

# FORUM

## A New Reality for Troubled Youth in Hungary: An Update

LAURA MIRSKY

This article is a follow-up to a presentation from “Dreaming of a New Reality,” the IIRP’s Third International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and other Restorative Practices, August 2002. In that presentation Vidia Negrea, director of CSF Hungary, discussed her experience learning restorative practices in the U.S. and her plans to open a school in her country. The text of Negrea’s presentation is available online at: [http://www.restorativepractices.org/Pages/mn02\\_negrea.html](http://www.restorativepractices.org/Pages/mn02_negrea.html)

A new Community Service Foundation (CSF) school has just been launched in Hungary — its goal: to implement restorative practices with delinquent and at-risk youth in that country. The school, which opened January 6, 2003 in Budapest, is funded by grants from CSF and the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) in the United States and the Hungarian Ministry of Children, Youth and Sports. The Hungarian Ministries of Justice and of Social and Family Affairs are also supporting the school as “a model for institutions to work with children with problems or at risk,” said Vidia Negrea, the school’s director.

The CSF school represents an important turning point for Hungary. As a matter of course, delinquent youth in that country have been removed from their home environment and housed in reformatories or other special institutions, put on probation or jailed. Negrea explained: “There is no law in Hungary supporting day treatment.” She hopes that the school will give troubled youth a better chance to reintegrate into society by providing an alternative approach in their own community. A new law will take effect in June acknowledging the need for services provided by NGOs (non-government organizations), in effect encouraging entities like CSF Hungary.

Working as a psychologist at the largest, oldest boys’ reformatory in Europe, in Aszod, Hungary, Negrea saw that the methods in use there weren’t working. Research data on 500 boys showed that six months after



**Vidia Negrea (second from left), director of CSF Hungary, poses with staff members Laszlo Gupcsi (far left) and Erika Bognar (far right), and two students.**

leaving the reformatory, 75 percent had reoffended. Data analysis revealed that the boys who had most closely followed reformatory rules had reoffended sooner and more often than others.

Boys at the reformatory told Negrea that they were scared to go home, afraid of being labeled for life as “bad” and terrified of meeting the victims of their crimes and their families. To address this fear, she asked 100 students in her care to write an imaginary letter to their victims. Their heartfelt, remorseful letters had Negrea and her colleagues in tears. Some boys wrote real letters to their victims, apologizing for the harm they had done to them and their families and offering any help they might provide. This was the first

time Negrea felt she came close to fulfilling people’s needs, both victims and offenders, instead of just administering punishment.

Negrea received her first training in restorative practices when Beth Rodman and Paul McCold of the IIRP came to Hungary. She was thrilled to finally find a framework for dealing with troubled youth similar to her experience with the letter-writing project at the reformatory. She later spent a year doing hands-on training in restorative practices at CSF schools in Pennsylvania and was determined to bring the fruits of her training back to Eastern Europe.

She also appreciated the restorative work environment created for the staff, where mutual support was a workplace priority. Said

# FORUM

Negrea: "My friends and colleagues at home deserve a place where they are happy to come to work, even with the most difficult students. Here at CSF, I realized it was possible."

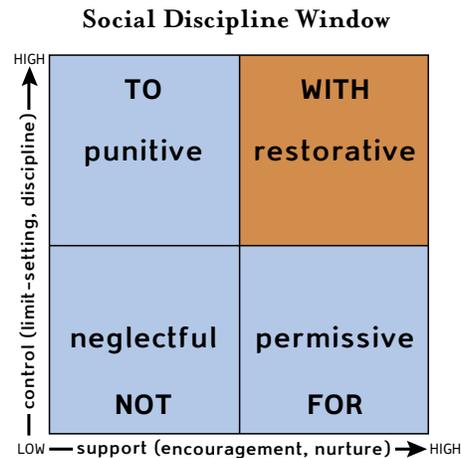
At first, Negrea wasn't confident that she could lead such an effort. Near the end of her stay in the United States, CSF/IIRP president Ted Wachtel suggested that Negrea try being a supervisor. When she served as a substitute supervisor at two CSF schools, she gained confidence working in new settings. "It was a great opportunity to see what I had learned and how my learning would apply elsewhere," she noted.

