



Citizens, Victims, & Offenders  
Restoring Justice Project  
MCF-Lino Lakes

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Heather Burns, Research Associate  
Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking  
School of Social Work  
University of Minnesota, St. Paul

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## Executive Summary

The Citizens, Victims and Offenders Restoring Justice (CVORJ) Project was designed to bring crime victims, offenders and community members together to address the causes and consequences of crime in a very personal way. Over a period of three months, victim/survivors, a community member and offenders gathered at the Minnesota Correctional Facility (MCF) in Lino Lakes to share their stories of grief and healing. Three facilitators assisted the group throughout the process and helped establish guidelines for creating a safe space in which to tell their stories. A circle process was used in conducting the sessions. Each session included time for a check-in and one or two personal accounts of a crime committed and its aftermath. Facilitators also shared personal experiences related to incidences of violence or loss in their own lives. Participants completed surveys both before and after the project and the meetings were audio-taped with the consent of the participants. These materials, along with observer notes, provide insight into the impact the project had on participants. Feedback from group members regarding their experience with the project was overwhelmingly positive. Victim participants who had suffered the loss of a loved one used the project as a way to create positive, meaningful experiences in their lives by talking with offenders, conveying the costs of violent crime, and honoring the memory of their loved ones. Offenders, in turn, were able to express their deep remorse for harm done to innocent victims and convey their commitment to making positive changes in their lives. The report organizes these findings in the form of case studies, common themes found in victim and offender stories, and the written feedback of participants.

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## **PROGRAM MODEL AND GOALS**

The Citizens, Victims & Offenders Restoring Justice Project (CVORJ) is a pilot program based on the work of Jacqueline Helfgott and her colleagues at the Seattle University Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice (1998). The project was first adapted for use in Minnesota at the Shakopee Women's Facility with very positive results (Burns, 2001). Surveys completed by participants of the Minnesota CVORJ projects were adapted from those used in Seattle, and a similar process of group facilitation was employed. Over a period of three months, participants in the Lino Lakes project met weekly for three hours. Meetings were held in a circle format with three facilitators present to guide the process. Parties attending at the outset included five crime victims, two community members, five male inmates, three facilitators, a neutral advocate, and a researcher/observer. (Three persons dropped out during the course of the project: a crime victim, a community member and an inmate.) The advocate was available for anyone who needed support, and the researcher taped the sessions and took notes on the process.

Meetings consisted of an initial check-in, or circle pass, eliciting input from each participant; a review of the previous week with questions or comments; and time for one or two participants to tell their stories, with a brief closing exercise at the end. Participants self-selected the evening on which they would tell their story by means of a sign-up sheet. Facilitators could also schedule time for open discussion as needed, to respond to the needs of the group as they came up during the meetings.

Before and after the project, participants completed surveys composed of brief statements and open-ended questions (see examples in appendix). Survey items were selected to measure desired outcomes as described in the project goals. For the purposes of the previous CVORJ project, which took place at MCF- Shakopee, these goals were summarized into eight points:

1. Provide offenders an opportunity to express empathy and remorse.
2. Give offenders tools to become accountable and accept responsibility for their crime.
3. Facilitate constructive communication.
4. Create a safe, supportive environment.
5. Learn causes and results of crime.
6. Enhance understanding of restorative justice principles and the centrality of harm to persons.
7. Foster hope for a balanced criminal justice response.
8. Healing from harm caused by crime.

When introducing the Lino Lakes CVORJ project to participants, facilitators described how restorative justice redefined crime in terms of harm against persons, (as opposed to an offense against the state) and clarified their goals for the project as follows:

- Creation of a safe place/environment
- Voluntary process
- Help participants understand causes of crime
- Foster a sense of balance in the criminal justice system
- Provide an opportunity to ‘take a step toward’ healing
- The process is not about achieving a predetermined outcome: e.g., forgiveness

## **RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS**

### **Offenders**

The following points describe the process of selecting offenders for the project:

1. Information and requests for applicants were distributed to general population.
2. Application questionnaires were completed and submitted by the offenders.
3. Case files of prospective participants were reviewed.
4. Interviews were conducted with selected offenders.

Offender applicants had crimes ranging from drug offenses to murder with sentences ranging from 48 months to life imprisonment. Staff took into consideration whether applicants were likely to get along well together, had any unresolved conflict, or were co-defendants with other candidates. It was also noted whether out-dates or potential transfers conflicted with CVORJ project dates.

From the 20 who passed the initial screening, ten applicants were selected for the interview process. To be considered for the project, candidates had to meet the following criteria:

- Six months clear of violations
- Working on or completed mandates
- Prior victim impact programming preferred
- No sexual offense on record

In addition to the application questionnaire, applicants were also asked to complete a survey designed to assess readiness to participate in a face-to-face meeting with victims and community members, and their willingness to take responsibility for their offense. Throughout the process, it was emphasized that participants would receive no benefit in the form of reduced sentence or “good time” for their involvement in the project.

Four project staff were present at the interviews. Two facilitators and the participant advocate led the questioning and rating of participants. The researcher/observer was present to offer input and to view the process but did not have a deciding role in the selection of final candidates. Five candidates with the highest ratings were chosen from the pool of applicants. In this case, all candidates selected received a rating of 14 or higher in a 15-point system devised by staff. This rating reflected the interviewers’ assessment of the following:

- Degree to which offender takes responsibility for actions/crime
- Potential to participate well in group: communicates well, is open, direct, honest
- Perceived need for this kind of program & potential for growth
- Taking advantage of and performing well in other programs
- Readiness for face-to-face meeting with victims
- Good fit with other participants

- Candidate's body language: eye contact, handshake, posture, etc.
- Intuitive sense / gut feeling that candidate is appropriate for meeting with victims
- Location/county within the state (i.e., it was hoped that not all candidates would come from the same area)

In general, interviewers were impressed with all offender candidates. The level of interest and the quality of applicants indicated that the need for opportunities to involve offenders in restorative justice projects was significantly greater than a one-time project could fulfill.

### **Victims/Citizens**

The following steps were taken to invite victim and citizen participation in the program (see Appendix for forms and questionnaires relating to victim/citizen screening and preparation):

1. Contacted victim advocacy agencies in the area (including grief and loss groups, local community colleges, and universities, hospitals, mediation services, etc.) to invite victim and community participants to apply.
2. Victim and citizen candidates were interviewed in person when possible. Two late applicants were interviewed by phone. In each case, interviewers used questions similar to those used with offenders addressing background information about the crime, knowledge of restorative justice, expectations of the program, etc.
3. All interested victims and community members were accepted into the program as participants. As was the case with the Shakopee project, finding and enlisting victims and citizens for participation in the project proved to be a challenge.

Other elements of preparation included:

- Prison tour for victim and community participants.
- Pre-seminar orientation one week prior to first seminar meeting.
- Brief orientation to prison policies/visitor regulations.
- Reading materials and pre-seminar questionnaires were distributed at orientation.

Prison support staff also provided an overview of facility that included: a map of the facility, volunteer handbook, expectations for visitors (signature required), and brief tour of living units.

## **PROGRAM CONTENT**

### **Orientation**

Participants were asked to attend an orientation one week prior to the start of the project. This was designed as an opportunity for them to meet, begin to get to know one another, and to receive an overview of the basic elements of the program. Staff introduced themselves and provided information about the origins of the project, principles of restorative justice, project goals and circle process.

### **Circle Process**

Circle process is a form of group work that involves the use of a small item called a 'talking piece' that can be held comfortably in the hand and is passed around the circle. The person holding the talking piece is allowed to speak without interruption until they choose to pass it on.

Thus, the circle process provides each participant a respectful forum in which to speak, and encourages careful listening from those present. A talking piece typically carries symbolic value and is associated with positive qualities that a facilitator (also known as circle keeper) wishes to bring to the circle process, e.g., honesty, trust, humor, etc.

Circle set-up included the following:

Chairs arranged in circle, facilitators spaced evenly among participants.

Colorful blankets and a collection of talking pieces were placed on the floor in the center of the circle.

Guidelines were written on large pieces of paper and posted on the wall.

Circle guidelines (established with participant input and posted on the walls):

Voluntary process                      Speak from the heart

Respect the talking piece              Speak in a good way

Equal opportunity                      All are equal

Confidential                              No name-calling

Role of facilitators:

Guardians of the ground rules/process.

Provide overview of Restorative Justice principles.

Allow plenty of time for participants to tell their stories.

Ensure sense of comfort and safety without controlling what people say.

### **Values and guidelines**

To emphasize the importance of guiding principles, participants were asked to write a value that was important to them on the back of a paper plate and place it in full view in the center of the circle. Participants were then asked to use the talking piece to introduce themselves, to offer a brief summary of why they had chosen to join the group, and explain why they chose the value they had to guide the process. These included:

Friendship, sincerity, honesty (offered 7 times), truth, courage, acceptance, humor, caring for other=s feelings, space for grieving, empowerment, love, empathy, self care, help not harm, compassion, gratitude, respect, honoring grief and loss, memories, and candor.

As the talking piece was passed, offenders shared their name, their offense and sentence; victims and community members related the events in their life that brought them to the project. The general tenor of the meeting up to this point was informal and conversational until one at a time, participants began to speak, and a palpable shift took place in the room as they introduced themselves and briefly described the violent crimes that had impacted their lives. ‘I’m incarcerated for 1st degree murder.’ ‘My son was killed on...’ ‘My mother was murdered.’ One person, a community member, was very tearful, unable to speak, and passed the talking piece without saying a word.

These are the people who met together for the first time to participate in the Lino Lakes CVORJ project that night:

## **The Participants**

**Sandra:** Her son was outnumbered and brutally murdered in a fight. Although formerly convicted of a drug-related offense, he had served his time and was taking steps to straighten out his life. Sandra, who left an alcoholic husband to raise her boys alone, recognized how much her son had struggled growing up and was proud of his recent progress. She had made him his favorite birthday dinner on the night he didn't show up. John was 17 years old the night he was killed.

**Sherrie:** Found her mother murdered in the farmhouse where she was raised and where her mother had lived peacefully for 62 years. Sherrie and her mother were the best of friends and she misses her mother terribly. She describes the murder a senseless and brutal act committed by a man who suffered from mental illness; his motives are unknown.

**Jack:** His son, who drove a taxi for a living, was killed on the job. Jack headed the Minnesota Chapter of Parents of Murdered Children (POMC) and is a regular speaker at prisons, schools and conferences around the state.

**Janie:** Married to Jack, survivor of her son's murder, Janie chose to leave the group after the first week of the program. Although she had participated in the Shakopee project, she found herself much less comfortable with male offenders. She felt it was too much like meeting with the offender who killed her son, and she chose not to contend with the painful emotions this brought up.

**Renee:** Traveled six hours round trip each week to attend the program. She works as a counselor in a domestic violence shelter and is herself a survivor of domestic violence. As a citizen participant, Renee sought insight into the causes of violent crime, and new ways to work effectively with offenders in her community.

**Cynthia:** Worked in the field of corrections and chose to participate as a community member interested in restorative options for offenders. Although used to dealing with offenders convicted of severe crimes, the dialogue with inmates proved to be much more challenging than she anticipated. Then, as Minnesota state employees went on strike, she felt crossing the picket line to be a conflict of interest. She chose to end her participation in the group, but expressed interest in the prospect of joining future restorative justice projects.

**Bonnie:** A survivor of childhood and spousal abuse, she had given her daughter up for adoption. After many years of separation, she was looking forward to a long anticipated reunion when she learned of her daughter's murder. She was an active member of POMC when she heard about the CVORJ project and chose to apply.

**Curt:** The son of an abusive, alcoholic father, Curt killed an elderly neighbor with the help of a friend when he was 16 years old. He spent the next 16 years in prison. Once an angry young man who both hated and feared his father, Curt now makes sense of the crime as a misguided "practice" attempt to kill his abuser. When he applied to the project, his hope was that his story might be helpful to a victim of a similar offense.



Frank: Killed a man while driving under the influence of alcohol. Convicted of vehicular homicide, he was sentenced to 3 years in prison. He had served 2 years when he joined the project, and was scheduled to be released in the following year.

Rick: Convicted of first degree murder for killing his sister and her husband, who were his guardians when he was a young man, Rick describes himself as an adolescent who related better with things than with people. When his parent split up, he grew increasingly distant from friends and family, and responded with intense rage when others attempted to control his behavior. Rick was serving a life sentence and was scheduled to appear before the parole board during this time.

Connell: Born in Chicago and raised in Gary, Indiana, his mom started using crack when he was 11 years old. Immersed in drug culture and a gang lifestyle, his mother was shot when Connell was 18 years old. She survives, but he and his brother find the assailant and kill him. He is convicted of second degree murder and sent to prison.

Matthew: Incarcerated for first degree murder, he was the only inmate who dropped out before the group was able to hear his story.

#### CVORJ Project Staff

Sue Stacey, Minnesota Department of Corrections – facilitator

Terri Grob, Independent consultant – facilitator

Tim Hansen, Minnesota Department of Corrections – facilitator

Noni Karkoska, Hennepin County Probation/Parole – Participant advocate

Bunny Telke, MCF-Lino Lakes – prison staff/support

Heather Burns, University of Minnesota – researcher/observer

## CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

### Highlights of the 12-week Sessions

The following excerpts are taken from transcripts of the tape-recorded sessions presented in the order they took place. While not exhaustive, they provide insight into key aspects of the group's process and rapport as it developed over time. Direct quotes are offered in italics throughout the text.

