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OURRJ: WHY RESTORATIVE JUSTICE?

A Story

Ashton entered the OurRJ program as a result of a school conflict issue at the end of his 8th grade year. Ashton was initially sent to the principal late in the school day for allegedly disrupting class. At the end of the school day, he was then pulled off of his school bus following miscommunication about whether he was supposed to take the bus home or wait for his mother to pick him up. At this point, a school police officer was called over. When Ashton became upset over what he felt was unfair treatment and unclear directives from school staff, the situation escalated, culminating in his arrest for disturbing the school assembly.

*“When Ashton first entered the OurRJ program, I asked him where he imagined his life in five years. His response: ‘All of my teachers tell me I’m going to jail.’ However, by the end of our circle process, I could see a real change in him. After participating in circles, Ashton could actually see a whole group of adults that care about him. **More importantly, he felt he had a future.**” - Eli Plenk, OurRJ Program Manager*

Ashton’s pathway into OurRJ is a typical example of the way in which many young people enter the juvenile justice system. Minor school conflicts escalate and increasingly, rather than school-initiated disciplinary actions, these conflicts result in police involvement and arrest. For many other young people in the Commonwealth, the outcomes of their stories are often very different from Ashton’s. In communities in which OurRJ is working, economic and educational marginalization, along with school discipline policies that disproportionately impact youth of color, contribute to what is frequently referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

“We just don’t need to keep locking up children.” - OurRJ Board Member

The Problem

- It takes just one misstep to push a student out of school, onto the streets, in front of a judge and eventually behind bars. This is the frequently referred to “school-to-prison pipeline”.
- It disproportionately affects youth of color who represented 57.5% of charges filed in Massachusetts Juvenile Justice System, in 2011 (Citizens for Juvenile Justice December 2012)
- **School exclusion leads to education deprivation and when coupled with a permanent Massachusetts criminal record that cannot be expunged, has dire consequences for future employment and life options.**

- o Juvenile imprisonment raises a person’s chances of being sent to prison again by 22 to 26 percent (National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 19102, 2013).
- o According to the Crime, Cost and Consequences Report by Mass Inc in 2011, former inmates earn 40% less annually than they would have had they not been sent to prison.

The Solution

- We focus on keeping kids in school and out of court. We help kids avoid the legal system.
- Our program transforms the way justice impacts young people and their communities. It provides solutions and closure for both the young offender and the victim.
- We help kids take responsibility for their actions.
- Our process typically takes six months, which includes on-going support from OurRJ staff as well as other community resources when necessary; at the end of those six months, upon completion of the program, a young person’s case is closed with the court-system and along with that, a lifelong criminal record is prevented.

Here’s what a typical case might look like:



“Restorative justice is a way to help teach kids who don’t know how to say sorry to address problems. It’s a way to heal people.” - OurRJ Board Member

Children who complete our program say:

The RJ program had a big impact on my life in many ways. It helped me grow up and take responsibilities for my actions and now I think about the consequences of what I do. -Raekwon (15)



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Before the meeting, I was too ashamed to talk about what I did but at the meeting. I felt like I express myself like I had never done before. I had a chance to take responsibility for what I did. - Robert (15)

The Reparation Agreement imprints in your brain what you did wrong and always reminds you not to make the same choices. - (Anonymous)

We felt like this program took time to understand us more than the court would've.
- Raekwon (15) & Robert (15)

"The process was reflective and good. It helps to have a lot of input from the people in your life who care about you. We didn't know how much the people in our community cared about us and wanted us to succeed." - Co Defendants in a Theft Case

Our Partners Say:

"I support restorative justice programs because they require offenders to take responsibility for their actions, listen to the victims, and take active and concrete steps to make amends to the victim and community." - District Attorney Marian Ryan

If a mother of a murdered child can believe in restorative justice, then so can I."
- Hon. (Ret.) Leslie Harris of Suffolk County

Family Impact:

When my child got in trouble with the law, I thought that this child ruined his life for a rash, bored decision. I looked at him with disbelief: I couldn't believe what he had done after the careful and thoughtful way I raised him. I looked at myself as a failure as a parent and what did I do to deserve this. Although my child made the decision he made, I was taking the ownership for his actions as well. This incident put a strain on my relationship with my son, and for the first time, I was not able to trust him. My son knew that I was angry, but most of all, my son saw that I was disappointed in his actions. This made my son realize the magnitude of his actions and was upset that he disappointed me and that I was unable to trust him.

As a parent, you want everything for your child and I was placed in a position where my child made a decision that could affect him for the rest of his life. I am very thankful that my child was able to go through OurRJ's Restorative Justice Diversion Program. This program has changed my son to grow up and think about actions he is about to take rather than be impulsive. He was able to take the responsibility and own what he did, and this lesson was one that he can look back on and say that he was able to grow as an individual and own his mistakes that he has made."

- A very thankful parent in Middlesex County.