

To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #16

Title: *Rethinking What Happened*

When I was in high school, in my community there were three all-white high schools and one high school made up completely of people of color. I had friends at all the various white high schools; and it was “common wisdom” at all of those high schools that if a sports team from your school was playing a sporting event against a team from the school of color, and if the game was at the school of color, you had to attend that game with a lot of your white friends in order to keep from being attacked by students of color from that school. This was never even debated, it was just “common sense.” It was not until I was out of high school and reflecting on those experiences that I remembered that while there had been one or two fights at the school of color, there had been a lot more interracial conflict at sporting events at the white high schools. Also, I learned later, the school of students of color had the largest class-size of any of our high schools, and it had the least qualified teachers. Its students came from the poorest families in town. It did the poorest on state testing and had by far the fewest students admitted to college-level programs beyond high school.

After I was out of high school a couple of years, two young men who had attended the high school of color robbed a grocery store at gunpoint. There were shots fired and two store employees were injured. There was a huge, community-wide outcry against those young men of color, and when they were tried, convicted and sentenced to literally decades in prison, the community seemed to believe that true justice had been done.

It is true that a crime had been committed and legal action against those convicted of the crime was taken. But Restorative Justice asks for different goals and different actions. Rather than saying that crime is a simple violation of the law, Restorative Justice says that crime is a violation of people and of relationships, and that it can cause harm to the victim, to the society, and also to the offender. And Restorative Justice says that rather than simply determining the extent of the crime and the punishment, the overall focus should be on having victims, offenders, and community members healing the harm and making things right.

In the case mentioned above, the two store employees were harmed. Also, their families were harmed when those employees could not work for some time. The store was harmed when customers began to fear that other crimes could happen there, so fewer people came to the store. And the offenders and their families were harmed when their relationships were almost terminated by their extensive jail terms and by the distance the prison was from where those young men lived. Also, the two offenders had been harmed for many years by attending a high school where the teaching was of lower quality and where the rest of the community “looked down its nose” at the quality of its students. Restorative Justice would ask us to look at all the ways that people are harmed and work together at finding ways of healing the hurt. In the case of the situation described above, it took many years for change to happen in that educational system, for schools to become integrated, and for education to become more equal at all the

schools. In the case of the offenders, they were in prison so far from their homes that their relationships with the families and friends was almost completely eliminated. In the case of the victims, they were able to eventually return to work, but I learned from people who continued to live in the community that the community attitude toward people of color in general was significantly damaged by this event. The legal system did almost nothing about most of these issues, other than sentencing the two young men to very long prison terms.

Whenever I remember this situation from my youth and early adulthood, I always ask myself how a Restorative Justice approach to this situation would have been different than the way it happened.

~ Mr. Anderson, Restorative Justice volunteer