those early meetings and helped set the foundation of what is Winners Circle today. That was the beginning.

Bill White: Dillon, what do you recall from those early days?

Dillon West: My experience was that, due to drugs and alcohol, I had picked up other negative behaviors—hustling and doing a lot of different things—that were wrong, but that’s how I was able to maintain my habit. Being a part of the Winners Circle, I felt comfortable being with other people coming from the criminal justice system. We could just talk about everyday living issues and support each other. That’s what was so attractive about the group—the peer support and knowing what you were going through was a normal part of recovery and that you were not unique. We were all facing the same things. It was a very inviting group.

At the time, we didn’t have financial supporters, but we had the support of Mr. Shapiro and Mr. Hayes and people from the Texas Criminal Justice System—people like Ms. Madeline Ortiz, Director of TDCJ treatment programs and Mike Giniger, Area vice president of the Gateway Foundation, who has since passed away. We also had a lot of great support from counselors back then, the majority of whom were also peers in recovery. Being a part of Winners Circle was like we were a family. That cohesiveness was very important to those of us coming out of treatment or prison.

Bill White: Leo, you were critical to launching Winners Circle in the Chicago area. Could you share that story?

Leo Hayden: Yes, I can. It developed in Chicago from this process that Governor Ann Richards had started in Texas that involved partnering with other communities. I had been working in Ohio with the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services and the Department of Rehabilitation Services, which was our Department of Corrections. My primary charge was to help get therapeutic communities established in the prisons. I then accepted a job in Chicago with an organization called TASC, Treatment Alternatives to Street Crime, which is now Treatment Alternatives for Saving Communities led by Ms. Melody Heaps. That continued the partnership that had started with SAMHSA and Steve Shapiro and the state of Texas. It was through that influence that I decided to explore getting Winners Circle started in Chicago. We had this meeting in Austin, Texas, with Hollywood Henderson speaking. That was when the vision really crystallized to develop a continuing care model through the Winners Circle. We started our first Winners Circle in Chicago in 1994. I had a guy who worked for me named Jerome Collins. Being an old community organizer, Jerome got the ball rolling and had people in the community donating food, and we fed everybody who showed up at the Winners Circle meeting every night. When things got going in Chicago, we were asked to help them start Winners Circles in Ohio. It just grew from there.

Evolution of Winners Circle

Bill White: How did Winners Circle then evolve during those early years?

Raymond Davis: Well, speaking for the flagship, as a lot of people call it, we've had our challenges. We've went from thirty groups down to ten groups, back up to twenty groups. I think we right now have about fifteen existing groups that are doing well. Our focus at one time was going back inside the institutions starting up Winners Circles, which they have a lot of today in most of the correctional institutions here in Texas. The Winners Circle became a part of the support system that a lot of those guys and ladies needed before they got out. By them connecting in there, they were then able to continue with the group support they needed in whichever city that they were going to because there was a Winners Circle there. A couple of the organizations, including Houston, started adding some housing support through a grant from the Department of State Health Services here in Texas. Another focus was trying to get those individuals who didn't have marketable skills back into school. A lot of our members went back to school and became licensed chemical dependency counselors or are now on the path to do so. Others, like Dillon, sought training as a recovery coach. Today, our members can start the process of training for a recovery coach while they are in prison. Our main focus right now is just having a viable organization that can give direction and support to those individuals who are getting out.

Bill White: Leo, how would you describe the growth or evolution of Winners Circle in the Midwest since the mid-1990s?

Leo Hayden: Iowa and Kansas City and a couple other places also got interested in Winners Circle in those early years. In Illinois, we had a bit of contention over the model we were going to use. We had what we called Inner Circles, which were the support groups we were hosting inside the institutions, and then we had the Winners Circle groups in the community for people coming back from the institutions. Chicago, being the size it is, had a lot folks coming out of the institutions back to the Chicagoland area, so our Winners Circle was in pretty good shape.

But what happens in a lot of cases when corrections gets involved is that they want to take it over and control it. They tend to want to make going to the groups a mandatory process where people need to show up based upon their being on parole. I was opposed to that because it violates the concept of Winners Circle being peer-led and peer-driven. It's a challenge to hang on to that grassroots, peer-led, peer-driven organization. As Winners Circle expanded in the Midwest, we would have these meetings around the country in which coordinators for Winners Circles who had been hired by the institutions would show up. There's tension over whether Winners Circle should remain a volunteer-based, peer-led organization or should move toward more professionalized leadership.

Organization and Funding

Bill White: How is Winners Circle currently organized and funded?