#### September 4, 2001 - Week 1

There had been a death in the prison the previous week; this has an unsettling effect on the inmate participants. After becoming very upset during the previous week's session, Cynthia does not return until the following week. Offenders comment that her emotional response has helped them to see corrections workers more as real people.

Dr. Mark Umbreit, Director of the Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking at the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work, attends this first session to present and discuss Restorative Justice principles and practices. He provides an overview of the growth of Restorative Justice in the U.S. and around the world, and offers to answer any questions participants may have. Facilitators moderate an open discussion.

This evolves into an important exchange between Sherrie and other victims in the group. Sherrie has never attended a support group for survivors of homicide and her concerns come quickly to the fore. Although storytelling is scheduled to begin the following week, she clearly needs to speak about her loss, and this is not discouraged. She describes her mother, how the murder of her mother changed her, and directs her questions to the group.

She seeks answers from offenders, and evokes a response from victims who recognize her needs, validate her feelings and give her some things to think about: You have to be prepared for the answers you seek; you probably can't expect the offender's family to approach you and apologize, the reality is attorneys counsel against this. She asks offenders directly, *Did you ever try to contact the victims in your case?* She wishes the offender's family had made some effort to acknowledge the harm done to her.

Sherrie grapples with painful emotions and unanswered questions and the group provides the listening ear she badly needs. Jack commiserates with her, saying that, as in her case, *our offender didn't apologize*. Additional thoughts offered from other victim/survivors included: feelings of enjoyment in life will slowly return; it helps to try to live in a way that would make the loved one proud; live so that she did not die in vain; one can begin to acknowledge the process of positive change and all the wonderful people met along the way.

Facilitators acknowledge that the group has begun the work they came to do, and encourage participants to sign up for the night they wish to tell their story.

#### September 11, 2001 – Meeting cancelled due to terrorist attack.

#### September 18, 2001 - Week 2

Group members comment on effects of watching television coverage of the terrorist attacks since the previous week. Participants relate directly to feelings of loss experienced by survivors of

loved ones killed in the attack. Sandra says she can relate to the mother who lost her son in the plane crash. Sherrie describes how the event brought up the feelings she had when she learned of her mother's murder. *I know just how they're feeling*, she relates.

Some participants, both victims and offenders, reveal they have been having second thoughts, and are thinking about quitting. In spite of their reluctance, they have decided to show up.

### **The Storytelling Begins**

Tonight, Terri, one of the facilitators tells her story, sharing aspects of her life experience related to victimization and healing. This approach was chosen as a way of 'breaking the ice,' modeling the process of storytelling and helping to establish trust and rapport with group members. Bonnie, who also signed up to tell her story that evening later relates that hearing the facilitator's story made her feel more at ease. She then felt more comfortable sharing painful details of her own life experience.

The meeting runs late, however, and facilitators are told they need to get the men out on time in the future. There is also some concern that participants might not have received a clear sense of what topics were appropriate to address in telling one's story. After some discussion, the facilitators return next week with more explicit guidelines around storytelling and staying on topic.

It was noted that the sign-up method for storytelling was working effectively. Participants were choosing times that suited them and it turned out that victims and offenders alternated. The prospect of a picket line is discussed in the event that Minnesota state employees should go on strike.

### **September 25, 2001 - Week 3**

Following their discussion of the previous week, facilitators draw up and post guidelines on the walls to provide a clear outline for storytelling. These include the following:

Stories contain...

'The Beginning' - History, events leading up to what happened

'The Middle' (body) - Describe what happened

'The End' (conclusion) - Might answer questions like:

How/where are you now?

What have you learned?

What has changed since then?

Other things the storyteller might ask themselves in preparing:

What is important for me to say?

What would I like to leave others with once I've concluded?

What have I learned that I want to share with others?

Sandra and Curt are scheduled to tell their story. Curt lets the group know he's anxious about it, and adds the value *acceptance* to the center of the circle.

### **Sandra's Story**

Her son was brutally murdered in the aftermath of a fight in which he was outnumbered. Although involved in drug trade, he had served time and was taking steps to straighten out his

life. After leaving an alcoholic husband to raise her boys alone, Sandra recognized how much John had struggled and was proud of his recent progress. She had made him his favorite dinner on his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday the night he didn't show up. Sandra's comments provide insight into the experience of survivors—in the justice system, with victim support groups—and her determination to live a positive, meaningful life in honor of her son.

*I don't like the word victim, Sandra begins. My son was a victim. I'm a survivor. She relates the details of the night her son was murdered and the subsequent trial. Murder scrambles your life, Sandra tells the group. The legal system in a lot of ways was as insulting as any of it. None of the defendants showed any remorse. They were all just real macho and real stupid, and all about themselves... It's scary to me that we have a revolving door for people that are capable and willing to participate in such a brutal [act]. What I did say in my victim impact statements and I felt very grateful to have that opportunity, was that I know that John could never have done to them what they did to him. And that made me feel good. John knew how to be loved. He knew how to love others, he knew how to respect people and he never ever could have done (that) to them. He wasn't like that...and I was proud of that. I was proud of who he was...and also very sad about them, that that's how they operate.*

Sandra also tells how she got the help she badly needed via the Victim Intervention Project Institute (VIPI) based in St. Paul, Minnesota. *The Victim Intervention Project saved my life. I'm so grateful it was available to me. It was so important to me to be able to see some people that could walk and talk after this... It would be way hard work and it was and it is, but that I could do it and I could do it in honor of John... Damn it, they got John, and we can't change that. But they don't have to get me and they don't have to have [his brother], either.*

### **Curt's Story**

Curt follows with his story. The son of an angry, abusive, alcoholic father, Curt bore the brunt of his father's regular outbursts. One day, with the help of a friend, he killed an elderly man who lived next door. For an angry young 16 year-old boy afraid of his father, the unassuming gentleman served as a surrogate target. Curt spent the next 16 years in prison. His hope was that he might be helpful to a victim of a similar offense, who needed to hear his story. Before giving his account, he tells the group, *I've never told everything all at once that I'm about to say.*

After telling his story, Curt fields a number of questions from the group. Victim and community participants want to know what he does with his feelings/anger now, how he maintains a productive life, recognizing his intelligence and the gifts he has. They express sorrow for the abuse he suffered, yet want to know if he could do something like that again. Curt takes the position that he has to admit to himself that he is capable of doing harm, but has decided that he won't repeat the offense. He's doing things differently now. He forces himself to think ahead, consider what might happen, and to see things from the other person's point of view. *I have that potential, he says, but no, I never will.*

Curt tells the group that he had made some efforts to contact the victim's family and gets challenged on this point. Cynthia tells him that, in her view, a letter from the murderer would be like *a slap in the face* for the man's family. This leads to a discussion on the topic of forgiveness. Jack acknowledges that the POMC group is split on the issue: some see it as disrespectful to their loved one to forgive the murderer, others say it's okay. Curt is advised not to press the victim's family for any kind of response or to try to contact them. Sherrie expresses

her opinion that forgiveness is a matter of perspective. *The only thing I'm sure of,*" she says, "is *we all have the right and ability to forgive ourselves.*

Afterward, Sherrie approaches Curt and they shake hands. She thanks him for sharing his story. Their cases are somewhat similar in nature and their apparent senselessness; learning some of the underlying dynamics at work in Curt's case (and perhaps those of her mother's killer, as well) seems to have helped her.

#### **October 2, 2001 - Week 4**

State employees are on strike. Cynthia sends word that she has chosen not to cross the picket line.

During the circle pass, Sandra takes a moment to share her reflections after hearing Curt's story the previous week. Her comments illustrate the ways many victim participants were coming to understand the relationship between childhood abuse and violent crime and offenders' basic humanity. Her words also give insight into how some victims choose understanding over vengeance in relating to offenders.

Sandra: *I think we all have pieces in our life like that, like what happened to John and what happened to Curt as a kid. That never should have happened to you (addresses Curt). Never. It's not right. You didn't deserve it. It's not good. And it's created a bitterness and anger in you that's justified, but then now you have the opportunity to...try and release that some way and get away from that and turn it around and do nice stuff. ... Use the gifts you've been given to make a difference that's good.*

#### **Franks's Story**

Later that same evening, Frank tells his story. He was convicted of vehicular homicide for killing a man while driving under the influence of alcohol. The following is an excerpt of an exchange between Frank and group members that takes place after they hear Frank's account of the offense. This dialogue shows how victim participants both supported and encouraged positive growth in the offenders while still holding them accountable for their actions. Their words convey a clear sense of concern for Frank, and their investment in his future success.

Frank: *I honestly, truly believe that if people don't do the [treatment] programs [here at the facility], that they should never get out. Because if they're not willing to give their mind to open up to something that's going to better them...*

Jack: *That's a good attitude, in my mind. (He relates it to his addiction to cigarettes, after being addicted for many years, Jack quit cold turkey.) It helps to be stubborn.*

Frank: *I have such a huge support group. My mother used AA, and she will be right on my ass the whole time, and I love her for it.*

Jack: *God bless, that's wonderful. 'Cause you do need support, there's no doubt about that.*

Frank: *The hard thing is, I'm going to have to say no to wedding receptions for a while and all that. That's what this treatment is teaching me - all my relapse preventions.*

Sandra: *Just be the best guy you can be because of [your victim]. And do it in his honor. His family doesn't ever have to know you're doing that, but that's a really cool thing. That will feel better for you, and it will just work right. It'll do what you need it to do for you and for them.*

Jack: *We make something good out of something bad in our lives. And you can make something good out of something bad. You can't turn that clock back to one moment before this happened, because that was a defining moment in your life. But you can make something, pluses out of minuses.*

Sandra: *Everybody in this room has that time, that date and time that they wish that they could take and erase or turn around, and we don't have that opportunity. The opportunity that we do have is to take that and make it into something good. To put it into something positive. And you're wanting it.*

Frank: *Every time I get on the verge of forgiving myself, I feel like I'm betraying [the victim]. I'm so afraid that if I forgive myself, I'm going to forget him. And I know I won't but it's just, I don't want to.*

### **Forgiveness and Shame**

*Discussion follows about aspects of shame and forgiveness. Victim/survivors caution offenders that shame can lead to a psychological tailspin and send a person back to drinking, whereas forgiving yourself can be a positive step that helps you move forward to do better in your life, and can even lead to the healing that will keep you from drinking. While an offender may not be forgiven by the victim of their crime (and some contend it is wrong to expect it), self-forgiveness is recognized as an important aspect of growth and positive change.*

Sherrie: *As long as you don't forgive yourself, you always have that as a basis that you can't go on, and you can't go on until you do forgive yourself. So, you're going to have to go on, you're going to forgive yourself so you can be whole again.*

Sandra: *And that doesn't mean approving. (Others concur) All you do is acknowledge the horror of it and all the stuff that it means, but allow yourself to be human enough to have made that horrendous mistake, but then not to make it again. ...That isn't saying it's okay what you did. And it sounds like that's where you're having, that's the hard part. 'Cause [your victim's] family can't ever say that [they forgive you], and I can't ever say that John's murderers are forgiven for what they did. If they want to live their life different now, I'd be all for that.*

Sherrie: *But don't put yourself in the place where you can't go on. You have to face what's there and say, I did this, I'm sorry I did it, and I'm going to live my life to make something good come of this. Just put yourself in that place and then do it. Bring up a great daughter. You can't stop. You just can't.*

Sandra: *If you do that's an insult to [your victim].*

Jack: *One of the people that you got to learn to care for in this world, is you. Care for yourself.*

## **Sherrie's Story**

Next, it is Sherrie's turn to tell her story.

Sherrie found her mother brutally murdered in the farmhouse where she had lived for 62 years. The offender never took responsibility for the crime, and his motivations remain a mystery. The case was settled out of court, a process that excluded Sherrie and left her with many unanswered questions. Sherrie had not sought help or support outside her circle of family and friends before participating in this project. She tells the group that she has struggled for over a year with intense feelings of hate, bitterness, and loss. She felt she was becoming someone she didn't like and didn't want to be. Like many victims of violent crime, she reached a point where she had done as much as she could do on her own. She had, in fact, come a long way. But she looked for something to help her move on and take up her life again. She needed to talk about the loss with people who understood, and she still sought answers to questions that never went away.

*At first, it was horrible. If I could've gotten ten minutes alone with [the murderer] I would have killed him myself. I would. ...But that wouldn't have made me any better than he was. Except that I had a reason to do it. He had no reason to kill mom. I hope he never has a day that he feels good. Not one.*

*It just seemed like...it was one of those things that just didn't make any sense no matter how you figured it... I don't know. I don't know what he felt. And that's why I thought, as I've heard your stories, I'm sure he felt something. I'm sure he felt...sometime, not honored in his life or something. I don't know...I wish he hadn't killed my mom. I'll never forgive him for what he did... I would feel better if I knew why he did it, and if he would own up to it. I think that's what hurts me the worst is that he won't own his crime.*

*So, I'm getting back to normal...the circle of life still goes on. I still have my son. I have a lot of friends. I have a pretty good family. Life will go on and it will get better. It has gotten a lot better already.*

## **How do we go on?**

This excerpt from Sherrie's story provides insight into a variety of concerns faced by survivors of homicide: looking for answers, trying to make sense of a senseless act of violence, getting shut out of the justice process and contending with bitterly painful emotions. Sherrie also shares some of the ways she finds participation in the group helpful: she feels less alone and gains some relief from an oppressive state of mind—begins to feel more like her old self again.

Listening to Curt's account gives her some insight into the world of the offender, that he may not have felt "honored in his life," that maybe he "felt something" after all. Paradoxically, the idea that her mother's killer might really be a troubled human being is a comforting one, and the possibility that offenders might have been victims as children helps her begin to make sense of a senselessly violent act.

