

Restorative Practices with Sweden's Homeless: The Stockholm City Mission

BY LAURA MIRSKY

The homeless people of Stockholm, Sweden, are benefiting from restorative practices, thanks to the Stockholm City Mission, a 150-year-old nonprofit institution. At the City Mission, "everyone is welcome, no matter the state a person might find himself or herself in. In the near term, we work to relieve acute need. In the long term, we give people themselves the strength necessary to take control of their own lives" (from the City Mission website).

Mija Bergman and Annelie Edren, and their supervisor, Eva Fahlstrom, have worked with the City Mission for many years. Edren is head of the City Mission social depart-

ment; Bergman is manager of Bostallet (the Homestead), a halfway house for homeless men and women; and Fahlstrom is an outside consultant. The women were trained by the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP). They have successfully implemented restorative practices at Bostallet and Klaragården, a day center for homeless women.

City Mission programs are funded by a mix of private and public monies, with by far the larger share coming from private donations.

Bergman described how the City Mission came to implement restorative practices. "Sweden is a very social democratic country. We thought we had social security, that the state would always take care of its citizens." Then, she explained, a massive financial crisis in the late 1980s changed the economic structure of Swedish society.

"Even though we had the highest taxes in the world, we didn't have the resources to fund hospitals and schools or take care of the elderly, and the homeless population started to turn up on the streets." At the same time, the state closed down the mental hospitals. The plan was to integrate the mentally ill back into society, with the cities taking responsibility, but suddenly no money was available. Consequently, many of the mentally ill became homeless and sick, and many died.

Bergman said that she and Edren had been in search of new methods in their work with the homeless for a long time. "There were

many problems caused by the old ways of trying to solve things," she said, including a phenomenon occurring with the staff known as "parallel processing." Working with homeless people for many hours a day created a great deal of emotional stress for the staff. Said Bergman, "A lot of the staff started to act like they were homeless people themselves. When our 'guests' [as the staff refer to them] come to us, they have been violated and abused. They have a black hole that you can't fill up. They want more and more and more all the time." But the staff also began feeling violated and abused. "Over the years we have seen a lot of the staff become quite ill and bitter," said



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Bergman. The staff needs began getting in the way of fulfilling the guests' needs.

"We have a big empathy issue in Sweden," said Bergman. "We are so understanding. It's in our self-image and our culture and in our history as a social welfare state. The problem is that we feel so sorry for these poor homeless people, so we figure out very good plans of how they should deal with their problems, and then we inform them, 'you should do this and you should do that,' and they get furious! And we say, 'but we are just trying to help you!' We want to do everything for them. And it will eat you alive." Eventually, Bergman realized that they needed "something with much more structure."

Bergman and Edren's supervisor, Eva Fahlstrom, had been looking for a method to help them. She heard about people in Australia who were practicing something called restorative justice. Through them, Fahlstrom contacted Real Justice (now a program of the IIRP) in the United States. She attended the first Real Justice restorative practices facilitator training in Europe, in Amsterdam, Netherlands, in February 2000.

"When I came back from the training, I was so enthusiastic that Mija and Annelie were contaminated by my enthusiasm!" said Fahlstrom. She invited the IIRP's Beth Rodman and Paul McCold to train people in Sweden, including Bergman and Edren, who then traveled to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to pursue further training.

"Mija and Annelie became our greatest ambassadors," said Fahlstrom. "They immediately started to use restorative practices

at the City Mission. Like hurricanes, Mija and Annelie trained 120 staff members. Altogether in Sweden we have 140 trained Real Justice facilitators." City Mission managing director Staffan Hellgren took the Real Justice training and decided to associate the Mission with Svenska Real Justice, the Real Justice-licensed organization initiated and directed by Fahlstrom.

Bergman said that at first she was "very suspicious" about restorative practices, because of her "Swedish culture baggage." An obstacle to Swedish acceptance of restorative practices, she said, is also one of the big differences between America and Sweden. "You have a much stricter way of bringing up children. In Sweden it's actually illegal to hit your child. You can't slap them on the bottom; it's a felony."

