

## Getting Ahead Blog—Week One

### *Getting to Know Each Other*

Even though we had spent months studying and preparing for the Getting Ahead program, Gary, our co-facilitator, and I really had no idea what to expect on the first night of our group. We had asked Conferences in the east and south Dayton area to refer people who they were serving for our 18 week program. We had met with each of the participants individually, but how the group would work when they got together remained to be seen.

As the “investigators” arrived, conversations started. The volume increased and we heard laughter as people shared their stories over dinner provided by Vincentian volunteers. One woman who lost her son last fall from an opioid overdose heard the story of another group member who has been clean for 14 years, and the two women spontaneously hugged.

An Iraqi refugee woman who joined the group shared her story of coming to Dayton 10 years ago with no ability to read, speak, or write English. The conversation flowed easily, and we felt as if we’d known each other much longer than a few hours.

The first step of the program, which takes the first two sessions, is a self-assessment. We drew a “Mental Model of Poverty”, asking the participants what they thought about and spent their time doing. This is a very personal exercise, and I had been concerned that the participants would be reluctant to share. I could not have been more wrong.

“Stress! Put that in the middle!”

“Depression!”

“Bills!”

“How do we get our kids anything for birthdays or Christmas?”

“Health problems!”

“Transportation!”

The list went on and on, and soon the paper sheet we had taped on the wall was completely covered by the issues and barriers that our neighbors in poverty struggle with daily. Once again, there was laughter as the participants shouted out their answers.

As we ended our session with prayer led by one of the participants, the new friends called out to each other, “see you next week! Same time, same place!” They were eager to see each other again and see what we would work on next time.

As everyone was getting ready to go and I was packing up, one of the participants approached me on her own. She shared with me that four years ago, she and her two young children had been in our shelter. They entered our supportive housing program, and are now in an apartment in the community. She is already a success, and the Getting Ahead group will help to propel her even further into stability and self-sufficiency. Her story really brought home to me how amazing the work St. Vincent de Paul is here in the Dayton area. We truly do meet people where they are on their journey.

What a gift it is to be able to walk with them as they travel.



## Getting Ahead Blog—Week Two

### Digging Deeper

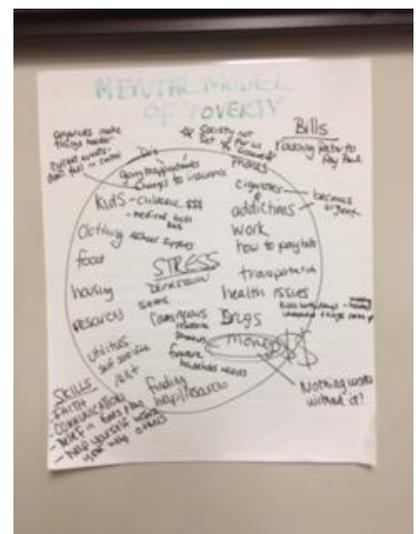
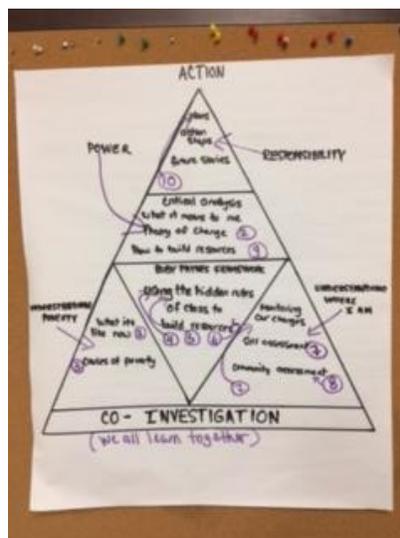
Every single one of our investigators (participants) came back for week two of our Getting Ahead group. That alone was cause for celebration—in our learnings, we have heard that 25 percent of investigators drop out of the program after the first week.

We opened, as we do each week, with prayer, and this week we had a volunteer from the group. Billy led us in a simple but heartfelt prayer, and we got started.

Week two is one of the most intense sessions of the program, because it digs deeper into the self-assessment that is so critical to the success of the process. This week, participants were asked to calculate how affordable their housing was and discover their DTI (debt-to-income ratio). As we went through this process, it was fascinating to see how much investigators' situations varied. Some people in the group had very little debt, whereas one participant was shocked to discover that her debt was actually more than 100% of her income. Some people in the group were paying far too much for rent, but we also have one member who owns her home outright, so she has no rent or mortgage payment. Once again, we were able to see how different everyone's situation is.

Again, I was amazed by how open and forthright the participants were about their situations. They shared the traps they've gotten into with rent-to-own furniture items, high interest credit cards, and "buy-here-pay-here" car dealerships. They offered tips to each other on how they have dealt with debt. Once again, there was laughter. One investigator who has recently become a widow broke down as she shared conversations that she had had with her late husband as he tried to prepare her for handling finances on her own.

The group is starting to gel. I noticed this week that they are becoming comfortable with some of the Getting Ahead terminology and are referring to themselves as "investigators". As we move into the next phase of the program, homework is getting more intense, and the members of the group are being asked to take on more responsibility for participation in the group. This week, our investigators will be keeping track of how they spend their time and they each have a research question to bring back information about. I drove one of the investigators home, and as she got out of my car, she eagerly said, "I think I'll investigate question 2 (about living wage)...I'm really interested in that." She was excited to learn and share, and to be with us again next week.



