

Circle Dance in Social Assistance - By Lonise Gerstner

I was thrilled when I received the invitation to write about our experience at Pequena Casa da Criança. Pequena Casa da Criança (www.pequenacasa.org.br) is a non-profitable institution to support vulnerable people in areas of extreme poverty. The focus is on education, community mobilization* and social assistance. It was founded in 1956: that means 60 years of providing free services.

I do remember the first day I arrived there to present our project for young women. It was quite difficult to find and the GPS kept moving the car up and down almost in circle at the top of Partenon Hill. The streets are very narrow and the houses quite simple. We call them favelas in Brazil. Also to park was an adventure because of the lack of space and the curiosity of the people hanging around. But eventually I made it to the meeting room and was delighted with all the nice people. Social workers are so naturally warm... Or do they become like that?

I presented the "Tenda Vermelha" (Red Tent) project for empowering women. This is an interactive course for developing confidence and self-knowledge integrating circle dances, songs, meditation, astrology, medicinal herbs, and experience-sharing. Once it was approved, I started working with these women and teenagers twice a month from 2-4:30pm on Mondays.

The beginning was not all that easy. Though it all seems very natural and simple once we are familiar with it, the idea of dancing in a circle for people who never heard about it and never travelled to another region (not even in their own country) is weird.

This was our first time together and they were all fascinated by our drums! Even drums seemed weird!



In a locality where unemployment is high, discouragement is the norm. I needed to capture the imagination of the girls. The Tenda Vermelha works with the traditional four elements (fire, water, air and earth). Each element symbolises an aspect of human nature and gives us a starting point for exploring our character. According to the moon's position on the meeting day we verify in which zodiac sign it is in, and then its element. If the moon is in Capricorn, for example, which is an Earth Zodiac Sign, we start the meeting with an Earth Dance. If the moon is in Cancer, which is a Water Zodiac Sign, we start with a Water Dance. And so on. We also talk a little bit about what that means and how fascinating it is to connect with the moon. How much easier our lives get when we are connected with our own rhythms and cycles.

The first meeting that we tried dancing was very difficult and some of the young women didn't want to participate. So they were only watching. But from the second meeting on they all chose to join in. As the time passed by they started to ask to do more than one dance, and nowadays we always do all the dances for the element of the day (we have 3 for each element).

There was a meeting when the element changed during the meeting, so we danced both elements.

And it's amazing how different they/we are on the different element days.
This one, for example, was a Fire Day: they were impossible!



As a result of this first exploration the group asked to build on this experience and to have a Dance Group next year. That means, these girls that went through all the content-driven Tenda Vermelha this year will be dancing with me next year. Circle Dance and general development.

Kimberle Goulart, 16 years old, Leo, said: "I found the classes very different and I never had an opportunity like that before. It was cool and I'd love to continue having this kind of session. I learned many things, don't regret anything, especially having participated in the Tenda: I loved it a lot!"

Tauane Reis, 15 years old, Capricorn, said: "the dances we practiced were so interesting and creative. Everything that is for the good and that helps me to understand life better is welcomed by me. Each music/dance is like opening a door to something new and unknown."

**Community mobilization is based on the simple premise that human beings are by nature social creatures whose behaviours, attitudes and beliefs are profoundly affected by the norms of the communities in which they live. It is a process of engaging communities to change the norms within their own communities. One primary goal is to engage the community itself in activities that can prevent incidents of sexual and domestic violence.*