

In June, Christopher Miliano will have spent six-and-half years behind bars. He is currently at Maine Coastal Regional Reentry Center (MCRRC), finishing up his degree in mental health services and participating in restorative justice courses.

“I learned about restorative justice from articles published in *The Free Press* and I liked it,” Chris said. “It was another way of looking at the concept of being in prison.”

A five-week RJP course that introduces the fundamentals of restorative justice is integrated into the services offered at the MCRRC.

Michelle Moschkau, Reentry Service Coordinator, said that the course is a time for residents to reflect, to be introduced to healthy support systems and to think about the wider picture.

“Restorative justice philosophy speaks a lot to our interconnectedness as human beings,” Michelle said. “We are intrinsically connected to others; therefore when we act, our action will affect people in a web.”

Co-facilitators guide the progression of the course. Michelle and a member from the community, who is highly involved with the restorative justice philosophy, co-facilitate the class. Michelle said, “The course curriculum varies depending on how the guys are interacting with the material. These adjustments allow everyone to feel comfortable.”

The reentry residents and facilitators sit in a circle to discuss issues such as harm and needs that are associated with those who are impacted by the harm. The group participates in mock circles where they imagine a hypothetical situation and take different roles as the offender, the victim, and the community member.

“We had to pick roles in the class,” Chris said. “My role was as an offender. It felt really powerful to be able to explain my thoughts on why I committed the crime, but it was also very difficult thinking about what to say. I thought about my crime and my victims and how I never gave them any basis for closure.”

These feelings and issues are what the restorative model is designed to evoke. It helps offenders become reconnected with their feelings and with the extended web of people with whom they are connected.

It can be hard to see right from wrong when everything is disconnected. Restorative justice is a key in helping to pull the pieces back, and it is the community who holds the pieces together.

“I think that being involved in the community and the community members showing you that you do have worth, and not just locking you up and throwing away the key, opens up doors and heals a heart,” Chris said.

As part of the five-week restorative justice class, mentors are matched with the reentry residents. Michelle coordinates the match of residents with compatible mentors. The pairs are required to meet three times to see if they are a good match. After the third meeting, they can choose to stop or to continue seeing each other.

“There are some guys who are super shy or find it weird. They think, ‘You’re hooking me up with a stranger,’ and that is uncomfortable at first, so the three meetings give those guys a chance to try out mentoring,” Michelle said.

For the first mentor meeting, Michelle introduces the matches, goes over the guidelines, and makes sure each party knows what is going on. During the second meeting, the pair begins to learn more about one another and by the third meeting, those who have been tentative before sometimes let go and realize that it is a good thing.

“I think what stood out the most for me was the day that the mentors came in and explained what they did,” Chris said. “Some of the mentors are professionals or former professionals that have never been in our shoes or in my shoes. They never did drugs or got in trouble with the law. They are usually higher on the socio-economic scale but they are willing to help.”

Chris said the genuine encouragement and support the mentors give the reentry men play a crucial role in helping them succeed once they are released from jail.

“The majority of people who are sent into prison are getting released again,” Chris said. “They are going to be your neighbors, cook for you, or wash your car. Letting these people realize that they are valuable builds self-esteem. When you see these mentors do acts of kindness, you build up your own self-esteem by seeing these acts.”

Once a week Chris and his mentor meet. They go for walks, drink coffee and twice a month, his mentor takes him to his cooking job. These moments together are the ones that keep him connected.

Chris said he has a good support system, which is *very* rare. Even though he has a good team he believes that you can never have too much support. Chris eventually wants to give back and become a trained co-facilitator.

“I want to be able to show the guys and girls that I know exactly what they are going through and I can say that with conviction,” Chris said.

Restorative justice helped Chris. He could not think of a single thing to change about it. He thought it would be beneficial to implement restorative justice in the school system.

Chris believes in restorative justice because it is helping him to be ready to return to his community.

“I think restorative justice has helped me to recharge,” Chris said. “It’s been a long time. I have been inside for a long time and it’s recharged my batteries.”