

Let the Healing Begin

By facing the victims of their crimes, inmates at Waiawa prison start to move forward.

By [Lori Anne Tomonari](#)

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Five years ago, Edwin Kansana was addicted to crystal methamphetamine. He sold drugs and stole from his family to support his habit. At the time of his arrest for drugs and car theft, he was forced to hand over his infant daughter to the police. Today, Kansana sits with his daughter, Mahina, and says he is a different man. And he wants to prove it.



Last year, Kansana was the second participant in the Waiawa Restorative Justice Circle Project (WRJCP). For three hours he sat face to face in a circle with his family members, who were ultimately the victims of his crimes. The facilitated process allows inmates to address the past and begin to make amends.

Edwin Kansana and his daughter Mahina gather with his family every Saturday for a picnic at Waikele Park. photo: Cory Lum

"Right now the system is about the offenders; it's about blaming someone, not trying to repair," says Loren Walker, founder of the WRJCP. "We need to look at the victims. It's outrageous that people are being convicted, but no one is asking them how people were affected by what they did. They need to sit in a circle and look eye to eye [with the people they've harmed]." Aside from violent crimes, "victimless crimes," such as drug abuse, also affect families. These family members and victims are looking for a way to move on, and, for many, WRJCP is the answer.

As a first step, inmates identify those hurt by their crimes and commit to a process to repair the harm. In Kansana's case, he apologized to his mother, from whom he stole to support his drug habit, and his younger sister, whose wedding he missed because he was high. Inmates don't do all the talking—they listen to their victims, says Cy Kalama, a substance-abuse counselor at Waiawa and supporter of the WRJCP. "Attendees can tell the inmate how they were hurt and the damage that was done emotionally, financially, mentally and physically," says Kalama.

Often, family members participate because they want to see if what they've read in the inmate's letters are true. "Most of them come to hear what the inmate has to say and to tell the inmate how they feel. It gets really emotional, but participants get to release themselves from that hate, anger and resentment."

Kalama works with prisoners at Waiawa for months before they're ready to participate in the circle. He encourages them to keep daily journals, helps them write letters home and rebuild relationships. There's a great deal of groundwork laid out before the circle, he says. "I won't support a guy having a circle just because he wants one; the sincerity has to be there."

When the program began in March of 2005, circles were held just before inmates were up for parole, to

prepare them for life on the outside. Recently, the benefits of the program have led facilitators to hold circles when inmates first enter prison, as well.

In addition to the reconciliation process, inmates create a plan for life outside of prison. During Kansana's circle, one sister offered him a spare bedroom to live in once he was released, while another sister committed to driving him to Narcotics Anonymous meetings each Saturday.

With 50 percent of the nation's inmates returning to prison after being released, Walker stresses the need for programs such as the WRJCP. "The circle helps inmates understand that their actions have impacts on their victims, their families and the larger community." It's too early to tell if the program prevents inmates from returning to prison; however, family members and victims have expressed overwhelming support, Walker says. "Ninety-nine percent of surveyed participants found the circles to be positive or very positive."

Although the program receives support from the prison staff and operates with grant funding until May 2007, the WRJCP needs additional funding to continue. Twenty-five inmates have been through the program, but more than 50 inmates remain on the wait list. With one circle scheduled per month, "We're not doing as many as we could right now," Walker says, noting the lack of funding. "My dream is that someday this program will be available to everyone," she says. Walker is also planning additional circles for inmates who have been released, to follow up on their progress.

"My family is so grateful for this program," says Kansana, who was released this past May. "They've heard it from me before, the promises I couldn't keep, but they never stop believing in me." For the past four years, Kansana has been drug-, alcohol- and cigarette-free and has continued a healthy relationship with his family. He lives with his sister and daughter and says he's not about to start breaking any more promises.

"This program is a seed," Kalama says. "It begins a necessary process."

For more information on charities in Hawai'i, contact the Hawai'i Community Foundation, a statewide grant-making organization supported by generous individuals, families and businesses to benefit Hawai'i's people. Visit its site at www.hawaiicommunityfoundation.org.