

volunteering
community service
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A Community-Police Partnership Comes to Wellesley

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MEDIA BAKERY

Jake, tell us what happened the night of the break-in.

I was out trying to get some stuff I could fence. I had to pay back some guys money I owed them and I knew how to get into the Parkers' house. I just did it. I thought it would be easy to get in and out.

the seven people seated in a circle in a room with bare walls are actors but the story is real. “Jake,” a teenager, broke into and robbed the home of his friend, “Meghan.” The family he betrayed is still hurt, angry, but they agreed to speak with him, face-to-face, as participants in a process called restorative justice that offers first-time offenders a chance to right

good works “focus on the needs of victims and offenders”

the wrong and avoid a criminal record. Jake slumped forward, head hanging low, and listened to Meghan’s mother.

My grandmother’s wedding band and engagement ring were taken, said “Judy.” They were so beautiful. Since then it has been a lot of work, talking to the police. And beyond that I feel violated thinking about him being in my home, going through my belongings, my underwear drawer. I feel sick that he was in my kids’ rooms and what he did in there.

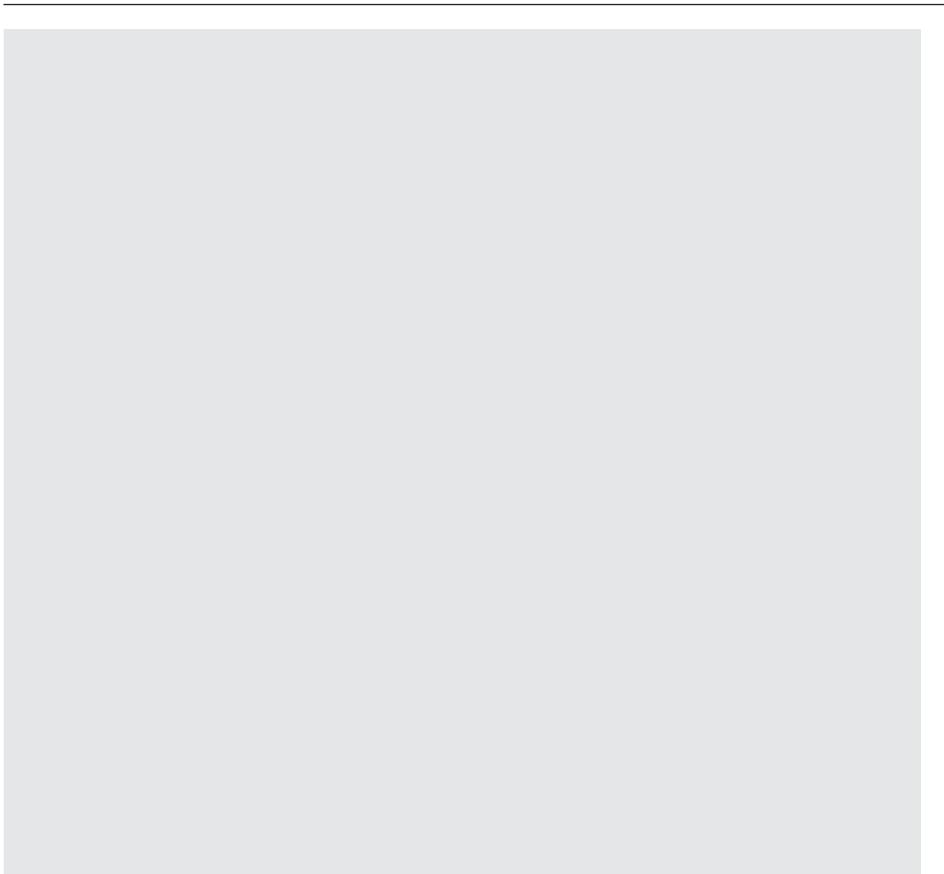
Unlike the traditional justice system, which considers crime a violation of the state and represents society’s interests, restorative justice involves community-police partnerships that focus on the needs of victims and offenders. Cases are referred by the police using guidelines set by their own department. Juveniles or adults who commit a crime, generally a first offense, must be willing to take responsibility for their wrongdoing and hear directly from the victim how it impacted them, their family, business, faith group, or community. For police, district attorneys, judges, and others concerned about our overburdened courts and prisons, restorative justice can

be an alternative tool that complements, not replaces, the traditional system. Programs are well-established in nearly 300 communities nationwide and internationally in the United Kingdom, South Africa, New Zealand, and elsewhere.

