

THE WISCONSIN RURAL WOMEN'S INITIATIVE

O.E. Rolvaag captured the feelings of isolation experienced by women who helped settle the high plains in the classic novel, *Giants in the Earth*. Despite advances in modern technology, many rural women still experience isolation. In some ways, the experience of isolation is worsening because there are fewer people who farm and, of those who do, many women now work off the farm at least part of the time. The Wisconsin Rural Women's Initiative (WRWI) has found its purpose in addressing these issues.

"Women in rural areas are the hidden population. They are not counted because they are proud and isolated. They do not report their isolation, loneliness, abuse and rising occurrences of suicide among their rural sisters. Many rural women are aging in poverty. Their need is simple and great." The Wisconsin Rural Women's Initiative



The Wisconsin Rural Women's Initiative (WRWI) arose as a way to respond to the isolation experienced by rural and farm women. The WRWI is located in Elkhorn, a small town in southeastern Wisconsin. From that post, for the last ten years, members of the WRWI have brought their unique programming to 57 rural Wisconsin counties and more than 2,800 rural women.

The WRWI bases its programming on Gathering Circles. Their mission: Wisconsin Rural Women's Initiative empowers women living primarily in rural areas. The ultimate goal is to effect systemic change within families and their communities through a unique Gathering Circle process. WRWI promotes wellness by developing personal skills and cultivates transformation in a safe environment.

The WRWI's objective with this process is to develop self-sustaining women's gathering circles within rural communities that maintain healthy practices and connections with other women. Trained facilitators encourage local women in the Gathering Circles to share their stories in a safe environment. The facilitators also train local volunteers in the communities as facilitators. The local volunteers then can continue the process by being present to support the circle participants' personal growth and mental well being.

The Gathering Circles have a number of different formats including:

- Gathering Circle Round Table: a one day event which the leaders invite the participants. This process includes a needs assessment and provides a basis for ongoing Gathering Circle programming.
- Farm/Rural Women Gathering to Rest, Refresh & Reconnect: a weekend retreat designed to provide farm and rural women a chance to getaway from their hectic lives and to learn self-care,

reflective listening and communication skills.

- Women Gathering to Create a Bridge of Understanding: farm/urban/rural women gather together to create a bridge of understanding by providing opportunities for women from differing backgrounds to gather together and share their stories and experiences

At the core of the Gathering Circles, is the facilitator training process. Through this program called "Women Gathering Women," (WGW) rural women are trained to offer the Gathering Circle program in their communities. The WGW is a weekend-long process oriented facilitator training program that includes a curriculum filled with workshop ideas and exercises. The WGW process has had significant impact upon the women who attend. As several participants have noted in their comments:

- *"I have seen this process touch women in a way that is life changing. These training sessions will assure that more and more lives are improved."*
- *"This program is needed among women of agriculture background. We are isolated due to time restraints, distance and work load. This program caters to the creation of smaller groups which can become flexible to meet the needs of farm women."*
- *"This has given me a 'tool' to take back to my community that gives purpose to bringing women together in a safe and empowering way."*

The Wisconsin Rural Women's Initiative offers in facilitator training and other programming to interested individuals and organizations in other states and it can be adapted for use by other groups with differing missions.

For more information please visit www.ruralwomensinitiative.com

or email: wisconsinruralwomen@gmail.com

or call: 262-723-4156.