

help



AFTER HYPNOTHERAPIST Rebecca Carswell (right) broke her back skydiving, the group helped her beat her fear of going back up

More powerful than a book club

Four women form a group dedicated to allowing each of them to realize a dream

BY JULIA MCKINNEL • When graphic designer Amy Mead dreamed of having a baby, she took an eccentric step. She joined forces with a group of women. It wasn't a pregnancy group. Each woman had a different goal but all shared the belief that a group's collective energy has more power than any one individual's. If anything, it was a support group for desires.

At the time, Mead was 38 and worried she'd blown her chances of getting pregnant by waiting too long. "There's strength in numbers. I was thinking along those lines," she said recently from her home in Florida, now that she's a mom, and now that her group has just published a book. Three years ago, the women hardly knew each other, now all four are the joint authors of *The Group: An Amazing Way to Achieve Success, Happiness and Extraordinary Relationships*. Tiffany Kaharick is a massage therapist. Rebecca Carswell is a hypnotherapist and professional speaker. Mirja Heide runs a computer training company. They all live in Florida. "We just began with the idea of: how can we achieve more?" says Heide. "We sat around a table discussing very openly what we wanted to get out of the group," remembers Mead.

Heide wanted to go to Africa but was afraid to travel alone. "It was a lifelong dream. I don't typically share really heartfelt things and here I was sharing it with the group and this was the beginning. The group believed in me and then I began to believe in myself. When you speak about a dream, it gets more substance. When it's just in your mind, you can put it behind." Heide's dream of Africa had sat on the back burner her whole life. "But when it's vocalized, it's out there. The group asked questions to find out what it was

that was keeping me from travelling. Then I started taking action steps." Within months, Heide had put down money with an organization called Earthwatch and was well on her way to studying elephants in Namibia.

The group meets once a month on Sundays. No food or alcohol is served. "When we want to have drinks and jibber-jabber, we go out and we do that," says Mead. "But for our group meetings, it's very focused and clearly defined. Our meetings start at 7:30 and go to 9:30 and every minute of those two hours is designated in segments. If we started with a glass of wine, it would lose its effectiveness."

The meetings focus on one woman at a time. "The Honoured One" has the full hour, explains Heide. When the Honoured One speaks, the others listen without interrupting. "Interruptions," explains their book, "include interjecting your own thoughts and opinions or physically hugging or touching the speaker. Physical touch, in an attempt to comfort someone, can be distracting and stop the flow of thoughts and emotions."

When there are pauses, "Allow the silence. Remain quiet and listen." Do not say, "Oh yeah, that happened to me, too! I know exactly what you mean" and proceed to tell your story. Do not be a problem-solver. "You may feel a need to have the right answers or impress the group with your knowledge." Resist the

urge to tell the Honoured One "what you would do in that situation, or what you've done in the past."

Heide says the group is "therapy for us but better than therapy because it's free. And you leave with an action plan. There are so many obstacles in life and you can get pretty burdened but this is the kind of thing you can come to the meeting with and unload it and then turn it around and ask, 'How can I manage my life so I don't feel so overwhelmed?'" Mead says the group helped her clear away self-defeating thoughts. "I believe this helped me relax and trust, which in turn helped me become pregnant."

When one group member succeeds, the whole group celebrates "naturally." The book italicizes the word *naturally* to emphasize the reaction isn't phony. "You don't have to force yourself to feel this way," they write in a section on jealousy. "If you ever feel jealous of what others have, you are not alone. In our competitive society, we are not typically taught to celebrate the success of others. Another's success can make us feel inadequate." Jealousy is blunted the longer you are a member of the group, they write. "Imagine listening to a fellow member share a dream. At the next meeting, she shares a step she took toward this dream. Two meetings later, she announces she has reached her goal. You are just as excited as she is because you supported, encouraged and believed in her." M



MOST IMPROVED... CHASTITY BONO

Sonny and Cher's daughter, Chastity Bono, is now "Chaz." In a statement that uses exclusively male pronouns, a spokesman announced Bono is undergoing a sex change, explaining that "he has made the courageous decision to honour his true identity." In the book *Family Outing: A Guide to the Coming-Out Process for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Families*, Bono wrote about always feeling "different from who my mom expected me to be."