Communities for Restorative Justice (C4RJ), a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, was co-founded in 2000 by two Concord community leaders, Jean Bell and Joan Turner, and former Concord Police Chief Len Wetherbee (now retired and chief of police in Moultonborough, NH), based on a set of principles outlined by Howard Zehr, a pioneer in the field. C4RJ today collaborates with police departments in Acton, Arlington, Ayer, Bedford, Boxborough, Cambridge, Carlisle, Groton, Littleton, and Stow and Ayer District Court. The Town of Wellesley recently joined these communities.

The actors portraying Jake and others in the signature “circle” meeting appear in a new short documentary, *Finding Courage*, produced by C4RJ.

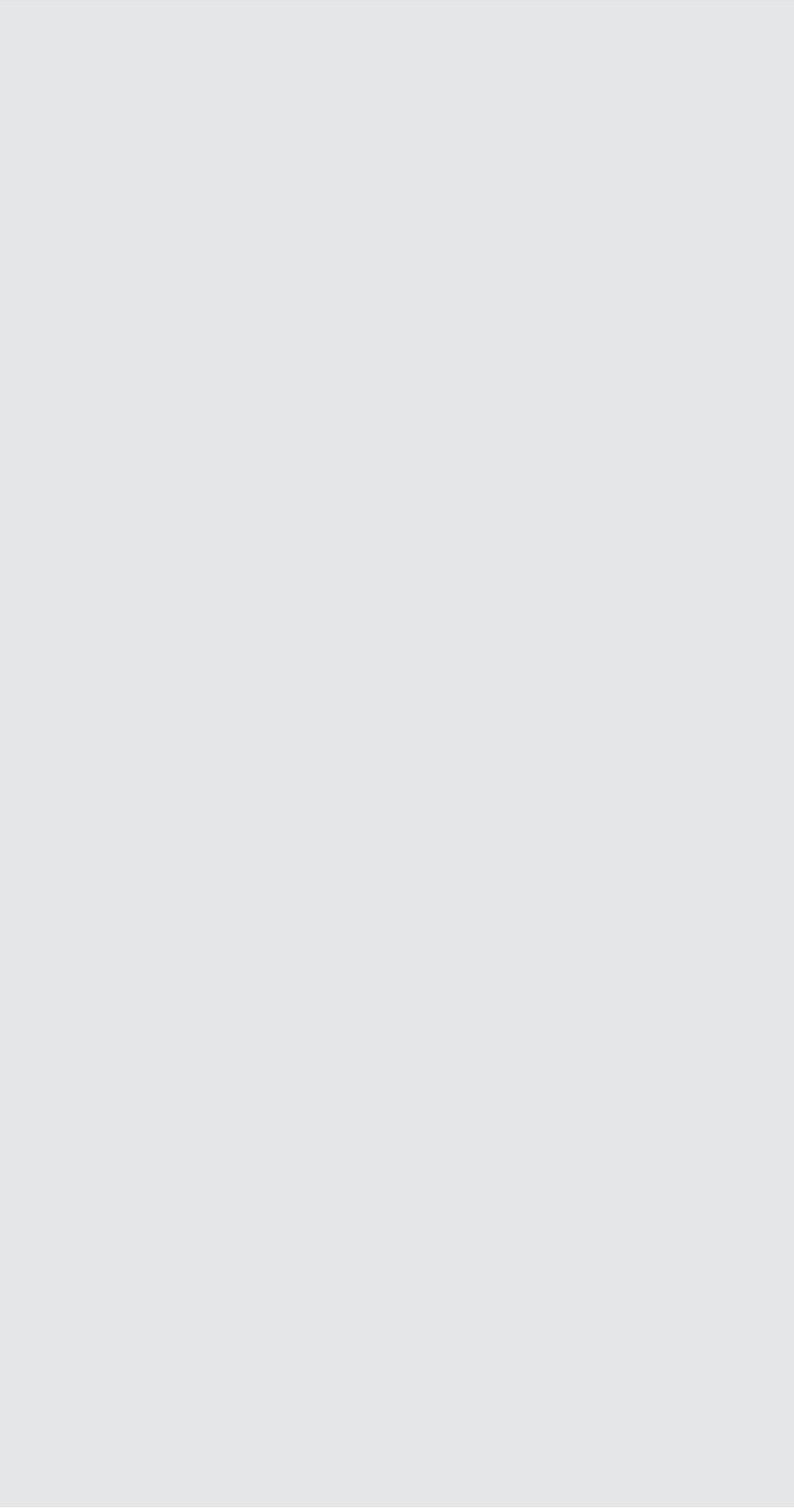
“Crime is a violation of the law, but mostly it is a violation of people,” C4RJ Executive Director Jennifer Larson Sawin told me. “Restorative justice doesn’t force anyone to do anything. All parties participate voluntarily. It works because victims have a chance to speak, to ask questions and seek repair that is meaningful to them. We’ve had lots of breaking and entering cases where victims want to know if they were stalked, followed, found



