



Beyond Law and Order
**Restorative justice programs
 puts a face on crime victims**

By MITCH MAERSCH - GM Today Staff
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Tanya Nelson of Madison, a victim of an armed robbery, has met with one of her teen offenders which has helped make a positive impact on both parties. Nelson, through the restorative justice program, speaks at prisons and crime impact sessions in which victims explain the impact of crimes to a group of offenders. Seven years after she was robbed at gunpoint by two teens, Tanya Nelson isn't angry anymore. She speaks at prisons and works with juvenile offenders, and has even sat down face to face with one of her offenders and talked for four hours.

Nelson is an advocate for restorative justice, an initiative trying to bring together communities, offenders and victims to reduce repeat offenders, namely juveniles. "It truly has changed who I am. I cannot imagine myself as the same person," Nelson said.

The hope is that change is mutual as offenders choose a better path as well.

A year and half ago, Washington County received a three-year, \$150,000 grant for the restorative justice initiative to do just that, and Nova Services in West Bend was put in charge. Nova, which works with troubled youth, is using the money to fund various restorative justice programs to reverse a growing trend.

Juvenile crime in the county in the past few years has doubled, and juvenile detentions went from 230 to 489 from 2000 to 2003, said Thomas Bozewicz, executive director of Nova. The trend is younger youth are going through the system as well, 12 to 15 years old and some even younger than 10. "It's pretty clear that we had some issues here we wanted to address," Bozewicz said.

One element of restorative justice is Project Payback, a court-ordered program in which Nova works with youth to find a job, and make sure restitution is paid and community service is completed. So far, the program seems to be working. Of about 130 Project Payback cases in the first year, one re-offense occurred, Bozewicz said. In 18 months, about 200 juveniles paid back \$50,000, completed 2,000-plus hours of community service and helped pay municipal fines of \$5,000, he said.

While Nova only takes partial credit for that success, this is a move in the right direction. "It's troubled kids doing good deeds," Bozewicz said. "Part of that community service has to be looked at as an impact on the community."

Tina Pohl, restorative justice program director, saw the impact firsthand when youth were working on a median of a road. "We've had a lot of people stop and say thank you for what you're doing," she said. Work has been done at the Washington County Fair Park, Riveredge, West Bend Art Museum, Washington County Humane Society and more.

Another element of restorative justice is offenders writing apology letters to victims, if the victims would like them. That helps offenders better identify what they did and the impact their offenses had on the victims. "They're going through the stuff in their own minds ... they have some sense of what they did to that victim in their own minds," Nelson said. "It makes them re-think their social situation, their friends." For victims interested, victim witness coordinators, the Department of Social Services and the Sheriff's Department work to help prepare them for the apology letters. Bozewicz and Pohl want the conservative, law-and-order community of Washington County to know restorative justice and its programs do not provide an easy way out for offenders. Nothing in restorative justice discourages punishment. "Restorative justice is sometimes thought of as being soft," Pohl said. Offenders, she said, are being held directly accountable to victims and to the system.

"This is really an add-on ... a way to assist the whole community on how to address this issue," Bozewicz said. The idea is punishment alone is not enough to change the pattern of behavior of an offender. Nor is it sometimes enough for the victims like Nelson. "I had some sense of court justice because they got sentenced, but it still left me pretty angry," she said. Bringing the offenders and victims together can help. "It connects the victim with these offenders ... that to me is how these things get solved," Nelson said. Nelson, a Madison resident, met with one of her two offenders, the one who made a positive change.

"It made him a person in the same way that it made me a person for him," she said. "It makes it less possible they will reoffend." Nelson's other offender didn't make better choices, something she cautions victims about.

"It's not a fairy-tale ending. You can't expect these kids will never get in trouble again," she said. Regardless, meeting with the one who took a positive path helped her rehabilitation better than anything else. "It's like nothing out there," she said. "It's a sense of peace."

She has a message for other victims. "I would say give it a try, just come to one (session), you don't even have to speak," she said.

Ali Krueger, Washington County victim witness coordinator, and Abby Rickmeier, victim witness specialist, both of whom work with victims of all kinds of crime, see the value of the program. "The victims might have a lot of questions as to why," Krueger said. "I'm just thinking about empathy and putting yourself in someone's shoes," Rickmeier said.

Nova would like to see many community agencies involved. It knows it can't tackle this initiative on its own.

"We're really trying to involve much of the community in a community effort," Bozewicz said. "Juvenile justice isn't something for the police department and courts ... it's really community justice."

Another element is Collective Mentoring Circles, started in January, which involves community elders. They review the offense, the impact on the youth, how to bring the person back into the community fold and how to involve other people to help, Bozewicz said. They'd like to involve victims in the program as well.

Bozewicz said Nova received a huge response when asking the parents of the youth offenders what impact the crime made on their families. Teaching parents good supervision and discipline makes an impact, he said. Our Savior's Lutheran Church and the Family Center of Washington County are addressing that with programs called Smart Discipline.

The goal, Bozewicz said, is by the time the grant runs out in another year and a half, more funding will be available by another source.