## Getting Ahead Blog—Week Three

### *Thinking About Change*

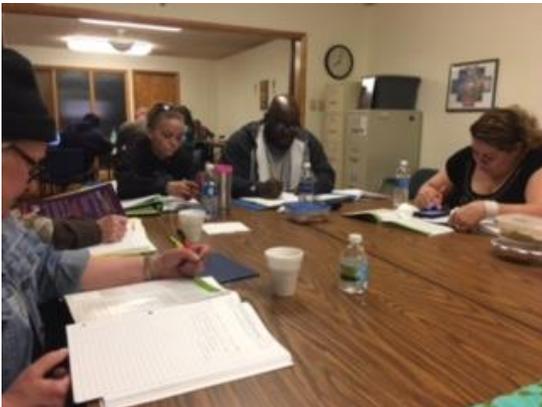
We were excited to see that we had good attendance once again this week. We noticed that after everyone welcomed each other, they spoke about phone calls and texts that had been exchanged between them throughout the past week. We see strong evidence of the formation of a cohesive group. One of the goals of Getting Ahead is building “social capital”—a group of supportive peers with similar goals. It is clear that this group is starting to build this resource.

Gary opened our time together with prayer. We then started with a review of last week’s homework. It was great to see the investigators starting to do the actual work of investigating, starting to explore their own circumstances, and understanding the differences between a living wage and a self-sustaining wage in their community. This assignment was a very important one and one that they took seriously. The investigators were creative in how they found this information. Some consulted Google; others found it in their paper resources from the last session. But they are on the road of investigation—a key concept at the foundation of Getting Ahead. Over the coming weeks, we will have many conversations about the idea of co-investigation—which includes both the participants, or investigators, and the facilitators—because it implies active engagement and this is how they will work toward creating their own personal plans.

This week’s discussion centered on the theory of change. We made a list of all the agencies with which our investigators have had experience. They then identified which of those agencies gave them “action plans” to follow. Through this activity, we discovered that most of these agencies gave them some type of a plan. We talked about some of the different theories of change used by these agencies. One of the quick-witted investigators picked up on this and asked about Getting Ahead’s theory of change, and we all had a good laugh. It was a good question to ask, however, because the answer gets to the unique nature of the Getting Ahead program.

Our last activity centered on the mental model of Getting Ahead’s theory of change. Gary talked us through each step of the mental model as he drew it, and we all followed along, drawing our own versions of the model in our workbooks. The investigators were asked to recall their own mental models of their lives now. We then talked about the idea of abstract thinking, and Gary made a list of several examples, such as detachment, objectivity, new information, new ideas, analysis, thinking, education or learning, plans, and support. We ended by discussing the three procedural steps for the GA Theory of Change: (1) Creating a mental model; (2) Developing social capital; (3) Learning from their pasts to plan for their futures. It is quite clear that this engaged group of investigators has a good start on the first two steps. In the coming weeks we will start to lay the groundwork for future planning.

Next week’s session deals with the causes of poverty. It promises to be a very interesting and lively conversation! It is hard to believe that we will be more than a quarter of the way through the curriculum. As winter turns to spring, we are excited to see new growth and change in our investigators—and in ourselves as facilitators.



## Getting Ahead Blog—Week Four

### *Hanging out with Poor People*

Years ago, I read an article called, “Catholics Should Hang Out With Poor People”. It really resonated with me, because it was the first time that it was called to my attention that as a country, we are extremely segregated in terms of spending time with and living around people who are in roughly the same economic situation that we are in. Getting Ahead is changing that for Gary and me.

I’m not sure when it happened, but as the weeks have gone by, I’ve started to think of our GA investigators as friends. I look forward to the group each week, and I laugh more with this group than I do the rest of the week. They are truly witty and there is no pretense in the group. The investigators are getting closer and closer and they keep in touch with each other during the week.

Mixed in with the laughter, though, is real growth and learning. This week, one of our investigators told us that she thinks about what we discuss in class often throughout the week. She shared that as she was changing the oil in the fryers at her fast-food job, she noticed that the oil swirling down the drain in the fryer looked just like our Mental Model of Getting Ahead’s Theory of Change!

Moving from Concrete “right now” thinking to Abstract “future planning” thinking is starting to happen. One of our investigators, who has lived in a very run down and somewhat dangerous apartment building, told us this week that she is getting ready to sign a lease at a new, nicer building this week. In the past, she has been afraid to move, but now she is thinking about the future and feeling brave enough to make a choice that will have long term benefits. The new building is much closer to amenities and she will be around people who are much more stable. This will build her “social capital”, that group of supportive people that helps us get ahead.

Speaking of social capital, one of our members came to group with the news that her employer is hiring. She had very specific information on where to go and how to apply. For the job seekers in our group, this was very helpful information. One of our investigators has a felony on her record, and she asked if this employer hires people with a felony, since this has been a barrier for her in the past. She was excited to learn that this employer does hire people with previous felony convictions. She wouldn’t have known this if she hadn’t made the connection she has made in this group.

