

Repatriating Conflict and Harm: A Provocation for Restorative Justice Professionals

by Ethan Ucker

We study restorative justice, and demonstrate our mastery of its principles and practices. We receive certificates. We graduate from recently accredited master's degree programs. We attend workshops and summer institutes. Registration fees are steep, but the cost is worth it because the credentials we acquire make us attractive candidates for the jobs we covet.

On email listservs, we are excited to announce that our institutions are now hiring. Restorative Justice Community Coordinator; Restorative Practices Coach; Circle Keeper Team Leader; RJ and Community Engagement Specialist; RJ Liaison. Qualified candidates only. Most of the positions we advertise did not exist five years ago.

We are contracted to install peace rooms in public high schools from which Black and Brown students have been getting suspended and arrested. We have a ceremony to cleanse the space. We invite the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps instructors who work in the classroom next door and the armed police officers who patrol the school's hallways to smudge sage with us.

The principal calls the students we are working with 'the usual suspects' or 'the frequent fliers'. He prints out charts to show us evidence that their attitudes are improving. He commends us for our work. They are more docile now, they are more compliant. He knows many other principals who are looking for a program like ours; he asks us to consider rolling it out district-wide. You could really corner the market, he tells us.

The white governor sits in a talking circle with young Black men who are incarcerated at a youth prison. He holds an eagle feather in his hand to use as a talking piece, and he tries to pronounce 'Māori'. Journalists take photographs. At a press conference, the governor announces plans to make the state's juvenile justice system more restorative.

A private philanthropic foundation is convinced by our outcomes. The foundation awards us a grant to offer restorative justice-based diversion to 18- to 24- year-olds who are facing nonviolent drug charges. When we tell two 16-year-olds from down the block that they are no longer eligible to participate in our programming, they seem hurt. Hopefully in two years they will be picked up on drug charges and referred to us by the judge so that we can have a relationship with them again. As they are leaving our office they bump into the new Restorative Justice Supervisor and the new Case Manager and the new Administrative Assistant that the grant monies we have received have allowed us to add to our staff.

We get fingerprinted, submit background check forms, take drug tests so that we can work in the jail. We do not have any felonies and we do not use drugs and we have never been incarcerated so we are qualified to work with people who have felonies and who use drugs and who are incarcerated.

At our university research centers, we help non-profit organizations quantify the impact of their restorative justice work. We help them design diagnostic rubrics to track non-white young people's behavior and to measure the ways their behavior changes during a 12-week program cycle. If a young person writes a poem or receives a GED or attends a peace circle or gets arrested or fails a drug test, a staff member from the organization documents it on a form. We feed the information from the forms into a database. The database is swelling. We analyze the data we have collected, and publish articles about best practices in restorative justice in

peer-reviewed journals. We hope to advance our careers. We eye newly minted tenure-track positions.

We purchase tickets for annual fundraising galas. Executive directors give awards to mayors, state's attorneys, wardens who champion restorative justice. A young Black man is introduced: being part of a restorative justice process helped him turn his life around. He is a success story. He is very articulate. He tells us about growing up poor, without a father, gravitating to the streets, cycling in and out of jail. While he speaks we eat salmon and spaghetti. He shares about a childhood marred by abuse. His pain is made available for our consumption. It is our food, we are slurping it down with the noodles. We clap when the meal is over. We feel satisfied, our stomachs full to bursting. We are contributing to a good cause.

We are experts. We allow ourselves to be called upon for our expertise. We are uniquely qualified to address harm – not just any random person can do what we do. There is a lot of conflict and so there is a high demand for our services. We are independent consultants, strategists, entrepreneurs. We form LLCs. We print fliers advertising our upcoming webinars. We facilitate restorative justice trainings at detention centers, police precincts, churches, probation departments, group homes. We submit invoices.

The professional association of which we are members convenes its biannual conference at the Marriott downtown. Attendance has more than doubled from the conference two years ago, and it has increased nearly fourfold from the conference two years before that.¹ At vendor tables set up in the lobby, we sell our RestorativeChat™ and Safe Space® toolkits. ToolUp before you Circle Up! Buy Restorative Practices Tools Today! The Tibetan Buddhist singing bowls we sell will help you engage clients in restorative activities. We offer our products at a

¹ The 4th National Conference on Restorative Justice held in Toledo, Ohio in 2013 – the first National Conference convened under the auspices of the National Association of Community and Restorative Justice (NACRJ) – was attended by 335 people. Two years later, the NACRJ's 5th Annual Conference on Restorative Justice in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, drew 553 participants. The NACRJ's 6th Annual Conference in Oakland, CA drew more than 1,300 participants. My thanks to Michael Gilbert, NACRJ Executive Director, for these figures.

special discount to conference attendees; we will ship them directly to your school or to your program site. We sell out of our We Will Heal You© curricula and our restorative justice sweatshirts. Business is booming.