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**RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PILOT PROJECT
AT THE PARENTAGE AND CHILD
SUPPORT COURT OF THE CIRCUIT
COURT OF COOK COUNTY**

STEFANI SILBERSTEIN RADIST,
JUDGE MARTHA A. MILLS, RET.,
ELIZABETH J. VASTINE AND PETER C. NEWMAN

INTRODUCTION

In the Circuit Court of Cook County, the Parentage and Child Support Court (PCSC) determines, for unmarried parents, the issue of parentage and attempts to ensure that the parties' children have two caring parents to provide physical, mental, emotional and financial support. For many reasons the results sometimes fall short of the goal. The relationship issues are often tenuous and contentious. The tools available to the court to assist parties in bridging those gaps are few and far between.¹ The Restorative Justice Pilot Project (hereinafter, the Project) offered parents, children and other agreed upon participants a safe and respectful space where they would have the opportunity to both speak and listen to each other. The experience also would allow them to learn and experience effective ways of communicating. If successful, the increased ability to problem-solve and any co-parenting agreements rendered would free them, totally or partially, from emotionally and financially draining court proceedings. However, court assistance would

¹ The needs of PCSC are exacerbated as an extremely high percentage of litigants are *pro se*, an extremely high percent live in economically stressed circumstances, and the waiting time for the few available services is often lengthy.

still be available to the parties, if needed, for extraneous matters, such as modification of child support orders, or assistance with any issue they are unable to resolve satisfactorily. The goal of both the court and the Project was to realize the hope that by supporting more effective co-parenting the children involved would experience greater stability, consistency and security within their family.

In mid-2008, Judge Martha A. Mills was assigned to PCSC, and in early 2009 was appointed Supervising Judge.² She felt the weight of a heavily criticized and crowded system on her shoulders, and searched for ways both to improve the existing structures and to bring additional resources to the families in her courtrooms. The litigants, unmarried parents, were growing in numbers. The number of unmarried parents had grown to a figure approaching almost half of all racial and ethnic groups, and was substantially higher among persons of color and those living in poverty. Thus, the number of cases in PCSC, already high, was increasing.

The proceedings were often hostile and antagonistic for reasons that did not necessarily exist in a dissolution of marriage case. In typical parentage cases, there was frequently little “relationship history,” which could be rebuilt around a child. Many children were the result of one-night stands or brief relationships. In many cases, the parties had never learned to communicate in any meaningful manner. In addition, the lack of a relationship often meant the child was put in the middle and kept from the non-custodial parent as “punishment” for a variety of reasons, possibly including a never attained relationship, for starting a new relationship with another person, for not paying child support or just plain antagonism. Sometimes the hostilities were exacerbated because the parentage case was not brought until years after the child was born. The parent may have initiated the case for the sole purpose of obtaining finan-

² Judge Mills served as the Supervising Judge of the Cook County Parentage and Child Support Court from 2009-2012.

cial support and not with the intention of sharing the child. The respondent may be equally hostile over the untimely or unexpected claim for support. And, in a few cases, if that parent were the father, he may have had no idea the child even existed.

Late in 2008, Judge Mills had a case in which both the parents and their family members had been close to the child and willing to work together prior to the current dispute. She saw an opportunity for a restorative resolution, and hoped that the family could avoid disputatious court proceedings and irreparable harm to their relationships. Judge Mills sought attorneys who were knowledgeable about family law and who were skilled in restorative processes.³ She found Peter Newman and Elizabeth Vastine, restorative justice practitioners who agreed to serve as circle keepers⁴ for this case. Judge Mills believed that if the family had an opportunity to sit in a restorative circle, they would be able to explore, discuss and make decisions around the principal issue in that case, i.e. the desire of one parent to take the child and move outside the jurisdiction.⁵ The family, including the child, agreed to try the circle process. Afterwards, the family shared that their experience in the circle process helped them communicate better than they had in years, and perhaps ever. This was the start of what was to become the Restorative Justice Pilot Project in the Cook County PCSC.⁶

³ Judge Mills herself was a long-time supporter, educator and trainer of others in restorative practices, in particular peace-keeping circles.

⁴ A circle keeper is a distinct type of facilitator who supports and guides the circle process and helps to make the process comfortable and safe for all participants to share.

