

Wishing peace and good will to colleagues and supporters of the Restorative Justice Unit



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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International Restorative Justice Week; Facing the Questions

The Restorative Justice Unit (RJU) recently hosted an event in recognition of International Restorative Justice Week. Denis Collins was the key speaker. His son Craig had been murdered in 2001 in what the judge described as “a spontaneous, senseless, brutal and callous assault on a seemingly harmless man”. With support from the Homicide Victim Support Group (HVSG) Denis had endured multiple trials and appeals of the three offenders now serving sentences for Craig’s murder. During each trial, Denis hoped for answers as to why the senseless act happened at all and what exactly happened. Instead he heard contradictory evidence from the offenders who also cast aspersions against Craig’s good character.

Through fellow HVSG members, he heard about the work of the RJU but Denis decided it wasn’t for him. He tried to achieve peace of mind through counselling but he reached a sticking point when he was no closer to finding answers to his questions six years on. Denis’ HVSG counsellor, Clare Blanch suggested the “crazy idea” that he should consider meeting the offenders who murdered his son. With much trepidation Denis called the RJU in late 2006 and made an appointment.

In September 2007, after the assessment of all three offenders and much preparation, a victim offender conference was facilitated by RJ Co-ordinator, Glenn Duhigg. As well as Denis and Clare, conference participants included Shiree Smit and her support people; Shiree is one of the individuals serving a sixteen year sentence for Craig’s murder. To recognise International Restorative Justice Week, the RJU invited Denis Collins, Clare Blanch and Shiree Smit to speak about their experience of involvement in a RJ process.

“The trial was about the defendants and little is said about the victims and that hurts, my son was dead as a result of their actions but not much was said about him” Denis said.

Not knowing what happened to Craig lead Denis to speculate and invent possible scenarios. He hoped that meeting the offenders would allow him to replace his imagined scenarios with the truth.

“On the day of the conference I felt screwed up, anxious, in a high state of anticipation, I felt driven to go through with it” Denis said.

Denis left the conference feeling emotionally exhausted. In telling

the truth about the events leading up to Craig's death, Shiree answered all of Denis' questions.

"I believe Shiree told the truth, she was remorseful but they had intended to hurt Craig if not murder him." Denis said, "It was a relief to get the truth, a great relief to get the whole story. My faith in my son's good character was justified."

Initially Shiree was surprised by the approach from the Restorative Justice Unit. "Glenn explained the process, I was anxious but I wanted to do it. I was ready and I wanted the truth to be voiced in a public arena" she said.

Staff of the RJU worked with the staff at Dillwynia Correctional Centre to ensure that Shiree was prepared for the conference. "It was profound to think that I was going to meet the father of the man I killed," she said.

The conference was emotional for all the participants. Shiree described it as "really overwhelming, I had a lot of shame and guilt, the conference was intense, I had nothing to give but the truth and I think I did it with compassion, at the time of the murder I had no compassion."

"It was a relief to tell the truth, I could no longer hide behind a lie" Shiree said "the court had sullied Craig's name and that was a lie."

World Leaders- *proclaims the column from the Commissioner in the December Bulletin*

There are times when it is easier to rely on tradition and continue out time-honoured practices than to introduce change and strive for innovation.

Tradition obliged the Department to keep offenders and victims separated no matter what the circumstances. The department built walls and fences to keep these two groups separated, for a victim to sit in a room and talk with an offender was beyond the realms of possibility.

Today the department routinely offers victims and offenders the opportunity to sit down together and talk about the personal effects of crime. The Restorative Justice Unit is a world leader in this process; its protocols and procedures carefully assess and support all participants to ensure that each meeting between offenders and victims has a positive outcome. New South Wales is one of the very few jurisdictions worldwide that regularly use restorative justice in serious offences with adult offenders. []

It is not easy for victims to participate in conferences with offenders, the courage of victims and the professionalism and sensitivity of Unit staff are to be commended.