



Restorative Justice International (RJI)

RJI is a global association and network with over 5,700 members founded in 2009 via social media at LinkedIn.com to support and expand victim-initiated restorative justice efforts worldwide. RJI's president is Lisa Rea, a national and international restorative justice expert with 20 years of experience in the field. RJI's Global Advisory Council is comprised of influential global leaders in restorative justice and justice reform, including crime victims and ex-offenders.

For more information go to www.restorativejusticeinternational.com

Interview with Lisa Rea, president of Restorative Justice International

By Ines Aubert, September 2017 (with paragraphs of an interview of 2010)

Lisa, thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. What convinces you so strongly about the idea of restorative justice?

It is clear that the justice system is broken. It does not matter where you live in the world. We are all battling the same problems: an over-reliance on incarceration (for all offenders - violent and nonviolent). We do not understand that crime injures victims. By not acknowledging that crime injures victims there is a lack of understanding that to change offenders (and their conduct) they must be held accountable. When you are looking to drive down crime rates, you must look at how offenders are held accountable. You also must look at whether or not victims are satisfied once they are a part of the justice system.

Much of the anger of crime victims in the U.S., in particular victims of violent crime, is because they are forgotten. The needs of victims are ignored while at the same time victims are also used by those in the justice system who are seeking convictions, and longer sentences. Crime has been used as a political football often to elect politicians or keep them in power. This is not a U.S. only problem it's sadly a global problem.

Do you recommend that every victim and offender participate in restorative justice?

I think restorative justice has great value for all injured by crime: victims, offenders and as well as communities. There are many ways to participate in restorative justice. Being a part of a victim offender dialogue or restorative justice meeting is one way. I think of it as "pure" restorative justice. But there is also something called "circles" or circles of accountability. That is defined as a victim offender meeting that involves family members of both the victim and the offender. These are increasingly used and quite successful.

There are times when surrogate victims participate in restorative justice programs where the end result has been successful or positive. That would mean real victims and real offenders coming together but in unrelated cases. That describes The Sycamore Tree Project. At first I thought using surrogate victims (and offenders) would not yield positive results. I was wrong.

What are some misconceptions about Restorative Justice?

There is sometimes confusion about the definition of restorative justice. Some think that any type of prison reform or criminal justice reform type measures are “restorative justice.” But if the victim is not central and involved in the process then it is not restorative justice. Some good reforms that are necessary and an improvement in our prisons and justice system can be called “more restorative.” However, if the victim is not integral in the reforms then it is not restorative justice. What tends to happen is that victims get forgotten which is a problem. That is why restorative justice was first created to put the focus on the fact that victims are injured by crime. Crime is not a crime against the state but against a victim, a real human being.

Are there some offenders or some victims who should never consider restorative justice?

I think all should have the option to meet - particularly the victim should have that option. Some might never choose to sit down have that dialogue. But the option to should be there. For offenders, I think all offenders should be able to meet their victim if that victim is agreeable.

This is where some standards must be set. I do not believe doors should be shut on lifers, for instance. If an offender takes responsibility for his/her crime then that act and the sharing of that remorse for the injury caused could mean a great deal to the victim/or the victim's family. I know what it means to the victims I have worked with.

How could either an offender or a victim start the process?

RJI often suggests that restorative justice processes be driven by the victim. Thus, it's usually better for an initiated contact to be coming from the crime victim versus the offender. For victims who are interested in contacting their offender, if they are in prison, they can go through RJI. We have a large network of members and affiliates and we can often assist either by referring or if possible sometimes working directly on cases.

RJI has found in recent years that there has been more openness by crime victims to be directly contacted by an offender by letter but there should be great care used if this were to happen. It's best to go through a neutral party to initiate some kind of RJ process. Because we work with victims of violent crime new victims who are just learning about restorative justice contact us to meet those who have met their offenders and participated in victim offender dialogue. By hearing the stories of other victims many who have been injured by crime but unsatisfied with the current justice system are

looking for something to help them. RJI strongly supports a victim's right to restorative justice. We believe it should be in our laws as a formal right to choose restorative justice and have access to services and programs allowing contact with the offender or at least the option of participating in surrogate type programming.