Finally, Sherrie's story and those that follow, give insight into the ways survivors of homicide manage to get on with their lives. *I still have my son. I have a lot of friends. I have a pretty good family. Life will go on and it will get better.* They make the decision to focus on what's right in their lives and to live according to the values that give their lives meaning.

## **Victim Support**

Discussion follows between group members and Sherrie over the murderer's denial. They support her skepticism and discuss aspects of mental illness. In this case, the offender was non-compliant with prescribed medication. Victim participants assure Sherrie that she can get access to an autopsy report if she wishes: *It's public record and you absolutely have access to it, if you want.*

Sherrie relates that, because the defendant pled guilty, she was unable to give her victim impact statement until after the sentencing. Victim survivors maintain that she should have been able to give it before sentencing. They share her frustration with deals made outside of court without victims' knowledge, and that such deals are common practice.

During this session, it becomes apparent that in responding to Sherrie's concerns, group members are beginning to serve as a support group for one another, teasing out the issues, talking them over, offering alternative perspectives, supporting and listening.

## **October 9, 2001 - Week 5**

### **Jack's Story**

Tonight, Jack tells his story. His son, who drove taxi for a living was killed on the job. He and his wife are active members of the Minnesota Chapter of Parents of Murdered Children (POMC). Jack's work in prisons speaking with offenders reflects his determination to live in a way that brings something positive out of a terribly painful event. Initially skeptical about the Lino Lakes project, he gradually comes to feel the project worthwhile and the offenders sincere in their efforts to change their lives.

He explains that he and others tour the prisons in the state to talk to inmates. *We do that anywhere from 2 to 5 times a month, dependent on who's asking. If I can demonstrate for one, that when you go off and you murder somebody, you've done an incredible awful thing, not just to that person, but to all the people around that person, and also to your own families...the ripple effect, it's not a ripple effect, it's a tidal wave effect. It goes out wham, and it does hideous awful things to people and some of those people survive it and a lot of those people don't survive it. We've got five families who, every day all day long, their murder consumes their life. Three of those five, can't hold jobs anymore. That's a terrible thing for them.*

Jack refers to his own murderer as an exception to the rule that most everybody has got good them, and says to the inmates, *"I think you people have all got good in you. You wouldn't be here (in the program) if you didn't. And I gotta believe that each of you have great remorse for what you got involved in... So I'm going to keep talking to guys like you, and help them.*

### **Rick's Story**

Later that evening Rick tells his story. His words provide unique insight into the experience of violent offenders as well as the ways prison life can reinforce the very behavior it is intended to correct. For over twenty years, Rick was simply marking time. Finally encouraged by the parole board to try treatment and restorative justice programming, however, Rick slowly begins to consider the prospect of life outside of prison. Opening up to unfamiliar feelings like hope and belonging, however, are a challenge for him.

Rick was convicted of first degree murder for killing his sister and her husband who had offered him a place to stay when he had nowhere else to go. As he describes it, *"One night I felt like my life had got so down, I'd reached the very bottom. I had no place to turn to and I ended up finding myself at my sister's house. I asked if I could stay there for a short time. She agreed. But I wasn't used to anybody telling me what to do. They were very much of the opinion that I needed structure, I needed guidance and I needed control more than anything else. Just the very things that I was rebelling against. So we argued quite a lot. One night we got into a really big argument, and I decided I was going to leave, and head somewhere else, and they said, Oh no you're not. They had what little money I had in their control at the moment and they thought that I'd be sensible enough to see their point of view. Only I didn't. They argued to the point*



where, I realized I...I needed them to stop...telling me what to do. And stop trying to control my life. Rage and resentment and hatred built up in me to the point to where...I wasn't a being anymore. I was something other than a person. And I was reactive. And I needed to stop them so bad that I picked up a rifle, loaded it and shot them to death. I thought that that was what it took to change the situation I was in. That that would be some kind of solution, some kind of relief...

People would ask me why and I couldn't tell them why. I became numb and mute, and I wouldn't even try to explain anything. When I went to trial, a lot of my family was there, and they couldn't believe I did it either. They knew I was an angry teenager, that I didn't show a lot of care and concern for people. But they never expected this from me. Never expected I could do this. The hardest thing that I ever faced was walking out of the courtroom and seeing all my relatives there in the hallway of the courthouse wanting to ask me what happened. And I couldn't face anybody. I couldn't tell them anything. When I was sentenced, the judge told me not to expect to ever get out of prison. And I believed that that's what my fate had become. Life, for me, had become over.

When I ended up in St. Cloud prison, I was suddenly handed this image of the killer. And people expected certain behavior of me, certain things, certain ways for me to act. And I learned how to fulfill that role of being hostile, angry, cold and unfeeling. I spent twelve years there headed in that particular direction, to where the only feelings I had left were anger or total disconcert. I watched people get beat to death and it didn't faze me at all. And then after 12 years, I come to Lino Lakes... I'd go to parole hearings and they would tell me not to expect to get out. So I didn't...

And then in '99, my last parole hearing, they kind of said, well, we're going to give you two years continuous. We want you to do this treatment. And if you do that, we'll talk to you. If you don't, you're going to find yourself in Rush City for a long time, and you won't have an opportunity to talk to us for a long time. So I said okay. I'll try treatment.

Treatment was a lot different than I ever imagined it'd be. It wasn't just destructive. Because I went in there thinking they were going to take something from me. And instead they ended up giving me an awful lot. And I began to accept God into my life where before He was who I blamed everything on. And I started realizing that, if I do what people tell me to do, I get something out of it.

So I started thinking, Okay, maybe they're right. If I do these programs, if I learn, if I start seeing society as someplace I want to be, instead of someplace outside of my world, then maybe I can be a part of society again. I still don't know if they're ever going to let me out. But hope has entered my life where it didn't before. Even though it sometimes feels like I'm taking chances, you know, if I do this and they don't let me out, I did it for nothing, it's gone to waste. But that's wrong, because none of it's gone for waste. Because I like myself. In the past, I didn't. I didn't understand why anybody else would either. So I'm thinking, first forty some years of my life were screwed up. I can't do anything about that. But I'm only middle-aged. I got a long life ahead of me. And a lot of that depends on the choices that I make where I go from now on.

I think about society now as the goal, or at least a goal in my life instead of rotting and dying in prison. But I'm always conscious of the fact that there's people out there that I'm going to need to prove myself to, that probably won't be very accepting of me. But I don't see anything as being something that can't be overcome with time anymore.

One of the things that's important to me is that somebody knows that I've learned something, that I realize the extensive damage that I've done and it's not all going to heal. But that I don't have to do things to harm people anymore. I'm sane, I'm half-assed rational,

*moderately intelligent, I can make choices that aren't going to harm people. But I always have to be conscious that there are choices. I can't ever let myself get backed into a corner of my own making again.*

*I don't know what the future's going to hold. I do know it's going to be better than I ever expected it to be. I'm extremely sorry for what I've done. My entire life has been wrong. And I want to do thing different. Programs like this are a means of learning to. I really hope they continue it in this state because more than most people, I know that spending 25 years in prison doesn't heal anything. It doesn't do anybody any good other than keep someone off the streets. That, the way justice is handled has to be done differently. And that's a big reason why I chose to be a part of this group. Because I don't know what else I can do. At least I can be part of this. That's all I have.*

Frank responds: *You said, Rick, that—something about having to prove things to some people. I believe that you know what's right and what you need to do, and if we go out there trying to live for what everybody else wants, we're never going to make it. And you have to find that peace in yourself before you're going to be able to make peace with anybody else.*

Connell adds: *I seen your growth, I heard your story, I heard it today in depth, and it was just moving the way that you've changed and to see the expressions on your face. I used to think you was just blank. And I've seen a lot of expressions lately, I always tell you how I see you changing, and I try to steal some of the credit, but [group laughs] it's pretty nice. I hope everything goes good for you when you go up for parole and, if not, I'll still be here to make you laugh. Good job, Rick.*

### **October 16, 2001 - Week 6**

The strike is over and group members are relieved. Inmates talk about having to pick up the slack, taking on extra duties while employees were out. Those who drive in are glad they don't have to cross the picket line anymore.

### **Group Bonding and Rapport**

When the meeting begins and the talking piece is passed for a check-in, participants are sharing very personal details of their lives quite openly: family happenings, difficult news, visiting relatives, what they planted in their gardens.

Facilitators propose an exercise: It's a kind of get-to-know-one-another game. Someone calls out a question like, 'Whose favorite color is blue?' And everyone who agrees stands up. The group plays this game for a while, tossing out questions about gardening, music, chocolate, etc. The last question comes from Rick: 'Who feels sad this group is going to end some day?' Everybody stands.

### **Taking a Break: 'Self-Care'**

The topic of the night is self-care, addressing the question: What do you do to take care of yourself in the midst of stressful circumstances and painful emotions? By this time, the group has listened to a number of painful stories. So facilitators have proposed taking a break from the heavy emotional content to discuss a more positive topic that is nevertheless very relevant to their lives. The talking piece is passed and each person describes the things they really enjoy doing, that make them feel good, and help them deal with the stress of their everyday lives. At the end of this circle pass, the mood in the room has noticeably lifted. The following excerpt

helps to demonstrate this and gives the reader a feel for the kind of good-natured give-and-take that group members were able to share by this point in the process:

Jack: *For me the wonderful way of dealing with that type of stress is I'll just go to one of the daughters and grab one of the grandchildren and do some huggin', serious huggin'. That works.*

Rick: *[I like having] time to think quietly about what I've soaked in and also to hear other people say things they've felt and experienced that I haven't necessarily been able to find words for myself. It helps hearing other people say what's happening. And I've been praying, talking to God an awful lot since we started.*

Renee: *Sometimes I just have to walk out the door...and I just drive. People (ask), Oh, how's your group going? I've never really known how to talk (about it). Oh, I'll just say, Oh great, or Good. But it's just like, wanting to pour out, like, Oh my gosh, I've learned this and I've learned that or you wouldn't believe this or now I understand this or I feel compassion for offenders or just all kinds of things that are like...but you don't really share with your co-workers or your family, they just think I'm crazy. (They ask,) Why would you go to a prison? Why? (Makes a puzzled face.) Just like that. Or, Why would you sit and listen to victims? I mean, people don't understand...even people at my work. So, that's what I'm having a hard time with. So, (laughs) I'm really not saying how I'm caring for myself. Maybe I am by just saying this right now.*

Sandra: *Does babbling work?*

Renee: *Yeah, it does (group laughs). Whenever I get that stupid talking piece, it's like, everybody else had something way more important to say or to add or whatever. I don't know. I'm not sure how. I'll just listen to your ideas. (Laughs,) I feel much better.*

Frank relies on prayer, writing in his journal, talking to people like fellow inmate friends and family via phone and visits. Bonnie reads a lot, though she does not have a lot of support people in her life; she tends to be the caretaker. Curt has put together a collection of quotes that inspire and guide him, reminding him of the path he wants to take. He says he has learned to identify a stress or difficulty, then talk it over with someone. Sherrie talks about her dogs and enjoying the simple pleasures of life.

This process itself has been an affirming one, helping people remember and talk about the things that nurture, support and give them pleasure—a good break for the group from talking about hard things.

### **A Violation of Trust**

To close the session, Matt reads a piece he claims to have written for a GED commencement ceremony. Group members quickly recognize that he has copied the work from a much-published piece called the Desiderata. A fellow inmate confronts him about the plagiarism, and Matt continues to deny his attempted deception. Facilitators note that time has run out, and the inmates must return to their rooms, so the session is closed with the understanding that the matter will be taken up again the following week. A few of the group members stay afterwards to talk about the incident and think together about how they want to respond to this unexpected development. As noted earlier, many group members highlighted the importance of “honesty” in their hopes for the project. Hence, participants describe feeling betrayed by a seemingly minor

and foolish incident. The plagiarism poses a real threat to the group's sense of trust and rapport. The following week's session is devoted to addressing these concerns.

### **October 23, 2001 - Week 7**

#### **A Broken Trust: Weathering the Storm Together**

This week's session is devoted to discussing the discovery of Matt's plagiarism. Matt has chosen not to show up. Group members are disappointed both that he lied to them and that he did not come to speak with them in person, though he did send a letter for the group to read. There is a general consensus that they would have been willing to talk things over with him and try to resolve the matter as a group, if he had been willing to show up and admit to what he'd done.

Bonnie notes Matt's denial and that he seemed to be in good spirits, even after he was confronted. She felt scared for him, and it raised the unfortunate maxim: "once a con, always a con." Inmates feared this might be the group's response, and share their concern that Matt's mistake would ruin it for the rest of them.

Curt expresses hurt and anger, he feels betrayed. He found it hard to confront Matt, but felt he had to say something. Curt says he doesn't trust Matt anymore, doesn't want him in the group, is worried what the group now thinks of rest of them, and feels that Matt should have come in person to address this.