⁵ Robert C. Koehler, *Get a Rock and Talk*, COMMON DREAMS (Sept. 12, 2012). <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2012/09/12/get-rock-and-talk-power-restorative-justice>.

⁶ The Pilot Project was created in partnership with DePaul University College of Law, where Newman and Vastine instituted a course in restorative practices for upper level students with the hopes that these students would volunteer to be circle keepers at the completion of the course and continue as they pursued their legal careers.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE GENERALLY

Restorative justice processes derive from indigenous practices and traditions throughout the world. In indigenous and aboriginal communities, crimes are understood as harms committed against the community as a whole, affecting everyone in some sense.⁷ What many of us today call “peace-making circles” have their roots in the indigenous tradition of healing circles.⁸ A healing circle brings together the community and the person who acted in a harmful manner to work toward the restoration of community balance. The healing circle encompasses the community’s spirituality and native traditions as it allows all participants, both community members and the person they feel caused harm, to speak about how the incident has affected them and what they need in order to heal and move forward.⁹

In addition to the Aborigine influence on restorative justice, religion has had a significant influence on the shaping of restorative justice into the comprehensive approach as it is used today. Ancient Judeo-Christian principles emphasize crimes as violations against people and families, rather than against “the state.”¹⁰ The Old and New Testaments both include biblical examples that set forth the responsibility for offenders to directly repair the harm caused to individuals.¹¹ Additionally, Christian values such as: peace-making, reconciliation, forgiveness, care and support for one another within a context of community; personal responsibility and accountability to one another, especially regarding wrongdoing; and restoration of the wrongdoer who is

⁷ *The History of Restorative Justice*, ABBOTSFORD RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND ADVOCACY ASSOCIATION (2010), http://www.arjaa.org/index.php?page_id=10.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Mark S. Umbreit et al., *Restorative Justice in the Twenty-First Century: A Social Movement Full of Opportunities and Pitfalls*, 89 MARQ. L. REV. 251, 255 (2005).

¹¹ *Id.* at 256.

remorseful and willing to change his/her ways are found within the restorative justice foundation.¹²

Furthermore, the rise of the influence of women in the workplace in the late twentieth century and the empowerment of the female voice has provided an impetus for change within the traditional justice system.¹³ The traditional justice system tends to be based on an absence of emotion, with no attention to feelings, and an emphasis on facts and persuasive argument.¹⁴ As a result, the rights and feelings of victims are largely ignored.¹⁵ Attributes such as nurture, care, empathy, and recognizing the legitimacy of feelings were once markedly considered to be “feminine” attributes, but are now largely accepted as “human” attributes.¹⁶ The acceptance of human attributes that were historically considered to be “female” resonates well with restorative justice processes.¹⁷

The healing circle translated most readily in this country to application in the criminal and juvenile justice systems, and that has been the primary, though certainly not the only, use of it in cooperation with court systems. Restorative justice has also been used in non-court contexts, albeit not as broadly publicized. It has proven its value wherever there was a “community,” particularly in schools, organizations and faith-based groups. As proved by the Project described hereafter, the value of restorative processes extends to individual families and to the family court system.

Restorative justice is a growing movement that addresses how relationships can be restored or built.¹⁸ It is a distinctive form of

¹² *The History of Restorative Justice*, *supra* note 7.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Sophia H. Hall, *Restoring the Peace*, CBA RECORD 30-31 (April 2007), <http://www.icmhp.org/newsevents/Tues-06-26-12/10/Restorative%20Justice%20CBA%20Article.pdf>. Judge Hall is the Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Jus-

conflict resolution that has transformative possibilities for moving from the burden of past wrongdoing or failures to communicate into the promise of a future in which new or stronger relationships are forged.¹⁹ Restorative justice draws upon the strengths and capabilities of individuals in a safe and respectful environment to openly address both needs and problems and how best to move beyond them.²⁰ Participants speak for themselves in a setting that encourages the respectful sharing of feelings and emotions.²¹ The safety and value of respect for participants, as well as the tenor of the circle, is supported and maintained by the circle keeper who facilitates the process. That keeper is a participant in the process, but has no voice in the ultimate outcome, which is determined solely by the parties. Participation of the parties in a restorative justice process is in all cases voluntary, a fact that lends power to the process and its results.²² What happens in a circle is confidential unless the parties otherwise agree, which allows participants to share openly without fear that their words may be held or used against them later. The principles in criminal situations and non-criminal ones are largely the same, except most often in the latter there is not a recognizable “wrong doer” or “victim.”