Bergman talked about seeing a film during restorative practices training about a restorative conference held for two girls who had been caught shoplifting. "I was really upset, because I could see in the film that the mother and father of one of the girls had issues, and I thought that they should be on trial instead, because the girls were just children," she said. "This is very Swedish: How can one hold children responsible for their behavior? But then it started to dawn on me—OK, they have this background, and they have parents who have their own issues, but when are these children going to meet grown-ups who will hold them accountable for their behavior?"

In 2000, it was decided that restorative practices would be tried at Klaragården, the day center for homeless women. Bergman and Edren began working with small impromptu conferences and more structured, formal conferences.

The structure at Klaragården was clearly established. Said Bergman: "As soon as you do something that violates the cardinal rules—if you are threatening, use violence, if you've taken any drugs—you have to leave. But you can book an appointment to come back." The process is about reintegrating people into a community, instead of excluding them.

"No matter how mentally ill they are, we always hold clients accountable for their behavior and their actions," said Bergman, "but we always separate between the deed and the

doer. This is very new to the way we do things in Sweden. But in the staff groups that I have worked with, it soon becomes integrated. This is very hot stuff in Sweden."

When Bergman and Edren began restorative practices training, they told Klaragården's guests about it. (They inform guests about all trainings and conferences.) Guests would no longer be cut off from Klaragården permanently or long term if they had used drugs or alcohol, as had previously been the case. (The old policy had been "a disaster," said Bergman.)

Klaragården's guests were thrilled. They thought, said Bergman, "'So that means, anything goes! We can do anything, as long as we say we're sorry!' And I was like, hmm, you just wait and see!"

Before long, two women stole about \$50 to \$60 in cash from Klaragården and bought drugs with it. Said Bergman, "They showed up drunk and said, 'We would like to make an appointment, please!'"

A restorative meeting was held. The women told their story: "We were going to buy flowers, but we wanted drugs. So we thought we would buy some drugs, and then we could sell some drugs, and we could make a lot of money, and then we could buy some flowers. And then we got drunk. And we're so sorry! We won't do it again!"

"I thought, hmm, OK," said Bergman. Then she told them how offended she was that they had violated Klaragården's trust: "We are a community working together, trying to have a sanctuary just for homeless women, a place for you and all of your sisters to come to, and you have pissed on our building! You have violated everything."

Then Bergman asked the women how they were going to repair the harm they had caused. The women were shocked, because they hadn't expected to have to *do* anything. But Bergman was very firm.

Finally, the women offered to clean Klaragården's radiators, and Bergman agreed. "I think it took them the whole summer," she said. "I knew how many radiators there were, and they didn't!"

"When they had done it, I told them, 'You have repaired it. This is beautiful. You have restored my faith in you.' And this was really

something, because these women are regarded as very borderline characters. They have been living in this subculture for so many years. I still meet them sometimes. Sometimes they are doing OK and sometimes they are not doing OK. But every time, they will say, 'Do you remember the radiators? I cleaned them the whole summer!' And I will say, 'Yes, you did very good reparative work.'

"I think it was the first time that they had actually been able to repair something, and it made them feel good. It's about pride, I think. They restored my faith in them and my trust in them. But they also restored their own pride in taking responsibility for what they had done."

When the staff began implementing restorative practices at Klaragården, they decided, "when you do it, you do it with everyone," said Bergman. She told a story about a long-term client, a schizophrenic woman who was very hard to make contact with. "She walked up to one of my staff and slapped her in the face. The staff member was totally shocked. She was crying and felt abused and violated. It was a very severe situation."

Bergman told the schizophrenic woman that she had physically abused a staff member. "And this is important," she said, "We make no difference between staff and clients. We would have done the same if [the person who got slapped] was a client."

Bergman told the woman, "You have to leave now, but you can make an appointment to come back, and we can have a restorative meeting. Do you want to do that?" The woman agreed to return for the meeting at 2 p.m. the next Tuesday.

"When she left us, it was the middle of the winter and she was barefoot and hallucinating, talking with her voices. I said, 'Oh God, what have we done? She doesn't know what planet she's on, and I told her to come back on Tuesday at 2!'"