Sherrie is surprised by the plagiarism, but wishes they could have handled it differently. *I guess we all get used to being lied to, she says. I probably would have taken him aside [and said]...if you don't tell them next week I will, and made him tell us himself. But (to Curt) what you did was fine... I hate to be lied to... I'm sorry he isn't here, too, because he should have come and at least said, 'I shouldn't have done that. I knew better, but I did it anyway.' ...There's nothing wrong in confronting people, it's just not in my nature to do that.*

Sandra shares her thoughts: *Initially, when we were leaving, I was really angry. I felt cheated, and duped or stupid. I kept thinking, y'know, what am I doing this for? So far, it's been about...doing something positive with John's death. I felt really dirtied. I thought, maybe this is too much sleeping with the enemy for me...I'm ambivalent about whether he's here or not. I don't think I could trust him again and I don't think that I can trust even an apology...I just felt really cheated. [Like] maybe what we were doing isn't going to be a good thing or isn't going to be effective. Then I was trying really hard not to think of all of you in the same way. But...I trusted him just as much as I trusted the rest of them. Now what? So, it was a crummy thing to feel. But I'm here, and I want to be able to trust...*

*Your stories aren't any less important or powerful than ours are and we really are coming from a pretty similar place; we're all hurting for one reason or another. We can help each other to a better place. If anyone tries to wreck that or taints it, then I'm defensive, I guess. I don't want anyone messin' with John's legacy. It was such a choice. It wasn't like he was cornered and made to come up with something. I mean, I thought about it a lot, about the circumstances, and that's what made it feel so dirty and so underhanded...*

*I just think it's way too bad and I think we can use it as a growing thing, too, as a group. I think now we're all aware of the honesty thing and how crucial it is for this to have any real value. We all want it to, so...*

Connell is disappointed that Matt thought he could fool the people in the group, and that he would not come up to them and talk to them in the yard. He read the letter, thought it was bullshit. If Matt had been able to say it to them, Connell would have taken it more seriously. *I don't fault a man for making mistakes. It's what you do once you've made them. Once he said the lie, he done nothing. That made me lose respect for him.*

Renee tells the group, *I was angry. I felt disrespected that he didn't feel any one of us would have recognized at least part of it. I don't drive here 6 hours every Tuesday for fun. It did hurt.* She wanted him to show up, offer some kind of apology that she could understand, or just say 'I'm sorry.'

Frank is concerned about the impact this will have on the group's progress. *I was just saying last week how I feel such a bond and so connected to everybody, and I just thought, Oh Christ, this is going to take and shatter [this]. Why would they trust anybody ever again? I still worry about it today. You come to prison and you don't think you can trust anyone. But along the way you meet a few nice people. Matt is one of the people I met in here that I thought I could trust. I thought was honest. When someone you look up to and hold in regard does something...It's been hard for me, it really has and I really trusted Matt. I truly hope that it doesn't reflect on the group as a whole. Because I did feel a bond with everybody and trust everybody, and I hope that we can continue that.*

Rick shares his perspective: *This group to me is about health and healing and...this part of it may be what was needed for him to gain something, to grow a little bit. Frank had some concern about how people were going to react towards all of us because of this. But I have come to trust this group, trust everybody here to the point where I don't think what one person does is going to carry that much weight against anybody else. I believe in the power of this group, is so immense and so healing that I let Frank do my worrying for me. (Group laughter.) If Matt chooses to come back and be honest, that's within his capabilities. I don't see it happening, and I feel sad for that. I wouldn't expect it. But if he does, I'm okay with that. I think he needed, to put it bluntly, a kick to the head like that, get some reality back in the game. I hope he comes out somewhat better than he came in.*

Noni, the group advocate, says she spoke with Matt by phone and asked if he planned to attend. *He said, I don't think I can do it.* She encouraged him to at least attend one more session to say that he could no longer be a part of the group. *I'm disappointed for the group that he couldn't at least try to make amends for his wrong-doing, because this is about restoring and I was sad to know he didn't get that message that you can do wrong and you can do right as a result of doing wrong.*

Matt's letter is read aloud to the group and it is met with general skepticism. Participants talk about how they are angry, feel insulted, that this hurt the integrity of the group and what they're about - restorative justice. They feel sorry for him. *A lie is nothing like murder; we've come to terms with that, we could address this if he were willing to show up and own it.* Some feel it's best that he's not a part of the group. Finally, participants express resistance to making Matt the center of attention, or spending much more time on the issue. They were willing to work with him, but decide to move forward in a good way, not letting this *ruin it for the rest of us.*

Connell puts it like this: *I don't want to work harder than Matt to clean this up. Matt knows about accountability. He went through the same treatment I'm in for 12 months. He's a mentor up there.... He knows everything he's supposed to do.*

Frank identifies with Matt. He sees Matt as doing what he himself (Frank) did when he realized he had killed a man – Frank locked himself up and wouldn't let anybody in, even his best friends. *And I feel for him, but I also know, every step in accountability that I've taken has given me some of that peace back.*

Sandra comments, *I think we can go forward maybe healthier without him.*

One of the facilitators sums up the discussion. *Matt gave us the opportunity to spend a session doing what we needed to do, which was to hear a lot of intense wisdom that I'm honored to have heard from each of you. And that's what community's about. We're talking about accountability, we're talking about each of us having rights and responsibilities in this community. And that's what it's all about.* For the closing circle pass, she asks each person to tell the group, *What you've done to take care of yourself in the last week and where are you at with all this.*

Curt: *I feel really good after this meeting. I actually feel a lot more a part of this group and a lot closer to all of you after everything that we talked about tonight. I guess the only self-care is where it started last week. That was something I felt bad about at the time, but it was something I told myself I had to do and I feel really good now knowing that it was for the best.*

Sherrie: *I feel good about tonight because in my own mind I have been able to put in proportion what the lie meant to me in proportion to other things that have happened in my life. It's important but not important enough that we should waste our lives worrying about. Let the person that did it worry about it. But I feel good about what we discussed tonight. It was good for all of us.*

Sandra: *I think the self-care thing is boundaries. You just got to set them and once you do it, then every time it becomes more comfortable to stay there... I feel good too, way better than I did last week at this time. I just think we're probably in a better place. And the other part of it is... his dishonesty brought honesty to the forefront. We're all human and we're all fallible, and we're not maybe all ready for this, or the stuff that we have to face that comes with it. And it's okay. His time might be later or maybe it's never, but that's okay.*

Frank: *I'm relieved. I really am. I've stressed all week. I was scared that I was going to lose something that I love...and I've told people, this is something that you love to hate. It's something that makes you scared, sick to your stomach, but I wouldn't miss it for anything.*

Curt closes with a quote: *'The world is not interested in the storms you encountered, but did you bring in the ship?'* *And we weathered the storm and we came out of it a better group.*

Sandra: *The ship has arrived!*

The meeting closes with a very positive sense of having tackled a difficult issue, made sense of it and moved on. The process of successfully addressing a problem that raised some of their worst

fears—that their work would be in vain, that people can't be trusted—seems to have strengthened the cohesiveness and confidence of the group while confirming their commitment to the basic values they had placed in the center of the circle.

### **October 30, 2001 - Week 9**

Tonight, both Connell and Renee tell their stories.

#### **Connell's Story**

He brought pictures of family to show the group, as nearly everyone else did. Connell tells of being raised amid violence. His mother killed her boyfriend, and no charges were filed against her. They left Chicago for Minnesota when he was eight years old and settled in North Minneapolis. He did well, was on honor roll till high school. His mom started using crack when he was 11 years old. *That was the beginning of the end of the family household.* Connell stopped going to school and his grades suffered. His brothers joined a gang till finally Connell joined, too. A self-proclaimed mama's boy, he would stay around home to take care of his mother. For a year, he states, he never left the house except to buy food or take out the garbage. At age 13 he started selling drugs for the Vice Lords. His mom would take the money and use it to buy drugs. He kept some aside to pay bills. Mom had lots of abusive boyfriends. He got a pistol from the gang and was told to shoot up a rival gang's house. He got some notoriety for that. Then, when Connell was 18 years old, a man shot his mother and put her in the hospital. She survives, but to even the score, Connell and his brother find and kill the man who shot her.

*I regret that I ever took a man's life. I sleep with that every night. It's not easy. At first I used to say it was all [the victim's] fault, and that's what made me sleep easier. When I started using his name, remembering his face, it wasn't easy no more. It was hard to realize that me, Connell, at the age of eighteen, got to the point where I can kill somebody. And I did it, and I understand that violence, that capability is in me, to do it, even if I don't, and it's been embedded in me from years, so to get it out of me, I have to go practice. I never knew how to be a regular person.*

*They say rehabilitated, I've never been habilitated in the first place. I was the son of a crack house and I did what happened in a crack house, and that was anything goes to survive. So, my story is one of tragedy as far as my life, and I place tragedy on a lot of people's lives, and I bring it to the point where I do a lot now, way more now for self care. Because no one else really cared about me, I don't have any long time friends that I can depend on. I just have me and my brothers. We all stuck together... Self care to me is just loving myself no matter what goes on around me. I love myself too much to get caught up in folly and things that is not self-enhancing. If it doesn't make me a better person, I'm not going to be involved. So, self-care, honesty, and gratitude is what I work on a daily basis. I have a lot to be grateful for. I'm grateful to have a chance to tell my story.*

Jack responds to Connell: *That's a part of the world that by the sheer grace of God I guess I never ever really comprehended existed, and I don't know how you lived through that, but you did.*

Sandra: *My thought was, what took you so long? I mean, no wonder this happened. Absolutely no wonder. You're treated like an animal, or less. In most cases, people treat their animals way better than that. And no guidance or direction. You just got to fight for your own...and you're in an environment where, y'know, nobody's gonna teach you to sell encyclopedias.*

## **Renee's Story**

Renee works as a counselor in a domestic violence shelter and was the victim of an abusive husband. She left him and lives alone with her daughter. She opens with the observation, *Like a lot of you folks here, I grew up with an alcoholic father.* She shares that she wants to be a part of ending violence on the planet. *They said no man would ever walk on the moon and of course he did and so...ending violence is within our reach and I want to be a part of that. I want to work toward it, I want to help, I want to learn, and I've learned a lot hear. I've learned a lot...with my own experiences...and I hope you guys can do the same (to inmates) it's about choice and getting out, and it's all about faith in humanity, it's all about hope.*

## **A Challenge to Offenders**

Jack offers the comment that up till tonight, this experience did not seem to compare well to the project at Shakopee in which he participated. He poses question to offenders: Has this been a positive experience for them? Would you say it's been a plus or a minus?

The talking piece is passed and inmate/offenders respond:

Rick: *My life is coming back together now, and you guys are the reason. I really hope that we're able to give something back to you. And we're able to give something back to society eventually because of what we did. It's definitely positive.*

Curt: *Definitely a plus. A huge plus. I was trying to remember what I said during the interview... the question was, What do you hope to get out of this? ... I said, I'm just really tired of feeling like a piece of shit for what I did. ...There's that constant fear of, am I ever going to get away from what I've done? Are people ever going to accept me? Will I ever be able to, obviously not make up for what I've done, but move forward? I've been hopeful that I could, but never really saw how it was going to happen. This group has seriously, not just started me feeling that way, but that's not really a fear anymore for me. And the other fears that I have are pretty weak in comparison. They're just, adjustment fears. I hope that answers your question.*

Jack: *Yeah, it does.*

Connell: *Definitely a plus. At one time in his life, he had given up on most of the values folks had put in the center of the circle. The one he trusted the most, hurt him the most, so felt he could trust no one. Being part of the circle has helped in gaining those values back. He addresses Jack, *You're so spunky I just hope I can be like that at one point in time in my life, when I get that age, I can be that...**

Jack: *Getting that old is kind of painful however. (Laughter)*

Connell: *...That witty. I anticipate seeing you and the first wisecrack you're going to give every day. So I get that from you.*

Frank: *I also believe this is the most powerful, wonderful thing I've ever done...To be accepted by society even though, when they know what we did, and you all come back week after week and are willing to share your lives with us. Like Curt said, it's such a closer step to not being that animal that we think of ourselves, the disgust and the shame. If I didn't come out of that, I wouldn't be able to do things.*



*I'm going to be very sad when this ends. It's weird to feel that way when it's such terrible things that we talk about. But it's such a closeness that we can, and it's really something that I know that I'll be fighting for as long as I can...I believe in this circle, and healing. And I believe that this is one of the biggest steps of accountability that we could have in prison, cause prison's not accountability. It's a punishment, or a consequence. But it's not accountability.*

Jack: *Think those are really great answers.*

The question is then posed to the other victim and citizen participants, what they're getting out of the experience.

Sherrie: *It's given me a chance to come to terms with some of this stuff that I didn't know how to face. And meeting you guys, it put a human face on people, and hearing your stories puts a, oh, not that it's okay, but it does happen, and you're still all good guys underneath. And mom always said, There's good in everybody. This was her most famous saying. That's just the way she was. And I'm sure there's good in him, someplace, so far I haven't found it (laughter).*

*But I found good in you guys. Knowing that helps me to say, she's probably right. There probably is good in him (her mother's killer), too. I don't know if I'll go and see him and try and talk to him, but I do believe that I should somehow get in touch with his mother and talk to her and tell her how bad I feel for her, too. Because I think we have a lot of the same common thread of misery in our lives. But you guys have given a lot too, and this group has been good.*

One of the facilitators, Tim, relates this experience to his own family history: *It has also given me the gift of having some conversations with my mother about her brother's murder, which I'll talk more about next week. But, we had never really done that before. ...That's an incredible gift. Also [I] got into a pretty heated discussion with my older brother...and finally he just says, 'You can't tell me that when someone kills somebody else, that they shouldn't be killed too.' And it was like a movie, when I saw your face, and I saw your face, (speaking to each offender) and I saw your face, and I saw your face, and I saw Matt's face...and I said, yes I can tell you that. You know it wasn't just some abstract issue to me. It was almost personal because I've been able to, I mean, you guys have shared and I've been able to take that in and it's part of me. And I know that in my work I've been pretty offender-focused. And so the sensitivity and the openness hearing all of your (speaking to survivors) stories have just moved me in a different way too, and it's kind of knocked me over sometimes, and I'm still trying to figure it all out.*

Sandra: *This has been really good, and kind of a nice addition to the other good stuff that's happened since John's murder. And I know that sounds weird, but I think you understand. It's about the personal growth that I've been able to experience and enjoy. And the peace, too, which is a factor I never expected to get. But things are a lot more clear to me. That's important.*

*And being involved in this gave me another hope...that there is, like your mom said (to Sherrie), there is good in everybody. And I don't know if I can believe that all of John's murderers could be one of you guys. But I think some of them could. And um, and it would be really peaceful for me if I knew that they could change like you guys are talking about. Making choice differently because of that experience. I certainly make choices differently. And it's a good thing.*

Bonnie: *For me this has been really wonderful. This has given me a better insight into myself, and I go up and down in the feeling of, I'm just amazed by the things, by the forgiveness that's in the room. And it's like, I need this weekly. And it's going to be very sad when it's over.*

Renee: *What have I learned or gotten out of this group? It's kind of like, you're speechless. It's so overwhelming, I'm very honored to be a part of this group and to learn and to learn about humanity, spiritually, to see you guys grow, to make me stronger so I can continue with my own work that I enjoy...It's just been a great process. Even for myself, it gives you a sense of who you are, where you're going, why you care about people... And this group has helped me to continue on in my journey with ending violence. Thank you.*

### **November 13, 2001 - Week 11**

A facilitator opens with a question for the group: *How do we want to end this process? She encourages participants to offer suggestions for the content of the last meeting.*

Another facilitator, Tim, and the advocate, Noni, are scheduled to tell their stories tonight.