Judge Sophia Hall writes, “Restorative justice processes are not the answer to every dispute. Yet restorative justice is right for disputes in which the participants will continue to live in a community together. For the appropriate dispute, it holds the

tice and Child Protection Resource Section and as such she oversees and supports restorative efforts and initiatives associated with the Juvenile Court and its many partners.

¹⁹ Howard J. Vogel, *The Restorative Justice Wager: The Promise and Hope of A Value-Based, Dialogue-Driven Approach to Conflict Resolution for Social Healing*, 8 CARDOZO J. CONFLICT RESOL. 565, 566 (2007).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² The participation of someone referred by a criminal or juvenile court, while voluntary, has, by its nature, an element of coercion to it. Failure to participate usually means that the court will be the sole determinant of the outcome.

greatest possibility of strengthening the relationships necessary to ensure a lasting peace.”²³ Relationships are the foundation of the family. As the family court system is not equipped to restore or build relationships needed to foster and support healthy childrearing and a functional co-parenting dynamic, restorative circles provide this opportunity.

THE PROJECT AND PARTNERSHIP WITH DEPAUL COLLEGE OF LAW

After Judge Mills initially reached out to Newman and Vastine for restorative justice assistance at PCSC late in 2008, she sent several more cases to them.²⁴ The outcomes were promising and encouraging. Judge Mills, then Supervising Judge, felt it was time to move beyond her courtroom. Judge Mills, Newman and Vastine met and agreed that the program should expand to all of the judges in PCSC. If the program were to be expanded, it would be necessary to increase the number of circle keepers available to handle cases from PCSC. Newman and Vastine had been doing all the circle keeper work – and more – individually and at their own cost, a situation that could not continue indefinitely.²⁵ Thus, Newman and Vastine conceived the idea for the Project. They suggested a partnership with DePaul College of Law’s Schiller DuCanto and Fleck Family and Child Law Center where they hoped to teach a course in Restorative Peacemaking Practices. Their first class was held in the spring semester of 2010 and has continued every spring semester since.

²³ Hall, *supra* note 18.

²⁴ See *infra* note 26, pp. 2-3.

²⁵ All the work on the Project by Newman and Vastine had been on a pro bono basis. Judge Mills estimated that over the past several years, Newman and Vastine had each invested, without compensation, enough hours to satisfy a big firm’s hourly requirements for associates for a year. It demonstrated a dedication to providing a restorative alternative to the courts and families that has been meaningful and impactful in many ways.

The course was designed to introduce upper level law students to the restorative philosophy in the context of family dynamics as well as to train students to serve as circle keepers for families referred by PCSC.²⁶ The course focused on actively familiarizing students with various applications of restorative practices, and exposed students to peace circles in a variety of settings (for example, participating in a drumming circle in the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center). Newman and Vastine also invited judges, attorneys, and other guest speakers who had either practiced or benefitted from restorative justice to share their experiences with the students. Upon completion of, or in conjunction with, the course law students were invited to apprentice as circle keepers in cases referred by PCSC under Newman and Vastine's direct supervision and guidance. The ultimate goal was for the students, as graduates, to volunteer as keepers or circle facilitators for PCSC referrals on a pro bono basis. The hope was that these fully trained former students would serve as the foundation of a developing list of qualified circle keepers to sustain the Project on a long-term basis.

Newman and Vastine's restorative justice course was unique. The class was small, no more than twelve students each semester. During class, students sat in circle, which provided an opportunity to become knowledgeable about the feel and dynamics of participating in peace circles, and also to experience the role of circle keeper as Newman and Vastine co-kept each class in circle.²⁷ The course benefitted students in ways unrelated to the Project. It offered students an opportunity to enhance their communication, listening and critical thinking skills which would serve them as advocates, counselors, colleagues, mentors, advisors, volunteers or community members. It rein-

²⁶ Peter Newman and Elizabeth Vastine, *Schiller DuCanto and Fleck Family Law Center Restorative Pilot Program Notes* (Spring 2012), Parentage & Child Support Court-DePaul College of Law.

²⁷ Peter Newman and Elizabeth Vastine, *DePaul College of Law Restorative Practices Serving Families* (Spring 2011).

forced the likelihood that students would integrate the restorative philosophy in their practices as well as in their lives.