The foci of tonight’s investigation were the causes of poverty, and the gap between the rich and the poor. Playing a game very much like “Mother, May I”, our investigators each played the role of a quintile of the US population. We learned that the middle class in the US is shrinking and that the gap between the richest and the poorest people in the US is vast and growing. We talked about community assets that give people in the community a “fair shot” at prosperity. Well-paying jobs, access to fair credit, good education, and good healthcare are just a few of the necessary supports that are needed in order for people to achieve and maintain stability. In the coming weeks, we will be investigating where our community stands in each of these areas.

The last topic we spoke about this week was predators—people and industries that prey on people in poverty. We discussed what types of predators exist in our own community. This was a lively conversation, and the homework for this week will be for investigators to identify some predators they have dealt with and think about what made them willing to work with them. Next week promises to have more engaged conversation, more learning, and more growth.

## Getting Ahead Blog—Week Five

### *Thinking Beyond Today*

We were missing three of our investigators this week due to emergencies, and the dynamic felt a bit different. It came home to me how much each of the members of the group adds to the conversation and how critical a variety of opinions are to the Getting Ahead Process. Nevertheless, there was certainly no shortage of opinions, conversation, and debate.

We started the evening after prayer and dinner with a review of our homework assignment, which was to identify predators in the community—people and businesses that prey on people in poverty. We talked about how thinking using future planning, rather than just focusing on meeting immediate needs, can help us to avoid these predators. One insightful investigator pointed out that predators force people in poverty to make an immediate decision—“they never give you time to think!” “That’s because if you had time to think, you’d never agree to it!” another investigator chimed in.

This week, we finished the unit on the causes of poverty. It is a complex topic, and it ignited quite a bit of lively discussion. During our first session, we had created a Mental Model of Poverty, and a good part of our time together this week was spent creating a Mental Model of Middle Class and a Mental Model of Wealth using case studies. The difference between the model of poverty and the other two models was striking. Whereas the Mental Model of Poverty was absolutely full of detail, the investigators struggled to complete the models of the other two groups we discussed. Even with the case studies, it was difficult for our group to visualize or describe what life might be like as a middle class or wealthy person. I was struck once again how different our lives are and how segregated we are by income in our community. One of the goals of the Getting Ahead program is to encourage learning about people from different classes and to work with them to create positive change in our community. There is certainly a need for inter-class relationship building, and we all shared examples of how getting to know people better helps to break down stereotypes and misunderstandings.

One highlight of the evening was a conversation about reactive thinking versus proactive thinking. One of the investigators shared a story that illustrated the difference between these two types of thinking perfectly. Her understanding showed how much she has really internalized what we’ve been learning about for the last month:

*“The other day, I was at work [at a fast food restaurant]. We were so busy and short staffed that we didn’t stop and clean the grill the way we should have. We were so worried about just getting through the rush that we didn’t take time to stop and clean up. Suddenly, the grease and crumbs on the grill caught fire! I had no idea what to do so I grabbed a canister of sea salt and threw it on it and I was able to put the fire out, but it was really scary! I thought about Getting Ahead and thought, ‘proactive thinking would have been cleaning the grill—when I threw that sea salt, I was doing reactive thinking. It put the fire out, but it made the grill an even bigger mess!’ “*

As we move into the next module of the curriculum, we will start learning about “hidden rules” and how they relate to the choices we make. We are looking forward to having the whole group together again, and having another opportunity to learn from each other.

## Getting Ahead Blog—Week Six

### *And Then There Were Seven*

We had a surprise this week when a couple in our group did not show up for the second week in a row. When we started the program, we had decided that we would not allow couples to join. We felt that it would inhibit sharing if a couple were in the group together. Sometimes it is hard to talk about things frankly with another person so close to the situation there with you, but when we met Katie and Billy, we knew that they would be a good fit for the group and that they had an open way of communicating with each other.

Billy in particular was extremely enthusiastic about the group and told me recently that it was what he looked forward to each week. When they did not come for a second week in a row, it was very disappointing. I have been surprised by how deeply it has affected me. During Getting Ahead, investigators share things that are very personal, and there is a vulnerability that comes with that sharing. As a facilitator, I am somewhat removed from this, but the investigators tell each other things that are extremely revealing and they have bonded because of it. For two of the group to be missing is hard. We will continue to pray for Billy and Katie, that their journey will continue and that perhaps they will be able to join a future GA group.

The dynamic of the group is different without Billy and Katie. We are finding a new way of relating to each other. On a very positive note, there are two people in the group that I have been very impressed with in terms of their increasing engagement and commitment as time has gone by. Donald was very quiet in the first week or two of the class. As time has gone by, however, he has taken on more and more of an active role in the conversation. Last week, he volunteered to do an extra homework assignment and present it to the group. Nadia, who came to the US as a refugee from Iraq, has been such an asset and has given us insights into her culture. She has been diligent about getting to class, even though it is not always easy for her because of family obligations.

Our first topic of discussion for this week was the conclusion of the module on economic class. Investigators completed a chart and a writing assignment on their “Economic Class Story”. They shared what income levels and classes they had been part of at each point in their life. It was remarkable that, in most cases, they had remained within the poverty class for most or all of their lives. “I guess poverty can be passed down, just like wealth”, one of our observant investigators commented.

Next, we talked about community sustainability—the resources that a community must have in order to help people achieve and sustain stability. We talked about we can do on an individual, organizational, community, and policy level to help our community be a place that offers these resources. This is a complex concept and we were impressed by how quickly the investigators “got it”.