Tim relates the way his participation in this project has sparked conversations with his family, and in particular, his mother regarding the murder and loss of her twin brother, Tim's uncle, and the effect that had on his family.

Noni participated in the group in the role of advocate for group members. After some deliberation, she chose to tell her own story. She speaks of her former gang involvement and being a regular visitor for a close friend in prison. In her view, prison was a harmful experience for her friend. This led her to get involved in probation with the hope of supporting others through the process of incarceration and release in a more positive way. She hopes to be part of creating a more productive system that truly reforms, hence her growing interest and participation in restorative justice projects like this.

Afterwards, Renee expresses appreciation for Noni's decision to tell her story – recognizing that many people have someone close to them who has been affected by or involved in crime. *We need to talk about it*, she points out. *Not act like it's out there somewhere, that it only happens to someone else.*

### **November 27, 2001 - Final Week 12**

#### **Closing the Circle**

For this evening's circle pass, participants are invited to check in and to offer any final comments about what they've seen in themselves or others, to express their wishes for the group, or anything else that they'd like to say. Group members sum up their feelings about participation in the project. Rick has been before the parole board and talks about being passed up for parole again.

Frank: *I'd just like to say how this group, you know I think about it all the time and the biggest thing I can say is it's given me more gratitude. I'm thankful to all of you, everybody, even other offenders. I've learned so much about myself and others. It's given me hope. And it's also given me a path. And I'm hoping to continue in some sort of circle or restorative justice [work]. It's more than I can even say. I couldn't put in words how much I've gotten out here...you've*

*given me hope, strength, and a little bit of self-forgiveness. And that's one of the biggest things that I needed. So I appreciate all of you. Thank you.*

*Jack: I told you guys last time that I was here that I had some misgivings about this group... And I did a 180 degree turn around and I am thrilled that I am sincerely convinced that you all got something out of it [addressing offenders], plus not minus. And I'm tickled for you.*

*Rick had his parole hearing yesterday. He went firmly believing that [he] was going to get what [he] worked so hard to get. That would either be transfer to minimum or work release. I didn't get what I wanted. What I got instead was 2 more years and then come back and see us again. It's given me a lot of reasons to look at progress I've made. Rick is discouraged, though the feedback he gets from others indicates that he is taking it better than expected. Rick responds, I treasure this group, everyone here, for the impact it's had on me. ...There was a time when I probably wouldn't have come tonight...but if I didn't, I would regret that. And I'm tired of regretting things, so I'm happy to be here.*

*Jack: Was this your first time up?*

*Rick: No, it was the 5th or 6th time seeing them. But this was the first time I ever went in with a positive attitude.*

*Jack: Well, for whatever it's worth, I feel bad for you.*

*Rick: They gave me the impression that I spent the last 23 years doing either nothing or being hostile towards them and the last 2 years of change doesn't balance the scale yet. They want to see more.*

*The talking piece passes to Curt: I just want everyone to know that I got more out of this group than I was hoping...I tried to come in with no expectations, but there were hopes. My hope was just that I could do something, maybe share something of myself that could help other people, especially people who have lost someone. That's too nice a way of putting it: people who have had someone taken. (Assenting sounds from group members). But the night I told my story and dumped all of that, and had the acceptance afterwards, was... forgiveness is the wrong word but, I just got a really great sense of peace after that... I sure wasn't expecting what I got. So, I just wanted everyone to know. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.*

*Sandra: Oh, this is hard. I don't like this part. ...I feel like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. She's at Oz, she's seen the Wizard, got the deal done, and she's clicking her heals, but she's kind of sad to go back. And I want to take the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion and you guys with me. (Group laughs.) And I can't. Now that movie is going to be forever changed for me, and it has a restorative justice influence now... I want to be done, and this is a good thing, but oh, I'm going to miss all this... Thank you all.*

*Connell: I got a whole lot more than I expected. I expected to come share my story...but then I got this great understanding of myself and what made me come to the point where I could take another person's life.*

Tim: *I know that part of my courage in being able to...have conversations not only with my mother and my brother and others, comes out of the courage from the surviving stories and knowing that it's okay to go back and talk and to struggle and to go into those spots because people can come out of it and beautiful things can come out of it.*

### **April 2, 2002 - Follow-up Session** **Looking Back and Looking Ahead**

Group members meet for one last time to discuss how far they've come together and what they hope to achieve in light of this experience. Agenda questions are posted for the evening's discussion:

- How have you been impacted by this?
- Where do you go from here?
- How can we make this better?

As participants share events from their lives since the last meeting in November, getting through the holidays and birthdays—some of the most painful markers in the lives of survivors—is a recurring theme.

Sandra: *Things have been pretty quiet. But I did have another Christmas and another New Year and another birthday. John's birthday is the 11th of March. He would have been 27 this year. And that day was really, really tough...*

*It gets easier every year, but the loss is still huge. [My son] and I are weaving our lives without John and we're doing a pretty good job. But, I don't think there will ever be a time when it doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt as bad and certainly not as severely as it did in the beginning. But it's an ache that I don't expect that we'll be able to live without.*

Sherrie went to Arizona after Christmas. *Every holiday is tough because Mom just isn't there. Of course, in March was another birthday and her and I shared a birthday so that makes it doubly hard. This year my sister did call me on my birthday, though. Last year she said I don't think we'll celebrate it. It'd just be too difficult. But this year she did.*

Jack: *We got through another January 14. The cab drivers each year have had a session down at the murder site. Each year we think, well this year they'll forget about it. Because you know there's probably only two drivers who were even in the company when Mitch got murdered. But they still show up and they get all these candles going and it makes us feel good that they still remember. As you walk out of the door of the cab office, Mitch's picture's up there to remind everybody to be cautious. They've had one more driver shot since Mitch, but he didn't get killed. Mitch's birthday is March 16—we get that behind us. Those are the days that we don't look forward to.*

Next, a facilitator asks the group to respond to the first question: How would you say this experience has impacted you?

Renee: *I'm just personally touched by everybody's story. What an honor to be here. I don't know that I shared a lot, but I certainly learned a lot personally. And it's just been a great experience. I mean, words can't explain it.*

Sherrie summarizes what she feels she gotten out of the project (in spite of some residual bad feeling toward the offender in her case), the ways she has come to respect the offenders in the project, and her concern that these kinds of programs not get cut for lack of funding:

*When I came to this I had no idea what I was getting into. None whatsoever. I had the biggest raw spot in my heart that just was bad. I came and the longer I was here the more I liked all you guys. And I thought, you know, people do make bad choices. That doesn't mean that people are bad all the way through which was how I felt...but I know that that=s not true and I've grown a lot, and listening to other people=s stories has just really helped me. I don=t feel like I=m the only one. I can=t say I miss Mom any less, because I miss her every single day. But I have a much better understanding of things and of myself, I think, too. And it gave me a basis to compare to other things, to have some kind of a level playing ground that, it wasn't just everything off the wall, you know, this hurt and this anger. It kind of leveled me. For that I'll be forever grateful.*

*I thought of you guys oh so often just in the last four months. The whole bunch, everybody. I heard on TV that they were thinking of cutting the restorative justice program. And I just went (puts her hand to her heart in gesture of shock), don=t do that. It just struck me like, you can=t do that. I do think it=s a good program. I know it=s done a lot in grounding me....*

*Some of the anger is still there. And the guy that killed mom as far as I know has never taken responsibility for it. I would feel better if I knew that he had. But just knowing you guys, and knowing, you=re great guys. And I questioned that a lot of times. 'How can I sit and talk to these guys?' And I=d think, 'Gee they=re nice guys.' Y=know, and I guess, sure you've all made bad choices. But you've all owned up to what you've done. And there=s so much more good in you than bad that, can=t help but like you. But anyway, it=s been good for me. It=s done me a lot of good.*

Jack, too, in spite of his previous skepticism, has come to think highly of the project and the offenders who participated in it. He also talks about his response when other victim/survivors challenge him for his participation in the Shakopee and Lino Lakes restorative justice projects.

*I think about you guys and the whole of the group very, very, very regularly on the premise that I do a lot of speaking at a lot of places, mostly prisons. And I keep using you as shining examples of the fact that there was a moment in your life when you made a bad choice. But now you=re making good choices. I have repeated this to dozens of people including a few legislators, that I feel that these types of programs have an incredible success rate.*

*I look at you guys and I just honestly, sincerely in my heart can=t imagine any of you making a choice to end up back in here, cause I don=t think you will. If that makes for a successful program, god bless, I hope the programs continue forever and ever and ever amen. End of sermon. (Makes the sign of the cross as group laughs.)*

*Rick: This program has impacted my life in such strong ways. Every day I=m aware of the changes that are still taking place. Having a purpose in life is like a real goal, but it=s kind of elusive, it=s not something that I can really nail down, but being part of something big and powerful and meaningful like this is kind of like a little bit of redemption for the waste that my life had been. I notice it in just daily interactions with people around here, the little subtle changes that have occurred because of this. My understanding of people and how people*

*interact with people and how people should treat other people. It=s just more what life is supposed to be. I=ve met some people here that I=m going to remember for my entire life. Good people, just incredible. I=m very grateful for it.*

*Frank: For me, inner peace. I don=t know where it came from. I know it was from this group. I was in treatment before and shared my story. I thought I was getting it, I wasn=t though. That peace you all gave me...*

*Curt: Part of this group for me was about reconciliation. Most of my life I felt like there=s society and then I was off here somewhere. Whether it was because of my own choices or because of circumstances I was born into or whatever reason I gave it at different points in my life. But for the first time in my life I really feel like I=m a part of everything. And while that gives me a sense of peace also, it makes harder to be here...*

*Sandra: I really didn=t have very many expectations when we started. I really didn=t have any at all. I know I told you that I expected you guys to be devils incarnate, but you weren=t. And uh, what=s happened over and over since John=s death is my faith in basic good and humanity is more and more restored. And coming here was another piece of that.*

*After getting to know you guys and knowing that you=re real human beings that deserve to breathe and eat and sleep and enjoy life and you made a bad choice or a series of them, whatever it was. Who hasn=t? It=s just restored my faith in how good really does conquer evil. Maybe it=s comic book kind of talk, but it=s okay. And I look around and I=m just amazed at the difficulties that all of you have faced and then the strength that you have taken upon yourself or created for yourself or whatever it is that makes it work. And that makes you want to be better and different.*

*I think the whole idea of restorative justice is a really good one. It=s extremely misunderstood. And I don=t know what to do about that but have to do something about it. And there=s so many people involved in crime victim either services or as a consumer, if you will, that really think that this is a bad thing. That this is giving bad people an easy way out. All kinds of really upside down things from what this actually is about. And I really feel privileged to be a part of it. I really am defensive about it.*

*I=m in groups of crime victims, homicide survivors and people who were desperately hurt by the act of another. They immediately, if they don=t know what this is about, and very few people really, do, think about it as sleeping with the enemy. Like you=re selling yourself short. Y=know, “How dare you do that to John=s memory?” One person did say that to me, and I was just like, ‘Wait a minute. What do you think I’ve done to John=s memory?’ ‘Well, they=re going to get good time, and they=re going to...’ I said, ‘You know what? It=s not about that.’ For me it was about putting the human element in it.*

*I can think about John=s murderers now as human beings, and perhaps they had a childhood like Connell=s. Who knows? But I certainly felt compassion for what Connell lived through, and all of the different stories, just using that one as an example. Then it makes more sense, it=s more understandable. And I think anything you do in life, if you have greater understanding or some kind of empathy for where the other person=s coming from, then things can be a lot less difficult.*

*I’ve certainly been around a lot of people who are extremely angry and they wear their anger like a right because of what=s happened to their loved one and what it=s done to their*

life, and I'm really saddened by that. And I think if they would allow themselves to see this, become a part of process like this, that maybe they could tap that, and get back to the compassion, the kind of loving people that we're supposed to be. I just really think for me there's been restoration. It's what it's about right? But it just is weird that it fits so good in the puzzle; it's not really a puzzle anymore.

If somebody else can be affected in a good way by what we've lived through, then that's a good thing. If you need me to tell anybody, I'll tell them. 'Don't take it away. No.'

