

Healing Through Justice

By Lorenn Walker '83

At 14, I was on my own. At 15, I was a high school drop out. At 16, I was in jail, and at 17, I was pregnant, but my “blessing in disguise” came later: when I was 24 and nearly killed in a Waikiki back alley in an attempted rape that left me seriously injured.

After months of physical recovery I realized I wanted to be a lawyer. And becoming a lawyer was my path to restorative justice, and eventually emotional recovery.

As a deputy state attorney general in Hawaii, defending state institutions, prosecuting people, and later representing youth and adults for crimes and child protection issues, I saw how adversarial processes often create more problems than they solve. One cross-examination in particular was enlightening. The witness kept trying to explain her answers. “Please instruct her to answer yes or no,” I asked the judge, but that witness managed to blurt out just enough for me to understand what had really happened in the assault case I was defending. My “theory of the case” was totally wrong.

Originally, I went to law school to help marginalized people. They were my people. They were me. But after 15 years of practicing law, I came to the realization that justice should be about healing, not only about blaming and punishing offenders, and handing cash to victims.

After earning a master’s degree in health education, I began to use public health approaches to help the disenfranchised and improve our justice system. My background in law and my new interest in public health led me to restorative justice. I learned that personal autonomy is vital for peace. People behave more cooperatively and are more kindly when they are in democratic,

not autocratic, systems. We are more likely to care about others, be considerate and compassionate, if we are actively engaged in decision making.

Restorative justice gives people harmed by crime and other social injustices a voice in finding ways to help repair the damage. Simply allowing people to express their feelings can be healing. Healing can also come from people respecting you enough to witness and be present with you in your suffering.

“You didn’t just kill my father, you also took my mother,” says a young woman, coping with not only the loss of a father but also, as a result, a suicidal mother. Yet, through restorative justice, the woman and her mother let go of their anger and hatred. They speak directly to the man convicted of the murder, and they come to see the murderer as a man. Being able to face him “gave me back my life,” the mother tells me.

Restorative justice does not require meetings between victims and offenders. It can happen on many levels. No one was apprehended for assaulting me more than 30 years ago (as happens in 70 percent of criminal cases), but looking at what happened through the restorative justice lens helped me heal. It helped the daughter and wife of the murdered man heal. And it helped the imprisoned man to heal, too.

Lorenn Walker is a Hawaii-based public health educator, trainer and coach who focuses on building peace and increasing individual and organizational performance. She received the 2011 John Byrd Pioneer Award for Restorative and Community Justice from the National Conference on Restorative Justice.

