

Restorative Justice Project seeks to 'bring justice back to the community'

Agency to mark five years

By Sarah E. Reynolds
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(Photo by: Sarah E. Reynolds) Donna Gilbert, a Vista volunteer with the Restorative Justice Project, left, sits with RJP Executive Director Margaret Micolichek.

Belfast — When the Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast celebrates its fifth anniversary at Point Lookout in Northport April 10, the theme of the event will be "Celebrating Second Chances." That seems to sum up what the organization is all about. Through several programs, RJP works with adult and juvenile offenders as well as area students to help them repair the harm they have done in the past and avoid repeating the same behaviors.

Executive Director Margaret Micolichek has been with RJP since its inception, but she had encountered restorative justice practices even before that. Prior to coming to RJP, she worked for the Girl Scouts of the USA in Boston for 17 years, designing non-traditional programs for girls in the city's housing projects and working with girls in public schools. She started a program called Girl Scouting Beyond Bars that brought inmates of the women's prison in Framingham, Mass., together with their daughters to do Scouting activities in the prison.

Micolichek also initiated a program to divert middle-school girls from the court system, which is when she first learned about restorative justice practices, she said.

She explained that the concept of restorative justice comes from the aboriginal peoples of northwestern Canada and the Maori of New Zealand. The practice has also been adopted by the Mennonites in the United States and Canada, she said. Although restorative justice is used locally mostly for individuals who are considered to pose a low degree of risk to the community, Micolichek said there are places, both in this country and in Australia, where the practice is used with people convicted of murder, sex crimes and other serious offenses. She added that restorative justice practices are not necessarily incompatible with incarceration.

As Roy Curtis, the juvenile community corrections officer assigned to Waldo County, pointed out, "enthusiastic volunteer support" is what makes RJP successful as an agency. And in fact the agency's programs depend heavily on volunteer labor. Its current group of 60 volunteers are mentors for either juvenile or adult offenders, or they may facilitate restorative justice circles or do office or fundraising tasks essential to the organization. Additional volunteers are always welcome, Micolichek said.

Volunteer training takes place over four sessions, in which recruits learn about the restorative justice philosophy, see a case study, learn the circle process and do role-playing in a circle. They also hear a mentor and mentee talk about their experiences with the program and visit the Maine Coastal Regional Reentry Center, formerly the Waldo County Jail.

In addition, volunteers talk about some of the underlying circumstances that often lead to involvement with the criminal justice system, such as poverty. They also learn "how not to judge," said Donna Gilbert, a Vista volunteer at RJP who lives in Winterport, as careful and judgment-free listening is critical to their work.

Among the things mentors help their mentees to learn are how to structure their time and how to make good choices for themselves, Micolichek said. "A lot of people live in crisis and chaos," she explained, which can lead them to act impulsively without considering how others may be affected.

RJP had been working with offenders nearing their release dates from Waldo County Jail, and now has a contract with Volunteers of America, the program provider for MCRRC, to mentor residents there, who are state prison inmates chosen because they are considered likely to re-offend. They usually have two mentors, to ensure that one is always available. Micolichek said the average recidivism rate in Maine is 65 percent, but for offenders who have a mentor before their release it is 40 percent. She added that over four years, RJP had saved Knox and Waldo counties \$400,000 in costs associated with keeping individuals incarcerated.

Waldo County Sheriff Scott Story, one of the founders of RJP, agreed that the program saved money, saying he first became interested in using restorative justice practices in the county to reduce recidivism rates, lowering the county's expenses in two ways: less crime and fewer inmates to house. Story also said studies have shown that mentoring helps offenders re-enter the community successfully, adding that mentoring is "a key component" of the program at the re-entry center.

"Traditionally," Story said, "jails have been nothing more than warehouses." Given the expense of incarceration, he continued, it makes financial sense to help inmates make the necessary changes in their lives to avoid returning to jail. Of RJP, he said, "When you look at everything that they're doing, it's having a very positive effect" in the community.

RJP also works with young adults ages 18 to 26 whose dispositions have been deferred by the court. Typically, these cases involve drug- and alcohol-related offenses, motor vehicle offenses and certain types of assaults, Micolichek said. In addition to providing the offender with a mentor, RJP will convene a circle with the offender, the victim(s), the families of both and community witnesses. Two facilitators trained by RJP guide the process.

