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NEWSLETTER

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Restorative Justice: Reconciliation & Reintegration in Practice

In this edition of our Restorative Justice Newsletter we discuss an offence and the Victim Offender Conference (VOC) that was facilitated to deal with the aftermath of the crime. We consider what the needs of the crime victim were and how these needs were met through participation in our restorative justice programs. We also acknowledge **National Reconciliation Week** (27 May – 3 June)

Rob & Jason: Reconciliation & Reintegration

Rob works as a taxi driver in a close-knit community where everybody knows and respects him. Rob welcomes everyone into his cab with a smile and a chat. Rob has lived in this community for 25 years, used to run a take away at the local shops and is known as a good bloke.

This particular community is characterised in the media by social and

economic disadvantage, high crime rates, drug abuse, unemployment and lack of infrastructure. Racial stereotypes are portrayed in current affairs reporting of the issues in the community. Rob always thought of his community as a good place, full of good people having a go, doing their best.

Late one night Rob was driving his taxi and picked up a passenger named Jason who was on his way home after seeing some friends. Rob drove on and after a short trip reached Jason's destination. In a split second there was a knife being held at Rob's throat and Jason was screaming demanding money. Jason and Rob struggled and the knife cut open Rob's forehead and his eyes filled with blood. Jason ran out into the darkness.

By the time the ambulance and police arrived Rob had gone into shock and was disorientated and highly distressed. Mates from the taxi company came to

help. Rob was taken to hospital and his family received the terrible news. Luckily Rob's glasses deflected the knife and his eyes weren't damaged.

Rob had always felt safe and in control in his cab. How could this happen? How could this happen to me? I'm a pretty good bloke! I don't have an enemy in the world! These thoughts raced through Rob's head and all the other taxi drivers became fearful that they would be attacked next. No one wanted to work nights and CCTV images of Jason went up in every taxi next to the radio. Over the next few weeks "Jason" was seen by many drivers in the community and the police would stop young guys of similar appearance only to discover it wasn't their man. A real fear spread through the whole taxi company and into the families of all the drivers.

Jason was eventually apprehended; convicted and sentenced to a 3 year term of imprisonment. In custody Jason withdrew from his drug addiction, began methadone maintenance, withdrew from methadone and began to live clean for the first time since he was 15. Jason was now 21 and felt that he had to take responsibility for his life and that meant meeting his moral obligations to Rob.

Jason's shame ran deep. Jason is a proud Aboriginal man who felt that he had not only disgraced himself but more importantly brought shame upon his family and his people. Jason's aunty, sister and brother agreed to support him in a VOC as well as a welfare officer from the Correctional Centre. Rob agreed to attend with his mate Simon and his boss Matt from the taxi company.

At the VOC Jason took responsibility for the offence against Rob and acknowledged the impact of the crime on Rob and his family. Jason then gave a heartfelt apology. Generously Rob accepted Jason's apology and told him that from this moment the offence was water under the bridge and that he forgave Jason for his actions. For Rob it was the acknowledgement of his suffering and a genuine apology that mattered. Rob said to Jason and his family that if we see each other in the community let's talk and be friends. Jason's aunty felt responsible for her nephew's offending and offered her apologies to Rob. Rob thanked her for the sentiment and suggested that for him the only one who need apologise had already done so and it was time to move forward. Rob's forgiveness to Jason was generated as his needs were met by

Jason in acknowledging the wrongdoing, the harm it had caused Rob and by offering a simple apology as well as a commitment to continue treatment for addiction.

Simon and Matt spoke about how the crime affected the broader community. In particular Matt spoke about how the cab drivers feared working nights and had become distrustful of young people. Jason had no idea that his actions had affected so many people. Matt also explained how Jason's theft of a small amount of money had cost so much as workers compensation, counselling sessions and new safety barriers in all the taxis cost the company a great deal of money in tough economic times. Matt & Rob said that this cost was trivial however when compared to the cost to Jason and particularly to Jason's young daughter who is growing up with her father inside.

National Reconciliation Week

The primary purpose of restorative justice is the healing of victimised people and the reconciliation of relationships between our citizens where possible. As illustrated by the experiences of Rob and Jason reconciliation can be achieved when we come together in respectful

dialogue, acknowledge wrongdoing, speak of the harms and work together to heal and promote justice.

National Reconciliation Week (27 May 2009 - 3 June 2009) is set on the anniversaries of the 1967 Referendum and the High Court decision in *Mabo*. The theme for this year is "See the person, not the stereotype". Reconciliation Australia suggest that "Reconciliation involves building mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and other Australians that allow us to work together to solve problems and generate success that is in everyone's best interests." Now that's restorative!