When Tuesday arrived, Bergman was very anxious about the schizophrenic woman. Then, she said, "at one minute to 2, she knocked on my door." During the meeting, Bergman, the woman and the staff member who'd been slapped talked about the incident.

The schizophrenic woman explained that, in her world, all the staff members had evil

twins, invisible to anyone but her. They called her bad names, pinched, slapped, kicked and abused her. On the afternoon of the incident, one of the twins had been giving her a really hard time, so she got fed up and slapped her. To her surprise, she slapped a real person! But that hadn't been her intention. "That was the first time that she told us anything about how she experienced reality," said Bergman.

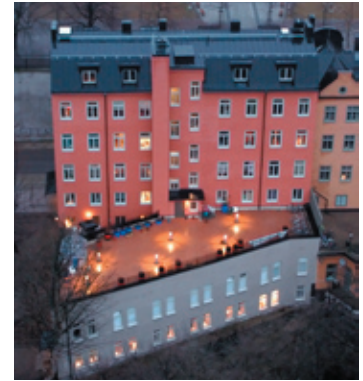
Then the staff member told the schizophrenic woman how she had been affected and how upset she was. "You don't try to smooth things over because you are talking to someone who is mentally ill," said Bergman. "You are actually respecting them by telling them, 'When you hit me, I was in shock. It was very painful and I had your finger marks on my cheek. And I went home and my husband said, 'Do you get beat up at work? What kind of work is that?' And he didn't want me to come back here.'" They also discussed how other people had been affected. Guests had left the center because it was uncomfortable to be there; staff members had been anxious about the schizophrenic woman's welfare.

They then discussed how the woman could fix what had happened. First, she apologized. Then Bergman told the woman that she could repair the harm she'd done by telling them how they could help her, so that she would not repeat her bad behavior.

Said Bergman, "She told us, 'In my world, the Russian tanks are coming down the streets. I'm in a war situation all the time. And all the people have scaffolding around them, like buildings. And my scaffolding is coming down. And when this happens, I get so afraid.'

"She was actually describing her mental defenses and how she emotionally fell to bits and how she lost her sense of self. And she said, 'When I get really scared, I want to be able to grab you on the arm and say, 'I'm scared.'" And I want you to tell me, "It's OK, there will be no war today. There are no tanks on the streets.'" And then she said, 'I want you to put your arms around me to hold my scaffolding.'"

The restorative meeting gave Klaragården's staff new knowledge about the world in which the schizophrenic woman lives, as well as tools to help her avoid violent incidents, so she could



Bostallet
Homeless Halfway House

remain at the center. "Now she has a much better relationship with the staff at Klaragården," said Bergman. "As soon as she started to talk about war and how scared she is, all the people who work there could help her."

After Klaragården, the City Mission opened Bostallet, the first halfway house for homeless people in Scandinavia. The house is in the center of Stockholm, "next to the square where all the drugs are sold," said Bergman. "It's a huge challenge," she added.

The notion of community was central to Bostallet's success from its inception. But, said Bergman, "We have no word for community in Sweden. 'Society,' that is our translation." Nonetheless, she said, a crucial part of the process at Bostallet is "the concept of being in a community, about reintegrating people instead of shutting them out."

As Scandinavia's first homeless halfway house, Bostallet got a lot of media attention. Said Bergman, "There was a lot of debate in Sweden about it not being possible to have homeless people living in the center of Stockholm. The house is situated in the poshest, most attractive part of town. We were expecting a lot of very negative reaction: 'Not in my backyard.'"

Bergman took advantage of the publicity. "When we were on television and in the papers, we said, 'We have such fantastic neighbors! They have been so supportive!' And we hadn't even met them!"

The optimism paid off. "I think it's because we introduced the concept of commu-

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nity to them,” said Bergman. “Even before we opened, people rang the doorbell—that’s very un-Swedish—and said, ‘I have made you a cake! I have brought you some towels!’ So we’re getting huge support from the community where we live.”

Bostallet has also put a lot of emphasis on being good neighbors themselves. Said Bergman, “We have the best-looking house on the street. In the summer we have flowers everywhere. You would never think that it’s a halfway house.”

