

## Directing *Burning Bridges*, a Documentary about a Restorative Conference

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Early in the morning of June 23, 2004, arson destroyed historic Mood's Covered Bridge, in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, USA. The community was heartbroken at the loss of this beloved landmark, a reminder of more tranquil, simpler times.

When the identity of the arsonists was discovered two months later, the community went into shock again. The six young men who had committed the crime were well known in the area, graduates of the local high school, college students from "good families." People were outraged by what the young men had done and struggled with how to deal with their anger.

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) offered to run a restorative conference with the young men, their families and members of the community, hoping it might heal some of the damage that the young men's crime had caused.

As IIRP communications coordinator, when I heard about the conference, I thought it could be a great subject for a documentary. This would be an unusual conference, I thought, because the "victims" of the crime were really the whole community. I hoped that the documentary could portray how conferencing can help a community move past anger and pain to healing.

*Burning Bridges*, as we titled the documentary, became not just about the conference but about the entire incident. The arson was big news in the Philadelphia region. As newspapers and TV followed developments in the story, we incorporated their coverage into our video.

Shooting the documentary, we had to remember that the conference was more

important than the video and take care to have as little impact as possible on the process. Still, we were able to capture the entire process, from the facilitators' pre-conference preparation with the participants to post-conference interviews.

As director of the documentary, I saw every stage of the conference process and observed how participants changed along the way. One of the young men's fathers came to symbolize this progression to me, and we featured it in the video.

Before the conference, this father expressed anger and distress, not only with his son and what he had done, but with the strangers who had attacked him and his son in the media. "Who are they to judge me and the way I'm raising my kids?" he asked.

During the conference, he was overcome by emotion and wept. Asked how his son's crime had affected him, he said he couldn't stop thinking about it; his stomach was in knots; he couldn't sleep.

In an interview a few days after the conference, he was relaxed and happy. He talked about how the conference had freed him to lay bare his emotions in front of his son. "He's never seen me like that before," he said.

The video had an impact on the judicial process. The judge in the arson case watched the entire three-hour unedited tape of the conference and used it as a sentencing tool. In the video, he said, he saw how the community had been affected by the crime and observed the young men who committed the arson apologize and try to make things right.

We held a free screening of *Burning Bridges* for the community. I was amazed by the turnout—over 160 people



Father and son in *Burning Bridges*

of all ages, including many conference participants.

The audience was riveted from the start. It was extraordinary—electric—to sit in an auditorium full of people watching themselves and their neighbors in the throes of an emotionally charged restorative conference.

During the "talk-back" period after the screening, community members stood up, one after another, to say how the video had helped them sort out their unresolved feelings of anger and sadness. To me, the most poignant such declaration came from a woman whose late husband was a member of the Mood family, for which the bridge was named.

We hope that *Burning Bridges* illustrates how restorative conferencing works, in a manner that is clear, affecting and powerful. We also hope that it will spread the word about how conferencing can help resolve conflict and repair harm between individuals and within communities. We believe that when people have a forum to communicate directly and honestly, face-to-face, it can be a bridge to peace.

To view a preview from or to order a copy of *Burning Bridges*, please go to: <http://www.iirp.org/booksvideos/description/burningbridges.html>.