As previously mentioned, one of the goals of Getting Ahead is to engage the investigators in leadership, so we tied this concept in with community sustainability. We invited them to look for opportunities within the community where they could play a role in making decisions that affect them and others in poverty. Cindy, who seemed particularly excited about this prospect, said it best—“we need to speak up, not just for ourselves, but for those people behind us”.

As I write this, we are in the midst of Holy Week. For Christians around the world, it is a time for us to reflect on the sacrifice that Christ made to give us our freedom. Being on this journey throughout Lent has added a new richness to the season. At the core of the Vincentian mission is the call to see Christ in the face of the poor, and I think that we tend to look for something lovely, something peaceful, or something noble in the people we serve. Those are some of the ways that we like to visualize Christ, aren't they? During Holy Week, however, we are reminded that while Christ was all of those things, on Good Friday, he was also a poor, ragged man who was hung from a tree and left to die. We see that Christ in our brothers and sisters who struggle with poverty as well. It is a blessing to be able to see Him in our investigators and to know that, just as His story didn't end on the cross, their stories still have many pages yet to be written. We hope that the work that we are doing with them helps them to write a hopeful story full of possibility.

## Getting Ahead Blog—Week Seven

### *Hidden Rules and Language*

The material that we covered this week and that we will cover next is some of the most critical of the Getting Ahead program. It is also extremely personal and Gary and I were very aware that some of it could be offensive if presented the wrong way. We finished our unit on Hidden Rules—those unspoken cues and habits of a group of people. We went through a lengthy discussion of how the Hidden Rules of Poverty are different from the Hidden Rules of Middle Class and Wealth.

As much as we tell ourselves that we are all on an even playing field and all have similar experiences in the US, the research has shown this is simply not so. Gary gave an excellent example—let's say that your whole life, you've been playing football. You know the rules and the strategy so well that you don't even need to think about it anymore. Then you get invited to a baseball game, and you try to use the football rules that you know so well. You see a hitter running from first base to second, and you run after him and tackle him. Is this going to end well? No! What was the problem? You didn't know the rules. People trying to transition from poverty to the middle class through employment or education may not know the Hidden Rules of these organizations, which tend to be the Hidden Rules of Middle Class. Learning these rules is extremely beneficial and will help our investigators navigate the "game".

One of the questions we talked about was whether the hidden rules of your economic class are part of who you are. Cindy responded, "Yes...I don't want them to be...but they are". She shared that one of her children has moved into the middle class and he is embarrassed by some of her mannerisms and the way she speaks. Learning this material was painful for her, but validated what she already knew...that language can create connections, but it can also highlight differences.

Moving from a discussion of hidden rules to the beginning of our module on language was a natural transition. For the rest of this week's session and for all of next week's time together, we'll be investigating how language is different in different classes and how we can develop relationships of mutual respect with people who may have different language patterns than we do.

Gary and I role played conversations using different "registers" of language, moving from the most formal to the least. We then each told the same story using different story telling patterns. Gary first told the story using the direct discourse pattern of the middle class, which values getting the most information across in the least time and being concise. I then told the story using the circular discourse pattern often favored by those in poverty, which doesn't always start at the beginning and is much more interested in details and humor. Some of our investigators were shocked to hear me tell a story this way—which led us to a discussion of "code switching"—that is, the ability to speak with the patterns of more than one class. This ability will be critical for our investigators to master if they want to relate well with members of the middle class, such as supervisors at work. We asked the investigators whose story they thought was better. "He sounded smarter, but I wanted to hang out with you!" "I wanted to hear more about your story—but he did get more points across..."

As we are learning each week, there is more than one way to do things. Knowing as much as possible about each way is the goal. At the end of this session, we are officially at the half way point of the curriculum, and we are enjoying seeing the growth in our investigators each week. We are also learning at least as much from them as they are learning from us.

## Getting Ahead Blog—Week Eight

### *Reality Check*

This week, we had the smallest group we've had to date—five investigators were with us. It was time to have a group discussion about attendance. At the first session, we wrote “group rules”. These rules were established by the group, and the group holds each other accountable for following the rules. I reminded those investigators who were with us that the group doesn't belong to Gary and me—it belongs to them. Any value that is found in the group is what they choose to make of it. They will be the ones who decide who is able to continue as part of the group based on attendance. The group decided that they didn't think that anyone who missed three or more sessions would be allowed to continue. “It's really hard for me to get here some weeks, but I do it. It's not fair to the others in the group for some people to not do their share of the work”, one investigator commented. I think that, even though this is a tough issue, it has given our investigators an opportunity to:

- Be leaders
- Make decisions
- Feel ownership

These are three things that the reality of poverty doesn't give them an opportunity to do very often. The participants who are in jeopardy of leaving the group will have an opportunity to make a decision as to whether they'll continue or leave.

As we approach the halfway mark of class, we wade deeper into the subject of language. So many times, as soon as we meet someone, we make assumptions and judgments about them based on the way they speak. When we understand how economic class affects the way we speak and what we speak about, we can get to know and understand people from different classes. This can be helpful for everyone involved and help build valuable social connections.

