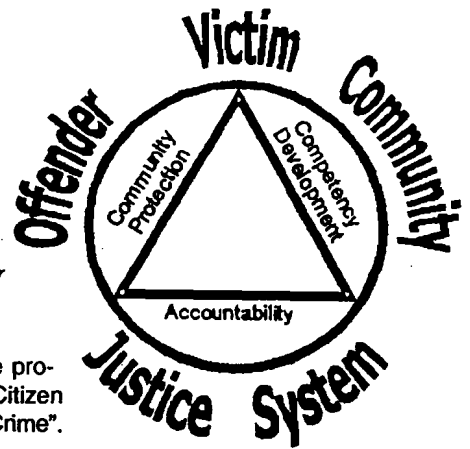


Balanced and Restorative Justice Project Update:



Restorative justice volunteers tell their story

by David Karp

On September 8-9, 2000, the BARJ Project invited volunteers from restorative justice programs around the country to gather in Burlington, Vermont for a workshop entitled: "Citizen Justice: A National Forum on Community Justice Volunteers in Restorative Responses To Crime".

What happens when you gather fifty restorative justice volunteers from around the country to share their work, triumphs and struggles? They speak from the heart. They ponder out loud the meaning of terms widely used in this movement:

- Reconciliation
- Empowerment
- Generosity
- Role-Modeling
- Accountability
- Trust
- Compassion
- Love
- Patience
- Listening
- Community
- Recognition
- Respect
- Commitment
- Understanding
- Service
- Empathy
- Healing
- Opportunity
- Support
- Inclusion

These are not the words we expect to hear from those involved in criminal justice work. Conspicuously absent was the standard conservative terminology of criminal justice: punishment, retribution, control, and war on crime. Nor did we hear the standard liberal terminology: rehabilitation, treatment, and individual rights. The terms listed above suggest an alternative approach to resolving crime problems. An approach with new language and new vision. Also absent in this forum was the cynicism and hopelessness so often expressed by the drones of assembly line courtrooms and prison warehouses. This approach seems to take personal relationships seriously, accepting inefficiencies that might exist when time is taken to address each individual's needs in the justice process and treating each stakeholder with respect and dignity.

Finally, what was absent was the divisiveness of adversarial justice, the standard bifurcations of innocence vs. guilt; us vs. them; good vs. evil; white vs. black. This group meeting was characterized by hope, dedication, and vision, and by a desire to seek common ground between victims, offenders, and diverse communities. This conference, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Balanced and Restorative Justice Project at Florida Atlantic University, was the first national conference for restorative justice volunteers.

Why They Volunteer

These national volunteers were drawn to their work for a variety of reasons. Many were crime victims who had not been well-served by our contemporary justice system. They participate in restorative justice initiatives as a form of self-healing, and feel compelled to change the system so that it may better serve others in the future. Some work with troubled youth, and have found restorative practices to be a powerful means to teach them about social responsibility. Some are motivated by their own commitment to community, and see restorative justice as one way to make their community a better place to live. Some were drawn to restorative justice because its message is consistent with their religious faith. Some were drawn to volunteer because their communities are disadvantaged by poverty or prejudice or the challenges of assimilation and restorative justice offers their community a way to become better integrated in the larger society.

In one session, break-out groups were asked to draw a picture that describes their motivation to participate. One group draw a devastating portrait of contemporary justice. The picture was of an offender, standing alone, holding a gun, yet ambivalent about his destructive behavior. Thus, his other hand reaches back toward the community in a gesture of need, desperation, and dependency. But, instead of aid, what is given to him by the community is a ball and chain. It is this woefully inadequate response that this group is dedicated to change.

While these volunteers are motivated by their commitment to community, many of them pointed out the benefits they receive from their volunteering. They spoke of spiritual growth, self empowerment, life-long learning, deeper personal connections, and community identity.

What Volunteers Add

One of the central questions posed to this forum was to articulate what volunteers can contribute to the justice process that is unique. Are they really needed, or can the jus-

tice system simply be maintained by the professionals. Here are three compelling reasons offered.

- 1 Volunteers are members of a local community often in day-to-day interaction with victims, offenders, and neighbors affected by particular crime problems. At the local level, volunteers can provide on-going support and supervision and oversight for the stakeholders in the process adding continuity to an otherwise ephemeral justice process.
- 2 Volunteers can offer a flexibility and creativity to the decision-making process that enable restoration of real problems and concerns to occur. Part of this has to do with the time volunteers take to identify what really happened, and part of this comes from the power that volunteers have in bridging the gap between the worlds of victims and offenders.
- 3 Volunteers role model good citizenship for offenders. Their participation is a demonstration of a community of care, of social responsibility, and of the meaningful expression of community membership. In the same vein, volunteering in restorative justice is empowering for the volunteering by offering a volunteer experience that builds personal relationships and reinforces moral beliefs.

The Markers of Success

Achieving justice for victims, offenders, and communities is an enormous challenge. This group was not naïve about the difficulties, and in their work, often experience set-backs. They recognize that even when they create a just process, success may not always follow. One volunteer put it this way: "All the crime may not be gone tomorrow, but we sure love how we handled it today." Yet these volunteers know success when they see it. They know it when the community has participated broadly and deeply, especially when the decision-making included offenders and victims. They know it when the harm of the crime has been identified, when offenders understand that harm, and concrete strategies of repair have been pursued. They know it when they feel safer in their communities. They know it when the community has responded to the crime in a timely manner, unencumbered by bureaucracy. They know it when new relationships have been built in the community. One volunteer called this spiritual bond of community, "koinania."

Another referred to the need we have to be citizens making decisions about community life. Thus democracy society is enhanced and strengthened. They know it when the media, politicians, and criminal justice professionals accurately describe their work and public awareness of it grows. They know it when victims and offenders can give voice to their needs, and express how restorative justice has

helped them heal or grow. They know it when offenders and victims have been embraced by the community and not stigmatized and outcast. They know it when the ranks of volunteers grow and when they volunteer roles change, evolve, and diversify. They know it when, in the words of one participant, "the sun shines brighter in the sky."

Collaboration with Government

Volunteers are faced with the problem of having no organizational structure that provides resources and authority. They depend on their association with community groups and government agencies. How can they enjoy an equal partnership with those who have traditionally controlled criminal justice practices? These volunteers recommended that first and foremost, the community must clarify and articulate a coherent vision of community justice. They must work together to define who they are, and seek to include marginalized members of the community. They must be willing and able to provide leadership and take responsibility for their part in the justice process.

Then they must invite key players from both sides to come together in a circle for ongoing meetings and open dialogue. Such meetings should occur in neutral settings, emphasize egalitarian relationships, and respect for the various roles that all play. This collaborative work invests all parties in the proposal for change and enables them to carefully delineate roles and responsibilities. It also helps identify what resources are needed and where they can be obtained. Excellent training in restorative practices are essential for delivering a quality process, and community and justice system participants should be trained together. Then new programs must be promoted through public education campaigns and accurate media coverage.

Building the Future

After the dialogue and debate, this group was energized to implement new ideas and reinforce their practices. Many lessons were taken to heart. Practitioners, policy-makers, bureaucrats, systems people, need to be invited into the community—to meet with victims and offenders, to

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