

# GIVING BACK, GIVING TOGETHER

Starting a Giving Circle  
in your community

**AAPIP**

BUILDING DEMOCRATIC PHILANTHROPY  
[www.aapip.org](http://www.aapip.org)

# GIVING TOGETHER=

You may not have called it a “giving circle,” but you are familiar with the idea.

Community members pool their money together to help with a big expense—a wedding, a home, a funeral. Immigrant families combine resources to help each other open a small business or pay for college tuition because they find it difficult to get a traditional loan. Friends take up a collection to help a friend in need.

Communities around the world have long and deep traditions of supporting individuals, families, organizations, neighborhoods and communities.

*Zakāt* is the Islamic practice of charitable giving based on communal responsibility for the poor. *Giri* is the Japanese sense of obligation to support those who are less fortunate.

And we recognize that that by coming together, we’re more powerful than if we acted alone.

It’s a *huei* in Chinese, *tanomoshi* in Japanese, *tong-tine* in Cambodian, *hui* in Vietnamese—any way you name it, it’s a giving circle, where everyday people like you come together in living rooms, restaurants, boardrooms, recreation rooms, church basements or the local bar to pool money together and then use it to help others.

It’s a circle because you give together.

It’s a circle because you decide together where your pool of money should go.

It’s a circle because you give, and then you get back much more in return.

# TRADITION

## Korean *geh*

“We borrowed from the idea of a Korean *geh* to gather women together to form a giving circle. Traditionally, a *geh* works as a social savings club. Each month, members gather to pool an amount of money together, and take turns bringing the pot home. This is how many newly immigrated Korean Americans were able to start their small businesses. We turned this idea around a bit and formed a giving circle with a philanthropic purpose. Asian Americans have been fairly quiet in the world of philanthropy, but we know we do a lot of it. By pooling our gifts of \$100 or \$1,000, and creating bigger gifts together, we are making more noise. Our goal is to channel more money into underserved communities and amplify the voices of Asian American women doing philanthropy.”

—Hali Lee, *founding member of the Asian Women Giving Circle, New York*

# GIVING TOGETHER=

You have a group of friends, co-workers, classmates. You have a shared desire to do something more meaningful than write a check and drop it in the mail. You don't want to quit your day job, but you do want to make a difference in your community and participate in the process. You start a giving circle, and you start by meeting at your house over coffee. You spend half the time hanging out, and half the time doing the business of becoming philanthropists.

Giving circles have been started by groups of friends and acquaintances in diverse Asian American/Pacific Islander communities around the country.

- The founding members of the **Hmong Women's Giving Circle** in Minneapolis are teenagers and grandmothers, stay-at-home moms and professionals, second generation women and women who speak little English. A typical meeting includes lots of food, laughs and stories about work in the community.
- The **South Asian Giving Circle**, based in San Francisco, was started by a group of friends and community activists who wanted a new way to promote giving and raise awareness of important causes within the community.
- The **Asian American Giving Circle of Greater Houston** is the first giving circle to be formally established in Houston, and the only giving circle in Texas dedicated to supporting Asian American/Pacific Islander community needs. The group decided it was important to be as non-bureaucratic as possible, and their best recruitment strategy is word of mouth.

# FRIENDS

## A breakfast conversation grows into a giving circle

Jo-Yu Chen, a financial planner in Philadelphia, is passionate about working with young people, something she inherited from her parents, both educators living in her family's native Taiwan. Eight years ago, she was a volunteer for an Asian American scholarship program when she met Mailee Walker. Over breakfast one morning, the two women talked about funding needs in the Asian American/Pacific Islander community.

“We didn’t know anything about giving circles—we just wanted to do something to change the dynamics of philanthropy and funding we saw in the community,” said Jo-Yu. “So we identified a handful of organizations and invited people to talk about what we could do together. When someone brought up a giving circle as the perfect vehicle, we asked AAPIP to educate us about how they worked. We just named the circle—Asian Mosaic Fund. A mosaic is lots of different little pieces together. The circle is about everyone contributing in a small way to make a big impact. My fiancé, who is also involved in the giving circle, helped come up with that name. We do a lot of community work together. If we can work well together in that capacity, we can make our marriage work!”