vulnerable in some way. They worry that they were targeted for their behavior. When they learn it was random, they are strangely reassured because then they can return to their routines knowing that they aren't 'weak.' Those questions are rarely relevant to court prosecution but they're hugely meaningful to victims."

Restorative justice is not about forgiveness, although sometimes that happens, Larson Sawin says. It may not bring closure, especially in cases of extreme violence. Nor is it easy on offenders who have to speak for themselves, unlike in court where they may be shielded by an attorney and never see their victims. But the main difference is who decides what takes place. In court proceedings, attorneys on both sides, probation officers, and judges decide what's appropriate. In restorative justice, it is those who were harmed.

The process begins when the victim, offender, and their supporters (often a loved one) sit in a circle with a police officer from the referring department who ensures everyone will feel safe and, from C4RJ, a case coordinator and one or two volunteers. They sign a confidentiality agreement and talk about what happened and its aftermath. Based on the victim's needs, they reach a consensus on what the offender must do to repair the wrong, such as financial restitution, write an apology, reflection exercises, community service, or counseling. When those obliga-



good works “it was the answer we were looking for”

tions are met, the circle reconvenes. Failure to fulfill those obligations, or if the process otherwise breaks down, means the case is referred back to the police.

C4RJ is a lean organization with a staff of 4 and a 13-member advisory board. It relies heavily on some 80 trained volunteers who participate in circles and call an offender weekly to help them stay on

task. Volunteers also assist with governance, office work, or fundraising. They must be CORI checked and approved by the police chief.

More than 600 cases have been processed by C4RJ to date, mostly felonies or misdemeanors including harassment, civil rights violations, grand larceny, counterfeiting, social host law violation, and assault. Some were violent crimes, arson, or domestic violence, but



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good works “taking responsibility for their actions”

not murder or rape, which are addressed by programs elsewhere. C4RJ has begun working with school districts and, in partnership with the Center for Restorative Justice at Suffolk University, with high schools in Charlestown and Fitchburg.

Law enforcement and correctional officers can be skeptical, especially those who are older and were traditionally trained. Some have called it “hug a thug” or a “get-out-of-jail-free” card.

Chief Wetherbee is not among them. “This is the most profound process I’ve been involved in in my career,” he points out in the film. “It was the answer we were looking for.”

