

The Texas Mediator

The Miracle of Restorative Justice

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By JAN BROWN / The Texas Mediator

“John, if ‘they’ knew what was going on in here, they would be paying to get in here and watch!” I said this to John Sage, founder of Bridges To Life, a non-profit organization that is pioneering Restorative Justice in Texas.

My name is Jan Brown and I am a Bridges To Life “victim” volunteer. I intensely dislike the “victim” title, but I wear it proudly as I go into prisons for 12-week projects with 25 to 30 other victims. What would “they” see if they could observe? Miracles.

That’s right! Miracles! You see, we work with groups of volunteer “offenders” to give them a bird’s eye view of the effect “crime” has on its “victims,” their families, congregations, and community. This “ripple effect” is not a pretty sight. Offenders get to see up close and personal the effect that crime has on someone’s life as the victims tell their stories in the small group to which they have been assigned for the duration of the project. By telling their stories, offenders are able to make connections about their lives that they may have missed before. They get to look at what in their life is not working and what they might do to change their ways.

How did I become a victim? In 1987, my nine and a half year old daughter, Kandy, was kidnapped, missing two weeks, and found face down under a pile of rubble, fully clothed and almost completely deteriorated. She was unrecognizable. Her abductor and murderer was a middle aged alcoholic junk dealer in Bryan, Texas. For fourteen years her murder was killing me. It was who I was. It was what I did. It was always there. But in June of this year I attended a victim-offender mediation that healed murder in my life.

The road was made much easier by the projects I did as a Bridges to Life “victim” volunteer. I have watched my life heal in some very important ways. The first was the tour of the death house by the warden who presided over my daughter’s murderer’s execution. I am not a card-carrying opponent of the death penalty nor a proponent. Although I am not sure of its source, I had some very definite pain associated with the execution. Maybe it was that I would never hear from him what Kandy’s last words were. Maybe it was that he would now never tell me why he killed her.

However, just to go back to that place that was the origin of so much pain and loss of power for me was helpful. To be given the opportunity to see the eyes of the warden when he talked about his philosophy of carrying out that part of his job, and how he treated the inmates prior to their execution was a tremendous healing experience for me.

I took two tours. Now that part of my journey no longer haunts me or causes me any pain. I know this sounds very shallow, compared to the actual life changing experiences I had

there. It would take a book to describe fully. Suffice it to say that I recovered a lot of my power and that I experienced deep healing by taking those two tours.

Another major life changing healing I experienced, again during a Wall Unit project, was deciding to live. I am a positive person with a lot of talent. However, while no longer actively suicidal over my daughter's death, I certainly made no long term plans. I looked forward to the time I would leave. One night I said so in a Bridges small group.

A week later my remark was still reeling through my head. Upon reflection, I realized that the death of one of my four children had so decimated me that I had difficulty experiencing any joy in my life, even in my relationships with my remaining children. I decided to ask them how they would feel if I died any time soon. You guessed it! They were not ready to lose their mother any more than I had been ready to lose my daughter in 1987.

Restorative Justice, as I see it, is being able to recover what was lost to you. I will never get my daughter back. However, I am getting my life back. Yes, I really have healed murder in my life, and I am getting my life and my power back. Bridges To Life played a large part in that process, but it was not the final event in that process. Meeting an offender face to face in mediation was. I will describe that at another time.

The healing of victims is never of interest to many people. No one would pay to see that. So, what is so important that people really would pay to see? It is the offenders making changes in their lives right before your eyes. Not phony changes, but real, deep down changes in their lives and attitudes. Changes that really do warrant the term "miracle." To be a part of that experience is indeed life changing for the observer as well. Bridges To Life really does make a difference in the lives of offenders and victims of crime. Seen a miracle lately? I have!

Jan Brown is Development Manager for SER Jobs for Progress and is involved in healing murder and other damage to people's lives in her spare time. Although not is practice, she is a trained Trauma Resolution Therapist. This aids in her understanding of people and what injuries cause their lives.