

I was fortunate to attend the Frontiers in Restorative Justice Conference at Massey University in New Zealand in December 2004. Each morning the conference was opened with a short presentation from individuals working in and with restorative justice. Ms. Jackie Katounas was one of those presenters. I hope that you find her story below as inspirational and remarkable as I did and that it spurs you on to healing and hope.

Debbie McDermott

Restorative Justice Services in Action
A Presentation by
Ms. Jackie Katounas, Prison Fellowship, New Zealand
Frontiers in Restorative Justice Conference, Dec 2004

I have never been able to fully understand the resistance to restorative justice processes within our criminal justice system.

It is so clear that justice is not being done when victims are left bereft and very often never informed of any outcome or process.

On the other hand we have some people who seem to want to take ownership of a victims hurt and trauma without considering what it is the victim needs or wants.

So often I have seen victims of crime begin a healing process that only meeting with the perpetrator face to face can bring about.

Victims of crime need to be heard and given an opportunity to have direct dialogue with the person responsible for causing the hurt.

Some victims are keen to enter into this process especially when some time has gone by, particularly in the more serious crimes.

In 1997 a man was murdered by a 19 year old boy, he was currently in prison serving a life sentence.

In 2004 the sister of the deceased requested an opportunity to meet with this young offender in a face to face meeting.

Although she was living in Australia she has a planned trip to NZ and wished to explore this option whilst she was here on holiday.

Before taking this request to the next level I needed to meet with the offender to determine if a face to face meeting would be positive and safe for all who would enter into the process.

I travelled to Wellington, When I first entered into Mt Crawford Prison, Wellington, I was abruptly reminded what a dismal and bleak environment prisons are. This is a very old prison with shabbiness and decay most evident. Although I enter into many prisons throughout the country and it has been some 10 years since I myself was incarcerated, I was shocked at my own reaction.

I remembered all too clearly how my life at that time had no hope or purpose, which places me in this unique situation of intimate knowledge of being an "inmate". Walking into that place reminded me of how far God has brought me by his grace.

I was also extremely surprised when this young bright faced man entered into the interview room, no he didn't have "killer" tattooed across his forehead and as I looked into the man's eyes I felt a huge sadness for the waste of life, not only for his victim but also for him.

I told him who I was and why I was there, this huge smile broke out across his face and he said "this is something that I have dreamed about for a long time".

He had yearned for an opportunity to face this man's family, he wanted to be accountable for what he had done all those years ago, he wanted to say how sorry he was.

He was now 26 years old and had obviously matured and had thought about his offending and the effects it has had.

I asked him to tell me about himself and how this happened.

He told me he was given away at birth and raised in an unloving and violent environment.

He sought out his birth family and was introduced into a gang household at the age of 12. He describes his life in an all too familiar way, I had visited this road on many occasions over the years.

Life for him was meaningless, going nowhere and no light for another way.

This was all he knew, drinking, drugs, violence.

Things got too much he wanted to die, he knew he didn't have the courage to take his own life, in his desperate thinking he decided to rob a bank with a gun, hoping and planning to be shot by the police.

He now says he can't believe how he was thinking back then, I was very impressed with his positive attitude and his outlook for his future.

After that meeting I travelled back to Napier, my mind was now swimming with hundreds of questions about why this woman wanted to meet him?, what could they possibly say to one another?, how would I feel in that situation? I couldn't answer any of those questions.

I travelled again to Wellington to meet with the victim's sister, I'll call her Susan for reasons of privacy. Susan was very nervous and fearful of this meeting but also determined it was something she had to do.

When I asked her why she wanted this meeting, her response astounded me – "If he is to have any sort of future I think it might help him move on and put it behind him". Hang on a minute where is this woman's anger? Why wasn't she screaming for him to be strung up!

She went on to tell me about her brother, he was married with two small daughters at the time of this tragedy, she said the family had never fully recovered, one daughter was still under treatment with a therapist. She didn't even want them to know she was going to have this meeting she felt it would be too traumatic for them. She said with huge sadness "he was my only brother, I have no other siblings". But there was no anger or bitterness in Susan just a huge sadness for not only her loss but also the offenders. The generosity of her spirit amazed me.

On the day of the conference it was typical Wellington weather, cold, wet and uninviting, the prison was a little of the same, some prison officers were slightly bemused by the entire thing and I guess sceptical as to how this would pan out. However I trusted God and the process and I was quietly confident this was going to be a great conference, despite having butterflies in my tummy.

At the meeting was Susan, her friend [who was also a counsellor], the offender, the prison chaplain Richard, my recorder and myself.

The conference started awkwardly as most do, the offender struggled to raise his eyes from the floor but once the dialogue started it just flowed. Both Susan and her friend asked questions I really didn't have to do much at all it just happened before my eyes, it was awesome.

Susan said something to the offender that really sticks in my mind, "Through this tragedy you and I are connected for life, don't let my brother's life be for nothing, I want you to get out of here and make something of your life". The talking went on for about an hour and I won't go into detail over who said what but at the close of this conference Susan hugged the man that murdered her brother and wished him well.

Once everyone had left the room I was alone with the offender, I looked into his eyes and was prompted to go and put my arms around him – he just sobbed his heart out, all I could do was hold him there were no words to say. Yes, I cried too.

I have spoken to Susan since, she has now returned to Australia and feels she can move on with her life fully now and she is glad she went through the Restorative Justice process.

When I witness these miracles happening is it any wonder I'm so passionate about my work, I feel privileged and honoured to be an instrument in bringing hurting people together to work towards restoration and reconciliation.

Some people may have the view that the restorative justice process is not suitable for serious crimes, my answer to that is very simple "come to work with me one day".