A facilitator initiates a second circle pass with the question: As a result of the impact of this experience, where do we go from here? This is framed as a 'call to action.' Also, requests input from group members on they could do this better or make it a better experience for participants.

Sandra: It really feels like this is the right way to go. I think it can far more valuable impact than just a plain old incarceration...I think if we can treat everybody with the respect that they deserve, that we're going to do a lot better job of lowering recidivism...if there's one less John and one less Sandra, then I'm going to do whatever it takes to make sure that can happen. That part has been a tug at me since John's death. And I've found a lot of different ways to maybe help or make a difference. Even just convincing people that I know that RJ is a good thing, that it's not a bad thing, it's not a con. There's all kinds of really bad information.

So educating people about RJ has become a big thing that I do, and that I'm happy to do. And I really do think that we should be doing it with first time offenders and kids and have them face the actual consequences. Everywhere, all the time, no questions asked, it should happen right now, real fast, not three months later like some darn court date when they've lived two more lifetimes by then. The impact is so watered down and then they get an attorney that tells them to just dummy up. And that whole process is really, I think it negates any kind of positive [outcome]. So anything that I can do or be a part of that can have a positive impact on all that is really good. It feels good and it feels right and I can do in honor of John and that's easy and nice to be able to do.

I don't know how you screened us all...but whatever you did it was right. We each came from different places but it was a really nice variety of backgrounds and kinds of people and ages, and everything. I don't think I have any >do-something-betters.=

Renee: Okay, >Where do I go from here?' Well, I'm just going to continue working in my program in criminal justice intervention and any education to people about Restorative Justice, about violence in the home, anything. Keep serving on committees, keep getting the word out, telling people, I'll just do what I can. I don't know how we could make it better, the people were great, the time limit was great, the snowstorms probably not so great. So that's my input on that.

Sherrie: Well from my own personal situation, what would I do next? I would like more information. But I don't think I'm going to get it. So I think that I'm going to have to just go on with my life and there's nowhere else to go, because the only place I could get the information is from his family and I'm sure they're not going to be forthcoming with any kind of information whatsoever.

As far as this program, I hope that they never, ever stop it, because I know it has, I have grown in so many ways in this program, and I've enjoyed each and every one of you so much.

*Everybody has given something to this group. If anyone had told me when I came here that I would get as much out of it as I did, I would have probably thought they were talking off the wall. But anything I can do to help this program, I am more than happy to make myself available. I thought was this group has done, I don't know how it could have been done much better.*

*Jack: You all know that I went from being an adversary of this type of program to a total advocate. And it took the whole of two of these programs to accomplish that. Over the years, in addition to the people in this room and as a result of Mitchell getting murdered, I met some pretty incredible people... I'm using this group as a model...because I think this works so well here. ...If there's good that comes out of bad, Mitchell getting murdered got me to a bunch of good people, and this room is full of the best.*

*Rick: [Someone here] told me just moments ago to continue to nurture the good things in me, and I'm going to make every attempt to continue to do that, and not let the environment I live in damage that. One of the things that I strongly believe in is acknowledgement of consequences. The majority of people here have no idea what that is. I don't believe it's too late at any age to learn. This program I think has been as powerful and effective as it has, not so much by plan as by destiny. I believe there's so much good in all of us that coming together as we have is what made it work. And I believe that it's work again given the opportunity...I'll always tell people that this is the type of program that they need to be involved in, and I hope it continues.*

*Frank: Where I go from here...I'd love to be able to put all of what I've done behind me. I know I'm going to go and share it...I plan to go on and work with restorative justice if I can.*

*Curt: I've been so inspired by all of you and the stories that I heard. I think coming into this, one of my hopes was that I could get past my past and be able to let it go and forgive myself and maybe not forget about it, but just move on. The night that I told my story, after that I never wanted to tell it again...Curt asked the people he confides in, Is there a point where it's okay to not talk about it or when it's none of anyone's business...and when there's no more healing left to do or something like that? He tells of going to speak with group of kids where he was supposed to talk about his offense, why he was there, what he had learned about being in prison. I didn't want to be there, didn't want to talk, didn't want to tell my story, didn't want to dig anything up again. But when I always hold onto is, if you guys can keep going on and trying to do some good out of what you've been through, then it's the least I can do. So the thought of putting it behind me and getting over it is pretty damn selfish actually.*

Jack suggests the group get together again in 3 more months as a graduation party for Frank near the time of his release date in August.

*Frank: I'd love that. I would love to see you all again. You all have been such a big part of my life.*

Renee asks about how Frank thinks he's going to deal with going back home to his small town. *I'm sure you're going to get some, maybe, nasty looks. How do you think you're going to deal with that and make it better for everyone involved?*



Frank: *I've actually been dealing with that right now. Even with the people coming to visit me that are my friends, I've always got that in the back of my mind, wondering, what is it [they=re] really thinking, y=know? I wake up every day and I killed someone...I know that I got to go and do what I need to do for me and do the best I can to give back and be there for my daughter. I can=t really worry about, I=m not going to be able to make everybody happy...I want everybody to like me, but I've got to accept that not everybody=s going to.*

*One of the biggest things for me is getting past that always wondering what does this person think of me...I still have a lot of shame and guilt and hatred toward myself...I can go through the day and look back and say, I haven=t hurt anybody today. And if I can do that, hopefully I can finally get back to where I know I=m alright with myself. I know that I=m a totally different person, for the better, but it=s still hard because I got friends that are good people that might not like my change. The bad influences, I=m not as worried about.*

For the closing circle pass, the question offered is, "What are our hopes for ourselves and others?"

Frank: *Understanding*

Renee: *I've been empowered to, in my personal life, to stand up for what I believe in and walk the talk. I believe I was empowered by the strengths of each and every one of you, so if you go out and do your part, I'll do mine.*

Sherrie: *Mine is self-growth and understanding...*

Jack: *I have always felt that tomorrow will be better. Tomorrow will be better.*

Bunny Telke: *I will carry all of the stories that were told in this group when I retire. And I really hope that we can do more, that facilities can do more for the guys. If I ever get a lot of money, I'll fund this.*

Rick: *Not taking anything for granted anymore; it=s all too precious.*

When the circle is completed, group members mingle in small clusters talking until their time together is up. Before leaving, participants are encouraged to take a couple of the plates with values written them on home with them as mementos of the program.

## KEY THEMES EMERGING FROM THE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE DIALOGUE

A number of key themes emerged from close examination of the recorded data gathered over the length of the project. These will be grouped here under four main headings:

1. Characteristics: Who were these people and what were they like? What kind of person chooses to be part of such a dialogue?
2. Commonalities: Perhaps surprisingly, group members found they shared very important experiences, feelings and made similar kinds of choices in their lives.
3. Conflicts: As part of the dialogue, participants grappled with strong internal conflicts related to meeting with the “other” who represented the one harmed or responsible for committing great harm.
4. Culture: Over time, a unique culture was created among group members that enabled them to share extraordinary stories of pain and healing. Key aspects of that culture will be described here.

### Characteristics

Values and Motivation. Who were the participants, what kind of people were they, and what motivated them to participate in such a confrontation? Many victims interested in restorative justice face opposition from family members, colleagues and other victim support group members who do not understand why anyone would wish to meet with a murderer. Some might argue that anger, hatred, or the desire for vengeance would be more appropriate under the circumstances. Indeed, these feelings are not foreign to victim/survivors, but in this case, an entirely different set of values informed their motivation to be part of a restorative justice project.

*I've certainly been around a lot of people who are extremely angry and they wear their anger like a right because of what=s happened to their loved one and what it=s done to their life, and I=m really saddened by that. And I think if they would allow themselves to see this, become a part of process like this, that maybe they could tap that, and get back to the compassion, the kind of loving people that we=re supposed to be. –Sandra*

*Out of this murder has come this change in my life that I never expected to happen. I think it's not a destructive change, it's a constructive change...Anger is a very costly emotion...I don't choose to be angry...When I'm talking to [offenders], I keep remembering the fact that at one moment in time they sat in somebody's arms and they only fit from here to here (gestures from his hand to his elbow) and they were not evil rotten people. –Jack*

*I refuse to let what happened put me in a state that I can't live my life...My mother would say, Just because I'm not here, you still have your life to live. Live it. I can just hear Mom saying, Live it! It's yours, I gave you that life to live, now you live it. –Sherrie*

CVORJ victim/survivor and community participants spoke of their determination, in spite of great pain and loss, to make positive choices in their lives, to focus on what gave their lives meaning, and to live in honor of the loved ones who suffered and were killed in crimes of violence. They had come to recognize the destructive power of negative emotions like hatred,

bitterness and anger, and refused to let them dominate their lives. Their main aim was to prevent further harm by speaking with offenders, impressing upon them the enormous damage inflicted by violent crime, and encourage them to redirect their lives to better ends.

*Sandra speaks of wanting “to help other people, because I’m so grateful it was available to me. It was so important to me to be able to see some people that could walk and talk after this, and that they walked through it, they could do it. It would be way hard work and it was and it is, but that I could do it and I could do it in honor of John...and if there’s any way John can help somebody else live a more peaceful life, that’s what I’d like to have happen.”*

*They said no man would ever walk on the moon and of course he did, so...ending violence is within our reach and I want to be a part of that. –Renee*

*My motivation when I go to the prisons and talk is to try to convince just one person to get out and not to re-offend, and therefore not to put another family through what we went through. –Jack*

Accountability and Reform. Offenders, for their part, spoke of wanting to do what they could to repair the harm they had caused by being willing to talk with victims and community members, answer questions they might have, and show themselves willing to accept full responsibility for their past actions. They also expressed anxiety around the prospect of meeting with people from the “outside” who represented society as a whole. Most of the inmates were “lifers” who had been incarcerated as young men. They were used to relating with prison staff and other inmates, but not ordinary citizens, let alone victims of crimes similar to their own. This project would test their readiness, not only to answer difficult questions, but also for re-entry into society as changed men.

*My hope was just that I could do something, maybe share something of myself that could help other people, especially people who have lost someone. –Curt*

*Like I said, prison has helped me. But when I first got here, prison could have been my worst enemy. Because I could have came here, I received 48 months, do 32. I could have did that time without facing one thing I did. More punishment would have been making me go out to face the community. Doing this is the hardest thing. It’s the first time I faced anybody besides other criminals, DOC workers or family, and took ownership and accountability for what I’ve done. –Frank*

*I’m extremely sorry for what I’ve done. My entire life has been wrong. And I want to do things different. Programs like this are a means of learning to. –Rick*

*I saw a documentary years ago of animals that have been caged up too long in these roadside shows... and they would rescue them and take them to a preserve and actually open the gate and... you would think that they would just be charging out the door, but they would very slowly go up to the door and look out, and come back. Because it was a comfort zone. And I remember crying when I was watching that because it just hit me, it was like, man that’s what it’s going to be like walking out of here. And that’s kind of what I feel. But I don’t feel as afraid as I used to. I feel much more prepared. And I want to thank you guys for that. –Curt*

## **Commonalities**

Pain, Loss and Belonging. In spite of the obvious differences that one would expect to find between victims and offenders of violent crime, it became clear over the course of the dialogue sessions, that the participants actually shared important aspects of their experience in common. Being the victim or perpetrator of a violent act changes you; it sets you apart from ordinary society. Victims may find it very difficult to recover a sense of security and belonging. Offenders feel they are marked for life. For all concerned, life after such an irrevocable act is never the same.

*I know that there's a part of me that, from the moment that he got killed until this moment, that is missing. –Jack*

*[The victim of my crime] was a good man, a firefighter. He might have saved a life of someone else that...I stopped it. It's like taking an arm, because, even though I didn't know [him], when I killed him, I lost part of myself. The part of myself that could say, I've never killed somebody. –Frank*

*My mom was the nicest person. I used to be like her. They've stolen that away from me. It steals something from the center of you. That person is gone. You're someone else. –Sherrie*

At one of the first meetings, however, Sherrie comments on *...how much I like everybody. I feel like I belong here. I had to do something that would make me move forward and I think this is going to be really very good for me.*

An offender concurs, saying, *I feel really safe here. I feel really welcome here, which is beyond what I would have ever imagined. –Rick*

And after hearing both an offender and a fellow survivor of homicide tell their stories, Sherrie and Sandra remark on the pain common to them all:

*I kind of digested it all and I certainly admire both of you, really, for being able to tell your stories. And I can feel everything that you're feeling, the hurt on both sides. I know exactly where you're coming from. –Sherrie*

*A couple things have come to me especially after Curt shared his story [of childhood abuse]. That we're all hurting, and we're hurting because of what's been done to us by others. –Sandra*

The Search for Why? Living through the aftermath of violent crime, both victims and offenders were compelled to search for the reasons behind the crime, essentially asking, “Why would anyone / I do this terrible thing?”

*I suspect too, that the why part of it, like your mom wanted to know, “Why?” That's a really common place to go with this kind of event. But I would imagine for you guys [addressing offenders] the why is there almost as big. It's like, Why could this happen? –Sandra*

*I'll never forgive him for what he did... I would feel better if I knew why he did it, and if he would own up to it. I think that's what hurts me the worst is that he won't own his crime.*

–Sherrie

*...The question that you asked was, 'What happened in a person's life to make them do something like that?' And I did a lot of searching trying to find out, what... 'cause I intended to kill the person that I killed. I hunted him down and I killed him. I kept asking myself over and over, what tragic thing happened in my life that made me do this? Where did a eighteen-year-old get the decision that I was going to kill somebody? –Connell*

**Surviving Abuse.** Several victim/survivors and offenders alike cited incidences of abuse—alcohol & drug use, domestic violence and sexual abuse—in childhood and marriage, and had subsequently established sobriety or independence from abusers. Familiarity with the issues surrounding recovery turned out to be an elemental aspect of understanding some of the underlying causes of crime and relating to one another as struggling human beings.