The Project is the first partnership of its kind between a family court and a law school to apply restorative processes in the family setting in order to address issues between parents related to raising, caring for and educating their children. It has been successful with benefits for the court system, law students and participating families and their children.

JUDICIAL OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

The expansion of the PCSC restorative justice initiative required that Judge Mills, Newman and Vastine educate PCSC judges on the restorative justice philosophy and circle process. On several occasions, they sat in circle with the judges so that they could experience the process and feel how it worked. They talked about how to inform the parties of the availability of the process, that it was voluntary and confidential, and that someone would call the parties once a case was referred to explain what they might expect and to answer questions. They discussed the types of cases that might be appropriate for referral. These included, for example, from one extreme to another: where parties were able to communicate, but had gotten stuck on a particular issue; where the children were telling each parent what that parent wanted to hear, but had never had the opportunity to talk to both parents at the same time; or, where the parties had exhausted every legal, financial and emotional resource, and were willing to try a new approach. They also talked about cases that might be inappropriate, for example, where one of the parties was “fixated” on a particular result, or where the mental or physical capacity of a party might prevent them from responsibly participating in a restorative justice process.

After the Project was up and running, it was realized that additional matters needed to be addressed with judges. For example, the court learned about what information, in addition to

basic party and case information, would be helpful and should or might be conveyed to the restorative justice practitioners. On the court's end, the judges needed to understand the amount of time it often took to schedule a circle with willing participants (due to the possible number, as well as each of their individual schedules, responsibilities and commitments to family, work, school etc.), and that a circle often could not be scheduled as quickly as the court might hope. Additionally, continuing court status dates to accommodate a circle that had been held due to scheduling difficulties was another matter that needed to be explored.

PROGRAM APPROACH

Once a judge referred a family to the Project, Vastine or Newman reached out to each parent individually to share the restorative process philosophy and describe the circle process and what they might expect from it. They emphasized that circle participation was voluntary and not court ordered and that the process was confidential unless the parties otherwise agreed.²⁸ To help them prepare for the circle process, they tried to get a sense of what brought each family into court. During the initial conversations, they asked the family to share some of their history, what has been going on, what is most difficult or challenging, how their children were doing (for example with regards to school, activities and friends), what impact their relationship with the other parent had on their children, on themselves and what they would like to accomplish or learn from this process. During the course of these preparatory conversations, they were

²⁸ This included the court. All the court would be told was that a circle occurred unless the parties agreed that the results should be communicated to the court. Many wanted the results placed in a court order, and that would be done. Often, if the parties returned to court, they would convey their experience with the circle and the results.

also able to gauge the capacity of the parties to participate in the circle process.²⁹

Newman and Vastine encouraged parents to consider inviting others to share the circle. They particularly encouraged the involvement of children, when possible and appropriate. The opportunity for children to express their concerns and feelings with both parents at the same time without the pressure of having to conform to what either parent wished to hear proved invaluable. Frequently, the child had valuable insights into how the current situation could be improved or the tension abated in practical ways.³⁰ They also suggested it might be helpful and useful to bring someone who has a relationship with the child, appreciates the situation and circumstances and would be both supportive of the process as well as of any agreements put in place by reason of the circle process. Additionally, there might be a significant other, a grandparent, or someone else who is part of the dispute or dynamic, but not before the court, whose presence and participation could be instrumental to a workable agreement.

When the families arrived for the circle, Newman and Vastine again explained the process to all participating members. If a child participated, part of the introduction was taking whatever amount of time was necessary to help the child feel comfortable with the surroundings and process. Newman and Vastine introduced themselves as circle keepers, explained that their role was distinct from a facilitator or mediator; they do not control the process, rather they “keep” the circle hand-in-hand with the talking piece. The talking piece, a small object of some sort, is a

²⁹ The ability to participate means assessing issues such as capacity, violence, imbalance of power, age and maturity of children, etc. If there were capacity difficulties, the circle may not be appropriate and would not be scheduled (this, of course, would be reported back to the judge who referred the case).