Much of this week's material on language was specifically geared toward parents. Most of our participants were raised in poverty, so their understanding of language and how to use it is filtered through that lens. Understanding that sometimes language skills, or the lack thereof, can be the difference between poverty and stability, is critical to the Getting Ahead curriculum.

Using the example of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, we talked about story structure. We went back to the material on linear story structure, which is the style employed in most written materials, including this story. We then contrasted that style with the circular story structure often used by people in poverty. We also talked about how important a rich reading experience in early life is to future success. The homework assignment for this week is for the participants to investigate sources for inexpensive or free reading materials for children. One of our investigators made the connection between the Mental Model of Poverty that we made in our first session and reading—“hungry kids aren't reading books...their parents are too busy worrying about how to feed them!”

The last topic we talked about this week was how we can use language to help us resolve differences. Once again, we tied the material into how it applies to parenting and family dynamics. When we learn how to resolve differences by negotiating rather than letting our emotions control our actions, we can maintain relationships and have more control over what happens to us. Participants completed a self-assessment of negotiating skills to shed some light on to what areas they need to keep working on. This will be helpful as we move into the next phase of the program, when we will learn about the different types of resources and how building on them can help them move toward stability.

## Getting Ahead Blog—Week Nine

### *Back Together Again*

This week, for the first time in a few weeks, we had everyone in the group present. Our investigator Cindy said it best: “it’s like a family reunion!” After a series of conversations with our “missing investigators” from last week, the group feels more motivated and engaged. The new issue of St. Vincent de Paul’s newsletter, “The Vincentian”, came out this week, and I brought a copy of it with me to group. The investigators were excited to see their pictures on the front page and to hear that I write about them every week. I told our marketing staff member that we will be seeing a lot of new followers on Facebook—everyone was excited to read about themselves!

This week’s topic was “Eleven Resources”. The material in this module represents the transition from talking about poverty in a more general sense to thinking about poverty and how it impacts our investigators on an individual level. The transition can be very challenging—it is much easier to talk about ideas when they are somewhat removed from your day-to-day reality.

For the first time, we asked the investigators what the word “poverty” meant to them. As expected, the definitions were almost all related to money, or the lack thereof. The investigators were interested to hear that Getting Ahead uses the *Bridges out of Poverty* definition of poverty—“the extent to which an individual does without resources”. What are some resources a person in poverty might be lacking in? We identified resources such as financial, emotional, and “social capital”; that is, a support system made up of people who you can count on. We then read a series of Case Studies to put our new understanding of resources to use. We “rated” each “subject” in each of 11 resource areas. Once again, I was impressed by the investigators’ quick grasp of a relatively complex concept.

The last part of the class was spent on a review of homework over the past few weeks. We have been holding on to a few assignments so that we can review them all at once. The reason for this is that all of the assignments have to do with planning and time management. For one of the assignments, investigators were given a chart that looked something like this:

	URGENT TASKS	NOT URGENT TASKS
IMPORTANT TASKS	Quadrant I- Emergencies and Crises	Quadrant II—Takes Planning (school, work, maintenance)
NOT IMPORTANT TASKS	Quadrant III-Other People’s Problems	Quadrant IV-Time Wasters (tasks that are neither important nor urgent—examples: watching TV, etc.)

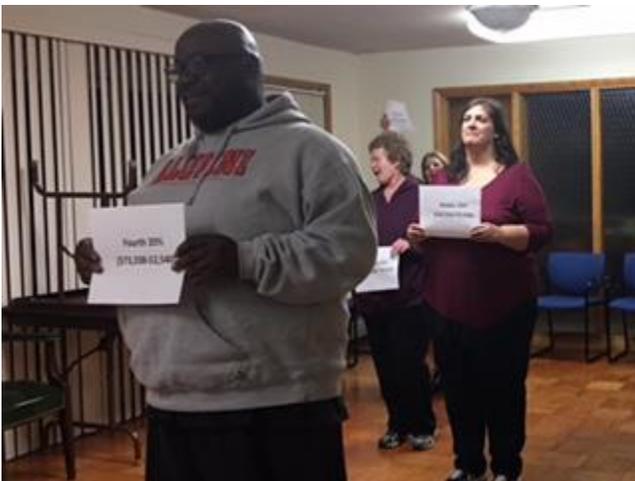
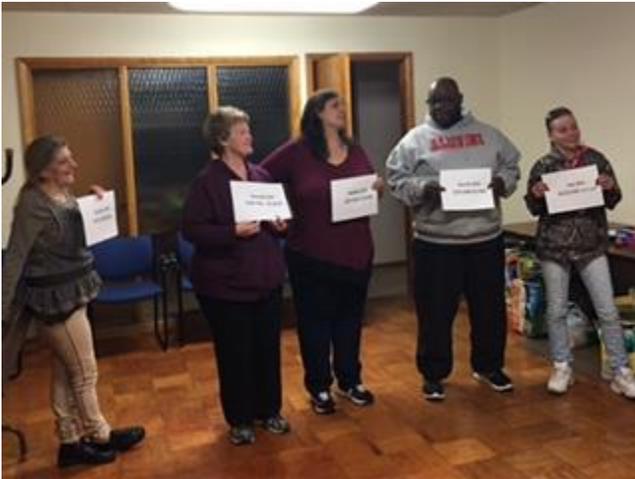
They were asked to list what tasks they do that fit into each of these categories. Many of the investigators were surprised by how much time they spend on “time wasters” and “other people’s problems”. “I need to figure out what’s important to me, not to others, and spend my time on that!” one investigator commented. This was a perfect connection to our discussion of support systems and role models.

