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## Community Justice: Not To You or For You, But With You

By *Christa Pierpont*

Education and job training are the most effective exits from poverty that a government can provide. Given this understanding, we were stunned by the cycling generational poverty in our affluent city of Charlottesville, VA. In response, a work group of community leaders began planning in 2003 to establish restorative justice practices as a more effective means to improve school and community safety, and thereby reduce economic marginalization. The longer I worked with community leaders, the deeper my understanding grew that long-standing racism was at the root of the problem and would need to be effectively addressed. Could we expand our ideas about restorative justice for individual acts to a wider sense of cultural harms? What could be done to turn the tide? Whose responsibility is it to do this work?

With the support of Karen Waters, the director of the Quality Community Council (QCC), I convened the meeting that resulted in founding the Restorative Community Foundation (RCF) in 2005. Our community hosted a top-10 university and offered model social service supports, yet the weight of cycles of grinding generational poverty resulted in too many of our schools' repeated failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind. Schools failing to make AYP over a period of years must provide parents with the option of moving their child to another school or pay for the student's educational tutoring. Charlottesville had just gotten top ratings on numerous lists of American cities, including #2 on *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* magazine's "Healthiest Places to Live in America" and #3 on *Men's Journal* magazine's "Healthiest Small City to

Live in America.” It is a great place to live for many people, but fewer than 50 percent of minority youth finished high school. In addition, the city had the highest rate of foster-care placement in the region, while people involved in that system were waiting forever in the Juvenile and Domestic Relations courtroom, losing time and watching their children become more apathetic. It was clear the problem was bigger than schools. From 1997 to 2007, city and county budgets had increased 1080 percent for the regional jail, 582 percent for juvenile detention, 527 percent for comprehensive services and only 86 percent for schools.

QCC had been established in late 1999 by residents of the city’s most challenged neighborhoods to provide a stronger citizen voice for community safety and economic empowerment. Our restorative justice work group began meeting at the QCC offices to discuss the potential of using restorative practices to reduce out of school behaviors that often lead to police involvement. QCC’s director, Karen Waters, had served on the governor’s task force to reduce crime in minority communities which included restorative justice initiatives in their recommendations. As we began our new effort, we understood that in order for restorative justice to be most effective, it would be necessary to bring about a paradigm shift across agencies and institutions so that restorative justice is not just a program but a way of being with one another when a problem arises.

To better understand the network of changes needed, our work group invited Dan Van Ness, executive director of the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation, a program of Prison Fellowship International, to present the planning simulation RJ City ([www.rjcity.org](http://www.rjcity.org)) to selected community leaders. We also invited Dennis Wittman, the 25-year director and developer of the renowned Genesee Justice initiative out of Genesee County, NY, to work with us. Excited about the potential inherent in restorative practices, we evolved into the Restorative Community Foundation ([www.restorativecommunity.org](http://www.restorativecommunity.org)), an organization dedicated to facilitating strategic planning, education and program development.

To strengthen our connections with successful leaders in the movement, we committed to work closely with the International Institute of Restorative Practices ([www.iirp.org](http://www.iirp.org)) because this organization has one of the most intensive and well-networked training and leadership resources that a community could hope for.

Additionally, we benefited from the leadership available at Eastern Mennonite University’s Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) in Harrisonburg, VA, ([www.emu.edu/ctp](http://www.emu.edu/ctp)). They were especially helpful when we established our mission statement.

The longer we worked with QCC Director Karen Waters and other community leaders, the deeper our understanding grew that long-standing racism had deprived too many people for too long of economic opportunities that would allow them the time and confidence needed to be fully heard. Those who could provide leadership were tired of talking; they wanted action. Within many churches, we found a philosophical gridlock that often interfered with how social problems were resolved. For all these reasons, we became concerned that the RCF's efforts to support restorative practices might have difficulty engaging effective full community participation.

The “magic” of restorative practices comes from a principled belief that when there is a breach in relationships, people can re-story their lives (often in gifted ways), given an active and supported responsibility to do so. It is clear from the research report, *Restorative Justice: The Evidence*, (Lawrence W. Sherman and Heather Strang, Smith Institute, 2007) that individuals can transcend large and small wrongs in a highly satisfactory way with improved long-term consequences when restorative practices are used. Our next question was: Could this opportunity be expanded from individuals to a wider sense of cultural harms?

