



## **NEWSLETTER**

**October 2006**

### **A victim-offender conference following a burglary**

When Sue left home one morning to go to the shops, the jewellery that had been recently left to her by her grandmother was safely in the glass cabinets in the lounge room, her daughter's christening gifts were in the cupboard in the bedroom, and the few thousand dollars she'd been saving towards her wedding preparations were in an envelope in the pantry. When Sue came home from the shops her jewellery, the christening gifts, and the cash were all gone.

She spent the next few weeks in shock and chaos. The missing items had great sentimental value, and nothing was insured. Every day she would realise that yet another precious item had been taken. Every weekend she would comb the pawn shops to see if she could find something. She spent the next few months in emotional turmoil.

Sue found herself constantly wondering why the burglar chose her house, and what he had done with her jewellery. Her wedding was postponed and then cancelled as the strain of the whole event took its toll on Sue and her fiancée.

Meanwhile, Sue's 3 year old daughter Lindy, who had witnessed her mother's distress, was frightened and confused. She didn't want to sleep in her own

bed anymore, and she began hiding her toys, her pre-school drawings and her precious items in a box under her bed. She worried about 'the bad man' coming back, and her pre-school teachers commented that she seemed 'preoccupied' with the burglary.

When Graham left home on that same morning, he'd been looking for money to buy heroin. Graham had been addicted for some years, and that day he needed a fix badly. When he came to Sue's house, he'd established that no-one was home, broken in through the side door, and taken anything of value he could find. A few months later he was arrested and sentenced to 4 years gaol. In gaol he withdrew from drugs, but didn't attend any psychology or drug and alcohol programs. He felt ashamed about what he had done, and now just wanted to 'do the time' and get it over with.

Sue was still experiencing anger and grief months after the event. She thought that it might ease her feelings if she could meet with the burglar, ask the questions that had been plaguing her, and tell him about the effect of his actions on her and her daughter. She approached the Restorative Justice Unit and asked if such a meeting could be arranged. We

spoke with her at some length and then contacted the offender, who agreed that if it would be helpful for her, he would meet with her.

Over the next few weeks, both the offender and the victim, and their families and friends, prepared for a victim-offender conference. During this time, the conference facilitator took each participant through the conference procedure, discussed questions they might want to ask, considered possible responses, and explored the emotions they might experience. When the facilitator felt that all participants were ready, the conference was organised.

The conference lasted for one and a half hours. The tension which was in the air at the start gradually gave way to communication sometimes heated, sometimes tearful. Sue told Graham how much her grandmother had meant to her, and how the stolen jewellery had been their last symbolic link. She told him about her daughter's reaction. Sue's friend spoke of how hard it had been to see a friend in pain. Graham's mother spoke of how hard it was to see a son go to gaol, and of how much she worried about him and missed him. Graham listened, answered their questions, acknowledged the harm he had done and offered a genuine apology.

The conference then turned to consideration of how the harm could be repaired. Sue's main concern was the anxiety and confusion her daughter Lindy was

experiencing, and she asked if Graham would meet with Lindy to assure her in person that he would not break into her house again. Graham has children of his own, and agreed to this request. Sue also asked that, as a symbolic gesture, Graham donate \$5 each week from his gaol wages towards a trust fund for the little girl, for the duration of his stay in prison. Graham also agreed to this.

On the following Sunday, Sue, Graham and Lindy, with a welfare officer and the Restorative Justice facilitator, met together in the gaol. The group shared party food and the child played with toys and drew pictures. Graham told Lindy that he was sorry he broke into her house, and reassured her he would not do it again.

In the weeks after the conference, Sue reported that she felt far less upset and angry, that she thought less about the burglary, and that she felt the conference had helped her to recover from the ordeal. She also reported that Lindy was no longer hiding her toys, appeared to have stopped demonising the 'bad man', and no longer talked about the burglary.

Graham was thankful that he had been able to right some of the wrongs he had perpetrated, and has now begun drug and education programs. Graham's mother felt that although she found the conference process and aftermath extremely difficult, in the long run she has been left with a sense of pride in the courage and maturity her son displayed.