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The Community Conferencing Center: Restorative Practices in Baltimore, Maryland

BY LAURA MIRSKY

The Community Conferencing Center (CCC) is bringing restorative practices to Baltimore, Maryland. Dr. Lauren Abramson, executive director of the CCC and assistant professor of child psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, believes the work that the CCC is doing is making a difference in Baltimore. Said Abramson, "I think one of the important things about what we're doing is that this is being done in some of the most disinvested and distressed neighborhoods in Baltimore, the second most violent city in the United States."

The CCC has facilitated over 500 conferences: as court diversion for juvenile nonviolent offenders and juvenile first-time felony offenders, as an alternative to school suspension, to heal ongoing neighborhood conflicts and as an aid in re-entry into family and community after incarceration. The process used by the CCC, said Abramson, is "basically the three-part restorative conference structure: hearing what happened, letting everybody say how they've been affected by the situation and then having the group come up with ways to repair the harm and prevent it from happening again."

Community conferences are always voluntary. In a diversion case, the offender must admit to wrongdoing and all parties must agree to go through the conferencing process instead of sending

the case to court. If the case is resolved by community conferencing, the offender won't have a court record. CCC does do conferences with adults, but not yet with adult court-diversion cases, said Abramson.

The CCC has conducted about a hundred conferences in schools, involving students in all grades, from kindergarten



Lauren Abramson
Executive Director
Community Conferencing Center

through high school and college, along with parents, teachers and administrators. Said Abramson, "The conferences not only result in suspended students being returned to school and staying in

school, but we have reports from teachers that it has boosted morale."

Abramson thinks that one issue in school that has been ignored is gossiping. There has been a lot of emphasis on bullying in schools, she said, and although a lot of schools still don't know what to do about bullying, gossiping also creates major problems, "not only in really deteriorating the quality of life for a lot of students in that school, but resulting in a lot of violent incidents that come out of gossiping."

Abramson termed prison re-entry into neighborhoods and families "a huge issue." Many re-entry programs, she said, emphasize obtaining housing, education, employment, and substance abuse and mental health treatment for people coming out of prison. This is all really important, she said, "but it's hard to do all that unless a person has support in their lives. So we use conferencing as a way for people coming out of prison to have a conversation with the people in their lives who have been affected by their incarceration. What we find is that it's a safe place and a structured way for people to have that conversation, which normally they would not do."

Abramson said that she is also interested in using conferencing for serious crimes "to provide a sense of healing and learning." She is preparing a case with a man serving a life term in prison for

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murder. "This is the first one I've done," said Abramson. "It came through one of our partners in the re-entry program who's working with a lot of 'lifers.' Since I've been doing this, I have wanted to do this kind of thing, but I felt that it had to come from them, not from me."

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Referrals to the CCC come from a wide variety of sources. Said Abramson, "We get referrals from schools directly, from the Baltimore City School Police, which is its own separate police force, from the Baltimore City Police, from the Department of Juvenile Services and from neighborhoods. At this point, any resident can call us if there's a situation." This was the case with a conference that Abramson regards as a great success.

In one neighborhood, Southeast Baltimore, young people had been a source of hundreds of calls to the police over a two-year period. The adults in the neighborhood were irate and frightened due to the youth playing on the streets, making noise and damaging property; the youth were frustrated because they had nowhere else to play. Matters came to a head in the fall of 2001 and the local neighborhood association asked the CCC to hold a conference, which was attended by 44 people, including 13 kids. At first, the adults just yelled at the children, but then the kids began to express themselves, protesting that they had no safe place to play.

One neighborhood resident, Don Ferges, a former high school football star, offered to supervise the children's play at a nearby park. More and more kids showed up to play football in the

park every day. Ultimately the children, Ferges and other adult volunteers formed their own full-blown neighborhood football league, which continues to grow and thrive every year. The quality of life in the neighborhood has improved immensely due to the league. Children are playing football instead of taking or selling drugs. As one neighborhood resident put it, the league has saved kids from a life—or death—on the streets. Another resident said he's seen a major change in the neighborhood kids' behavior overall: more cooperation and respect and less bullying. Said Abramson, "For two years now, 150 young people have been engaged four days a week after school in this league, based on all-volunteer time, and that came about from a conference."