³⁰ Where appropriate or needed, the child can participate in parts of the circle, but not all. This would require, however, additional room where the child could be occupied (a video, toys, homework, etc.) and an additional person to be present so the child is not left alone, perhaps someone brought for that purpose by a parent.

signature piece of the circle process. When a participant has the talking piece, only that person is invited to speak. When it is passed to another, that person may talk and everyone else has the privilege to listen. If a person does not wish to speak at that time, the talking piece may be passed on to the next person as there is no obligation to speak. The talking piece creates a pattern or rhythm that makes space both for better listening and more thoughtful speaking, helping to make it comfortable for all to share. Additionally, it also helps to make room for quiet or more reserved participants and balances participation so that no one person is dominating the conversation. Each circle begins by seeking a consensus of values that the collective circle participants wish to guide their individual circle process. Often participants chose values such as respectful listening, open-mindedness, being non-judgmental, and creativity as collective values that they wished to guide their individual circle process.

Once participants identified values to guide the process, Newman and Vastine would begin by asking the parents about their child. Starting the process with a focus on the child, they set the child at the center of the conversation. Although the parents had a difficult relationship with each other, they had a child together. They came to circle to try to work on their differences for the sake of their child. Newman and Vastine constantly reminded the parents of their responsibility as a parent to their child, and thanked them for their openness and willingness to share the challenges and difficulties they often encountered in their co-parenting relationship. Typically, families came to some sort of agreement and a better understanding of one another as well as an appreciation of the value of continued respectful interaction.³¹ The parties were always invited to return to circle

³¹ There were a few circles where parties were unable to come to an agreement about major issues between them, though usually still agreed on some matters that would help the relationship. Even when there was no agreement, the circle often had lasting beneficial effects for one or both parties and the children.

with Newman and Vastine for follow-up sessions to modify their arrangements or to address any subsequent issues that might arise as they moved forward.³²

The results of the Project were optimistic and affirming of people's desires to do the best that they possibly could for their children. Parents who participated in circles indicated that the circle process had a lasting and positive impact on their lives and relationships with the other parent as well as with their child or children. The Project successfully resolved a number of cases that would otherwise have returned to court many times. More than eighty cases were referred to the Project. There were thirty-three cases in which Newman and Vastine were either unable to reach the participants, the participants were not willing to participate, or the participants lacked capacity to engage in the circle process for decision-making purposes. The vast majority of cases that proceeded to circle resulted in an agreement. Some never had to return to court; others returned for resolution of other issues, such as child support modification.

Benefits of the Project for families included an increase in the family's ability to problem solve and make decisions, reinforcing their confidence in their own co-parenting abilities. This shifting of responsibility from courts to families for problem solving increased the likelihood that the parties would remain accountable to each other and that agreements reached were durable and more likely to be successful over time than those imposed by a court. Any agreement was further strengthened if the children participated in the circle and had an opportunity to share their thoughts, experiences and ideas with both parents at the same time.

Benefits were not limited to families, but included the court system. The families' ability to reach agreements in circle freed court time to hear conflicts and issues that remained in cases not

³² Out of 81 cases, 8 returned to circle for further work, some on several occasions. In each of those cases there were favorable results.

suitable for the restorative process. PCSC has one of the most crowded dockets in the Cook County Circuit Court system. Thus, any lessening of the time required by the court for a particular case may speed up the time in which other remaining cases may be heard and resolved.

THE PROJECT AND THE FUTURE

The Project was an experiment, and a successful one in most respects. The initial vision of Judge Mills, Newman and Vastine was to develop and expand the Project within the family court system. Once judges outside of the PCSC understood the value of restorative practices, they also wanted the Project to be available as a resource throughout the Domestic Relations Division of the Circuit Court. The Domestic Relations Division has 43 judges and a current docket of over 10,000 cases, not including cases from PCSC. However, to service that many judges and the number of cases that potentially could be referred, the underlying program as initially envisioned would need to be changed. The reliance on graduates of Newman and Vastine's DePaul College of Law Restorative Practices Serving Families class as potential pro bono circle keepers had not produced the numbers of volunteer circle keepers hoped. The number of graduates available over the several years of the program would not be sufficient for the number of cases that could possibly be referred if the Project were expanded to all of the Domestic Relations judges.³³

In general, it was challenging for students to stay involved after law school. Despite the powerful impact of the DePaul College of Law Restorative Practices Serving Families class on students, the number of those who committed to serve as circle

³³ All of the circles were kept by Newman and Vastine. Some circles included students as part of their education to learn how to keep a circle in a PSCS referred case. A few circles included graduates as apprentice keepers with Newman and Vastine.

keepers for the Project after graduation had been small. Although not uncommon for students to move to other jurisdictions after law school, the greatest challenge was availability and scheduling. Preparation for a circle, scheduling (and often re-scheduling) and then actually keeping a circle is extremely time consuming. It requires flexibility, acumen and sustained sensitivity to the parties and their needs and issues. From start to finish, a case may take 10-20 hours. Time is always problematic for attorneys, but almost certainly more so for new practitioners who are adapting to their career and its demands.

