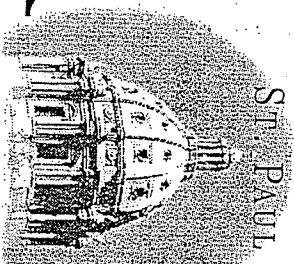


PIONEER PRESS



FRIDAY
June 7, 2002

MINNESOTA'S FIRST NEWSPAPER

WWW.TWINCITIES.COM

CITY EDITION ■ 25 CENTS

Changing her ways, set to graduate

Innovative justice circles were key to Bonnie Robinson's ability to straighten up.

BY JOHN WEIBES
Pioneer Press

Bonnie Robinson learned about law enforcement in school, but not from a textbook.

For much of the time she attended Thompson Heights School in South St. Paul, she was unable to shake a long history of threatening behavior and violent outbursts. After one incident last year, when Robinson was a junior, she

was taken to a time-out room to calm down.

"I busted out the door frame when the Dakota County deputy wouldn't take off my cuffs," she said. Four South St. Paul police had arrived by then, and she was soon on her way to a juvenile detention center.

Today, Robinson, 18, is a senior at Burnsville High School. Surprising her former teachers and others who know her, she's on course to graduate today.

She plans to attend North Central University next year, a Christian school in Minneapolis.

Several things fell in place to help Robinson break the pattern of damaging behavior that hurt her chances of graduating. One important part of her turnaround included the introduction of restorative justice circles into one of the most challenging environments she

CHANGING HER WAYS, 9A



JIM GEHRZ, PIONEER PRESS

Bonnie Robinson, 18, will graduate from Burnsville High School tonight.

Changing her ways

(continued)

state's education system has to offer.

Thompson Heights serves students who have serious emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Currently, the K-12 school has about 80 students from across Dakota County, although the numbers vary as students move in or out of the program.

The circles, which have attracted a core group of about nine students, allow them to air whatever is on their mind, including conflicts or school-related issues, and work toward a resolution. More formal restorative justice conferences also are held occasionally at the school, which are typically an alternative to the criminal justice system and bring together perpetrators and the people affected by their crimes.

Not every police report on Thompson Heights or other EBD campuses is as violent as Robinson's encounter with the door of the time-out room. (The state's education department recently held hearings on how children in time-out rooms at all kinds of public schools are treated.) But an on-site Dakota County deputy at Thompson Heights files incident reports regularly, and calls to the South St. Paul police are a common occurrence.

Earlier this year, Thompson Heights introduced restorative justice circles.

In a two-year span ending in February of this year, South St. Paul police received a total of 254 incident reports from Thompson Heights. The department is sometimes asked to assist on calls or to transport students. By comparison, at a mainstream school such as Apple Valley High School, there were 327 police incident reports in the same time span. But the difference in enrollment means there were 20 times more police reports per student at Thompson Heights.

Earlier this year, with help from the South St. Paul Restorative Justice Council, Thompson Heights introduced restorative justice circles. Students were asked to volunteer for the circles and to work on a short training video about restorative justice circles.

"If we could do a training video and show it works here, it can work anywhere," said Beth O'Keefe, a social worker on classroom assignment at Thompson Heights. Robinson was one of the students who worked on the video and started attending the circles.

"This was probably one of the more challenging environments I'd ever worked in," said Nancy Riestenberg, a violence prevention specialist with the state's education department. She worked with the circles during the filming of the training video last fall. "The kids' social skills vary greatly. And their desire to use social skills varies widely from one minute to the next," she said.

Getting the students to follow the rules of restorative justice circles wasn't easy, said Lois Swanson, president of the South St. Paul group that's been facilitating the circles. A talking piece is used in circles, traveling around the group and giving its holder the opportunity to talk uninterrupted. Even that was a bit of a challenge, but the students continued to show up for the twice-monthly meetings.

One thing that seemed to help her cause, Swanson said, was her volunteer status.

"The very first question (from students) was, 'Are you getting paid to do this?'" said Swanson, who is 72. "When I said I was a volunteer, there was dead silence. It had much more of an impact than I expected."