This week was one of the most interactive, animated, and productive weeks we’ve had thus far. We are headed into the second half of GA with focus and determination.

I want to take a moment to thank the following Conferences for their assistance with Getting Ahead. We truly could not do what we are doing without them:

- Ascension Conference
- Mary Help of Christians Conference
- Emmanuel Conference
- St. Helen Conference
- St. Anthony Conference
- Incarnation Conference

Thank you all for your dedication and support of this program!



## Getting Ahead Blog—Week 10

### *Everything Comes Together*

Once again, we had an excellent turnout for our group this week. The energy and focus were palpable as we came back to the discussion we started last week about resources. We had a lengthy conversation about motivation and persistence, and we spoke about how important it is to have these resources. We circled back around to the topic of “social capital” –knowing people who can support you emotionally (“bonding social capital”) as well as people who might have access to skills and resources that you don’t have (“bridging social capital”). We could see the pieces coming together as the investigators named each other and the facilitators as “bridging capital”. “That’s the point of the group, isn’t it?!” Donald asked.

In order to finish our material on resources, we had a discussion about being motivated to change. This was the first time we’ve overtly talked about making needed changes and about where our investigators are in this process. Are they still in “pre-contemplation”, where they are blissfully unaware of the changes that they need to make? After all of these weeks of learning, we certainly hope not. The group agreed that their eyes are open to the fact that some things in their lives need to change. Are they in “contemplation”, where they know that changes need to be made, but they haven’t made a decision as to whether the costs of making the change are worth the benefits? Many of our investigators saw themselves here. A few of them felt that they were in the “preparation” stage of change, where they begin to test the waters and try something new and different. I pointed out that coming to GA faithfully for 10 weeks is a very definite step toward change. A few of our investigators are approaching the “action” stage of change. In this stage, a person actually makes a public commitment to the change, but doesn’t yet share the decision with friends or family. “I will know when I am willing to change,” shared one investigator, “when I stop being afraid”.

The vast majority of our time together this week was spent on a lengthy assessment of ourselves in each of the 11 resources we have identified over the past two weeks. Investigators individually completed an assessment tool. This step can be very emotional because it is a snapshot of where each investigator is thriving—and where they are lacking. As difficult as it may be, however, an honest and thorough self-assessment is crucial to creating goals and a plan. Investigators sat in silence, each working at their own pace, as they thought about the resources they currently have in a variety of areas, such as financial, mental, physical, and spiritual. They thought about how many people they have in their life that they can count on. They explored how well they knew the “Hidden Rules” of their own and other classes. How much motivation and persistence do they have? The assessment led to another conversation about how intertwined the resources are and how much being “rich” in one resource can lead to growth in another resource.

At the beginning of this blog, I shared the four steps of Getting Ahead. The first step is assessing where investigators are right now. The second step is to identify what barriers are holding the investigators back. With the self- assessments that we have now completed, we have finished the first two steps. In the remaining weeks, we will rapidly go through the third and fourth steps, which are to identify community resources and to create an individual future plan with goals that are unique and important to them. It is hard to believe that we are now two thirds of the way through the program. Gary and I are now beginning the process of matching middle class mentors with each of our investigators. These mentors will offer them support for the next six months as they begin to put their future plans into action.

## Getting Ahead Blog—Week 11

### *Learning More about our Community*

This week's session began with a discussion of homework. This week, investigators were asked to reflect upon and write down what they had discovered about their levels of resources. We went through a series of discussion questions to find out which resources the investigators felt they could build upon in order to move forward. We discussed how the resources tend to build upon one another. If a person is lacking in one resource, the lack tends to bleed over into other areas of resources. For example, one of our investigators has a Master's degree, but due to a severe health problem, she has been unable to work. She is extremely well resourced in the area of education and mental abilities, but has a lack of resources in the area of health. As a result, her financial resources have suffered.

Once we finished our material on the resources the investigators have within themselves, we were ready for the project that will take the next three weeks—an assessment of community resources. This project will use all of the investigation skills that we've developed in the past 11 weeks. After being split up into teams, investigators were asked to choose two topics that they will research as a team. The topics that they will be researching will be:

1. Community Assessment of Economic Conditions
2. Community Assessment of Housing Conditions
3. Community Assessment of Financial/Banking Conditions
4. Community Assessment of Jobs, Wages, and Wealth-Creating Conditions
5. Community Assessment of Protection from Predators Conditions
6. Community Assessment of Education Conditions
7. Community Assessment of Public Sector Conditions
8. Community Assessment of Health Conditions
9. Community Assessment of Leadership Conditions

Each area has 10 indicators about which investigators will be gathering data. Using laptops and smartphones, as well as literature made available by Montgomery County, the investigators spent the next hour researching their indicators. In the coming week, they will also be visiting government offices, agencies, and non-profits to get the answers to questions. Visiting these places and meeting community leaders will be not just be a great way for the investigators to learn more about their community—it will also be a wonderful opportunity for them to build social capital and to build confidence. When we gather next week, we will aggregate all of the data that we have gathered in order to create a Mental Model of our community that can be shared with leaders and others in poverty. The investigators were extremely excited and intent upon their task, and I cannot wait to learn from them when they bring their data back next week.

