



RESTORATIVE JUSTICE UNIT

Level 7 HDB 20 Lee Street Sydney NSW 2000 TEL: 02 8346 1054 FAX: 02 8346 1141
E: restorative.justice@dcs.nsw.gov.au

NEWSLETTER

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Steve read Jenny's letter, grabbed a pen and wrote on it "DON'T CONTACT ME AGAIN." Steve meant it and posted it back through the prison mail. The Court of Criminal Appeal had recently sentenced Steve to life, without parole and he didn't feel like talking, especially to the sister of the man he'd murdered.

Fast forward 10 years and Jenny made contact with the Restorative Justice Unit. Jenny explained how she had spent well over a decade wondering why Steve had committed the murder of her brother. There were just so many outstanding questions and things that were left unsaid. The court process didn't address all of Jenny's questions and because Steve pled guilty the case went to sentencing without a full exploration of all the evidence. The prosecution appealed the original sentence and Jenny felt relieved that Steve would not be able to hurt anyone else in the community ever again.

Steve was incarcerated in a maximum security correctional centre. We met Steve and he explained how angry he'd been as a young man and how he had stopped using drugs over the years in prison. Looking through Steve's file it was obvious why he had been so "angry with the world". It didn't excuse his actions, it just explained his rage. Steve had connected with a senior custodial officer who had encouraged Steve to think about himself, what he'd done and who he really wanted to be. Steve agreed to meet with Jenny.

As we began to prepare for the Victim Offender Conference (VOC) we became aware that Jenny needed support beyond her family and friends. Jenny connected with Brooke a counsellor and met with Holly, who had also lost a family member to a violent offence. As Jenny focused on herself she realised just how angry she still was and how her anger was impacting on the quality of her relationships.

In preparing Steve found it difficult to explain his history of violent offending. Steve had lived on the streets as a child and violence was the norm. Steve had a long history of drug addiction and the offence was committed when he was withdrawing from drugs. Steve engaged with Andrew a psychologist and started to think about what was behind his violent behaviour and drug addiction.

Nearly a year later we assessed that Jenny and Steve were ready to participate in a VOC and that there was scope for them both to benefit from the process.

Maximum security correctional centres are intimidating places and Jenny was feeling overwhelmed as we arrived at the centre. Jenny couldn't lift her feet as she walked from the security gate through the compound. A switched on Manager of Security had cleared the grounds of all offenders before we walked through and Jenny's anxieties were reduced.

We escorted Jenny, Brooke and Holly to the group room where they met Andrew the psychologist and Karen the Senior Correctional Officer. Steve was escorted to the group room by correctional officers and the VOC began.

Steve explained what happened when he murdered Jenny's brother. Steve was answering all the questions that Jenny had told us were significant to her. Steve gave a full account of the offence, what led up to the offence and what happened afterwards. All the pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place. Jenny was processing all this new information and for the first time since her brother's murder started to understand how and why the offence happened. Steve explained his background and exposure to various forms of abuse. Jenny firmly told Steve there was no excuse with which Steve agreed. Steve spoke about his life in the centre and what he did each day. The media generated mythology of prison dissolved for Jenny and she understood the truth of incarceration and its impact on Steve. Steve imagined how the offence may have affected Jenny and her family. This was hard for Steve who was disconnected from his own family and the outside world.

Jenny spoke at length about the impact of her brothers' murder on her, her family and her relationships. Jenny spoke about the loss, her anger and her frustrations. Steve acknowledged Jenny's hurt and that he was responsible for it and apologised.

Brooke spoke about the fear, anger and loss Jenny had experienced and how the VOC was part of dealing with these feelings and moving forward. Holly spoke about the sense of helplessness and powerlessness that victims of crime have thrown upon them.

Andrew spoke about the therapeutic work he had done with Steve in preparing for the VOC and how Steve was learning to connect with his feelings and was trying to develop empathy for others. Karen observed how Steve was doing the right thing in custody, was no problem to manage and had been nervous about the VOC.

For Jenny there was now nothing left to ask or say as all her questions were answered and she had expressed the emotional impact of the crime to Steve. Steve offered to meet with any of Jenny's family should they ever want to and that he would respond to any other questions that may arise after the VOC.

Following the VOC Jenny reports that she has stopped trying to analyse the offence and wondering why it happened, she feels less fearful and angry and has finally made significant decisions to enable her to move forward. Steve reports that he is glad that Jenny got something out of it and that surprisingly he did to. Steve has started courses for the first time in his life and feels like he wants to learn more so he can mentor other offenders with similar histories to himself.

Moving Forward

Intense positive emotional experiences such as the VOC that Jenny and Steve participated in can result in long term positive boosts in emotional energy. It is in the post-conference stage that staff working with offenders can draw upon the offenders' positive emotional state to further motivate them to actively participate in their case management. For victims of crime and those in support roles, the post-conference stage presents an opportunity to positively reinforce the inherent strengths within and to focus on moving forward and taking back control of one's life.