“We are trying to integrate the halfway house into the community in every aspect we can,” said Bergman. Two major art exhibitions were held at Bostallet recently. “We sold some very famous painters’ paintings, along with pieces created by our tenants, as we call them. So they can show that they are not just homeless, drug addicts, freaks, dangerous people, but that there is something exciting going on here. The art studio is at street level, so everyone who walks by can see it.”

Restorative practices are in constant use at Bostallet. “We work first on the individual level,” said Bergman. “We have seven counselors who work on a daily basis with the clients. You have to support clients to clean messes up all the time themselves, and support them to communicate with their neighbors in the house. We have community meetings on the different floors every week.”

“It’s a deadly sin to let anything pass,” said Bergman. “You must confront the person at once, within 24 hours, when it’s still fresh, because otherwise it will not make sense. Everyone knows that as soon as you violate one rule, you will have a talk, at once.”

Bostallet has eight floors, which provide four progressive levels of improvement for tenants, from basic shelter to semi-independent “training apartments.”

Men can come right off the street into the first level, the shelter. “We give them a contract when they come in, to become a member of our club,” said Bergman. “We want them to realize that they are members of this community. They have to sign their name, their social security number. It’s like they are assuring us that they will behave in a good manner when they are with us.”

The men are welcome in any state, as long as they do not violate the house cardinal rules, like taking or selling drugs. If they break the rules, said Bergman, “We will tear the contract, and they are no longer members, they will have to leave at once.”

But the men can make an appointment for a restorative meeting to come back and talk about what happened, who was affected, what they can do to make sure such an incident doesn’t happen again and what they need from the staff in order to make sure it doesn’t recur. “This is quite successful,” said Bergman.

The needs of the men in the shelter are addressed according to the Maslow model. (Abraham Maslow, 1908-1970, was an American psychologist who developed a personality theory based on a hierarchy of needs.) The first step in the hierarchy is individual needs, said Bergman: “personal security, not to be cold, to have someplace to stay, to have food to eat, to take care of your hygiene.” The next step is relationships with other people. The highest step is self-actualization: fulfillment of one’s visions, goals and dreams.



Her Majesty Queen Silvia and His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden (left), visit the art studio at Bostallet, hosted by Stockholm City Mission managing director Staffan Hellgren and art therapist Helena Fredriksson (right).

In the shelter, the focus is on basic needs. “When they have eaten and slept and they feel secure, then we can start to relate,” said Bergman. “We talk to them, ask them: What do you want, what can we do to help you now? Also, do they need rehabilitation, do they need therapy, do they need medication? A lot of the people come to us severely physically ill. They have multi-resistant bacteria, cancer, AIDS, hepatitis, you name it.”

When the men start to want to change, to work on their problems and on quitting drugs, they can move up to the short-term living floor. “We accept a lot of stuff that goes on there,” said Bergman. “You have to want to change, but we accept that change will not happen at once. Everyone who lives in our house messes things up eventually, and they should, because if they do it when they are staying with us, we can help them. We can say, ‘Oh, so you decided to relapse now,’ and that’s interesting, because you can ask what had happened before—try to make things out together with them, and bring the professional network in and talk about it and try to support the individual in finding alternative strategies and new ways of solving things.”

Bostallet has introduced “network packages,” involving psychologists, therapists, rehab centers and hospitals, to bring resources together for their tenants. Many of Bostallet’s tenants attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

One of the biggest issues for Bostallet’s tenants is their children and families. Bostallet collaborates with the Meeting Place, a City Mission unit inspired by the New

Zealand family group conference (FGC) method. FGC facilitators “support our tenants and find different ways to communicate and repair the history of the family,” said Bergman, adding, “We work in a very similar way, and we can communicate very easily because we share the same approach.” (For a list of articles about family group conferencing—also called family group decision making—available in the IIRP online

library, go to:

<http://www.familypower.org>.)

When tenants want to quit drugs completely, they move up to the drug-free level: long-term living. "It's at this level that the tenants do their own big work," said Bergman. "They get tested, they have to try things out, they have to relapse, they have to mess things up and sort things out."