Dillon West: Winners Circles in Texas are still supported through their own monetary contributions and fundraisers. As I was listening to Leo, I recalled that we chose not to accept certain monies for the very reason that he was just talking about. However, I can see how not

having any money can limit the range of support the group can offer. Right now, the Houston Chapter of Winners Circle, which is the mother ship, does have small contracts with the City and various agencies to do recovery supports. We've been doing that for a few years. We did have recovery housing, but right now, we don't offer any housing services.

Winners Circles are basically funded through our own monetary contributions, with people who have been around the Winners Circle a long time giving back through voluntary service. I think that we're better at managing resources today, and we shouldn't be afraid of them. We may have to reach out for some type of funding to sustain and expand Winners Circle in the future. We're way behind the curve when it comes to current funding.

Bill White: Does the Houston Chapter serve as what you might call a National office for Winners Circle?

Leo Hayden: Well, I would say it does. Any time that I've needed help in the past with what we were doing in Chicago and Ohio and other places, we've always reached out to the mother ship to look at their experience and to bring us together in national meetings where we could share their experience and enthusiasm and their perseverance. The experience in Houston has been our foundation.

Bill White: Raymond, would you have anything to add on Winners Circle's organization and funding?

Raymond Davis: One of the reasons why I think that we didn't seek funding the way that we should have is that we were trying to keep the integrity of the group intact. Like Leo said earlier, outside parties try to take control once they put their money into it, and that's something that we basically didn't want. We want the group to stay intact, to remain peer-led and peer-driven, which it is today. We're willing to share with anybody as long as they keep it in the confines of what Winners Circle stands for and what Winners Circle is. That said, we need to seek more outside contributions in order to assure our sustainability. We have to get the message out that Winners Circle is something different than AA or NA.

Comparison with AA, NA, and Other Mutual Aid Groups

Bill White: When I describe Winners Circle, I'm often asked how it is different from an AA or NA or SMART Recovery group. How would you respond to this question?

Raymond Davis: When I was looking for the Winners Circle, I visited a couple AA groups at first. They were talking about alcohol. Well, I'm not an alcoholic. I was a crack and heroin user and when I shared, I was told, "Well, you can't share that in this group." That motivated me even more to get this Winners Circle started because I can go into the Winners Circle and talk about the sun shining too bright if I wanted to and it would be alright. But the one key thing in the Winners Circle and the format that is set is that, whatever you put on the floor, if it's not conducive for the group, you're going to get some feedback about it, and that's what's so unique about it. So you're going to get some feedback about anything that you put out there, especially if it's not right for the group.

Leo Hayden: It's always about getting what you need to hear as opposed to what you want to hear. In the Winners Circles, we don't have a lot of clichés. What we have is a sense of people who have shared the same experience of incarceration—whether it be through actively being incarcerated or having a family member who was or is incarcerated. The Winners Circle is a place you can just be without feeling people are looking down on you because of your incarceration history. You know, this whole discussion brings me back to when I was just getting ready to leave Chicago. I had really fallen out of favor with the whole Winners Circle effort there because I felt that it had been taken over by the Department of Corrections. I felt we had lost fidelity with our founding vision—that it was becoming something else. It changed the moment people were forced to be there who really didn't want to be. That's in contrast to a very different flavor you get in a peer-led and peer-driven group in which everyone is there voluntarily. Then you get a spirit and a wealth of knowledge and information that can only be given and received freely, not by force.

Dillon West: At Winners Circle, you get more than just mutual sharing. You can get things like job contacts. I've got so many people hired on where I work, and I've helped people get an apartment. It's just a network of people that you can utilize all of their resources to support each other. We're about strength-based recovery, and we really get behind one another and rally our resources. Some of our people have felt uncomfortable in other support settings because they feel like they are looked down on, but at Winners Circle, you feel comfortable going in there and knowing that the only dumb question is the one you don't ask. You feel comfortable talking, even if you are not fluent and knowledgeable about the recovery process. In coming in and participating, you find a new way of thinking, a new way of talking and walking, how to behave in society.

Family Involvement in Winners Circle

Bill White: Leo, you referenced family members, and I wanted to clarify if family members were welcomed at all Winners Circle meetings.

Leo Hayden: Yes, family members are welcome at the Winners Circle meetings in Chicago.

Bill White: Raymond and Dillon, was that also the case in Houston?

Dillon West: Very much so. The family component was one of the strongest components. We've seen family members get involved in recovery that needed to recover themselves. We've seen family members so happy about the change that happened to their family members that they became some of our strongest supporters. We have had family functions, and family members continue to come just to talk with us, hear our experience, and get information from us. But most of all, they come to get hope. Over a period of time, our whole group evolves into one big family.

