Bethel will host first-ever statewide restorative justice conference

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NORTH NEWTON, KAN. – There are many areas in which Kansans are on the front lines in building peace and facilitating justice that benefits entire communities.

But until now, no one event has brought many of these practitioners together at the same time and place. “Restorative Kansas: A Vision for Justice” is a conference that intends to do just that, happening on the campus of Bethel College April 19-20.

The lead sponsor is the Kansas Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (KIPCOR) at Bethel, in collaboration with the Center for Conflict Resolution, Kansas City, Missouri; the Kansas Department of Corrections, Victim Services, Topeka; Kansas State University Department of Communication Studies; Mennonite Central Committee-Central States, based in North Newton; the National Association of Community and Restorative Justice (NACRJ); Offender Victim Ministries of Newton; and the Salina Institute for Restorative Justice.

KIPCOR executive director Sheryl Wilson is also the current president of NACRJ, a professional organization that mainly serves as a way to get resources to, and promote networking for, restorative justice practitioners in the United States.

Her connections have helped Restorative Kansas draw in nationally and internationally known speakers who have agreed to come “just because they want to help us [in Kansas],” Wilson says. “They want to see us succeed, to see Kansas be on the restorative justice map.”

Five people will make up the keynote panel that opens the conference on April 19.

Edward Valandra is the founder of and senior research fellow for the Community for the Advancement of Native Studies, Mission, South Dakota, and an adviser to Living Justice Press, a nonprofit publisher for restorative justice. Valandra is Sicangu Titunwan, born and raised on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation.

Joanne Katz is a professor of legal studies in the Department of Criminal Justice, Legal Studies and Social Work at Missouri Western State University, St. Joseph, just returned from Vietnam, where she taught restorative justice at the School of Law, Foreign Trade University, in Hanoi under a Fulbright Scholar grant.

Morris Jenkins, dean of the College of Health and Human Services at Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, “talks fluidly about the intersectionality of race and restorative justice, and community policing..."
projects,” Wilson says.

Another person working in the area of community policing is Raj Sethuraju, a professor in the School of Criminal Justice and Law Enforcement at Metropolitan State University, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Jasmyn Elise Story is a recent graduate of Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, and a restorative justice facilitator.

Story will also speak in Bethel College’s convocation April 20 along with David Karp, a sociology professor at Skidmore who directs the Project on Restorative Justice there. Their topic is “How restorative justice is informing the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements on college and university campuses.”

The convocation, at 11 a.m. in Krehbiel Auditorium in Luyken Fine Arts Center, is free and open to the public, as is a presentation the night before, April 19, at 7 p.m. in Krehbiel Auditorium, “One Victim’s Journey to Healing.”

The purpose of this first-ever conference, Wilson says, has several facets.

One is to provide an introduction to restorative justice to people who work in communities – such as police officers, pastors and public school teachers – and who may have heard of restorative justice but don’t know, or don’t understand, what it is.

Another is to bring together those who are already practicing restorative justice – in schools, in the criminal justice and court systems, through community mediation centers – to get re-inspired to spread “the gospel of restorative justice” and to make connections with other practitioners across the state.

“We also want to have a national voice – to spread nationwide what’s happening here in Kansas,” Wilson says.

And she hopes to inspire Bethel and other college students.

“We’d love nothing more than for our students to get excited about restorative justice,” she says. “Bethel is starting a new Criminal and Restorative Justice certificate [in fall 2018].”

Students were what conference planners had in mind when they invited Circles & Ciphers, a Chicago-based, hip-hop-infused restorative justice organization led by and for young people affected by violence.

Circles & Ciphers “integrates the arts with circle processes,” says Sharon Kniss, KIPCOR director of education and training. “They’re coming here before their East Coast tour. Their goal is to inspire other young people to do this kind of work themselves, in ways that are applicable to the communities.”

Circles & Ciphers will be involved in the evening programming at the end of the first day of the conference, as well as lead a plenary session on the second day.

Day 1 of the conference will “give the big picture of restorative justice,” says Kniss, while Day 2 focuses in on what’s specifically happening in Kansas – such as the progress of a bill in the Kansas legislature that would
keep youth out of juvenile detention and provide an opening for restorative justice practice, and work across the state toward restorative practices in schools.

Other workshops will deal with restorative justice in community policing, Native communities, workplaces, faith communities and college campus life.

Mark Umbreit, probably the most widely known of the resource people present at the conference, will present a workshop on trauma and restorative justice.

Umbreit directs the Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking at the University of Minnesota. He is an internationally recognized practitioner and scholar with more than 40 years of experience as a mediator, peacemaker, trainer, teacher and researcher, and the author of 10 books.

The conference “will give a good cross-section of what’s going on,” in Kansas and nationally, in restorative justice, Wilson says.

“Those who come will get a lot for their registration fee.”

Go to kipcor.org for the link to the conference, which includes links to the sponsoring organizations, a complete schedule for both days, and online registration.

Bethel College ranks at No. 1 in College Consensus’ ranking of Kansas colleges and universities, and is the only Kansas private college listed in the Forbes.com analysis of top colleges and universities, the Washington Monthly National Universities-Liberal Arts section and the National Liberal Arts College category of U.S. News & World Report, all for 2017-18. The four-year liberal arts college is affiliated with Mennonite Church USA. For more information, see www.bethelks.edu.

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