To read more about the Baltimore-Linwood Football League, go to: <http://www.citypaper.com/2002-11-13/feature.html>.

Abramson first brought the idea of community conferencing to Baltimore in 1995, after working in communities with young people and families for about 20 years. "I've always been interested in ways that people can deal with each other on an emotional level in more healthy ways," she said, adding, "My degree is in biopsychology, so I studied neuroscience and animal behavior. I've taken what people think of as being a circuitous route, but it's all very much connected to me, because I studied the neurobiology of emotion and how emotions affect health and illness and emotional development through the life span."

Abramson said she was introduced to the concept of restorative conferencing in 1994 by David Moore, John McDonald, Terry O'Connell and Margaret Thorsborne of the former Transformative Justice Australia. Said Abramson, "I saw this process as an excellent way for people to have a safe place to express affect with each other, keeping the experts out of it and honoring the capacity that we have to work things out, if we're given a place to do that on an emotional level."

Abramson believes that the process lets people express their negative and often toxic affect, such as anger, to each other and in so doing, provides a way for that affect to be transformed into distress and other less toxic negative emotions. "Then, at that moment, which can be called collective vulnerability, or shame," she said, the dynamic changes so that everybody feels responsible. "That's really a critical emotional turning point for the group," said Abramson. "Then they can begin to get interested in: How can we move forward in a better way?" Abramson sees the emotional component as the basis of the power of the process. "It's just been fantastic for me to marry my interest in healthy emotional development and working in distressed communities and to be able to offer this in Baltimore," she said.

"I really got a lot of flak when I started this," said Abramson: "It's not going to work in a big city; it's not going to work in inner-city neighborhoods. The implication of that was offensive to me. Not only that, it just goes against what I understand the process to be about. We have seen hundreds of times now, that whatever people's image and thought is about this city and what the statistics are, there are still human beings who live here



Baltimore residents participate in a community conference.

who are capable of resolving their own conflicts and their own criminal cases in really effective ways, just with each other. I think it's a really important message to get out."

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Funding for the CCC comes from a variety of private and public sources. Monies from the state of Maryland helped the program get going initially in 1998. The state provided funds for four separate neighborhoods to do their own programs, with Abramson supplying technical assistance. "What we learned is that it was the wrong way to do it," said Abramson, adding, "For a variety of reasons, neighborhoods don't always have the capacity to really promote a new way of doing justice. It's not a part-time thing, and you need people who are very clear about the principles and articulate about promoting those principles in institutions." When separate neighborhoods ran their own programs, said Abramson, they weren't able to get referrals, and there was no way to institute quality assurance.

In response to these concerns, the Community Conferencing Center was born in 2000. Said Abramson, "We realized that we had not separated the program implementation from the process, and that the *process* always needed to be community-based and in the neighborhoods where these conflicts and incidents occurred, but the *program piece*, which included getting referrals, setting up quality assurance, promoting the program and doing education about the program was better served from a centralized location where that capacity was very well-developed." Abramson stressed that the CCC is a community-based organization with "strong relationships with the police, juvenile justice, the state's attorney's office, schools and literally hundreds of community organizations, agencies and faith-based organizations."

The CCC has a small core staff of three people who facilitate most of the program's conferences. They also train numerous volunteers from the community, many of whom come forward after participating in a conference. Abramson told a story about how one conference engendered a volunteer facilitator: the father of a girl who had been sexually harassed in school.

A 12-year-old boy put his friend's hand on a girl's breast in the cafeteria line. Her father wanted to press charges but he agreed to participate in a community conference instead. At the conference, the man learned that the boy hadn't planned the act against his daughter; "it was just a spur of the moment act of idiocy," said Abramson. "In the middle of the conference the young man was sobbing.

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And the girl's father leaned toward this kid and said, 'Son, you're not thinking about what you're doing and what effect it's going to have on your life. There are too many young black men in prison, and you need to start thinking about what you're doing. I love you and care about you. And I want you to make the best of your life.'

