

Healing Justice

Saturday, November 20th was a first in the history of MCF-Shakopee. Several courageous female offenders agreed to have the victims of their crimes come to the facility to participate in a discussion of the hurt caused by their crimes. As you can imagine, it was a very emotional experience for these victims, the offenders and for those of us who witnessed this discussion. What made it so emotional was that the victims were the offenders' own kids.

When I talk about restorative justice to new offenders at the facility, I remind them there are no victimless crimes. There is always one offender in each group who will challenge me by saying that this does not apply to her, because her crime didn't involve physically hurting anyone. Yet, when I ask if her children were harmed by her actions, she will quietly agree that indeed, they were. Children are "secondary victims" when their moms commit crimes. As one insightful adolescent said in the discussion, "It's like I've been sentenced to prison, because I don't get to see my Mom."

For an hour, these brave kids talked about what it's like to have their moms in prison. They expressed anger and embarrassment. Sometimes their words were harsher than any prosecuting attorney's could have been. As we all listened and felt their pain, the healing began. Words of love, support and hope were expressed. We formed a closing circle of support around the kids and it was evident that the experience had touched everyone.

All of the comments I've heard since this event have been positive. One offender in the audience said, "I didn't hear the kids talking about their own moms, I heard them talking about me." Another offender observed, "You have to have a strong, honest relationship with your kids in order for them to be willing to talk so openly about these painful issues." One of the teenagers said, "Thanks for letting us do this. We need to get this off our chests!"

The term "Restorative Justice" is difficult for some to understand. It's about involving victims, offenders and the community in repairing the harm. For some, it was simpler where we just locked up criminals and forgot about them. Anyone who participated in this event was able to experience this healing form of justice. It was a heart-felt ending to our celebration of National Restorative Justice Week, and I am privileged to have been a part of it.

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