When a tenant relapses, a meeting is held, bringing a group together to talk about what happened. The person who has relapsed will tell his or her story, everyone else will say how they have been affected—staff and tenants alike—and they will discuss what repair work needs to be done.

"It's always the same," said Bergman, "At first, people will be angry at this individual, because he has brought in drugs and shown up under the influence of drugs on their floor. And also because they do not want to sit in a meeting! But then they hear what has happened: 'My 15-year-old son called me yesterday and said that I had destroyed his life and that I'm a bad mother and he doesn't want to talk to me again. So I needed to go out and get drunk.' Or 'I got the diagnosis from the HIV clinic and I'm positive. So I went out and took heroin.'

"It always makes sense, and it's always something that the others can identify with and feel very sympathetic with. They will give support and say, 'Our main concern is that you are slipping away from us and that you need to get support from us. We have noticed that you have been avoiding us. I will feel that you have repaired what happened if you come with me to a meeting, if you go out for coffee with me twice a week, if you join me in the art studio and we do some work for the exhibition.'"

Bostallet's fourth level has 38 training apartments, each with a kitchen and bathroom. Here, tenants are expected to take care of themselves but still belong to the community. They go to work or school during the week but participate in community activities on weekends.

Fourth-level tenants also begin to try to find another living situation because Bostallet is not a permanent solution. To that end, they begin to repair their economic history.

Because of their debts, they would be unable to have an apartment outside Bostallet, said Bergman.

"When you have debts, the tax authorities bar you from everything. You can't get a job. You can't get an apartment, a loan or anything. So together with them, we start to track down what kind of debts they have." She compared the process to detective work: "Usually they have a big plastic bag full of unopened bills. You have to map it out, contact all their creditors and ask them to write off their old debts or make some kind of deal. We

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—Mija Bergman

support them in trying to pay back whatever they can."

The staff also helps tenants find occupations, said Bergman, "but the tenants have to be involved in the process. We don't do it for them." The City Mission has a school for adults, and when tenants are clear of drugs and have their situation under control, they can apply there. The Mission also runs a chain of secondhand stores where tenants can receive job training. "It's the same there as it is at the halfway house. If you show up at the secondhand store under the influence of drugs, you will be asked to leave," said Bergman.

Bostallet has fewer places for women than men. (The seventh floor has short-term living for women only, and the eighth has some training apartments for women.) Many more men apply to live in Bostallet than women.

"We have succeeded much better with men than with women," said Bergman, adding, "Women have a lot more to deal with when starting the process of change. Women's issues tend to be about relationships: being a good mother, girlfriend or daughter. Many women have great difficulty with guilt and

shame. Men's issues are more about how to be seen as a man of power and position."

Women find it painful to be in an institution, said Bergman, "because they have been on drugs for the last 10, 20, 30 years. Their faces are scarred, they have no teeth, their children are in their late teens and they haven't seen them for many years, and there is a lot of anxiety, acting out and being self-destructive."

Bergman said she thinks that many women need something that's more focused on them as individuals. (There is a shelter, on the island of Kungsholmen, in central Stockholm, exclusively for women.) "When they move into the house," she said, "they mother people and take care of them because they don't want to feel what they are feeling themselves." It's sad, she said. "We are constantly telling them not to worry about the other people because we are here for them.

"This may seem like we simplify or that we see women as more complex than men, which is not true," said Bergman. "We just recognize that we need different strategies working with women than with men. At the end of the day, all the men and women we meet are persons who have been abused in their lives and need a lot of support—and boundaries—to be able to dare to change."

Mija Bergman and Annelie Edren will be plenary speakers at the upcoming IIRP conference, "Building a Global Alliance for Restorative Practices and Family Empowerment, Part 2," to be held August 5-7, 2004, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. For information on this conference, go to: <http://www.iirp.org/bc04>.

To access the Stockholm City Mission website, go to:

<http://www.stadsmissionen.se> (in Swedish).

For information in English, go to: <http://www.stadsmissionen.se/zino.aspx?articleID=486>. ☉