



Andy Atkinson / Mail Tribune Andrew Jordan and Raphaville Miller talk out front of Phoenix High School Friday.

Repairing harm from crime

BY **VICKIE ALDOUS** | April 23, 2018

What is the best punishment for a student who vandalizes his school?

- • Suspension or expulsion from school.
- • Serving time in a juvenile detention center.
- • Spending spring break working alongside the school custodian cleaning up the building.
- If you picked the third option, you are a proponent of restorative justice.

Formerly called Mediation Works, the Resolve Center for Dispute Resolution and Restorative Justice in Medford is working to spread the alternative model of justice in local schools and the criminal justice system.

The traditional justice system's approach is to impose suffering on offenders as punishment for the suffering they inflicted on victims, says Raphaëlle Miller, director of education and school services for Resolve.

With the restorative justice approach, offenders take part in efforts to repair the harm they caused, she says.

In one example, a student who vandalized his school had a meeting with the custodian and other adults. He agreed to work with the custodian as payback for all the work he caused the custodian. The student also agreed to join the school's track team and mentor younger kids at the school, says Resolve Director of Restorative Justice Cara Walsh.

"He gave up his spring break. He was really taking positive steps to make changes in his life," Walsh says.

Community members can learn more about restorative justice during the annual Northwest Justice Forum, which will be held May 8-10 at Southern Oregon University in Ashland this year.

See nwjusticeforum.com for more information and to register. Registration closes Tuesday.

Not all victims and offenders want to meet, but for those who do, the meetings can provide accountability for the offender and answers for victims, Walsh says.

"It's a big shift from our traditional justice system in which those who've been harmed are often left out of the equation and there's an inadequate process of justice for them," she says. "Restorative justice wants to make sure that the voice of those who have been harmed is included in the process and that their needs are met and they are part of the process."

Vandalism victim Amber Silva recalls when she got a call from Medford police that her car had been heavily damaged while she was away.

"You're really angry and you're really confused and hurt," she says of the emotions she felt after the vandalism.

A group of boys who were about 12 years old had been climbing onto a fence and building, then jumping down onto cars. Her car suffered about \$1,200 in damage to its hood, blinkers and lights, Silva says.

She had to spend time dealing with her insurance company and had to pay a deductible that, as a mom with three kids, she could ill afford.

When Resolve contacted her and asked if she would like to talk with the boys who damaged her car, Silva agreed to the meeting.

"I wanted to see who it was who did this," she recalls. "I was nervous at first. But it was powerful for me. I realized they were just kids. They were extremely apologetic. In my mind, I thought they were out vandalizing vehicles. But they were playing a game. They were just being kids. They weren't thinking it fully through."

Silva went on, "It was a really human moment to me because they're children and kids make mistakes. I explained I didn't hate them and I understood. Having an opportunity to sit and listen to these kids was amazing for me."

Since that meeting, Silva has been acting as a surrogate victim when other victims aren't able or willing to meet with offenders. She gives the offenders a chance to explain the situation, then describes the negative impact crime has on victims and the community as a whole.

Silva, who overcame a problem with drugs and alcohol four years ago, also uses the meetings as a chance to talk about her struggles and recovery.

"I say, 'This is where I've been in my life. You have the opportunity to not go down the path I did.' This is another form of recovery for me, and it's empowering to say, 'I've turned my life around,'" Silva says.

Miller says when people first hear about restorative justice, they assume it's fluffy or could only be effective for minor crimes.

But she says restorative justice is about accountability.

"It's the accountability that people really want to see when there's been some kind of crime or wrongdoing, whether it's been in a school, or a family or in the community," Miller says.

Although restorative justice might sound new, Walsh says people have been practicing it throughout history.

“It’s rooted in good old family values. Back in the day, if you stole a candy bar your mom would drag you to store,” she says.

For more information about Resolve programs, see www.resolvecenter.org.

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