



## Restoring Justice to the Whole Community

Kevin MacDougall, a veteran RCMP officer who is the community policing coordinator of Kelowna, B.C., can still remember how he became such a big supporter of the Okanagan Boys and Girls Clubs' restorative justice program for youth.

He sat in on several restorative justice panels that included a young wrongdoer, the victim, a police officer and a volunteer facilitator and saw how the youth who had committed a minor crime took full responsibility for it and became accountable for making things right.

"I said, 'Wow, this is really great,'" he said. "It works."

The idea behind restorative justice for first-time offenders under 18 is not to give the wrongdoer a break, but to heal the wounds created when the crime happened and repair the harm.

It grew from the philosophy prevalent in some indigenous and faith communities that a crime represents the breach of relationships, including those between victim and the wrongdoer and between the wrongdoer and the community. Restorative justice aims to put back in place the moral balance that has been disrupted by crime.

Shown to be powerfully effective in community after community, restorative justice became a global movement in the 1990s, with Canada as a leader. Honourable Madam Justice M.T. Devlin said restorative justice directly supports a main principle of the Youth Criminal Justice Act in fostering responsibility in the wrongdoer and ensuring accountability and meaningful consequences for the crime.

As a result, Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada in British Columbia, Alberta, Yukon and Ontario have been offering youth restorative justice programs for several years with great success. The one in Kelowna, which has been going since 2001, has a success rate of 87 per cent, meaning that nearly nine in 10 decide not to reoffend as youths.

Jill Hotchkiss, a volunteer facilitator in the Kelowna program, said she's committed to the idea of restorative justice because she encounters adults who she believes would have avoided a life of crime had they had access to it as youths.

"If only we could turn the clock back," she said.

And David Anderson, another volunteer facilitator in the Kelowna program, said he's seen powerful results. Because of the program, youth understand why they committed the crime in the first place and then choose a crime-free path.

"I feel this is a golden opportunity to give a child a way to make a different choice," he said.



Mr. MacDougall, the former RCMP officer, said he appreciates the fact that the program is fiscally responsible.

“Financially, it’s very smart,” he said.

For example, the program at the Boys and Girls Club of Durham, Ontario costs just \$200 per case, far more cost effective than the average \$110,000 to put that same youth in jail.

The Kelowna program relies on 24 highly trained volunteer facilitators who, in pairs, oversee community panels where the wrongdoer and a guardian, the victim and a police officer gather to right the wrongs that stem from the crime. That means the wrongdoer must admit the crime and talk honestly about what led to it. The victim talks about what impact the crime has had.

Then everyone on the panel must agree on how to repair the harm, and it must go beyond community service. That frequently involves writing a letter of apology and delivering it to the victim, for example, the owner of a store that has been robbed. Sometimes, there’s an essay on the nature of crime and community. Often, the wrongdoer earns or raises the money to offset any financial losses stemming from the crime. Sometimes, the youth will go to court as an observer to understand the consequences of committing another crime.

As for youth, they overwhelmingly report that the program transforms their lives for the better and say it helps them repair broken relationships with adults in their lives.

Angie Wouters, a case worker in Kelowna’s restorative justice program remembers a recent case involving a mother and daughter. The mother was so fed up with her daughter’s behaviour that she was on the point of sending her to live in another province. But during the restorative justice panel, the pair had a breakthrough and learned to trust each other again. The mother abandoned plans to send her daughter away.

In another Kelowna case, several young males vandalized the bathroom in the local park. Through the restorative justice process, they learned how terribly their actions had traumatized their tightly-knit community and vowed to make things right, said Lauren Ozanne, coordinator of Kelowna’s program. They also learned that despite their mistake, the community stood behind them and wanted them to succeed in life.

Ms. Ozanne, who studied correctional services, said a key is to encourage young people to consider the whole community.

“We want to find the root cause of this, to restore justice not just to the person harmed, but to the whole community,” she said.