

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

Volume 6, Number 1, Nov 2005

Addressing Off-Campus Student Conduct with Restorative Justice

by Gena Gerard, Restorative Justice Community Action,
Inc.

On a recent Saturday morning, 14 young people -- most of them University of Minnesota students -- assembled at First Congregational Church for the first community conferences to deal with alcohol-related incidents in the U of M campus area. After an orientation, they divided into three groups and sat down with University representatives, neighborhood residents, and fellow students to talk about their cases.

Each group began with a conversation about the impact: Who had been affected? How? Like most offenders referred to the program, many weren't sure if they had harmed anyone at all.

"You said it didn't affect anybody, but it does," said a University student who lives in the Marcy-Holmes neighborhood. "I live on that corner. There's a lot of trash, and there's vomit. And the police didn't just come out of nowhere. They're working for the neighborhood to make this a safe place."

"This is my neighborhood," said another resident who has lived near campus for many years. "My wife wouldn't dare walk in the neighborhood at night. She's afraid because of the noise and shouting. This just shouldn't be."

A University employee explained, "This is a part of my everyday life. I get calls from people asking me, 'Why can't you control this? Why can't you do something?'"

"For the most part, the student population is great," added a

police officer from the University Police. "But when the community sees drunk students passed out, or puking, or urinating on their property or the property next door, it affects how the community looks at the University."

The conversations continued, with some groups delving into causes, education, and prevention. Each group eventually turned to the task of repairing the harm, which in every case involves a written and signed agreement outlining specific plans for restitution.

Each agreement was crafted to fit the individual case, with some including letters of apology and others requiring counseling. A common thread was volunteer work to be performed in the neighborhood of the incident.

This event is the culmination of a special effort on the part of Restorative Justice Community Action and its primary partners to customize restorative justice for the University of Minnesota and the nearby neighborhoods of Marcy-Holmes and Southeast Como. Since most ticketed offenses in the area -- e.g., consuming in public, minor in possession, and noise violations -- are "payable" and never go to court, Restorative Justice Community Action initiated an exciting and innovative multi-agency effort Office led by Lois Conroy of the Minneapolis City Attorney's Office, Mary Ellen Heng of the Minneapolis City Attorney's Office, Lt. Troy Buhta of the University of Minnesota Police Department, and Lt. Jeff Rugel of the Minneapolis Police Department, Second Precinct to develop a new model for direct referrals at the point of arrest. The police were trained in the summer of 2004 and began to refer cases in October 2004. This new process has dramatically increased offender participation rates.

Restorative Justice Community Action engages low-level offenders with the community to resolve incidents of livability crime at the neighborhood level. Through facilitated face-to-face

meetings called community conferences, community members and offenders discuss the impact and work out agreements to repair the harm. Since its inception in 1997, this court diversion program has handled nearly 900 cases with more than 450 community members participating.

In just one year, over 200 students have participated in restorative justice, meeting face-to-face with community members, fellow students, and campus staff to resolve their cases at the neighborhood level. The results of their conference agreements include hundreds of hours of service in the neighborhoods affected (picking up litter, tutoring at a gradeschool, volunteering at the local library, serving meals to the homeless, etc.), plus written apologies, verbal apologies to neighborhood boards, outreach and education efforts on campus, and in some cases, self-help such as chemical dependency counseling.

This special collaborative effort was undertaken in response to the infamous "hockey riots" of 2002 and 2003, involving young people who took to the streets in mobs, drinking in public, disturbing the peace, setting fires, and damaging property. Community leaders were seeking new safety strategies in partnership with the judicial system. The University of Minnesota and campus-area neighborhoods of Marcy-Holmes and Southeast Como hoped that the restorative justice program would help create positive relationships between students and long-term residents so that together they might build safer and stronger communities. It seems the recent conferences have been a step in that direction.

For more information, see <http://www.rjca-inc.org>, or call Restorative Justice Community Action Executive Director Gena Gerard, at 612-341-1661.

Gena Gerard is Executive Director of Restorative Justice Community Action, Inc. located in Minneapolis, Minnesota.