# GIVING TOGETHER=

Your group has collected a pool of donations—several hundred dollars or several thousand. You're ready to put the funds to work. Now for the fun part—deciding where your dollars will make a difference in the community.

Giving circles are making a difference in Asian American/Pacific Islander communities across the country...in so many different ways.

- The Asian Women Giving Circle in New York supports Asian American/Pacific Islander women-led **cultural, arts and education projects** that further community activism. Since they started in 2005, they've granted more than \$270,000 to 30 groups.
- The Saffron Circle of Boston funds groups working towards **social change** in the greater Boston Asian community. They've supported groups like Massachusetts Asian and Pacific Islanders for Health and Asian Community Development Corporation.
- The Cherry Blossom Giving Circle of Washington, DC supports nonprofits working to uplift the lives of **underserved segments** of the region's Asian American/Pacific Islander communities.
- The Los Angeles Asian Pacific Islander Giving Circle supports small Asian American/Pacific Islander organizations engaged in **innovative projects that may not be supported by traditional avenues of support.**

# COMMUNITY

## Giving to my community

Eric Mah is president of Gim Electric Co., Inc., a family-owned electrical contracting business in Chicago. Born and raised in Chicago, Eric admits to not strongly identifying with the Asian American/Pacific Islander community growing up. But that changed in 2003 when he joined forces with other Asian American/Pacific Islander-owned construction businesses and nonprofit organizations to push the City of Chicago to change its minority contracting policy which excluded Asian Americans. After four years of community organizing efforts, the city changed its affirmative action construction programs.

“The experience reinforced my belief that Asian Americans need to have a political voice, and a voice in philanthropy,” Eric shared. “I met a lot of people through our organizing efforts, some of whom were involved in the giving circle. That’s how I joined the Asian Giving Circle four years ago. As a local business, our clients ask us to make contributions to various charities and attend golf tournament fundraisers all the time. We’re happy to, but these are other people’s interests. The giving circle gave me the opportunity to stop and think about donating to my own community, and make my own choices about who I’m giving to.”

# GIVING TOGETHER=

Your giving circle gave out its first grants. They may be grants of \$1,000 or grants ten times that amount. You invite representatives of grantee organizations to speak at your meetings, and you plan visits to see firsthand what your grant support is doing to help affect positive change in the community.

Giving circle grant awards have helped organizations big and small provide critical services and programs in Asian American/Pacific Islander communities around the country.

- Free primary medical care to underserved Chinese immigrants and others in Chicago
- Violence prevention programs in the Hmong community in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area
- Mentorship, career development and leadership skills training for Asian American/Pacific Islander high school and college age young women in Boston
- Political education and community organizing efforts in the South of Market neighborhood of San Francisco to empower communities to have a voice on important issues like land use

Your giving circle will make a tremendous difference to the organizations you support, but the impact will be equally as great on you. The act of giving, and giving together, will educate you, inspire you, transform you.

# POSITIVE CHANGE

## Power of support from the community

Malik Gillani is co-founder and executive director of the Silk Road Theater Project in Chicago. Started as a creative response to the attacks of 9/11, the theater focuses on stories featuring lead characters of Asian, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean backgrounds.

Growing up in a tight-knit Indian immigrant community in Chicago with a strong tradition of giving, Malik remembers community members contributing anything they could to community events, whether it was Dunkin' Donuts coffee or money or time. He first learned about the giving circle as a grantee.

“It meant the world to receive a grant culled together from small contributions from an array of people,” Malik said. “These are individuals giving not only their money, but their time. Individuals who want to strengthen community organizations, and who care deeply about their community. It was incredibly meaningful to go through that process as a grantee... so meaningful that I became an active member. For me, being a part of the Asian Giving Circle is an opportunity to have an impact much greater than your own donation.”

# GIVING TOGETHER=

You are inspired to make a difference in your community, and you're ready to start a giving circle. Now what? You can start right here:

- **Get together and get focused.** Gather your group and decide on a shared mission and focus, including priorities for the types of organizations you want to support.
- **Decide on the logistics.** How often will you meet? How much will each person give? Where will the funds be kept? How will the group pay for the expense of running the circle? How will you decide who to donate the money to?
- **Stick to the plan but stay flexible and have fun.**

For more information about giving circles in Asian American/Pacific Islander communities around the country, and to learn about starting a giving circle, visit [www.aapip.org/givingcircles](http://www.aapip.org/givingcircles).

