

Celebrating fifth year, Restorative Justice looks to go statewide

By Ethan Andrews
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(Photo by: Ethan Andrews) Jeff Sholes, a participant the Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast, thanks his mentors at RJP's fifth anniversary celebration at Point Lookout, April 10, drawing some of the loudest applause of the evening.

Northport — "At the roots of our work is a belief that we all have inherent worth and that we owe it to each other to find that seed of goodness in each other, even when it is really well hidden."

So said the Rev. Mark Glovin at the opening of the fifth anniversary celebration of the Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast, held April 10. The event, organized around the theme of "Celebrating Second Chances," drew 200 guests to Point Lookout and included a silent auction of dozens of donated gifts, and live music by the Bel-Isle Trio.

The Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast dates its roots to 2003 with meetings between retired professor of theology and ethics T. Richard Snyder and Waldo County Sheriff Scott Story. While at the New York Theological Society, Snyder had taught prisoners in the seminary's master's program at Sing Sing prison and had become convinced of the futility of the prevailing approach to corrections. Story was frustrated with the high recidivism rate among inmates at Waldo County Jail.

Restorative justice, a concept in practice around the world, presents an alternative approach to the punitive measures that frustrated Snyder when he was at Sing Sing — those which, as the RJP Web site describes them, "focus on laws and rules that have been broken, rather than on the harm that has been suffered." The use of restorative justice has also been linked to lower rates of recidivism.

The approach views criminals as members of the community who have made mistakes. To repair the damage done to the community, the philosophy says, the offender must be encouraged to feel remorse, and there must be reconciliation between the offender and the victim. To achieve this, offenders and victims are brought together in mediated "circles." The offender is also paired with a mentor, much the same as someone recovering from drug addiction.

In 2005, RJP mentors began working with inmates at Waldo County Jail. During the statewide consolidation of state prison and county jail systems, initiated by Gov. John E. Baldacci in 2007, Story, who serves on the joint Board of Corrections, pushed successfully to have the mission of the jail changed to that of a pre-release facility.

The Maine Coastal Regional Reentry Center, as the jail was renamed, opened in January serving six counties: Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, Waldo and Washington. The 36-bed facility currently has 13 residents, some of whom, Jail Administrator Robert Walker said Saturday, are employed at businesses in Belfast.

Programming at the facility is run by Volunteers of America and includes restorative justice among a number of other programs, including substance abuse, parenting and job counseling, anger management sessions, GED preparation, meditation and yoga.

Story said RJP plays a larger role at MCRRC in part because a resident's stay at the facility is often longer than it would have been when the building was a jail.

On Saturday, RJP Executive Director Margaret Micolichuk marveled at the packed hall. Five years earlier, she said, RJP consisted of a few people meeting at Darby's restaurant, "trying to figure out what the mission was, and what we wanted to accomplish." The idea that everyone could agree upon, she said, was that the revolving door of recidivism, the generations of families coming through the court and jail systems, had to stop.

"These individuals belong in our community. They are part of our community. They need to be connected," she said. "We can't keep sending people away and expecting them to come back with changes in behavior and fit in if we don't welcome them back."

Micolichuk drew applause when she forecasted the next five years. "If it continues to go as it has for the last five years, I think it could be a statewide program," she

said.

Later, Story gave a vote of confidence to Micolichek's projection. "From just the presence in this room tonight and the work we're doing in the six counties, it's clear to me that going statewide, Margaret, [will be] no problem. We can get it done."

Much of the work of RJP focuses on juvenile offenders. Micolichek said in two schools where restorative justice practices were used as an alternative to suspension and expulsion — which, contrary to restorative justice principles, distance offender and victim from one another — detention rates dropped 40 percent in one year.

Since 2005, RJP has worked with 80 juvenile offenders, of which, Micolichek said, 90 to 95 percent have been successful in completing their RJP agreement, which involves speaking with the person they have harmed. The organization has also worked with 20 adult offenders.

Micolichek said participants in RJP have given more than 1,400 hours of community service, repaid restitution of more than \$7,000, and engaged in 2,200 hours of mentoring. "Much different than what they would see if they had gone directly to court and stood before the judge."

She attributed this success to the program's 70 volunteer mentors, some of whom have maintained relationships with their mentees for as long as four years.

In introducing Richard Snyder, Glovin quoted from Snyder's book "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment," saying, "The basic problem with our criminal and juvenile justice systems is neither a lack of awareness nor a lack of alternatives, but rather a culture that is captive to a spirit of punishment."

Snyder kept his remarks brief, thanking a number of parties who had helped or participated in the program. He called Saturday's celebration "living proof of Margaret Mead's famous quote, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'"

Other speakers included State Rep. John Piotti, who read a proclamation from Gov. Baldacci that named April 10, 2010, "Restorative Justice Day," June Koegel, president and CEO of Volunteers of America Northern New England, Carolyn Otto of RJP, who gave several cases of youth who were helped by the restorative justice process, and Jeff Sholes, one such youth, who expressed gratitude to his mentors and RJP, drawing some of the loudest applause of the evening.