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## **Voices of 'Restorative Justice': Why it works**

*'It brought me a sense of peace, not just peace but it really let me hone in and take responsibility as well as accountability for my actions and how my actions created all this collateral damage.'*

By R. W. DELLINGER

Violent crime struck Rita Chairez's family in Elysian Park not once but twice. Her youngest brother Gustavo, 22, was killed when a fight broke out during his birthday celebration April 22, 1990. Then older brother Roberto, 35, was mortally wounded 10 years later in a brutal gang-related drive-by shooting.

"It destroys the whole family," says Chairez. "It's still painful to even think about. The pain never really goes away. There's always something that brings back the memories of your loved ones, whether it be a song or just walking out on the street and you see somebody who looks like them." The 49-year-old woman says it's been her mother's inspiring example of Christian forgiveness that has helped her family heal. That's because her mom has been practicing "restorative justice" before it even had a name, forgiving the killers of her two sons.

"I remember her saying, 'I don't know if I can go on' when Roberto was killed," Chairez recalls. "But her faith was like: 'I believe in God, and I believe if I forgive the people who killed my son, they're going to rest in peace.'"

Today Chairez coordinates victims' ministry for the Los Angeles Archdiocese's Office of Restorative Justice. But she still struggles at times with her own efforts at forgiveness, especially when she hears about another senseless act of Southland violence on the local news. Yet she believes in the faith-based process and tries hard to help other victims and their families find inner peace by practicing it.

"I think that's the only way you can restore a relationship by working it out and having people be accountable for what they've done," she says. "It has to be a whole circle with the perpetrator, the justice system and the victim in the middle. I believe that when you have everybody involved, that's when restorative justice happens."

### **Taking responsibility**

While growing up in South-Central Los Angeles, Joe Aleman, who was born in Mexico, joined a gang to simply survive. His juvenile gangbanging eventually morphed into more serious crime, until he was arrested for robbery and murder.

He served 14 years in prison, participating in both Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous groups. But he never really felt they were "honing in" on the roots of his personal destructive problems. Then he became a founding member of Criminal and Gang Members Anonymous, which experimented with putting restorative justice into concrete practice.

When Aleman got out of prison a few years ago, he started doing outreach to other gang members along with motivational speaking. And it was at a speaking engagement at a PTA meeting in El Monte that he finally took full responsibility for his crazy, violent lifestyle.

"It was pretty much like walking into a room nude and exposing all your vulnerabilities - telling everybody I lied, I cheated, and then just standing there and accepting everything thrown at me," explains the 39-year-old man. "But taking responsibility for my past activities restored justice within myself.

"It brought me a sense of peace. Not just peace, but it really let me hone in and take responsibility as well as accountability for my actions, and how my actions created all this collateral damage. How it affected my family, how it affected the community, how it affected my girlfriend and my kids. Because my actions went really deep."

After awhile, Aleman adds, "If the person making the amends is really genuine - and he's going the extra mile to show that he really is sorry for what he did - that can really change the person. I know it did me."



### **A Philosophy**

Father George Horan is running late getting back to his office on Santa Fe Avenue near Vernon. He's been doing the "direct ministry" he loves at the downtown Los Angeles County Men's Central Jail, the largest jail in the U.S. with some 5,600 inmates. The 63-year-old priest visits people there every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and then celebrates Mass on Sundays.

As co-director of the archdiocese's Office of Restorative Justice, he also helps supervise a full-time staff of 19 other workers plus volunteer chaplains who work in most of the 52 juvenile and adult institutions throughout the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Father Horan readily agrees with Joe Aleman that lives can be radically changed through the restorative justice approach. He's seen it happen time and time again, in fact. But he acknowledges the concept is difficult to get your head around.

"It's a philosophy that underlies things; you don't actually have a restorative justice program," he explains. "And that philosophy basically says, as one person put it: 'If crime

creates a hurt, justice should be a healing.' We say crime hurts a community, so justice should somehow heal the community and heal the individuals who are more directly involved in it.

"Our current criminal justice system focuses on the criminal. Three questions are asked in the retributive justice model: What crime is committed? Who committed the crime? And what should their punishment be? With restorative justice it's: Who was hurt by this crime? What do they need to heal? And who's going to bring about the healing? It really is the healing of human relationships."

The whole concept can be a hard sell, Father Horan admits. He believes it's a lot easier to say, We know who committed this crime, so let's punish him, than to ask, What do we really need to do to heal everyone affected by this?

For Christians who like to quote "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" as justification for the death penalty, three-strike laws and other severe sentences, Father Horan points out how biblical scribes were actually putting a limit on retribution. If somebody stole one of your sheep, you were forbidden to steal his whole flock as payback.

But, much more crucial, the priest says, is what Jesus proposes in the New Testament: "You say an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. I say love your enemies." By refuting the Old Testament logic, Our Lord is reminding his followers, in short, they must work together to make "right" transgressions instead of focusing on punishment.

"So with Christians, if you're going to just stay in the Old Testament before Jesus, you can't really call yourself a Christian," says Father Horan. "Part of it, too, is our own growing and our understanding of who God is. But, unfortunately, we are people who think that revenge is the right response. If that's the case, we aren't people who embraced the Gospel message."

### **No Soft Approach**

Suzanne Neuhaus has not only embraced the message, but somehow been able to practice it while working 21 years for the California Department of Corrections - a penal system noted for punishment and retribution, not healing.

And the 44-year-old woman, who grew up partly in Camarillo, certainly has a special perspective on restorative justice, entering the corrections field after her own brother was murdered. She has been a field parole officer, delinquency prevention worker and for eight years a victims services specialist.

"I don't find it a system that's focused on healing, focused on resolving pain and restoring hope," she says. "It's not. So that is challenging for me. And many times I stayed because I believe that I'm able to do that for some people. That can only be good to people in their lives; and, consequently, it can only be good for our world."

After the trial, Neuhaus stresses, the victim of the crime basically has no rights. She's one of the few people in the state's criminal justice system who has worked with both victims and offenders, even acting as a mediator to bring them together.

The parole officer is convinced that a lot of people don't really understand what restorative justice is. She likens it to a lens through which to look at crime and violence and, moreover, who is impacted by it. Then it tries to create opportunities for healing for everybody impacted in a balanced way that brings people back into "right relationships" with one another.

"I would say that those who criticize restorative justice as a soft approach don't understand it, because it's really hard," she maintains. "It's very hard for human beings to reconcile the fact that other human beings are simply not good or evil. It is much easier to believe that by virtue of a decision made on a given day at a given point in time that your entire worth is defined by that decision - especially if it was something that we might call 'evil.'

"Can you imagine being in a prison cell and looking at yourself in the mirror knowing that you've killed someone, even if it was accidental? And living with that and owning that and being responsible for that, and then asking for forgiveness, seeking forgiveness for that?" she wonders aloud. "That is much harder. That causes true suffering."

As a victim service specialist and sometime-mediator, Suzanne Neuhaus has witnessed firsthand the healing results of restorative justice for both victims of violence and their attackers or murderers.

"In victim-offender mediated programs, you see changes in attitudes, values and beliefs which have cultivated the criminal activity," she says. "And you see tremendous satisfaction in both parties. I've seen it, even in crimes of severe violence like homicide. Restorative justice works."

November 2009 is International Restorative Justice Month. Catholics in California parishes are asked to learn about and participate in restorative justice. Recently, the California Catholic Conference sponsored training conferences across the state titled "Healing the Wounded Heart: An Exploration of Restorative Justice."

To learn more, go to [www.restorejustice.com](http://www.restorejustice.com)

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