## Getting Ahead Blog—Week 12

### *Stepping into Leadership*

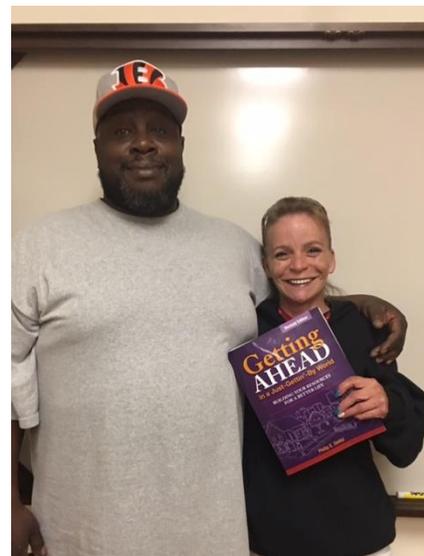
When the investigators gathered this week, they were generally well-prepared to present their reports on indicators of stability in our community. Investigators had been partnered together to do their research, and many of them had spoken to each other throughout the week to compare notes and to ask advice from each other on where to go to find data. We were missing two investigators, which was a disappointment, and the importance of each investigator pulling their weight was highlighted by their absence. The group members are accountable to the group, and this came home to the other investigators. Each of the other people in the group will take time to answer one of the research questions that were assigned to the “missing investigators”, and once we have that additional research completed, we will be ready to complete our report on stability indicators in our community and to complete our Community Assessment Mental Model.

Also related to our “missing investigators”, the group had a discussion about attendance. The two investigators who were absent this week have now exceeded the number of absences that the group agreed upon many weeks ago, so it was time for the group to make a decision about whether or not they would be allowed to stay in the group. Once again, it came through to me that our neighbors in poverty only rarely have opportunities to make decisions—even decisions that will affect them personally. They looked to me to make the final decision for them. I reminded them that Getting Ahead belongs to them, not to me, and that they are accountable to themselves. Finally, a decision was made. Hopefully this opportunity to come to a group decision and to take on a leadership role will be good practice for them after they graduate. One of the goals of the GA program is to create community leaders who can speak for those in poverty, and looking around the table at this group, I see leadership developing week by week.

Gary, my co-facilitator, was out of town this week, so Debbie, our backup co-facilitator, was in attendance. She has not attended a GA session since Week three, and she remarked that she was amazed by the progress that the group has made. She was especially impressed by the amount of ownership and responsibility that the investigators have taken on as time has gone by. One example of this is our “dynamic duo”, Donald and Kat, who have consistently attended and taken on extra responsibilities. A more unlikely pair you might never meet, but through GA, they have created a friendship that is building social capital.

As we begin the final phase of Getting Ahead, we will have just one more session with only the investigators present. After that, we will have two prospective future facilitators in attendance, and then our mentors will be joining us for our final session. It is hard to believe that the end is so near, but we are looking forward to seeing in the coming weeks what our investigators will be able to do with all of the knowledge and connections that they’ve gained already.

*The “Dynamic Duo”*



## Getting Ahead Blog—Week 13

### ***Identifying Community Connections*** By Co-Facilitator Debbie Smith

Attendance was strong again this week. One of the investigators was absent because of a high school graduation event. Another investigator also had a graduation commitment to attend later in the evening. Much to his credit, he came to class and then left a little early. Debbie subbed again for Gary this week. As the investigators arrived for class, their discussions indicated that they had been in communication with one another throughout the week. As co-investigators on their Getting Ahead journeys, they are clearly supporting and holding each other accountable. The investigators' homework from the prior week was to complete Section 6, Module 8, the Community Assessment of Education Conditions. Investigators were assigned specific indicators to explore and report their findings. For the most part, they were prepared. One valuable resource they used was the Human Services Planning and Development 2016 Annual Report. The investigators are becoming proficient with using this as one tool to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their Montgomery County community. This is an important step in the Getting Ahead process. They previously addressed their own situations and resources, and now they are researching the conditions and resources in their community. This is valuable information which they will use when they write their own "future stories." The next activity involved identifying potential partners in their community, such as individuals, neighbors, churches, schools, and other institutions. After identifying potential partners, the remainder of the class time was spent exploring and discussing how they could form one-on-one relationships with these personal and community associations and institutions. This activity was designed to do two things: (1) identify potential partners that would help them complete their own future plans and (2) benefit the community as a whole, including others in poverty. The investigators were creative and resourceful in identifying ways that they could both benefit from and contribute to these potential community partners. They identified gifts that they could bring to the relationship that did not cost any money but yet are very valuable, such as volunteering their time, advocating, and increasing awareness. This was a very lively discussion. It was quite clear that these investigators are developing an even greater awareness of community resources and possess the strong problem-solving skills they need to take action on their future plans. As the class came to a close, the investigators were talking about the few remaining classes. They were each given the name of their assigned mentor, and you could see the excitement on their faces as they thought about this next phase. Interestingly, they do not see graduation as the final step, though. In fact, in addition to the support they will have from their mentors, they are looking forward to continuing to meet once a month as a group. We ended with a heartfelt statement by one of the investigators. She expressed how much she has already gained from the classes and her newly-formed relationships with the Getting Ahead facilitators and co-investigators. She added that she is already a changed person.