Wellesley Police Chief Terry Cunningham, who introduced the program last year, laughed when asked about his department. “Some thought it was ‘touchy-feely stuff’ until they participated in circles and saw how it works,” he told me. “Now they think it’s great and my supervisors have a good feel for which cases are suited to it.”

“I don’t see a downside to this and I do see an incredible upside,” says Chief Cunningham. “Most of us do stupid things or make bad decisions when we’re kids. If they cross the line one time, they shouldn’t have to suffer for it later when it comes time to apply to college or a job and they’re asked if they’ve ever been charged with a crime. Most of these kids are not mature. They take risks and don’t understand the consequences. This is really about giving them the tools they need to succeed and taking responsibility for their actions. So far, we’ve had no [repeat offenders] among the six to ten cases we’ve referred, all juveniles,” Cunningham says. “This is better than diversion programs [which are another option]. If a kid smashes your mailbox, we can bring charges and, if it’s the first offense, the district attorney might divert him to community service or put him on curfew, or say he has to maintain a ‘B’ average. If he fulfills that, the charge might go away but you, the victim, don’t get to ask why he did it. You don’t have a say or get closure. Kids usually do these things randomly. Victims generally feel better when they realize they weren’t targeted.”

A University of Massachusetts-Boston 2012 study by Jillian M. Furman found that restorative justice is nearly more than six times more cost-effective than traditional justice practices. A national study of restorative justice programs* in 1998 found the rate of recidivism was 18 percent versus 27 percent with traditional cases. C4RJ’s ten-year record is even lower: 16 percent.

Massachusetts Senate Bill 52, now making its way through committee, would make restorative justice an option for law enforcement and courts statewide. Its lead sponsor is state Senator Jamie Eldridge (D-Acton) who said among the bill’s supporters are the Massachusetts Major City Chiefs Association, the 12 C4RJ-partner police chiefs, Middlesex District Attorney Marian Ryan, and Lowell Juvenile Court Judge Jay Blitzman.

Last summer, Eldridge spoke with inmates at Norfolk Prison. “It was absolutely fascinating. Powerful,” he says. “Many were familiar

*Data from a nationwide meta-analysis of restorative justice programs:
<http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v1n1/umbreit.html>

good works “their actions have unexpected consequences”

with the bill and said if someone had reached out to them, especially when they were younger, their lives might have been very different. Our criminal justice system is broken. Prisons are overcrowded, prisoners get no training or mental health care. Anything that can be done to reduce the number of people incarcerated is to the good. At the same time, victims can come out of the process feeling more whole.”

Christy Barbee, Chief Case Coordinator and the film’s scriptwriter, came to C4RJ as a volunteer 12 years ago. “Contrary to what we see on TV or in the movies, a lot of crime is not

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– Christy Barbee, Chief Case Coordinator, C4RJ

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malevolent or premeditated,” Barbee says. Graffiti is a case in point. “It doesn’t help that graffiti is now considered an art form. People who trespass or vandalize often think of them as victimless crimes. It’s stunning to them to realize they are wrong.” Or their actions have unexpected consequences.

In one particular case, a business was “tagged” (painted). The owner had previously left a city where her store was targeted by a gang. She thought the graffiti meant it was happening again. In another, three of the four youths who painted swastikas around town didn’t know what the symbol represented. One just thought it was an edgy design. They just wanted to do something cool and artistic but were clueless it would make people afraid. Similarly, shoplifters think stores are big and won’t miss what’s taken. Sometimes they want the items but often it’s just for fun or for reasons even they don’t understand. But when they hear how cumulatively it affects the bottom line, that there will be no Christmas bonuses that year or a raise for a deserving employee, they feel terrible.

“In a circle,” says Barbee, “one very angry owner said, “You have made everyone who works here feel dirty that they didn’t catch you. We don’t want to have surveillance. It’s costly and uncomfortable for our staff and customers, and this is a low margin business. But now we feel we have to.” And the shoplifter felt ashamed. 

