



What is Restorative Justice?

By Vickie Samland

When Restorative Justice (RJ) first emerged in the 1970's, its intention was to change some of the problems with the western criminal justice system. If you do a Google search of restorative justice you will find a wide variety of applications and approaches. As a working concept RJ was practically non-existent 25 years ago. RJ is coming more and more into people's awareness and it continues to evolve in the ways it is practiced.

Its beginnings were in the judicial system most often around crimes committed by youth. RJ was especially concerned about victims and their needs. Victims tend to get lost in the retributive justice system where offenders are focused upon. RJ recognized that punishment is often ineffective. So RJ emphasizes that the offender be accountable, repair the harm and work to make things right through restitution to the victim and the community. Victim and offender meet along with others from the community in a facilitated session.

In New Zealand, RJ is the first approach used within the juvenile justice system for

serious crime and the courts serve as backup. There are differing processes for practicing RJ. It can take the form of one-on-one mediations, circle process or conferences. The participants tell their stories, express their feelings, get questions answered, and develop agreements to repair the harm. With successful outcomes, victims report reduced fear and trauma, all participants report high satisfaction with the process, reduction in repeat offenses and lowered court costs. The findings are showing that the more serious the crime the more positive the outcomes with RJ. Many states have official protocols for bringing together the victim and offender in serious cases, even including murder.

Restorative Justice is evolving into wider practice and application beyond the courts. It is practical and uses common sense in solving problems and building relationships. The Conflict Center is using RJ in schools and classrooms; it is excellent for parenting, as well as the workplace. RJ honors each person, expects responsibility from each person for their behavior, and recognizes that we have the opportunity to build relationship after we have harmed each other.

