

Justice in Motion: New Issue of the Advocate Newsletter



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A Place of Healing

By Rev. Fred VanderBerg, Westmount CRC, Strathroy, ON

I had been invited to sit in as an observer. It was my first experience of a Restorative Justice Circle. I walked into the gymnasium of an empty school. In the middle of the gymnasium's tiled floor was a circle of cold, plywood chairs; like the kind found in many churches and schools. A second row of cold, plywood chairs circled behind the first row. A pleasant looking person serving as a host approached me. She introduced herself and asked in what capacity I was participating. I informed her that I had been invited to observe. She asked me to take a seat in the second row of plywood chairs, which I did.

Sitting there, I observed a group of people standing quietly at one end of the gymnasium. There was the odd whisper. Some of them - nervous like - shuffled from one foot to another. I noticed a second group of people, behaving in much the same way, on the other side of the gymnasium. A table containing mugs, cans of Coke, baked goods and a coffee percolator - whose gurgling was creating the most noise in the gymnasium - stood at another end of the gymnasium.

After several minutes, Ron Hunt, an Anglican clergy person in Renfrew, acting as convener, asked all the participants to sit down. After they were seated, Ron explained the procedure, asked if there were any questions and invited each person in the circle to introduce themselves. There were two teenage girls, parent(s) of each girl, two friends to support the two teenage girls, three teenage boys, parent(s) of each boy, a high school principal, a physical education teacher/ basketball coach, a lawyer, and a police officer.

Ron Hunt asked the first teenage boy to describe what took place on the night in question, what happened after that night, and how he felt at this time. In a hushed room, where one could hear a pin drop, the young boy told of how he and his two friends were driving down the main street of Renfrew. It was Halloween night,

dark and late. They noticed two young girls walking on the sidewalk. The driver slowed the car to a crawl. As they approached the two young girls, one of the boys rolled down the car window, reached out and grabbed the girl's bag of candy. After grabbing what he thought to be a bag of candy but was her sweater, the driver of the car sped up. The young girl was dragged down the street, terrified. The boy's grip on the sweater broke loose. The speeding car left the girl lying on the sidewalk. They had the bag of candy, which they opened in the parking lot of the local high school. There they were apprehended by the police. In the quiet of the gymnasium, he told of how he felt now. The second teenage boy was asked to do the same thing, which he did. The third teenage boy was asked to do the same thing. He described what happened with tears rolling down his cheek. Between sobs, he spoke of how he felt, that it was intended as a prank, a joke but that it was not a joke. Next, Ron asked each parent of the three boys to tell the people sitting in the circle how they felt. The parents spoke words of defense. They spoke words expressing disappointment, disappointment in the behavior of their sons. They spoke words of apology. Then Ron asked the high school principal of the three boys and the physical education teacher to speak. The principal spoke of their academic achievements, their contributions in school life. The teacher spoke of their participation in cross-country, their participation in basketball.

Following this, Ron asked the teenage girl who had been dragged down the street to describe what happened that night and how she felt now. With every ear in the room attentive, she described what had happened, what had happened afterward, how she felt now. She described weeks of sleepless nights, nightmares that followed the event. She said that today, she is gripped with fear as she walks down a dark street in Renfrew. The second teenage girl told her story. She spoke of her fear walking alone at nighttime. She fears every stranger that walks past her on the streets. She said that every stranger has become a monster.

Ron asked the parents of each girl to tell how they felt. They spoke words of anger: angry that these teenage boys had taken away their daughter's sense of safety, sense of security! They were angry that their daughters no longer felt safe in their own town! They spoke word of wonder, puzzlement, asking, "How could you do such a thing?"

I sat there observing, thinking. The three teenage boys had to speak out loud what they had done - a hard thing to do. They had to hear how it effected their love ones - their parents. They heard, face to face, how their acts had hurt the girls - not an easy thing to hear. The two girls heard that the boys meant it as a prank. They heard sobbing. They heard words of apology. They heard from the boys' principal, their coach; hearing that they were good students, active participants in the life of their high school. They learned that the monsters created in their minds were in fact

human; teenagers who had made a terrible mistake.

Following this, Ron instructed the people in the circle that together they were to negotiate the punishment for the three boys. The negotiations, which went back and forth, resulted in: one, the boys were to reimburse the young girl for her sweater; two, they were to participate with a traveling production called R.I.S.K. (This production was traveling to the local high schools. It taught students to analyze the risk involved with each decision. Their goal was to help students make good choices. The boys were to tell their story as part of the production); and three, the boys were to volunteer a number of hours to help the intramural sports program at their high school. After the boys signed the agreement, all were invited to enjoy the provided refreshments.

Things had changed. All the participants walked to the table where the coffee was perking, where cans of Coke and cookies were waiting! Parents of the three boys mingled with the parents of the two young girls! The three teenage boys approached, personally apologized, talked with, even laughed with the two young girls! Reconciliation had taken place! Healing was taking place! A community was active in resolving its own problems. It was good to be part of this.

*Our thanks to **Pastor Fred VanderBerg** from Westmount CRC in Strathroy, ON for sharing his experience. **Restorative Justice Week takes place November 17-24.** Please visit www.crcjustice.org for more on Restorative Justice Week, including resources, and action ideas.*



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