The key to the work, Negrea discovered, "was not about being knowledgeable about everything happening in each particular school and having all the answers, but about using the same way of working with people and being responsible and respectful with people. The structure and philosophy were the same." Negrea realized that her work in Hungary would be based on implementing the same structure and philosophy.

When she went home to Hungary in 2001, Negrea quit her two jobs: as a psychologist at the boys' reformatory, and at the National Institute for Family and Children, and began to try to introduce restorative practices. Some of Negrea's colleagues told her that Hungary wasn't ready for those methods. "It's not America," they said. But Negrea understood that restorative practices were "not based on American culture, but on relationships between people."

Negrea drew on her existing relationships with people in social services — students, probation officers, teachers, administrators, police — and "made a lot of noise" about why restorative practices are important. She was then asked to do trainings for government institutions that wanted to make changes. "I used to be sent in as an expert to say why things weren't going well," said Negrea, adding, "They expected me to report on how to change or close the institutions."

Instead, Negrea did two-day Introduction to Restorative Practices trainings with all the employees at several institutions, "not just teachers and counselors, but the gatekeeper, the cook, the director." Negrea told them: "If you really want to change, you have to think



about how you can work together, otherwise, they're going to close you down."

Negrea was struck by how quickly people understood the practices she introduced. "Very simple people can understand in hours that it's their responsibility to change the institution," she said. The institutions stayed open and are now using restorative circles. In one big group home, a semi-secure unit "where children are sent because nobody else can deal with them," the staff is using circles for themselves and with the children. At first it was strange for the staff to discuss their problems with each other. They were accustomed to blaming each other and relying on a hierarchy. But now they are expressing their issues openly and the children are developing their own group "norms" — standards for behavior.

**My friends and colleagues at home deserve a place where they are happy to come to work, even with the most difficult students.**

- Vidia Negrea

Negrea also did restorative practices presentations for prosecutors, judges, lawyers, probation officers, schoolteachers and administrators — people who will refer children to her CSF school. She used IIRP training videos and overhead projections, which had been translated into Hungarian, as well as interactive exercises.

To elucidate the social discipline window, which illustrates the concepts of TO, FOR, NOT, and WITH, she tried an exercise at one of her presentations that was originally developed in a CSF Professional Learning Group. Dividing the participants into four groups, she gave each group the same simple task to perform (drawing a flower). She then did NOT do anything and completely neglected one group (little support or control); did the entire task FOR another (high support, little control); dictated TO another group exactly what to do (high control, little support); and gave the WITH group the help they needed, but let them perform the task themselves.

By the end of the exercise, the participants had obtained a thorough, visceral understanding of the restorative paradigm. People in the neglected group felt hurt because they were being ignored. Those in the FOR group sat there and did nothing, upset that they had no input. The TO group members were angry and resentful at being told what to do. The people in the WITH group were happy and productive, having been treated restoratively: that is, with both high support and high control.

In all, the restorative practices presentations went extremely well. "I was amazed," said Negrea, adding: "Nobody wanted to break for lunch; they wanted to keep going." Instruction in Hungary is traditionally very intellectual and theoretical, said Negrea. The restorative practices trainings, in contrast, were dynamic and interactive, based on real practice and understanding through action and reflection.

The trainings were a revelation. One teacher said that, deep inside, she had always known about the concepts Negrea had shared, but had never had the words for them, never known how simple and obvious they could be. Said Negrea: "I wanted the authorities to realize that they needed the program."

Negrea's strategy has been working. At her last presentation for police, some of them realized that they had been talking on the phone about the same students for a long time without ever meeting each other. They talked about their need to start working with each other, and not just in a formal way. "Like a small but good virus, it's spreading," said Negrea.



