



# How to Guide a Witnessing Circle

Developed by Jay Pitter | April 2019

Cultural memory can also be of a place. Thus, a physical location becomes a site of testimony, as people associate places with both events and sentiments. Sometimes, in the act of setting up a public space as in memoriam to an event is an attempt to call for action as well as a testimony to collective memory. Testimony of place is often an act of remembrance for those who are both directly and indirectly involved in the creation and witnessing of such spaces.

—Elizabeth Cooper & S. Michelle Driedger

When bearing witness to holocaust atrocities, place emerges as a central theme. Scholar Esther Jilovsky<sup>1</sup> explains how place—journeys, sites of immense violence, post-holocaust resettlement sites, and formal documentation of sites—bears witness to displacement and exile. More broadly, collective memory and trauma are enmeshed in the urban landscape. Indigenous residential schools and streets stained with mass gun violence also bear witness to painful, often unresolved, histories. Increasingly, cities are initiating a wide range of placemaking interventions to acknowledge these histories while creating a greater sense of belonging and safety at these sites.

This brief guide is based on the Witnessing Circle process emanating from the (RE)IMAGINING CHEAPSIDE project—a one-year placemaking project that sought to build inclusion and healing into a newly redeveloped public square that was once the epicenter of the African American slave trade in Kentucky. The Witnessing Circle created a healing and educational opportunity to contemplate the history of the site and implications for the new design and social planning. This easy-to-follow guide will help you successfully organize a Witnessing Circle commemorating the lives of individuals exploited or lost at a fraught historical site. In addition to Confederate Monument sites, Witnessing Circles may be a good intervention for public spaces impacted by gendered violence, mass shootings, and urban displacement. Here's how the Witnessing Circle process works:

## 01 Develop Witnessing Circle Goals

The first step to leading a successful Witnessing Circle is to be clear about your goals. *Why are you organizing this Witnessing Circle? How will revisiting the past place-based tragedy help to create greater inclusion at the site? How can bearing witness impact the design and/or programming of the public space? Do you want people to do something after witnessing?*

<sup>1</sup> Jilovsky, E. (2008). Recreating Postmemory? Children of Holocaust Survivors and the Journey to Auschwitz. *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique*, 15, 145-162. Retrieved from: [www.colloquy.monash.edu.au/issue15/jilovsky.pdf](http://www.colloquy.monash.edu.au/issue15/jilovsky.pdf)

Being able to clearly and succinctly answer these questions will enable you to build partnerships and identify clear metrics for success. Remember, you can't achieve or measure a goal you haven't clearly planned for in the beginning of a city-building process.

## 02 Assign Roles

Witnessing Circles are a cross between a public ritual and event. A concerted team effort is required. Before beginning, it is imperative to assemble a team to address key functions such as: identifying readers for the Witnessing Circle, developing a project schedule, and forming partnerships with local organizations and media.

## 03 Gather Archival and Personal Information

Bearing witness is most effective when we are able to humanize place-based tragedies. In the case of the Lexington-based Witnessing Circle, archival records, like the one below, were read aloud. However, you may choose to share stories, media quotes, and/or personal artifacts as part of your Witnessing Circle.

*John P Aldridge doth sell and convey to Elizabeth B Dickerson her, her heirs and assigns forever, the property herein after described viz. one set dining tables, a half dozen windsor chairs, three feather beds with all the sheets, two washstands, school room furniture, one clock, one female slave named Cassey about thirty years of age, one female slave named Garnet about twenty years of age, one female slave named Louisa about fifteen years of age, one girl slave named Ann about six years of age, one other girl slave Rachel about five years of age, one boy slave named John about ten years of age, one boy slave named Luke about 8 years of age, one male child slave named Ned about 4 months old, by estimation of the value of three thousand dollars.*

—*Deed Book, Volume T, Page 460, May 16, 1820*

Community members commented that reading out the names and ages of the enslaved Africans Americans in these transactions created a deeper sense of empathy and understanding. Also, many individuals were surprised to learn these humans were included in transactions alongside inanimate objects such as sheets and clocks. Reading from the archival records humanized the individuals fated to the indignity and hardship of the *slave*<sup>2</sup> trade. Equally important, doing so created a greater understanding of the complicated relationship with the newly redeveloped public square.

**Note:** If you are leading a Witnessing Circle related to a more recent tragedy, it is important to get permission from living family members or impacted communities before reading painful details of a place-based tragedy publicly.

<sup>2</sup> The word slave is used for consistency with the original auction block language, however this term diminishes the humanity of the individuals. Enslaved as an alternative is preferred, as it more accurately describes the oppressive acts done to the people.

## 04 Prepare Witnessing Circle Presenters

Now that you've gotten your Witnessing Circle team organized and have collected archival information, it's time to identify and prepare Witnessing Circle presenters. You may choose to include witnesses from diverse backgrounds to read archival content or choose to have presenters from backgrounds directly connected to the place-based tragedy. In the case of (RE)IMAGINING CHEAPSIDE, presenters were chosen from a diverse range of backgrounds to demonstrate a shared commitment to healing the newly developed public square. There is no right or wrong approach; consulting with community members closest to the place-based tragedy is key. Once Witnessing Circle presenters have been selected, host a conference call or send out an email including the following information:

- All Witnessing Circle logistics—presenter call time, location, list of readers, and agenda;
- Provide presenters with their own scripts (five-ten sentences is ideal) and request they review them in advance of the Witnessing Circle. Also, on the day of the Witnessing Circle, provide presenters with their scripts printed on cue cards or nice paper;
- Ask presenters to simply read the gathered content rather than beginning with greetings, speaking about themselves, or commenting on the content itself, as this helps keep the focus on the individuals being witnessed.

## 05 Creating a Safe(r) Space for Everyone

Bearing witness can be an emotional, and even triggering experience for people. While a safe space cannot be promised—each individual experiences safety differently—it is possible to take steps to create a safe(r) space. Here are some strategies for setting the stage for a safe(r) and respectful Witnessing Circle:

- Highlight the ways acknowledging historical place-based tragedies can allow us to create more inclusive and vibrant public spaces;
- Remind community members that discomfort is the precursor to growth, not conflict—encourage an embrace of discomfort;
- Ask community members to practice deep and respectful listening;
- Ask the audience/witnesses to hold their applause until the end of the Witnessing Circle as the readings are not a performance;
- Recognize the goodwill of all community members in attendance.

## 06 Close on an Action-Oriented and Uplifting Note

A key principle for initiating difficult conversations or placemaking initiatives is ensuring the process is concluded in a responsible manner. The (RE)IMAGINING CHEAPSIDE process incorporated the following in its closing:

- A local vocalist performed a hopeful song at the end of the readings;
- Community members linked hands as a show of collective acknowledgement of the past and hopes for a more inclusive public square;
- Everyone was asked to contemplate a clear action they could take to make the newly developed public square more inclusive.