In particular, could restorative processes begin to address underlying racial anger and fears in our region without exacerbating negative economic realities? These questions grew out of dynamics we were discovering as we explored the history of public school education in Virginia. When the RCF studied school disciplinary statistics for public schools, we found a significantly higher rate of disciplinary action for low-income and minority youth. Efforts are now being made to reduce out-of-classroom placements and to transition to more restorative disciplinary practices, but it will take decades and funding to re-build skills for individuals who have given up on the public school system.

Princeton sociologist Bruce Western concluded that 60 percent of black men who dropped out of high school have served prison time. Anyone familiar with the research on our failing prison systems knows that tight budgets go to security, not to well-funded re-entry plans. Prison budgets rarely include properly-funded education and job training that will translate into real jobs in the outside world. Clearly our efforts to “fix” people through exclusion binges has not made our communities and schools safer nor closed economic disparity gaps, particularly along racial lines.

Restorative practices are not a means to do something to someone or even for them in order to facilitate constructive changes. Restorative justice and restorative practices are intended to be a multi-party transformation to facilitate healing and community safety. But to succeed, authentic community voices must be at the table. We understood that the racism table was one that was too

painful and unsafe for many people, and we questioned ourselves on how much of an investment we could afford to make without moving too far off the RCF's mission. As Karen Waters commented, "If you have to ask for an apology, what good is it?" She later stated that some form of restitution would need to be considered in order to make the process meaningful. There have been noble efforts by individuals in our community to attempt to address racism, but when the RCF looked at the economic bottom line for families, we did not see promising results.

Jointly addressing the matter of long-standing racism is not a small matter. Frustrations with the slow progress and lack of positive impacts on day-to-day quality of life issues can make the matter more intractable. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Virginia Massive Resistance occurred in 2006. Following the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ordered public schools to desegregate, U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr., who controlled Virginia politics, promoted the "Southern Manifesto" opposing integrated schools. The manifesto was signed by one hundred southern office holders in 1956. This turbulent period gave birth to many private schools in the state. When the idea of organizing a commemoration of Massive Resistance came up at an RCF meeting, several people agreed that the matter would need to be carefully reviewed. There was unease at the idea of celebrating 50 years of change when it was clear that there were still serious matters of educational disparity. Even given that NAACP leaders in Charlottesville were instrumental in challenging school segregation and re-opening the public schools to include children of color across the state of Virginia, the grandchildren of citizens from that time are rarely found in advanced placement classes and too often fill segregated special education classrooms. While clear efforts are being made to correct the current disparity, these efforts will not get at the root of how people can systematically exclude others and then punish them further when they don't like the results or what is being said by representatives from the marginalized community.

Looking for greater confidence on the matter, I attended a presentation by Hillel Levine, director of the International Center for Conciliation (ICfC). Professor Levine confirmed for me the necessity for people to address historical cultural traumas in order to move forward on immediate matters that require sustained trust and cooperation. I am still in the sharing stages of working with the information I gleaned from that workshop. Levine's insights on working with memorized trauma and its energy for continuing social traumas is worth a separate study itself. For more information, you can find the ICfC's website at [www.centerforconciliation.org](http://www.centerforconciliation.org).

Revalorization of a community through story-telling, ritual and shared fundamental interconnections with other community members has a way of melting away the sting of public

policies that limit people. While we can individually support such efforts, racial reconciliation work is going to need to take a greater leap with strategic planning and a long-term commitment from government, business and faith community leadership. And it will be critically important to recruit and support young black leaders in this work if we are to overtake generational economic losses.

In my most recent conversation with EMU/CJP's Associate Director Amy Potter, who had just returned from doing post-war trauma healing work in Sierra Leone, she said that her reconciliation work in Africa is evolving by listening to the invested needs of each group. She noted four basic principles:

1. There must be space for truth-telling;
2. Justice must be served;
3. As people meet together, they need to be open to mercy not just retribution; and
4. A greater peace (or security) must be a primary goal of the work together.

I believe that these four principles could help guide most discussions about social justice and racism.

Hillel Levine sagely observed, "Memory is the receptacle of hatred." History teaches us that hatred becomes further inflamed during periods of economic stress, and that is all the more reason why it is wise to be investing seriously in both restorative justice practices and reconciliation work now.



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*Editorial Corrections (1/14/09): The originally published article had an incorrect date on page 2 and should have read "from 1997-2007." On page 4, the word "excluded" should have been "exclude." The article has been updated with the corrections.*