A "feedback group," shown here, is a structured opportunity for community members to tell one another how their behavior affects them.

The idea is to disseminate restorative practices everywhere. "Children at the new school will take what they learn home with them and it will affect their families," said Negrea.

Negrea hired Erika Bognar, a young Hungarian woman, as her first CSF staff member. Bognar had six weeks of training at the CSF school in Bethlehem. Despite initial language difficulties, she felt that she learned a great deal about restorative practices to bring back to her country, and was able to work with Negrea on plans for the opening of CSF Hungary. A third staff member, Laszlo Gupcsi, was hired more recently as a counselor and math, science and art teacher, and there are plans to hire more staff as the school expands.

The school now has four students, with more on the way. The four are ages 13 – 16, all children at risk who were expelled from school: two who had used drugs, one with a criminal record and one with truancy problems. All are doing very well at CSF Hungary. These are kids who never wanted to come to school, but now they come on time every day, even during heavy snowstorms. They help each other get up in the morning by calling each other on the phone. "It's a tough group," said Negrea, but she feels that the kids and the staff are making great progress together.

"We're doing exactly the same things we did at the CSF school in Bethlehem," said Negrea: "The same schedule, the same

group structure, the same questions, the same 'feelings poster.' " And it's all working. Kids are confronting each other and taking responsibility for themselves and each other. "I thought it would be more difficult," said Negrea. But, she said, "the tough kids feel respected, so they have no reason to be disrespectful to the staff or to each other."

Feedback from parents has been extremely positive. Negrea delighted parents by inviting them to attend intake interviews, along with the students and caseworkers. One parent exclaimed: "You mean we are going to be in the same room with our children and their social workers?" Said Negrea: "From the beginning, they have seen restorative practices and have been part of the program. Everybody had the chance to speak up." It's also a new thing for parents to be called with positive news from their children's school, a "good surprise" for them, said Negrea. One mother said that she never thought that her boy would go to school — that he never went before without being pushed.

Feedback from caseworkers has been positive, as well. Most caseworkers didn't believe students would come to the program. Now, said Negrea, "every day we are being viewed more and more seriously." Students are being referred to the school from group homes all over Budapest. Soon, they will have from 12 to 15 kids. Negrea wants to keep the maximum at 15 for now.

Negrea is hopeful that restorative practices will be good for Hungary. "Like every other country that was under the socialists for so many years," she said, "somebody always decided FOR you what you had to do, or told you what TO do." For that reason, she thinks, the notion of doing things WITH people will be especially beneficial for Hungary. (Socialism is not a bad thing in and of itself, Negrea believes, but it became an unsound system because people abused power.) "Restorative practices will be a good tool to help people develop fair relationships between people," she said. "Hungary needs that," she said, "and not just Hungary!"

"Some people are waiting for a miracle," said Negrea, "but I need to remember that it's not all me, it's up to them, too. The referral sources — everyone." In the candid spirit of restorative practices, "We'll be open for everybody," she said, adding, "The Ministry of Justice is already planning to visit." Ultimately, sustained by the knowledge that she has the full support of CSF and the IIRP behind her, Negrea declared: "I'm sure it's going to work."

### **It's all working. Kids are confronting each other and taking responsibility for themselves and each other.**

—Vidia Negrea

The IIRP's Benjamin Wachtel is traveling to Hungary from Pennsylvania this month to help set up the school's computer network, train the staff and kids to use it, and instruct them in digital video and photography. He's looking forward to the experience, even though he doesn't speak Hungarian and the kids don't speak much English. Negrea and her staff are teaching the kids English, a little at a time, and Wachtel will no doubt provide assistance with that, as well.

The kids at CSF Hungary are proud to be the first ones in a new program, and to finally really belong somewhere. Said Negrea: "We have kids with a lot of new dreams." We at the IIRP have great hopes for Negrea and CSF Hungary, and we'll keep you informed of their progress. ☉