

Buddy's Story: An Unforgettable Mentoring Experience

By Lincoln County Mentor, Bobsy Dudley Thompson

My most meaningful Restorative Justice mentoring experience involved a pale, thin quiet 18 -year-old prisoner in Two Bridges Jail, Wiscasset, Maine. He was nearing his court hearing and probation date, one of many in his life. I'll call him "Buddy," (In my home I call him my beloved jail-bird.) my buddy, as in a swimming buddy. You know, someone you keep track of, you stand by him. You make sure his head is above water, at least most of the time. We met twice in the cold, gray, airless, metallic arraignment room. I listened to his stories—he told them haltingly, inarticulately, incomplete mumblings. Sometimes just a quiet moan or groan. Usually his head was down, his eyes on his feet.

Buddy's background looked like this: foster homes, group homes, reform schools. A lot of the time he wandered—homeless, penniless, and alone in the Maine woods. Mostly, he was in and out of jail. His family life was marked by blood chilling domestic violence, hunger, sickness, and death.

As we grew more accustomed to each other and more trusting, Buddy told me more stories. They were not all grim. There were some bright spots. When he was four or five years old, his Dad took him kiting all the way up on a mountaintop. He tried to tell me how much string they head let out, tons and tons of it and how far, far up in the sky that kite flew. As he threw up his arms to demonstrate, there was an immediate cold clank of metal on metal. His shackles yanked him down. He looked up at me, and with an ironic half smile, he whispered, "Ohh, Jeeesus."

Buddy proudly told me about his boxing family. "Thems was all boxers—some real ones in the ring, some out on the streets fightin'...my grandfather, oh, he were some big brute of a man—tough ol' bastard. Buddy told stories about camping on an uninhabited island on the Maine coast. He and a few other street kids each cleared and marked out a place they claimed as their own. He came close to grinning when he thought back on the island days, a sense of freedom in his voice. I asked him how he got enough food to eat, and what was it? "Oh, an old woman come by most days with cucumber sandwiches. Cucumber. Them was good cucumber sandwiches." He seemed to like hearing the sound of the word cucumber. It was probably all they had to eat.

As we bonded—well, more or less—more stories came up. Some funny ones, (I knew he had a good, keen, sense of humor; it just hadn't been let out, not yet) but mostly raw

and tragic stories. Never full or complete—just little pieces of the story. Like the time he said, “I saw the knife...I know what it did.”

As Buddy’s court hearing and probation date drew closer, Joy (RJP staff member) and I both heard him say, “I can’t do probation. Don’t want it. Every time I get out, I screw up. Drink, drugs, and stealin...every time. More and more we heard him pleading, quietly wailing: “I want help. I need treatment. The paranoia’s big. I wanna get better.” He could not have been clearer. And yet, sadly, at that juncture, one is tempted to respond with conventional wisdom, cynical dismissal, and distrustful of his cry for help. After all, we all know the prisoner’s pattern: they will snooker you through clever con artistry. By hook or by crook, they will woo you to their side. Woo you into believing they really need you to help them start a new life. Still one holds to that initial response: It’s all a big lie.

In the kind and humane spirit of Restorative Justice, Joy and I made an immediate and tacit decision to go to bat for Buddy. To believe him, to trust him, to honor his sense of himself—especially his readiness for treatment. Two weeks or so before the court date, Joy, promoting a new plan for Buddy, (Buddy’s plan for himself) met separately with me (his mentor) his case worker, and his prison mental health advisor. His caseworker then met with his state appointed lawyer to push forward a motion from the lawyer to drop the probation plan in the offing, and to substitute a year-long treatment program. The judge honored the motion. Restorative Justice won that round. Mostly, Buddy won. It was a critical breakthrough for him. It offered the only hope and light that might find its way through the hopelessness of prison walls, generations of abject poverty, violence and abuse.

Two weeks later, Buddy, Joy and I drove to the residential treatment center. The place was perfect—everything from the solid, safe, sturdy, very large farm house and attached barn, to the huge old America Elm trees, to the two warm and welcoming earth mothers who greeted us at the door. There was nothing fancy about this place, and, nothing shabby. It was sensible, solid, and just right.

As we shook hands and said goodbyes, Buddy stood tall before us, and his head was as high as I have ever seen it. He smiled and quietly said, “Thank you.” And that was all.

I am grateful for the possibility, not the certainty, of resilience and recovery of Buddy and so many others like him. May he be a phoenix, rising from the ashes.