The offender hears from the identified victim(s) how they were harmed and what they feel about it. Members of the offender's and victim's families may speak as well. The offender is also asked to consider five key questions: What did you do? What were you thinking? What were you feeling? Who do you think was harmed? What do you need to do? If the process is successful, it results in a contract that states what the offender must do to repair the harm, which is often some form of community service.

The process takes offenders seriously and keeps them connected to the community, Micolichek said, which helps healing to occur. "The harm [in the offense] is really a breaking of relationships," she said, and the restorative justice process tries to restore those relationships as much as possible. Thus, instead of being exiled from the community, the offender is made accountable to it and continues to be a part of it.

Offenders who complete their contract can have the charges against them dismissed or reduced, she said.

RJP's Community Resolution Team uses a similar process with first-time, nonviolent, juvenile offenders, said juvenile corrections officer Roy Curtis. At a preliminary investigation meeting with Curtis, youths are referred to CRT instead of to court and if the process is successful, the offender has no criminal record, he said.

One of CRT's assets is that it "really individualizes the cases," Curtis said, so that the resulting contract is specific to the individuals and the harm involved. A 13-year veteran of Maine's Department of Corrections, Curtis was familiar with the CRT concept when he came to the area six years ago, he said, adding that he is "very happy" about the presence of a CRT here. The recidivism rate for the program is "very low," he said.

Conceding that "delinquency is normal" for most teens, he said the circle process helps young people understand better their own behavior and also the feelings of the victim. Facing the victim and hearing his or her feelings about the offense is not easy, Curtis said, adding that often kids say to him, "This is tougher than I thought."

He also stressed the importance of family involvement, calling it "huge." "You can't expect change to occur if you don't have the families on board," he said. The CRT process is sometimes the first opportunity youths have had to hear that the adults in their life care about them, he said.

When RJP first invited schools to talk about restorative practices in 2005, Micolichek said, Troy Howard Middle School in Belfast was interested in starting a pilot project. The teachers were trained and started using circles to build community at the school. The process helped students to connect with each other, with the result that the incidence of bullying was reduced, she said. The school went on to create what it called Community Resolution Circles to solve difficulties between students, and within eight months the number of students in detention had dropped dramatically, Micolichek said.

These days, RJP works with schools in a couple of different ways. At Belfast Area High School, it facilitates circles for students facing suspension and for those seeking to return to school after being expelled. It also trains school staff — it has contracts with 10 schools from Topsham to Bingham this year — in the restorative justice circle process. Once faculty and administrators are trained, they run the process themselves, adapting it as necessary.

One of the schools RJP is contracted with this year is the Belfast Community Outreach Program in Education, an alternative high school. Training of BCOPE's staff and students began in 2009, and the process is now used to resolve conflicts not only between students, but also between students and teachers, according to Program Director Gary Skigen.

Skigen said he had been exposed to the restorative justice process when he was asked by a student to attend a circle on his behalf several years ago, and he felt then that the practice would mesh well with BCOPE's educational philosophy. "We want our students to treat everything ... as an educational experience," he said, including being late for school and getting into fights with their peers.

He said the circle process often reveals to the students involved that the the problem wasn't really between them, but came from somewhere else. In addition, it helps them think more clearly about what they've done and take responsibility for it. Also, students find it empowering because when it is their turn to speak, no one is allowed to interrupt them.

Students who have taken part in the process have responded positively, he said. For example, he mentioned the case of two girls who got into a fistfight, and through the circle process found they had a lot in common. In another case, a circle helped to bring together a male student and his mother who were estranged.

Miranda Parsons is a junior at BCOPE who was involved in a conflict with another student last year. The two agreed to take part in a circle to resolve the problem and Parsons said the process helped her realize how the other girl felt. She said the circle made it safe to open up and be honest, and now the two girls are friends.

"All of a sudden," Skigen said, "students see a different perspective."

Vista Volunteer Donna Gilbert said restorative justice "hits a chord" in people because "it brings together so many things that mean a lot" to them.

Micolichek said whereas punishment makes people harder and more angry, restorative justice makes them realize that they are cared about and valued. It "makes people feel like human beings," she said.

Looking forward, she hopes the entire six-county region covered by MCRRC will embrace the restorative justice philosophy, and Gilbert would also like to see those counties — Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, Waldo and Washington — support programs for juveniles.

"It's cheaper than court, it's cheaper than jail," Micolichek said. In time, she hopes "we can really bring justice back to the community."