***Facilitator Sunnie Lain and Co-facilitators Gary Miller and Debbie Smith***



## Getting Ahead Blog—Week 14

### *Making the Leap*

As we near the end of our curriculum, the connections between all of the material we've learned are becoming more and more evident. This week's session dealt with creating a specific plan for accessing all of the resources we've now identified, and during the evening we referred back to at least a half dozen concepts that we have learned in the past three months. I was impressed by how many concepts our investigators have not only understood but have retained. They truly are poverty experts, and they are ready to move forward into leadership.

In order to talk about and understand the concept of resources, we need to understand that there are two types of resources: getting-by resources and getting-ahead resources. In order to build each of the 11 resources we identified in previous sessions, there is a vast array of resources available. These resources are within us and within the community. Before we choose to access those resources, however, it is helpful to understand whether those resources will merely help us to maintain our poverty or if they will help us to move beyond it.

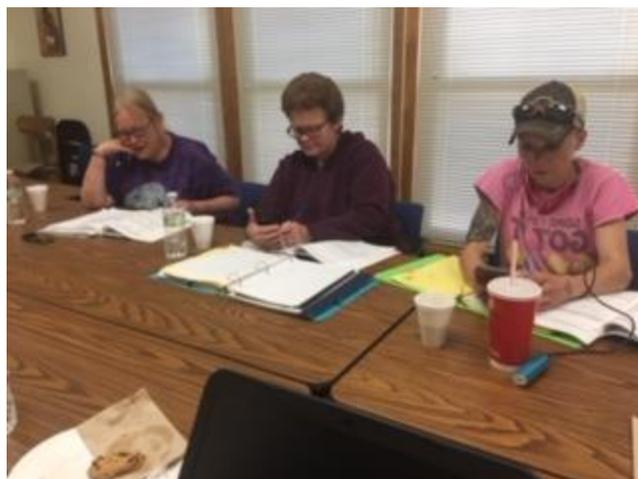
To do this, we first made a list of resources in the community. Here is an example of a few of the ideas that came from our brainstorming session:

	<b>Getting-By Resources</b>	<b>Getting -Ahead Resources</b>
<b>FINANCIAL</b>	Food Pantry/clothing vouchers	Budgeting class
<b>RELATIONSHIPS/ROLE MODELS</b>	Same crowd we've always associated with	Meet new people from other social classes/mentors
<b>MOTIVATION/PERSISTENCE</b>	"I can't—it's too hard"	"I WILL TRY"
<b>SOCIAL CAPITAL</b>	Existing circle	Join a group/club/ GA

The ideas flowed freely. One of the most amazing moments of the evening came when an investigator realized that sometimes it's not what the resource offers you—it's what you do with it that matters! "Almost anything can help you get ahead if you use it the right way!" Another investigator added, "The next time I call an agency for 'getting by' help, I'll ask them if they have any programs that can help me get ahead so I won't ever have to call them again".

Part of our conversation this week was a long and very honest conversation about the scary reality of making the transition from poverty to stability. When people are used to having a safety net, it is very risky to jump from it and onto the ladder that can lead them to stability. We hope that the knowledge, tools, and social support that Getting Ahead has offered them will help them to find the courage to close their eyes, hold their breath, and jump.

People in poverty are largely missing from decision-making tables in our communities. Much of this has to do with the fact that people in poverty are too busy "putting out fires" to think about joining a civic group, a neighborhood association, or the board of a non-profit. But hearing their voices is critical if we as a community are to find real solutions to the problems of poverty. If we want to move beyond a "band-aid" approach, we need to invite those most affected by the complex and difficult challenges that poverty creates and perpetuates to the table. Through Getting Ahead, we have educated our first group of poverty-affected -and-informed people. They are needed and they are ready to share their knowledge.

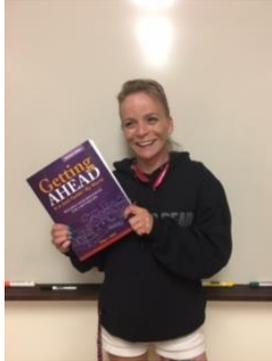


## Getting Ahead—Week 15

### *Walking into the Future*

This week was the culmination of the work we've done for the last 15 weeks. Our investigators spent the evening writing a very detailed and specific SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-specific) plan for achieving an individual goal. Here are some of our group's achievements and goals as we finish Getting Ahead.

Kat is exploring joining the board of a local non-profit and will be serving as a mentor our next cohort of GA investigators. She will be continuing her education as well.



Lillian has started the process of becoming a volunteer at two local agencies.



Nadia will be working on improving her English reading and writing skills with the help of her children and the local library.

Jennifer will be joining the GA staff as a co-facilitator for our next cohort. She is excited to receive her certification as a Getting Ahead co-facilitator.



Mary has moved into a new apartment and is getting ready to start a new job that will increase her income.

Donald will be working with his mentor continue to build social capital. He is planning to serve as a mentor in our upcoming Veterans Getting Ahead program.



Cindy is focusing on spending her time on reading and learning. She is excited about the possibilities she now has with new time management skills, a mentor, and the friendships she's made in GA.

