

“Tomorrow is a New Day”



Tommy with his mentor and his mentor's father, who helped with mentoring

“I know how my actions have affected others, including you and your family, as well as my own family, especially my Mom. My life feels unfair in that my family is poor which means I don't get to have things that I want but that doesn't give me the right to steal from you or anyone else. What I did was wrong because I know there is a better way to get what I want without stealing. I could've asked if you'd be willing to sell, swap or trade any one of your items but I chose to steal them instead.”

Excerpt from Tommy's letter of apology

Tommy was in trouble. His list of stolen items reads like a chapter taken from *Huckleberry Finn* or a young man's Christmas wish list: a bow and arrow set, an axe, a chainsaw, a National Guard knife, and a guitar.

What 13-year-old boy living in abject poverty wouldn't find it hard to resist the allure of such possessions?

A bumpy ride down a winding dirt road brought RJP facilitators to the home of Tommy, [not his real name] who had recently been referred to RJP's community conferencing program. Tommy had spent the winter with his siblings and single mom in a trailer with limited heat and no running water or transportation. Tommy had tried to commit suicide several times. He was on medication for depression and had been getting into increasing trouble at school.

The items were stolen from his neighbor who had a working farm next door. Tommy had been helping out there until Peter [not his real name] discovered items missing. Then Peter had started to lock his doors for the first time ever, having become fearful for the well-being of his home, his wife, and young children.

The opening Restorative Community Conference, facilitated by RJP staff, included many whose lives were touched by Tommy's wrongdoing—from his mother, to the victim, Peter, to members of Tommy's behavioral health team and the SRO (school resource officer) who had referred the case to RJP. In this restorative circle, Tommy addressed the classic four questions—describing what he had taken from his neighbor's home, what he had been thinking at the time, whom he had affected and how. Those present then detailed how they were negatively affected by his actions.

The group then created the reparative agreement—giving Tommy a way to take responsibility for the harm he caused by taking active steps to heal the harm and make things right. Words of high support were offered to accompany the terms of high accountability embedded into the agreement: “*Keep your chin up and move ahead*”; “*We've all made mistakes*”; and “*Tomorrow is a new day*.” Items on his repair agreement included: Picking rocks from the garden and $\frac{3}{4}$ acre field behind his neighbor's home; a letter of apology, and 30 hours of public service.

Then Tommy's neighbor, despite his discomfort and anger as a victim, made a surprise offer to give Tommy the guitar he had stolen, provided he met all the terms of the agreement.

Three months later, the group gathered together again for a closing circle to hear how Tommy had met his obligations and to share their experience of supporting him along the way. This circle included the folks who had been there originally, including his mentor, his mentor's father who ended up helping significantly in the mentoring, and Tommy's boss from his place of community service. All who worked with Tommy in that period provided glowing reports of his accomplishments and effort.

He loved his community service work at the transfer station so much that he volunteered beyond his service time. He was so successful there that the town issued a work permit and found money in the town budget to keep him there as a paid employee. His work supervisor had good things to say about him, *"He's been my best there. He's got a great personality, and he's smart in a lot of ways."*

Tommy's mentor told him: *"You've come a long way in a couple of months. You've learned a lot about yourself."* To the group, his mentor offered insight into the added benefit of Tommy's community service, saying, *"Interaction with adults at the transfer station taught him [Tommy] a lot. He was hearing a lot about how other people struggle and it's helped him come out of his little box. He can have a great life. He can do anything in the trades. It's up to him. "*

The profound benefits of the restorative justice process reveal themselves in this real life story of a youth who, in the midst of tough circumstances, made some poor choices. Tommy's community took him in, and buoyed up by that high support, he displayed the capacity for high accountability. He had "grown the circle" to include community members he had never imagined could be there to connect him to new possibilities. He matured tremendously, gaining new perspective into his capabilities and future possibilities. As his caseworker stated, *"He's not the same kid anymore. He was a young and confused man. ... and now he shines."*

At the end of the closing circle, Peter pulled out his guitar and gave it to Tommy, saying, *"I have no problem having Tommy around. I can sleep with both eyes closed now."* This kind of generosity coming from the victim is not unusual in restorative justice circles, offering clear evidence of how often the process heals the harm and opens hearts.