The father asked that the boys be returned to school. (They had gotten a 25-day suspension.) He suggested that their role should be to protect the girls in the school. A woman from suspension services who was attending the conference got the boys back in school the next day. The father volunteered to work for the CCC, and now he's a facilitator. Said Abramson, CCC volunteers are "people who have been through it, social workers, lawyers, police officers, residents—anybody who wants to be part of what we're doing."

Abramson related another story about a criminal case, which, she said, "has both

great success and great tragedy in it." A boy stole a car and picked up two of his friends. The CCC organized a conference, attended by the woman whose car had been stolen and her supporters, as well as a lawyer from the insurance company. (The insurance company was also considered a victim of the auto theft.) One of the three boys had already been rearrested and was in jail, so he couldn't attend the conference. The other boys, who were 15 and 16 years old, related how the theft had happened. The woman whose car had been stolen said that she was upset about some irreplaceable things that had disappeared along with her car. What she was really concerned about, however, was the boys and what they were doing with their lives. (At the conference, one boy revealed that he was raising himself. He had a job and was paying for his own apartment.)

The boys apologized to the woman and she didn't want anything else from them. But the lawyer said that each boy had to pay \$500. The mother of the boy who stole the car immediately offered to pay that amount, but the lawyer wouldn't accept her money; he thought her son ought to pay. The boy said he didn't have a job and didn't know how he would come up with the money. At this point, said Abramson, the woman whose car had been stolen reached into her purse, handed the boy her card and said, "I know where you can get a job. You need to contact me." The lawyer gave the boys a month to begin saving money, then worked out a payment schedule to begin the following month.

"So everything was really worked out in an amazing way," said Abramson, "but the next thing we heard was that the court had decided that the case had been inappropriately marked for diversion to us. So it went to court, and it was dismissed." Everything that had been worked out at the conference fell apart. "It really shows how the current system fails kids," said Abramson, adding, "There are so many instances where they're not held accountable for

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what they've done. We see kids with 15 priors, and then they become adults and they get slammed. And of course, there's also kids in detention who really don't need to be there and shouldn't be there. It works both ways."

Research has confirmed the success of community conferencing. Said Abramson, "Out of over 500 conferences, 99 percent have resulted in agreements, with over 90 percent in compliance with those agreements."

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Abramson said that the CCC is also working on qualitative analyses of the "collateral impact" of conferences. "So much of the research is about recidivism and participant satisfaction," she said. Collateral impact refers to the effect conferences have on communities. Said Abramson, "We can list a hundred different kinds of impacts that we have seen come out of community conferences." She continued, "I think it's really all about relationships and building social capital. That's where the incredible benefit comes from this process. What we're faced with in this world is that the final frontier is probably human relationships—how we figure out to get along with each other. This process is amazingly powerful at giving people a way to realize that if they work together they can do amazing things. Very specific things come out of conferences that people do work on collectively. Social scientists talk about the importance of collective efficacy and social capital, and that's what this is really about: it's using conflict to build communities."

Asked what she hoped for the future of the program, Abramson said that the CCC has a contract pending with the State of Maryland Department of Juvenile Services that will allow them to handle a significant number of juvenile diversion cases in Baltimore. This "represents that the system is recognizing and providing this community-based response as part of what they do (as opposed to trying out a pilot of the program)," she said. The contract also will allow the CCC to establish other community conferencing programs in Maryland and functions as a hub for evaluation, training and technical assistance.

Abramson's expectation is that the public institutions that benefit from the CCC will soon provide stable funding. "Our private-foundation funders have been very generous in helping us get going and also very clear that public institutions need to kick in, which means changing the way public institutions do what they do, and fund what they do, so that's a long fight," she said, adding, "It's been a struggle, but it's been very worth it. People come out of a conference and they are just thrilled with the outcome. Most of the people that attend conferences have been to court before and they're pretty amazed at what they've been able to do. My big thing is that it's about the people—the participants making it happen—and it wouldn't happen unless there's a structure and a process for that to happen. Community conferencing is, I think, one very effective way to provide that structure."

For more information about the Community Conferencing Center, visit their website, at <http://www.communityconferencing.org>. ☎