

It was a June day in Maine when they had their first one-on-one encounter. Kathryn Matlack and her mentee Brandon, who at the time was enrolled at the re-entry center, were walking around Belfast when they saw the most enormous and beautiful sailboat.

“I have never seen anything like it before,” Kathryn reminisced. “We started talking about sailing and how we both wanted to learn, that’s when I got the idea.”

Kathryn’s idea was to learn how to sail with Brandon and a few of the other reentry guys. She contacted Rockland Community Sailing, who in September donated four sailing lessons to the group, on a 26-foot sailboat.

“It was such a good time,” Kathryn commented. “They loved and looked forward to Thursdays.”

Kathryn loved it too.

She became involved with the Restorative Justice Project of the MidCoast just over a year ago. After learning about the work that RJP is involved with she knew that it was something she wanted to devote her time to.

“I just dove in,” Kathryn said. “I started with the facilitator training a little over a year ago and soon after that I got the mentor training.”

Her first position as a mentor began last May. It was short-term position, but in June she went to meet Brandon, her next mentee. Initially, Kathryn was nervous and unsure of what she had to offer as a mentor.

“I met with him and Michelle and he made some joke about not being sure if we were matched up on all levels of compatibility,” Kathryn said. “It totally cracked me up and I knew that this was going to work out.”

After her success with the sailing lessons, Kathryn reached out to Kea Tesseyman, who teaches Power Performance at High Mountain Hall in Camden to see if she and some of the reentry men could take dance lessons.

Though her original mentee, Brandon, could not attend the dance lessons because he had to focus on the logistics of entering back into the community, some of the other reentry residents were able to partake in the lessons.

“Dillion was really interested and he kinda just took off,” Kathryn said. “He had never done anything like that in his life and by taking the lessons, he realized how it was one of his passions.”

This positive reaction that Dillon had with the dance lessons is what drives Kathryn to do more.

Currently, she is taking a small group of the reentry guys to the MidCoast Recreation Center. The MRC has donated court time and a half-hour tennis lesson to the group.

“One of the reentry guys was blown away about the court time,” Kathryn said. “He wanted their address so he could write a letter and tell them how much he appreciated it, and not let this gracious deed go unnoticed.”

After the lesson, the group grabs lunch and enjoys a hike in Camden Hills State Park.

Kathryn also does not let her original mentee, Brandon, go unnoticed.

“He is making good headway in his life. He is staying clean and sober and is an incredible artist,” Kathryn remarked.

Brandon’s parole officer has offered him a job to paint the waiting room at the parole office. Kathryn said Brandon truly appreciated this offer because it formed a connection between him and his officer which was not there before.

Even though Kathryn is the mentor she feels like she learns a lot from Brandon.

“He had opened my eyes,” Kathryn said. “He will say things about his life and it’s true in my life ... he is extremely smart.”

Kathryn said the more she learns about the restorative justice process, the more she wants to become involved.

She has facilitated a court deferred disposition circle and a restorative conference that she said was: “hugely eye opening, witnessing the power of bringing the offender and victim into one room.”

Another opportunity that offers Kathryn an enlightened mindset is the five-week restorative class. Taught by RJP, it gives reentry residents a chance to explore how

restorative justice differs from the traditional justice system and to take ownership of their actions while reflecting on the impact of their choices on others.

“I think the key that I have seen and the reentry guys have also expressed is knowing that people genuinely care about them,” Kathryn said. “One guy said that it was the first time that he has experienced anyone really care about him.”

Kathryn said most have them have paid their dues; they are working really hard and deserve to have some fun.

“Those guys don’t have [those] connections. They wouldn’t be able to go sailing or play tennis but I can help them with that,” Kathryn said. “It has been a transformative experience that I did not really expect.”