What do you think about people such as our lifespark members who do so much for inmates on death row?

Since I first came to prison reform/justice reform work (in 1989) as a pen pal to a lifer through Prison Fellowship Ministries then I, of course, understand those who choose to seek to respond to the great need of others in our society in this way. Those in prison around the globe are often the most forgotten in our world. My concern for those in prison came from my faith.

What could our role as pen pals of offenders in a restorative justice be?

You could learn more about restorative justice and be a link to those who are doing restorative justice work, as you are doing here through this interview. Support restorative justice as a means towards systemic reform of a broken system. I think those offenders who are interested in restorative justice should learn more about it.

Do you think we should address our pen pals with the idea of restorative justice?

Yes. Some might say that educating offenders about restorative justice, especially those serving life sentences or on death row, only sets them up for something that will never happen.

I do not believe that. I can think of cases where the impossible happened but it is not easy. In fact, it is often very hard work for the offenders and the victims. However, the fruit that comes from restorative justice is real and can bring hope to all those who have been deeply injured and violated.

Participating in a restorative justice meeting has great benefits. However, it should not affect the sentence of the offender. That is something that often concerns crime victims and those who advocate for victims' rights. The benefit comes from the healing that is possible. I have seen the value in the lives of both victims and offenders. It is tangible.

Would it be possible for our members to get in contact with victims and talk to them?

Yes, I do think there are victims who would speak to offenders about restorative justice and their experiences. Not all victims are at the same place in their lives as Bill Pelke, for example. But there are increasing numbers of victims in support of restorative justice worldwide. They have stories to tell and they are stories of hope.

Could Restorative Justice be effective in our everyday lives?

Yes, it is very applicable to our everyday lives. I talk often about restorative justice applying in the macro and the micro. Whenever any conflict occurs restorative justice principles can be applied to attempt to make things right and resolve the conflict. Healing comes, on some level, when we seek to resolve conflicts personally or after crime or violence. Do I use the principles of restorative justice in my own life? Yes. We all need it. Increasingly restorative justice is being used in our schools and in the same way the principles apply to family conflicts or disputes.

Has the years-long work with Restorative Justice changed you personally?

Yes, definitely. I've met some amazing people - crime victims and even those who have served significant prison time. Restorative justice has taken me to places I never thought I'd see and you could say that I would not have chosen to see. I spent a good deal of time visiting an offender in San Quentin and I've visited prisons in Bulgaria, Puerto Rico, New Zealand and of course in the U.S. I've met many victims of violent crime who have forgiven the offenders for truly horrible crimes. The road of restorative justice takes you to places of violence that are begging for new ways of responding to crime. The use of restorative justice in cases of wrongful convictions is another example. What restorative justice gives you is an increased thirst for real justice because our current justice systems are so lacking. This work also expands your capacity to care about people - hurting people. But hopefully we go beyond that and provide some kind of relief and hope to others.

What is your vision with regard to Restorative Justice?

As I mention in our short video restorative justice provides this new vision and gives us hope for changing our justice systems no matter what country you live. We start with the premise that our justice systems are broken. Restorative justice provides hope for those injured by violence and those that commit violent crime as well. It also acknowledges the fact that communities are injured by crime. Peace is broken after crime. How can that peace be restored? I'm convinced that we need law makers who understand the importance of restorative justice and are ready to work to change our laws to reflect it. This takes courage.

Throughout our justice systems we need professionals willing to commit to this vision because it's the right thing to do. That will bring real systemic change. I'm encouraged by the change I have seen since I first started in the justice field. Change has happened and we need to commit ourselves to restorative justice every day and explore new ways of making it a reality. Everyone can join this effort and step up to be a part of the solution.

Thank you so much, Lisa. What you told us here is really encouraging and very moving. Everybody should learn about Restorative Justice – probably through this interview. I'm happy that you shared all of this with us!