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Using Video as a Restorative Practices Tool: Establishing Communication Between Diverse Groups

Thank you for attending this breakout session. During our time together today I will show some video made by a group of prison inmates at a maximum-security prison. I know they would interpret the meaning of having a "breakout session" in a completely different way than we do...

Today we will explore how to use Restorative Practices and video technology to have dialogues between people in situations where they would otherwise not occur. For clarification I want to say that I firmly believe in the advantages of face-to-face interaction and wouldn't ever suggest substituting first-hand exchanges with something that required technology to intervene in exchanges between people. But in situations where person-to-person can't happen I think video can function as a valuable tool.

First I will talk and then show some video. Next I will ask for volunteers to respond. Then hopefully we will still have enough time for questions and further discussion.

To begin with I would like to say a few words about my background. I have done video production professionally on-and-off for thirty years. I first got involved with Restorative Justice in 1996 as a crime victim. My wife, our five-year-old daughter and I became victims of a burglary of our home that included a violent confrontation. After learning about Restorative Justice we arranged to have a victim-offender conference with each of the two young men who broke into our home. Because of the remarkable positive experience we had, I have become an advocate for Restorative Justice in Wisconsin since then.

Fast forward eleven years to early in the year 2007 when a group from my hometown of Madison Wisconsin, named *The Prison Ministry Project* began to offer a twelve-week seminar on Restorative Justice at *Columbia Correctional Institution*, a maximum-security prison. I have taken part by telling my crime survivor story to the prison inmates during an intensive three-day circle retreat at the culmination of the seminars. I never would have imagined after becoming a crime victim that it would lead me down this path – to the inside of a maximum security prison. Every time I participate in the Restorative Justice seminars at *CCI* it has a profound effect on me. Hearing the heartfelt personal stories and seeing the deep impact the circle process has on the men renews and energizes my belief in the great potential that Restorative Practices can have in transforming people's lives.

The on-going work of the *Prison Ministry Project* has produced a loyal group of Restorative Justice practitioners within *Columbia Correctional*. Twice a year a new group of about twenty men more go through the program and over time a small and devoted community of graduates has grown steadily at the institution.

Shortly after the first group graduated from the program some of the men had conversations with Robyn Bradley, a social worker at *Columbia*, about continuing with their Restorative Justice work. They wanted to put what they had learned about into practice.

A few words about the setting here: the majority of the prisoners at *Columbia* have received very long sentences and many have "life without parole." They live in an extremely restrictive environment with limited opportunities to make choices. So, for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections to even allow the Restorative Justice program into the institution at all represented a big change in their thinking. In the spring of 2008 the warden at *CCI* gave the staff permission to form the *Restorative Justice Alumni Group* on a trial basis. The positive behavior changes of the inmates must have played a role in his decision.

At their first meeting they discussed how they, as a group, they could begin to work to repair the harm they had caused and reach out to the community from inside the prison. The *CCI* Social Workers who facilitated the group suggested that they make a video program, which the group took on as their primary focus. When I heard about what the group wanted to do I felt overjoyed and volunteered to help with the project.

I have to confess to my initial naïveté about the dynamics of working in a maximum-security prison. We struggled finding a way to work with the video that the prison authorities would allow. We had a lot of obstacles to overcome - but I don't want to dwell on the problems or the missteps that occurred. Partially they had to do with my lack of knowledge of the prison environment and partially because of the unusual nature of the project. Some of the staff at *CCI* viewed our work with cautious apprehension, but to their credit, they did allow us to develop the program. The WI Department of Corrections took a risk by allowing me to work with the prisoners - if things had gone seriously wrong they would have to take the blame for it.

I have learned over the years of producing video that the relationship you build with the people you work with has everything to do with the success of the endeavor. Far more often than not the people who work in corrections get treated badly by the press and media people who misrepresent their true intentions have often exploited them. So, I had to put a lot of effort into earning their trust. That meant accepting without question the strict limitations imposed on the activities of the group and moving ahead knowing that we could not do things we envisioned. At times I felt completely exasperated - I know also that I frequently tested the patience and tolerance of the *CCI* Staff too. Over time, with some trial and error, we did develop a good working relationship.

Eventually we settled upon a simple way of using the video. I have to give Jerry Hancock of *Prison Ministries* credit for coming up with the name: *video dialogues*. We used the video in a specifically targeted and way: not broadcasting a message - more analogous to having a conversation. We would pick out a group to communicate with and make a video message to initiate a dialogue.

The men in the group felt strongly about reaching out to young people on the edge of getting into trouble. When they reflected back upon their own lives and choices they had made at that age they realized how they had taken a path that had led them astray. They expressed a deep commitment about reaching out to young people to help them avoid making the same mistakes.

