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Restorative Justice Project To Hold Volunteer Seminar



By Matthew Stilphen

The Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast will hold a volunteer seminar Wed., Jan. 19 at the Second Congregational Church in Newcastle.

Damariscotta Mills resident and Justice Project volunteer coordinator Joy Knowlton will conduct the training for potential mentors. In an interview with The Lincoln County News Dec. 17, Knowlton described the mission of the project as an alternative way to address issues of justice in a restorative and less punitive way.



Damariscotta Mills resident and Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast volunteer coordinator Joy Knowlton (L) with Justice Project director Margaret Micolichek Dec.17 (Matthew Stilphen photo)

It also aims to provide healing and support for the victims of crime while fostering a sense of accountability for the offender, Knowlton said.

"In the last 100 years we've really removed the community from the equation. Our goal is to engage the community as partners in restorative responses to crime," Knowlton said.

According to the group's website, the conventional response to crime is not working and ignores the needs of victims. This, they argue, generates shame rather than remorse and denial rather than accountability.

With incarceration rates soaring in the United States, estimated to be the highest in the industrialized world, and diverting money away from other social needs such as education, the Justice Project feels a different approach is needed.

"Through our principles, the program aims to reduce the likelihood of future offenses," Justice Project Director Margaret Micolichek said.

The Justice Project works with both juvenile and adult offenders across the state, providing a pre-release "mentor" to assist the individual with the daunting task of rejoining the free world.

The goal is to help the offender with basic needs such as housing, employment, and most importantly reestablishing connections within the community. Upon release, the mentoring relationship continues for a period of 6-12 months.

"During this time our goal is to break harmful patterns in the individual and have them accept responsibility for their actions," Micolichek said.

As a Lincoln County educator, Knowlton said she could often identify children at high risk for problems as early as the seventh grade.

"You can tell from an early age who will probably end up involved in crime. Unfortunately it's the same kids you see in the police report of the paper later in their life," Knowlton said.

According to Micolichek, the Justice Project gained a foothold in the United States during the 1970s as a way to address juvenile crime. The nondenominational program shares a spiritual kinship with the Mennonites and has been embraced by the Canadian government as an effective model for rehabilitation.

The Maine chapter was started in Belfast five years ago and is expanding throughout the state.

In addition to working with correctional facilities, the project offers training to school staff on restorative disciplinary techniques as an alternative to detention, suspension, or expulsion which Knowlton calls "counter-productive."

While the jury is still out on the effectiveness of the program here in Maine, Knowlton has seen the difference firsthand.

"It's a rational, humane approach to justice. These are human beings involved, not numbers. Community involvement can make a difference and both change and heal lives," Knowlton said.

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For more information on mentoring opportunities at Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast please call 338-2742 or visit rjpmidcoast.org.

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