FROM BOOT CAMP TO A JUSTICE CIRCLE

Robinson credits the diagnosis of a bipolar disorder a little more than two years ago, her foster parents and the restorative justice program that's been introduced at Thompson Heights for her turnaround.

She arrived at Thompson Heights from Texas late in her sophomore year, but her problems at school had started years earlier. She can still recall an

Justice circles are available to students going through the courts system

When a student at Thompson Heights broke a desk during a recent outburst, he faced criminal charges. He also volunteered to participate in a restorative justice conference.

While restorative justice circles made their debut at Thompson Heights School this past year, Stephanie Haider, a Dakota County probation officer, holds more formal restorative justice conferences for Thompson Heights students moving through the criminal

justice system.

"Kids don't connect their actions with the punishment," she said, but restorative programs help make the point.

In the desk-breaking incident, the case had already gone through court. For the conference, Haider brought in everyone affected, including teachers, the school's custodian, the principal who sets the budget and the student's mother, who had to take a day off of work to go to court.

The student apologized and the group decided the student had to pay for the desk, Haider said.

Those conferencing sessions teach empathy, and the restorative justice circles at Thompson Heights have also helped participants see the broader consequences of their actions, said JoAnn Ward, a coordinator with the South St. Paul Restorative Justice Council.

— John Welbes

Still, there's a recognition that the restorative justice strategy doesn't work for everyone.

Robinson says that at an EBD campus like Thompson Heights there's less control and many of the students "aren't really into education. At a mainstream school it would accomplish even more."

incident in kindergarten with a school principal in Ohio to whom she threatened to give a karate chop. As he called her mother, she ran out the door and several blocks home in snowy weather without her jacket.

She regularly got in trouble for fighting. During several years in Texas, she says, she made two trips through "boot camp," a military-style program for kids who are habitually in trouble. The youths wear camouflage gear and spend a good part of their day running, doing calisthenics or traversing an obstacle course.

On her second stay, Robinson was at the boot camp for six months. "They want you to realize you're going to be here again if you mess up," she said. "Most of the kids it worked for, but for me it didn't."

Just a few months before leaving Texas for Minnesota two years ago, she went through a lengthy evaluation with a licensed psychologist and was diagnosed as manic-depressive. After a long struggle to find the right medications to help her control her mood swings, Robinson says she's finally struck a balance.

"I always have the extra time

to think, 'Do I want to do that?'" she said.

A year ago, she says, she moved in with a foster family in Burnsville after her mother left the Twin Cities area. While Robinson can point to a number of changes that motivated her to take a heavy load of coursework this year and move toward graduation, she credits the restorative justice program with opening her eyes to what her behavior did to herself and, just as importantly, to others.

"I've never had any remorse about it until this last year," she said.

As part of the training video, the group held a circle that discussed a fight that Robinson got into with another student earlier in the year. The fight, she said, brought her a 10-day stay in the Dakota County Juvenile Detention Center. They put the fight behind them, they said, and are back on speaking terms.

"I realized through the (circles) that what I was doing was really hurting other people," she said.

CHANGE IS DIFFICULT

When the students first volunteered to be in the circle, O'Keefe said, they didn't

know what to expect.

"They were very relieved it's not therapy," she said.

While the circles can indirectly end up being therapeutic in nature, she said, that would not be a selling point with the students.

As Robinson worked on the training video, she also worked to convince her teachers at Thompson Heights that she could handle a mainstream high school campus. With improved behavior and coursework, she made the jump earlier this year to Burnsville.

Still, there's a recognition that the restorative justice strategy doesn't work for everyone. Robinson says that at an EBD campus like Thompson Heights there's less control and many of the students "aren't really into education. At a mainstream school it would accomplish even more."

Swanson, the facilitator for the circles, equates the changes the Thompson Heights students are trying to make with losing weight or quitting smoking.

"Even the little things are not easy to change, but these kids are taking a close look at changing," she said. "It's just the beginning."

John Welbes covers Dakota County education. He can be reached at jwelbes@pioneerpress.com or (651) 228-2175.