The spark of inspiration came from Robyn Bradley a social worker at CCI, whom I mentioned earlier. One day, in a conversation with her young daughter she asked: "*If you could ask one question to the prison inmates, what would you ask them?*" Without missing a beat her daughter replied: "*How do I know that you will not commit crimes again when you get released from prison?*" When the CCI RJ Alumni group considered that question it prompted a sincere and thoughtful discussion. Because, for most of the men, their current prison sentence had not come as the first, so, in all honesty, they had to confront the likely possibility of re-offending again after their release. After the discussion I set up the camera on a tripod and we made video recordings of group members who chose to respond.

I made arrangements to show the video to a group of teenagers in program called *Dane County Youth Court*. The *Youth Court* takes referrals from the justice system for juvenile offenders who have committed non-violent offences. They use a circle process and a peer court to decide how offenders will make amends for their crimes. We watched the video made by the *CCI Alumni Group* and they discussed it. I video taped their questions and brought the recording back to the prison. We watched the tape and then recorded their answers the next time we met, so they had time to prepare their responses. I followed up with a session for the teens to see the answers to their questions. Although difficult to truly measure, I sensed that the recordings had an impact on the teens from watching their reactions and hearing what they had to say.

We had another *video dialogue* with the members of the church that sponsors the *Prison Ministries Project: The First Congregational United Church of Christ* in Madison Wisconsin. The members of the church financially support the work of the *Prison Ministries Project*, but most of them will never have contact with the prisoners or directly experience any of the results of their generosity. The church had an event to show recognition for the prison program volunteers so the *RJ Alumni Group* wanted to reach out to them to express their appreciation. I wish we had more time today, because I would love to show you the *RJ Alumni Group's* messages and the responses we got from the congregation. People reacted so favorably to the inmates and gave them a lot of positive feedback.

In both of the examples I mentioned the *video dialogue* had only two installments: one from the *RJ Alumni Group* and one from the audience we reached out to. But this format has the potential to accommodate an on-going exchange as well. Our third project used an extended form of the *video dialogue*, with multiple exchanges.

Voices Beyond Bars in Madison supports people returning to the community after their release from prison. They also have some participants who get temporary

releases from their incarcerations to attend meetings. Their weekly circle groups offer a place for formerly incarcerated people to come together to share their experiences and to support one another in their struggles to remain free. Over a six-month period we recorded nine installments of a *video dialogue* between the *RJ Alumni Group* and *Voices Beyond Bars*. This exchange had an added dimension because several of the *Voices Beyond Bars* members had served time at *Columbia Correctional* and the members of *RJ Alumni Group* knew them well. For the men in the *RJ Alumni Group*, seeing their peers succeeding in their lives after incarceration gave them positive role models to look up to and emulate. The conduit provided by the video link enlarged the circle of support to connect the community with the men inside the prison. The two groups offered encouragement, hope and unity to each other through their *video dialogue*.

None of the communication in three examples I have talked about would have taken place without the video forming the link. The technical resources of the video lend themselves to this application, having relevance in contexts where face-to-face interaction cannot occur. Again, I don't advocate this as a substitute for first-hand exchanges but as an alternative when it can't.

The simplicity of the structure of the *video dialogues* makes it accessible in a variety of settings and does not require an advanced level of expertise to produce.

Using *video dialogues* creates the potential for a powerful feedback mechanism. By articulating their messages participants utilize a number of critical thinking skills: introspection, self-reflection and meta-cognition and assimilation. Using the *video dialogue* as a conduit for communication both sends messages out to connect with others while at the same time reflecting insights back at the sender. In the examples I have talked about the members of the *CCI RJ Alumni Group* model constructive and engaged behavior. They apply the concepts they have learned, which reinforces the connection with the values embodied in the philosophy of Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices.

I can envision using this video technique in a variety of settings for other applications involving Restorative Practices. As telecommunications technology has proliferated throughout our culture, yet we have not adequately developed the potential for using it. Since we have come from a history characterized by technological inaccessibility we still have a mindset with those blinders on. Also, because of a generalized lack of training people tend to associate using the accessible types of video with low quality production.

Now I would like to demonstrate how this works and ask you to participate in a *video dialogue* with the *Restorative Justice Alumni Group* at *Columbia Correctional Institution*. Before I came to the *IIRP Conference* I recorded the first part of the conversation at *CCI* with members of the *RJ Alumni Group* who addressed their messages to you here in this room, which we will now view. To complete this conversation I ask that anyone who wants to volunteer to respond which I will record. I will put the responses on a DVD for the inmates at the prison to complete our conversation.