*Like a lot of you folks here, I grew up with an alcoholic father. –Renee*

*My parents and family are all alcoholics. I'm the youngest of six. –Frank*

*Last week hearing Curt's story really opened a lot of doors for me too, because, when you're sexually assaulted...that's probably the worst turmoil that I've ever felt in my whole life, and I want to say that to you Curt...that I understand. –Bonnie*

### **Conflict**

**Controversy.** Victims and offenders contended with powerful inner conflicts. Victims were at times accused of being disloyal to the loved one who was killed by meeting with murderers. Jack relates that, *People in my group say to me, when you do that, you're a traitor to us all because you're out there talking to people like you guys (referring to the offenders in the room). Well I think it's very important to talk to people like you guys, cause you are not nothing people, you are persons, you are people with a heart and a soul and emotions and a life, and we do this because we hope it helps your life get better than it is now.*

As a community member, Renee also finds it difficult to talk to people about her experience with the project. *People [ask] oh, how's your group going? I've never really known how to talk [about it], oh, I'll just say, "Oh great," or "Good." But it's just like, wanting to pour out, like... you wouldn't believe this or now I understand this or I feel compassion for offenders or just all kinds of things...but you don't really share with your co-workers or your family, they just think I'm crazy. Why would you go to a prison? Why? (Makes a disgusted face.) Just like that. Or, Why would you sit and listen to victims? I mean people don't understand...even people at my work. So, that's what I'm having a hard time with.*

Sandra describes her own experience with survivors who misunderstand her commitment to restorative dialogue. *I'm in groups of crime victims, homicide survivors and people who were desperately hurt by the act of another. They immediately, if they don't know what this is about, and very few people really, do, think about it as sleeping with the enemy. Like you're selling yourself short. Y=know, "How dare you do that to John=s memory?" One person did say that to me, and I was just like, 'Wait a minute. What do you think I've done to John=s memory?'*

*'Well, they=re going to get good time, and they=re going to...' I said, 'You know what? It=s not about that.' For me it was about putting the human element in it.*

**Recovery.** Another form of internal conflict experienced in the group centers on figuring out how to move forward in life. Offenders recognize that part of recovery is self-acceptance and moving forward in their lives, yet they contend with the question, "When can I say I've done my time and put this behind me?"

*Every time I get on the verge of forgiving myself, I feel like I'm betraying [the victim of my crime]. I'm so afraid that if I forgive myself, that I'm going to forget him. And I know I won't but it's just, I don't want to. –Frank*

*A question that has gone through my mind in the last several years, and more this week is--and more for myself, but...with the guys here--when is enough, enough? When you've done your time, and you're truly sorry for something you've done. How do you know that it's over? –Bonnie*

*With most things in life, when you do a wrong, there's some way you can right it. There's some way you can make amends. But I know there's nothing I can do. I can't give him back to his family, give him back his life. I just feel like no matter what I ever do in life, there's always that weighing the scales down. There's nothing I can ever do. –Curt*

*Yet victim participants caution offenders against despair and giving up. As long as you don't forgive yourself, you always have that as a basis that you can't go on, and you can't go on until you do forgive yourself. So, you're going to have to go on, you're going to have to forgive yourself so you can be whole again. –Sherrie*

*And that doesn't mean approving. (Others concur) All you do is acknowledge the horror of it and all the stuff that it means, but allow yourself to be human enough to have made that horrendous mistake, but then not to make it again. –Sandra*

This exchange illustrates the environment of mutual support and encouragement that developed among participants over time, which the next section attempts to describe more fully.

## **Culture**

Meeting weekly for three months, sharing the details of horrendous violent crimes, and listening to others tell their stories, participants steadily built among themselves trust, rapport and the kind of environment more akin to a support group than a volatile confrontation. This enabled them to undertake some very important work together which contributed to a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment by project's end.

Elements of this culture included:

- The power of storytelling, through which participants could gain understanding of one another's experience and basic humanity.
- A process that allowed them to speak and live in honor of the victims and loved ones who were killed.
- The opportunity to engage in respectful dialogue around tough questions of forgiveness, accountability, readiness for re-entering society or meeting with their actual victims / offenders.

- Mutual support and encouragement—a sense of belonging, acceptance and empathy that allowed members to acknowledge that they needed one another in order to heal, and to work toward that healing, together.

### The Power of Storytelling.

*It really moved me to know, because when you guys are hearing our story and what we feel as victims, that moved me to know what you feel like and what you would have to...I mean it was something that I never thought I'd feel. For me to even think that I should be worried about your feelings. –Rick*

*I really want to thank you for your story last week (to Sandra) Being able to hear yours first, and hearing how well you have come out of that gave me a lot of the strength that it took to be able to say what I said. –Curt*

*I thank you for sharing your story. It helps me to continue. I was sitting over here just thinking of the impact that I did, committing my crime onto a family...I've never seen the pictures and things...the pictures have kind of stunned me. These are people here. –Connell*

*After talking here, I felt so much better. I woke up and thought, 'It's such a beautiful day.' I used to feel that way every day. Maybe it's coming back. –Sherrie*

*You guys are way more mature, and human, than I expected. I really did think about horns and tails. I thought only devils could murder. Really, I did... But you know, you're just regular people. And some really shitty stuff happened to you that shouldn't have. No way. You didn't deserve that. And it makes it way more easy for me to understand. I imagine that most of John's murderers had a life like yours. Just from their criminal histories. They were doing that stuff way young, all the way up. And it gives me a, more compassion for them as human beings, and I think that's a necessary thing. –Sandra*

### Honoring the Victims.

Remembering her mother, Sherrie tells the group, *I choose to remember her for who she was and what a great lady she was and all the things she taught me, and try to live my life the way she'd want me to. She wouldn't want me to grovel and be unhappy. She'd say, that's enough now, get up and get going, have fun, live your life. It was given to you. She gave me my life.*

Frank reads from a letter to his deceased victim in which he writes, *I ask you for strength, forgiveness and to be with me in doing some good. I want to move on, I want to forgive myself so I can heal myself and continue on my second life. Promise I will do all I can to give back to the community and your family. I pray for them. I will never forget how I've hurt them. I hope that you approve of my plans. I will do my best to live for both of us.*

Sandra advises offenders to honor victims in a way that is sensitive to the needs of those who remain. *Just be the best guy you can be because of him. And do it in his honor. His family doesn't ever have to know you're doing that, but that's a really cool thing. That will feel better for you, and it will just work right. It'll do what you need it to do for you and for them.*

### Respectful Dialogue on Tough Questions.

Participants challenge offenders about their plans for successful re-entry into the community.

Sandra (addressing Connell): *If you go back to North Minneapolis is it going to be hard to say no to the hundred dollars for 10 minutes work?*

Renee: *Yeah.*

Sandra: *And the gangs and all that stuff. There's still going to be people around that know you.*

Connell: *At this point they know that I don't do that no more. I made that decision here.*

Frank tells of protecting a woman from her abusive husband and Sherrie challenges him, asking what he would do if this guy comes after him to retaliate.

Jack: *The trouble is when payback comes, and you win, you lose.*

Bonnie: *You can't fight violence with violence.*

Frank: *I don't think if he was to come do something now, after doing this, I wouldn't fight back.*

Sherrie: *What would you do? Would you sit there and let him beat her up?*

Frank: *No.*

Sherrie (persistent): *What would you do then? If you aren't going to fight back, what are you going to do?*

Frank: *Call the cops. That's the only option I would have. But I wouldn't beat him up, 'cause then I'll be coming back here.*

Addressing a very sensitive topic, participants talk over the prospect of a meeting with the actual offender or victim in their own case.

Jack (responding to Rick): *You asked a good question, would I meet with my two murderers? The younger one maybe yeah, because he was really personally destroyed. The older one now he didn't give two hoots in hell.*

Sherrie: *Some day I'm going to go talk to him. And I don't want to yell at him. I don't want to say mean things to him. I want to sit down and talk to him and say, How could you do this? How could you do this to my mom? She didn't have anything like that coming. She never bothered a soul. She was the sweetest person in the world. I don't know how he managed to do it.*

Frank: *I honestly, if I was given the option to face [my victims]'s family, I think I'd want to do it even if they were going to yell at me, because I'd think about my sentencing date and how they did tell me how they felt, but I didn't look them in the eye. And I would give a lot to go back to that day, to know what I know now, and to be able to give them that respect, look at them when they talk to me, and to look at the pictures of [the victim] that they had there. And I didn't and I couldn't on that day. But if I could have that chance to go back, even if they were still going to tell me the same things they told me that day, which nobody like to hear, it would give me that little more peace of mind to know that they know I heard them. Even though I heard them, they don't know that because I didn't look in their eyes.*

*Being involved in this gave me another hope...that there is, like your mom said (to Sherrie), there is good in everybody. And I don't know if I can believe that all of John's murderers*



*could be one of you guys. But I think some of them could. And it would be really peaceful for me if I knew that they could change like you guys are talking about. –Sandra*

### Mutual Support and Encouragement.

Victim participants respond to Sherrie's distress around not hearing anything from the offender's family, no signs of remorse or concern. They offer reassurance, put things in perspective, provide a kind of clarifying reality check around what one can expect under these kinds of circumstances: the kind of input only another survivor might know how to offer. *Our offender didn't apologize, (either),* Jack relates. He sat through many trials and never saw one family approach another, as Sherrie wishes they had, to apologize for what happened. *It's just too fresh, too new.*

Sandra responds to an offender's story of childhood abuse: *That never should have happened to you. Never. It's not right. You didn't deserve it. It's not good. And it's created a bitterness and anger in you that's justified, but then now you have the opportunity to...try and...get away from that and turn it around.*

Offenders recognize and support progress in one another: *I seen your growth, I heard your story, I heard it today in depth, and it was just moving the way that you've changed and to see the expressions on your face. I used to think you was just blank. And I've seen a lot of expressions lately, I always tell you how I see you changing, and I try to steal some of the credit, but [group laughs] it's pretty nice. I hope everything go good for you when you go up for parole and, if not, I'll still be here to make you laugh. Good job, Rick. –Connell*

Jack encourages offenders by sharing the lessons he has learned in life: *If you try to do good to people, they'll try to do good for you. If you take a first step, the second step is easier. And that's what hope is about and you people all (have) taken these steps and I think it's wonderful. And I agree with you, I wish you were out. But you aren't. But don't lose hope. Don't be angry. Don't hate. Anger and hate are monumentally expensive emotions. They eat you alive. It's just I find a whole lot easier to be happy, than to be sad. And if you determine to do that, life goes better.*

Sherrie describes how being part of the group has been helpful to her: *I've found that I'm a lot less angry since I've been coming to this group than I was when I first came. And I think it isn't so much what anyone has said or done, but it's given me a chance to look within myself and remember how I'm supposed to face things. I've never been one to skirt around things. If I have a problem, I put it right there and I face it and I work on it. And this was one problem I didn't know how to work on... It's given me a chance to come to terms with some of this stuff that I didn't know how to face.*

Sandra expresses her confidence in the offenders' ability to turn their lives around: *I'm hopeful that every one of you can get out and be good people. As far as being accepted, I think the biggest thing is if you accept yourself. And you're comfy with you, and you're pretty okay with who you are. You did a really rotten thing. You did way bad thing. But that was [Curt] a while ago. This Curt isn't going to do that. This Curt is bigger and better than that.*

*What have I learned or gotten out of this group? It's kind of like, you're speechless. It's so overwhelming, I'm very honored to be a part of this group and... to learn about humanity,*

*spiritually, to see you guys grow, to make me stronger so I can continue with my own work that I enjoy...It's just been a great process. –Renee*

## **PARTICIPANT SURVEYS**

Three versions of the survey were used, one for victim participants, one for citizens or community members, and one for inmates. Responses to the statements were recorded on a four-point Likert Scale that offered the following optional responses: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree and Strongly Agree. In addition, each survey included open-ended questions that allowed the participants to express themselves in their own words. These questions addressed issues such as concepts of justice, expectations for the project, hopes and fears, and safety. Surveys were administered prior to and just after completion of participation in the project (see Appendix for copies of preliminary surveys).

Four sets of victim surveys, four sets of offender surveys and one set of citizen surveys were completed (i.e., both the preliminary and follow-up surveys). Also, participants in some instances did not respond to each question on the surveys. This limited number of responses makes it difficult to generalize or draw conclusions about other participants in similar projects. Nevertheless, these participants offered input worth noting with regard to how this process impacted them.

### **Initial Survey Responses**

Victims' open-ended responses on pre-project surveys reflect the hope that their stories might have a positive impact on offenders as well as assist them in their own healing journey. Asked about their expectations for the program, one victim wrote, "I would hope that the offenders sincerely comprehend the horror they put victims through and truly determine not to re-offend." Another victim, asked about what she hopes to gain from discussing her experiences with other participants, responded, "Telling of my personal experiences is a way of healing for me. I hope to experience a more powerful acceptance of where I am today and achieve more strength to move on to another stage of my own healing and an acceptance." The citizen participant shared an interest in learning more about violent crime and effective means of working with offenders. She wrote, "I want to gain a better understanding of offenders of violent crimes. To come up with ways to better rehabilitate and hold offenders accountable."