# EASY

## Friend to friend

“We recruit by word of mouth and friend to friend. We’re not trying to set the world on fire—our fundraising goal was \$10,000 the first year. We decided that everyone who gave would have the right to vote on where the money went. We organize an event to hear presentations from applicant groups. Then we do site visits. Some people want to be very hands on—they like seeing for themselves what different groups are doing in the community. But then there are people who don’t want to be that involved—they believe in us and just want to write a check. Many of our members have never done anything like this before. They are learning about needs in the community and about the organizations that meet them for the first time.

Since we started, one of our circle’s founders has helped birth at least two other giving circles, giving them advice. I’m proud of that legacy—we helped start other giving circles. And we were the first.”

—Rogene Gee Calvert, *president of the Asian Chamber of Commerce and co-founder of the Asian American Giving Circle of Greater Houston*

# GIVING TOGETHER=

## How can AAPIP help you start a Giving Circle?

Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP) is a national membership and philanthropic advocacy organization dedicated to advancing philanthropy and Asian American/Pacific Islander communities.

AAPIP's goal is to grow and demonstrate new models of grassroots philanthropy through giving circles, which allow for a wide range of giving styles, philosophies and values to be expressed by and for communities.

AAPIP has incubated giving circles since 2005 to support and engage individual Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders as donors. So far, AAPIP's giving circles represent:

- 11 different giving circles in 9 cities across the United States
- More than 600 Asian American/Pacific Islander donors pooling money and time
- \$600,000 in pooled funds
- Grants to more than 70 AAPI nonprofit organizations in the country

# AAPIP

AAPIP can support your giving circle by:

- offering technical assistance and training
- sharing best practices and “tried and true” methodologies
- leveraging philanthropic resources
- providing networking opportunities with other giving circles, local experts in Asian American/Pacific Islander community needs, and professional grantmakers
- inspiring you with stories about people just like you, who made a difference in the community through giving circles

Contact AAPIP to learn more about giving circles and find out how you can start a giving circle in your community.

**Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP)**

[www.aapip.org/givingcircles](http://www.aapip.org/givingcircles)

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## Making an impact: Watch out!

“Giving circles should be seen in a historical context. When we formed AAPIP in the late 1980s, our focus was to get organized, establishment philanthropy to give more to the Asian American/Pacific Islander community, because there was a huge disparity. Fast forward 20 years, and philanthropy has changed a lot. Now, our community is a larger, younger, wealthier, and more assertive group in the U.S. population—and at the same time more diverse in national origin and cultural values and behavior. It is important to have Asian American/Pacific Islanders involved in all kinds of philanthropic activities, and these circles are one impactful way to do that. To me, the message is: We are here—we belong—and we are players. And we will be bigger players in the near future. Watch out.”

—Ruby Takanishi, *Asian Women Giving Circle* founding member, *AAPIP* founding member, and president/CEO of the *Foundation for Child Development*, New York

## Giving Circles AAPIP has helped establish:

Asian American Giving Circle of  
Greater Houston  
*Houston, TX*

Asian Giving Circle  
*Chicago, IL*

Asian Mosaic Fund  
*Philadelphia, PA*

Asian Women Giving Circle  
*New York, NY*

Cherry Blossom Giving Circle  
*Washington, DC*

Hmong Women Giving Circle  
*St. Paul/Minneapolis, MN*

Los Angeles Asian Pacific Islander  
Giving Circle  
*Los Angeles, CA*

Lunar Giving Circle  
*San Francisco Bay Area, CA*

Muslim Women Giving Circle  
*San Francisco Bay Area, CA*

Saffron Giving Circle  
*Boston, MA*

South Asian Giving Circle  
*San Francisco Bay Area, CA*

## Participating together, building community

“AAPIP sees giving circles as a model for empowerment. Giving circles are a very concrete expression of civic participation. We are trying to inspire that spirit of volunteerism—gathering and sharing resources, participating in strengthening our community. That’s the kind of society we’re trying to build through giving circles—where everyone builds together, and where everyone takes responsibility.”

—Peggy Saika, *president and executive director, AAPIP*



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