

City uses 'restorative justice' with woman who stole to gamble

By Robert Franklin
Staff Writer

She sat with her husband at a U-shaped table in Renville, Minn., and told her former employers at the town's liquor store how she had stolen money to support her gambling habit.

Uneasiness gave way to understanding during a half-dozen meetings in which victims and defendant talked about their anger and remorse. It was an unusual experiment in "restorative justice," where making amends becomes a face-to-face collaborative endeavor.

The idea has become increasingly common in such cases as drunken-driving accidents and burglaries in which people are hurt. In this case, the victim was a southwestern Minnesota town of 1,315.

Connie Eischens, 36, was manager of the municipal liquor store in Renville for five years before she pleaded guilty in October to stealing thousands of dollars that she spent playing slot machines in western Minnesota tribal casinos.

In lieu of a 10-year prison sentence, she was treated for gambling addiction, wrote a letter of apology to the town and entered mediation ses-

sions with two City Council members, another Renville resident, the city administrator, a probation officer and a mediator.

Eischens and the town agreed that she will repay \$95,000 over 10 years. Initial estimates had put the loss as high as \$195,000, but City Administrator Duane Hebert said the town now puts it at \$95,000 to \$120,000.

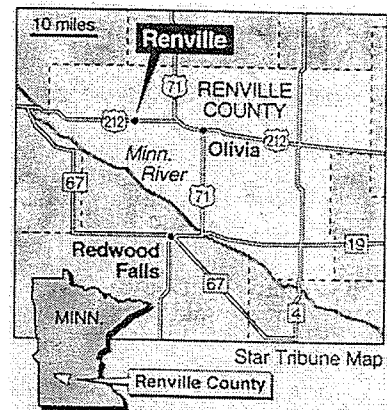
He said Eischens seemed to be open, honest and remorseful during the mediation.

"Initially there was a lot of uneasiness, uncertainty," he said. "Some very pointed questions were asked both ways. I believe the mediation process ... worked as it was supposed to ... to get beyond that initial hurt and victimization and find some way to ease it all over."

Ella Hanson, one of the participating council members and chairwoman of the council's Liquor Store Committee, said, "You show anger at times. It's still kind of hard to understand how someone could do something like this, [but] I know I have a better understanding of it all. Even if it makes you angry that this happened, she's still a person and you've got look at it from that side too."

Eischens, who graduated from high school in Renville and was a church organist in town, said this week that the process was difficult. However, she said, "My life is kind of getting back to normal." She still lives in the area, has "definitely not" revisited casinos, has support from lifelong friends and has taken a job in another industry.

Initially, some thought that mediation might lead to Eischens doing community service in Renville, but Hanson said that "all in all, we thought it was better for her" not to work in town. "She does have to have a life of her own, too."



Hebert said the sessions moved Eischens' theft from coffee-shop talk to face-to-face discussion. He added, "The way she responded, it was not an easy thing for her to go through, and I think if she wasn't remorseful, she wouldn't put herself through that."