Offenders' responses to the pre-project survey reflect concern for the needs of victims, willingness to hear their stories and offer support, openness to learning from the experience, and hope for healing. Some were concerned about feeling judged, expressed remorse for their actions, and hoped for an opportunity to be of some help to a victim of violent crime. Asked

about his hopes and fears for the program, one inmate wrote, “My hope is that I give back for my crimes (and) use this to maybe save somebody else. My fear is that I get rejected.” Another offered this response, “I hope I can aid someone else in their healing process, to maybe let go of their anger and forgive their perpetrator. It’s the next best thing to speaking to my victim’s family. I also hope to gain some insight into how my victim’s family must be feeling—what they’ve had to go through over the years.”

## PRE-AND POST-PROJECT SURVEYS COMPARED

### Positive Changes in Attitude

#### Citizen/Victims Trust Offender Motivation

Victim survey responses indicate a notable change of attitude in a number of areas. Pre-project surveys indicate some doubts about offender participation, suspecting it might be motivated by a desire to look good for their parole hearings. After meeting with the offenders for twelve weeks, however, not one victim held this belief about the offenders involved in this project.

Table 1. OFFENDERS JUST WANT TO LOOK GOOD FOR PAROLE HEARING

VICTIMS/ CITIZEN N=5	STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	0	80%	20%
AFTER PROJECT	60%	40%	0

#### Empathy for Offenders

Similarly, before this project, victims seem ambivalent about the statement that the wounds and healing of offenders should be seen as important in the justice process. Only two agree and one abstains from responding. Afterwards, the same statement received a positive response from each victim, indicating greater empathy for offenders and perhaps a greater openness to restorative responses to crime.

Table 2. THE WOUNDS AND HEALING OF OFFENDERS ARE IMPORTANT

VICTIMS N=4	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	25%	50%	0
AFTER PROJECT	0	25%	75%

Offenders Held Accountable

Statements designed to measure perceptions of offender remorse and accountability are compared here. Before the project, victims and citizen felt that most offenders do not show remorse and are not held accountable for their actions. In post-project surveys, however, all agree that these offender participants did show remorse and accept responsibility for their crimes.

Table 3. OFFENDERS SEEM TO FEEL SORRY FOR WHAT THEY DID

VICTIMS/CITIZEN N=5	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	20%	80%
AFTER PROJECT	100%	0%

Table 4. OFFENDERS HELD ACCOUNTABLE

VICTIMS/CITIZEN N=5	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	20%	80%
AFTER PROJECT	100%	0%

Successful Surrogate Process

Prior to their participation in the project, victims did not necessarily expect that speaking with offenders unrelated to their case would help them to deal with their victimization. Post-project surveys, however, show movement in a positive direction with regard to the surrogate process. Victims in fact did find that speaking with offenders unrelated to their cases helped them to deal with their loss.

Table 5. SPEAKING WITH OFFENDERS UNRELATED TO MY CASE WILL HELP /HELPED ME DEAL WITH MY LOSS

VICTIMS N=4	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	25%	75%	0
AFTER PROJECT	0	50%	50%

Victim responses to a related question confirm that the surrogate process helped them to heal in some way.

Table 6. PROCESS WILL HELP / HELPED ME TO HEAL

VICTIMS N=4	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	25%	75%	0
AFTER PROJECT	0	50%	50%

## Positive Expectations Confirmed

### Offenders Well Screened/Prepared

Although offender surveys show little change in attitude, their responses indicate a confirmation or strengthening of those views that were initially consistent with project goals. This was likely due to the fact that offender participants were carefully screened for behavior and attitudes consistent with project goals

For example, before participating in the restorative justice project, most offenders *disagreed* with the statement “I do not expect much to come out of conversations with victims.” Post-project surveys show this expectation was justified and strengthened, as afterwards, every offender strongly disagreed with the statement “I did not get much out of the conversations with the victims in the seminar.”

Table 7. CONVERSATIONS WITH VICTIMS WON'T / DIDN'T ACCOMPLISH MUCH

OFFENDERS N=4	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	25%	75%
AFTER PROJECT	0%	100%

In the same way, offenders were unanimous in their response to the statement “I have no interest in doing anything to help the victim(s) of my crime or his/her family.” Both pre- and post-project surveys register offenders’ strong disagreement with this statement.

Table 8. OFFENDERS DON'T WANT TO DO ANYTHING FOR THEIR VICTIMS

OFFENDERS N=4	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	0%	100%
AFTER PROJECT	0%	100%

### Additional Offender Responses

Surveys indicate that every offender participated in the project with the hope of gaining a better understanding of what victims experience in the aftermath of crime. After the project, all agreed that the seminar helped them to do this. Offenders were also unanimous in their expectation that the program would help them to deal with the feelings they have regarding their crime, help themselves and victims to heal in some way, and allow them to play a greater role in the justice process. According to the follow-up surveys, these expectations were met in each case.

Additionally, offenders indicated that they felt comfortable discussing their crime with participants, and that doubts about positive outcomes for victim offender dialogues were lessened as a result of their participation in the project.

### Citizen/Victim Expectations Satisfied

Citizen and victim participants entered into the project motivated by a desire to educate offenders about the needs and interests of victims. Follow-up surveys show this expectation was met for each respondent.

Table 9. VICTIMS WANT / WERE ABLE TO EDUCATE OFFENDERS ABOUT THEIR NEEDS AND INTERESTS

VICTIMS/CITIZEN N=5	AGREE	DISAGREE
BEFORE PROJECT	100%	0%
AFTER PROJECT	100%	0%

### Additional Citizen / Victim Responses

Results indicate that citizen and victims were interested in playing a greater role in the justice process and that the project made this possible. All agreed that the wounds and healing of victims should be considered important in the justice process. Each felt they had gained a better understanding about crime and criminals, cared more about what happens to offenders once they go to prison, and unanimously agreed that the project had been a positive experience.



## RESPONSES TO OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

### Offenders

Offender responses reflect the consensus that participation in the project was a positive experience for them. In response to the question about what was gained from discussing his experience with other participants, one offender wrote, *Being accountable is part of my healing and I was able to move a little closer to self-forgiveness.* Another wrote that he had gained, *Acceptance. Opening up and pouring out my crime and the events which led up to it was...full of anxiety, to say the least. To reveal the worst of myself and still be accepted gave me a sense of peace I've longed for but didn't expect to find in this group. It was VERY healing for me.*

The question "Do you consider the program a success?" met with these responses from offenders: *Yes, I learned a lot and I've taken steps in my own recovery and I also had my eyes opened to a whole new world.*

*Yes. The realization of what goes on in this program is undeniable to anyone and an eye opener to inmates like myself.*

*Yes, although I wish it was longer.*

### Victims/Citizen

A few selections from victim responses to open-ended questions on the follow-up surveys reflect their largely positive assessment of project outcomes. One wrote, *I didn't have many expectations, but certainly found the RJ circle at Lino Lakes a very positive experience. It surprised me how quickly we "bonded" as a group. I never expected to genuinely care about an offender and/or their past and future. I appreciated meeting other victims and sharing their coping skills and grief experiences.* Another stated, *I feel I gained healing and understanding.*

Asked whether they consider the program a success, one victim offered his guarded praise. *I would guess it was most successful. I'm reasonably sure that the offenders would lean towards not re-offending when they are released and that this program will be important in their future making of choices.* Another responded with great assurance: *EXTREMELY successful. I have a better understanding and now some compassion for offenders. I believe that all 4 offenders in our circle were genuinely touched by our stories and those of one another. I believe we were able to display acceptance and respect and give them a mini-view of a caring society. Their desire to accept responsibility for past actions and create a positive future was very rewarding.*

The citizen participant had this to say: *I believe this circle program was a great success! The victims had a chance for continued healing. The offenders learned of how the victims really felt and the effect on others. Offenders were also able to take responsibility for the crime and to go beyond that by helping to make things right. The community members were able to get new ideas as to how to be able to work with members of the community and victims and offender.*

## CONCLUSION

As with any project of this nature, the richness of the experience, the intensity of emotion and the subtleties of human interactions can be difficult to convey. As much as possible, I have attempted to let the participants speak for themselves by means of recorded transcripts and written survey responses. In their own words, this project was a success, and on many levels. Participants were able to create a safe environment in which to talk about some of the most painful experiences of their lives. Victim/survivors allowed their assumptions about offenders to be challenged and, by the end of the project, were able to recognize the inmates' humanity—that they too had suffered a great deal and were working to make positive change in their lives. Offenders were able to share seldom-told stories of violence in a respectful setting that allowed them to experience acceptance and a newfound peace in relation to their offense. The community member learned more about the causes of violent crime and was encouraged to find and apply more restorative interventions in her work.

In reviewing the goals for the project, it seems that most, if not all, have been met. Facilitators succeeded in helping the group create a safe environment for dialogue, participants were free to withdraw from the project and did so as needed, survey responses indicate participants learned more about the causes of crime and were able to 'take a step toward healing.'

- Creation of a safe place/environment
- Voluntary process
- Help participants understand causes of crime
- Foster a sense of balance in the criminal justice system
- Provide an opportunity to 'take a step toward' healing
- The process is not about achieving a predetermined outcome: e.g., forgiveness

That the process helped foster a sense of balance in the criminal justice system is less clear, though among victims who found the legal process to be an alienating one, this project offered a

forum in which to express their pain, receive support and pursue their desire for a different way of achieving justice.

At this point, the evidence collected indicates the project has achieved its aims. Whether or not offenders have been truly reformed or participants find lasting satisfaction from their role in the project remains to be seen. Nevertheless, all who chose to join and stay with the group say they found the experience to be worth their while, and in some cases, an invaluable opportunity for education, growth and healing.

This report is respectfully submitted with the sincere hope that it may serve to honor and accurately reflect the values and experiences of those who took part in the project. It was a privilege to be in their company.

## **REFERENCE**

Helfgott, J., Lovell, M., & Laurence, C. (1998). Citizens, victims and offenders restoring justice: Final project report. Seattle, WA: Seattle University, Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice.

## **APPENDIX**

-- An Invitation

Victims of Crime and Community Members

are invited to participate in a project entitled

*"CITIZENS, VICTIMS & OFFENDERS RESTORING JUSTICE-*

The Center for Crime Victims Services and the Minnesota Department of Corrections invite victims of crime, family and friends of crime victims, and interested community members to participate in a new project that will be held at the Minnesota Correctional Facility - Lino Lakes (MCF-Lino Lakes) beginning in September, 2001. The project will consist of ten or eleven weekly sessions that will involve:

- reading material on restorative justice and discussing the material in group sessions that will include male offenders from the facility;
- the sharing of personal stories about the impact and aftermath of crime; and
- engaging in dialogue about offender accountability, restoring the lives of those harmed by crime, the role of the community, and ways in which justice may be made more meaningful for victims, offenders and the community.

The sessions may be of interest to victims of crime or family and friends of crime victims who wish to express their feelings, pain and experiences to offenders (not those involved in their crime/case) as part of the healing process; and/or to community members who are interested in victim impact, offender accountability and contributing to a discussion about new ways of doing justice. The sessions will be facilitated by experienced community representatives and victim advocates will attend each session as a resource for participants.

The sessions will be based on the concept of restorative justice, which has become one of the most significant developments in thinking about crime. In the words of Dr. Mark Umbreit, Director of the University of Minnesota Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking,

"Restorative justice is a victim-centered response to crime that provides opportunities for those most directly affected by crime - the victim, the offender, their families, and representatives of the community - to be directly involved in responding to the harm caused by the crime. The starting point for all restorative justice efforts is to make time to listen to the concerns of those most affected by the crime and to invite their participation in the justice process."

The purpose of this project is to provide such an opportunity.

The sessions will be evaluated and participants will be asked to complete confidential and interviews prior to and following their involvement. Participants will receive complementary reading materials, and either transportation to and from the seminar or a stipend for transportation expenses. All participants must be willing to be attend an orientation prior to the starting date, and be screened for criminal history background. (Persons with a criminal history may be allowed to participate on a case-by-case basis.) Victims and community members who have any connection to the offender participants will not be able to participate in the project.

If you are interested in or would like further information about this project, please contact:

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CVORJ PARTICIPANTS**

(Taken from Seattle project and adapted for use in Minnesota. See adapted versions below.)

### Offender Interview Questions

- 1) Are there questions on the questionnaire that you have not answered completely that you would like to elaborate on/or respond to in person? (I.e., explanation of offense, impact on victims, be sure to get NAME of victim, etc.)
- 2) How do you feel about speaking candidly with victims and community members about your offense?
- 3) Are there individuals (offenders, prison staff, particular types of victims, community members) who you feel would interfere with your ability to fully/honestly participate in this program?
- 4) How do you see yourself responding if, during the course of the program, you were verbally attacked by a victim of crime?
- 5) Throughout your incarceration, how much thought would you say you have given to the victim(s) of your offenses?

### Citizen Participant Interview Questions

- 1) Why are you interested in (what do you hope to gain from) participating in the CVORJ Program?
- 2) Have you ever participated in a victim-offender program before (such as mediation or victim panels) or been active in the victim rights/awareness activities? Please explain activities, when/how long you participated, and the impact the experience had on you.
- 3) Prior to hearing about this program, had you heard or read about “restorative justice?” If so, can you generally discuss your thoughts on this model of justice?
- 4) Have you ever been the victim of crime? (Please probe regarding ANY type of crime including property, domestic violence, date rape, etc.)
- 5) Have you, or anyone you know, ever been convicted of committing a crime? If yes, explain.
- 6) Do you have any family, friends, or acquaintances presently incarcerated at Lino Lakes Facility? If yes, who?
- 7) Are there individuals (prison staff, types of offenders or victims) who you feel would interfere with your ability to fully/honestly/comfortably participate in this program?