Comparison of Winners Circle and Addiction Treatment

Bill White: You've all referenced peer support as being so critical to the recovery process. What do you think peers offer each other in Winners Circle that is different than what they would get in a professional treatment setting?

Dillon West: One of our concepts is, “If they can do it, I can do it.” You sometimes think that you are the only one that’s been through certain situations, but when you hear other people’s stories, it offers living proof that all that is involved in recovery can be done. It really helps. Peer support builds self-efficacy and self-esteem a lot more than might occur in the professional helping relationship because you actually get an opportunity to participate in helping yourself and helping others. A lot of people come to peer support having blown all their chances. When you put them up there and you make them a president or something, it helps them to grow. Raymond was talking about education: we have a high education rate at the Houston Winners Circle, including people getting trained to work as electricians and carpenters. People feel like they can do it as they become a part of the group and its work. They get to see themselves be part of that group’s growth. It’s more than just seeing a counselor or going to a meeting and then giving it back to the newcomer. It really helps one to build their self-efficacy.

Peer Support in Winners Circle

Bill White: Leo, you were referencing the loss of peer integrity in Chicago and your concerns about that. What do you think about the importance of the peer support element?

Leo Hayden: Well, most of the time what you get in other types of recovery mechanisms is you get a program; you get dogma, you get a whole bunch of other things that may be good for the moment but may not be there in the morning when you get up. Everybody in peer support is a sponsor; everybody in that room has a vested interest in your getting the best possible guidance: wisdom, knowledge, information, care, and concern. They give you what the books say they are supposed to give you. I think peer support gives you something from the heart and you’ve got to have that because we’ve all fallen short somehow or another. Even today, after twenty-eight some years of recovery, I’m always this far from making it and this far from screwing it up. So, that’s what peer support does for me; it gives me a place to go daily, not just when I think I need it, but simply because I am who I am and that’s what the Winners Circle has made me. It’s made me who I am. That’s what I’m saying. You get a program; you get what other people want you to hear. You get what other people want you to say, what they want you to do, and how they want you to act. Peer support is, “Man, if you vomit on the floor, we’ll clean it up. Just keep bringing it. Because we’re here to support you.” That’s what peer support is. I think that’s why they’re so successful in Texas. That’s what I want to happen here in New Orleans.

Raymond Davis: What I made sure of here in Texas is that when we introduced the Winners Circle to the Department of Criminal Justice, there were no strings attached. We’re in their contract to provide peer recovery support services, but that’s as far as it goes. They can mandate any of their releasees to come to Winners Circle, but that’s as far as they go.

Contacting Winners Circle

Bill White: If somebody is reading this interview who’s interested in making contact with Winners Circle for themselves or a family member, is there a central point of contact where they can get information on local groups or get literature?

Raymond Davis: They can go to www.wellnessandrecovery.org and they can always reach me on my cell phone at (713-448-9896).

Personal Reflections on Winners Circle

Bill White: Let me ask a final question: What has being involved in Winners Circle meant to each of you personally?

Raymond Davis: It's allowed me to find out the potential that I really had. It's allowed me to become a better man, a better father, a better son. It's allowed me to feel a part of society with some degree of normalcy. I know I'll never be normal because I'm a recovering addict, but it's allowed me to have some normalcy. It has allowed people who meet me to be shocked when they hear my story because they would have never thought that I was that type of person. The Winners Circle has allowed me to develop into a respectful, sincere, caring individual, and it's given me the satisfaction of having some peace and not looking for a reward around every corner. It's pointed me through all my trials and tribulations, including those I still face today.

Dillon West: First of all, just sitting down talking to Bill White and Raymond Davis and Leo Hayden, three guys that I look up to very, very much, is giving me chills. I just couldn't seem to get ahold of recovery until I got out of a TC a second time and I found Winners Circle. There I got plugged in. Winners Circle really gave me my life back. Not only did it help me to get clean and sober, it helped me to see and address behaviors far beyond drug and alcohol use. Winners Circle and having people I respected point those behaviors out to me and called me on them gave me my life. I became a professional person, a licensed counselor for eighteen years and now I'm working in a recovery support center in the Houston area as Director. I never could have foreseen the life I have now. I was in a hopeless state of mind, and I'm thoroughly convinced it was the peer support of Winners Circle that changed that. I'm forever grateful.

Bill White: Leo?

Leo Hayden: For me, it's given me something of value that I'll always have and that's safety, healing, liberation, and justice.

Bill White: Gentlemen, this has been wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing the story of Winners Circle and your own stories that have been such a part of it.

Acknowledgement: Support for this interview series is provided by the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) through a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). The opinions expressed herein are the view of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA, or CSAT.