For all these reasons, Judge Mills, who is now retired from the bench, Newman, and Vastine brainstormed supplemental or alternative program structures which would increase the number of available circle keepers so that restorative circles could be offered to greater numbers of parties involved in family court.³⁴ They explored options for stable and sustainable programs. The idea of partnering with a law school, as did the Project, was a good one and could be continued. However, whatever form the program would embody, certain needs had become apparent. The two most important were the need for an overall administrator or coordinator and the need for considerably more trained circle keepers than the Project's law graduate volunteers in order to accommodate referrals and to provide services in a consistent and sustainable manner. This more comprehensive program could still be run by a law school, or by the court or another organization, preferably based on restorative philosophy and processes such as circle.

Regardless of what entity undertakes responsibility, the program would need a coordinator who could take over a number of tasks that Newman and Vastine had administered and man-

³⁴ They have since formed an LLC called In-Circle Solutions to expand the availability of restorative practices to other courts and organizations to assist families and communities in improving communication, resolving conflicts, building relationships and finding healthy and respectful ways to move forward.

aged for the Project.³⁵ These would include, among others: maintaining the list of trained and qualified circle keepers; assigning referred cases on a rotating basis to trained circle keepers; assisting with scheduling, and then following through with evaluations, data collection and preparation of an annual report. Preparation for the actual circle would be the responsibility of the circle keepers assigned to the case. Circle keeper training could be offered to family law attorneys who would be responsible for covering their own training costs. It would be an opportunity for meaningful professional as well as personal development in the same way mediation training is beneficial and is paid for by attorney participants.

The Project, bringing restorative processes to families in court, was valuable and its services should not be abandoned. For restorative circles to continue as initially imagined with the law school, but on an expanded basis, or for the program to move to the court or another organization equipped to operate, implement and manage it, are all realistic and possible options.

CONCLUSION

Restorative justice is about the building or rebuilding of relationships. The Cook County PCSC Restorative Justice Pilot Project provided families with the resources to address their needs, to reduce the emotional and physical stress of not being able to problem solve and make decisions around their children and to co-parent in a constructive and more cooperative manner. It invited and encouraged parents to work through issues and concerns outside of the often adversarial courtroom setting in a way that affirms their responsibility and commitment to their children. Participation in the circle process strengthened families' sense of self-reliance and encouraged durable co-parenting relationships better equipping families to navigate day-to-day as

³⁵ The Coordinator's tasks would not include keeping circles which Newman and Vastine had consistently done as well.

well as cope with more challenging childrearing matters. Additionally, it gave parents who typically did not interact or did so in negative ways, an opportunity to model respectful communication and behavior. Participant comments illustrate the impact of families sharing in a safe and respectful space:

“[I] wish we had been able to participate earlier. . . . [T]he damage done over the course of four years in court could have been avoided.”

“[The process was a] good opportunity for open communication, cleared up misunderstandings that were the root of many issues, communication has greatly improved.”

“[I]t facilitates family. You get so wrapped up sometimes, you lose sight of the real point which is the child. . . . [T]his was a huge reminder of this and a reminder to be respectful.”

“I believe this is a great program that a lot of families can benefit from. I have seen a great improvement in my situation and can only imagine how many other families have benefitted from this program. My daughter and I have developed a stronger bond thanks to the circle meeting. . . . [The circle] helped both parents realize what we can do different(ly) and need to work on.”

Based on experience, the Project should be expanded and supplemented, or replaced with a court-run program or other independent program with roots in similar restorative processes. The program, which has proven effective, would offer an alternative to court involvement, which would, in the best case, shorten or eliminate the need for continued or lengthy and combative litigation. The effects of the Project would support families in strengthening their relationships so that they might function in more resilient, healthy and positive ways.

