

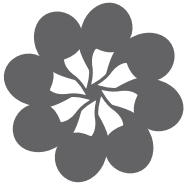
July 2011

# CONNECTING VOICES

the newsletter of the Greater Barre Community Justice Center

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## **From the Director—**

As this newsletter was put together, a common theme began to grow. I saw how we use restorative principles and put them into action. Our practices are used across the justice continuum with all of our programs, and make an important point that seeing our interactions from a different view creates better relationships. Although the central ideas of restorative justice are concerned with how crime affects the whole community, which creates obligations, and engages all parties (victims, community and those responsible) to make things right, it goes deeper than that.

It is about inclusivity, hearing from all parties and really listening to each other. In order to do this, all parties need to feel included and safe. In Jim's story, working with him about his issues of not being truthful tended to focus the COSA meetings more on accountability, although the support was still there. It became obvious that more relationship building had

to take place around the issues that were preventing Jim from moving forward. When Circles were held to address this, passing the talking piece and each participant focusing on what trust and honesty meant to them, giving examples and telling stories really helped to set the foundation to build meaningful relationships between all. On equal footing, it connected each of us to our own humanity based in our own experiences, and put everyone on a human level. That opening let the trust build — which in turn made the group more connected so new ground could be laid. It contributed to Jim's acceptance of the COSA team's guidance and overall success.

Our featured volunteer, Paul Irons, holds restorative philosophy in his heart. Having gone through many challenges in his life, it seems apparent that he recognized inclusivity and it helped him to make changes. Imagine how one instance could change your life by someone being open enough to allow you to belong.

The comments of Reparative Board victims and responsible parties tell the tale of how this process creates learning and change. Enjoy your reading!

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## **Jim's Reentry Story: A Real Challenge for Change**

Jim's journey into the CJC's reentry program began over two and half years ago with a call from his case worker at the correctional facility. Jim was a thirty two year old male, who was past his minimum sentence and in need of housing. He wanted to make positive changes in his life and needed the help of our Reentry program. The request for this client's need for a Circle of Support and Accountability (COSA) team seemed to be one that we could support.

The first several intake meetings with Jim revealed that his early childhood was similar to other offenders we had seen our program. He, along with his mother and brother, had suffered at the hands of an abusive, alcoholic father. He was described by his case worker as a quiet, hard working guy who kept to himself and stayed out of trouble while in jail. His major goal was to complete his high school diploma and to find a steady job. He was very close to his mother, whom he called daily. He had been married at one time, but that relationship had ended rather unhappily for him. In fact it was during his marriage that his reckless spending began, eventually leading into his trouble with the law. Jim's crimes became a lengthy list, including forgery, identity theft, and stolen checks.

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## **The Greater Barre Community Justice Center**

**Lori Baker**  
Executive Director

**Kate Aylward**  
Reentry Program Coordinator

**Jackie Smith**  
Reparative Program Coordinator

**Lynda Murphy**  
Volunteer Recruiter

**Diane McKain**  
Family Group Conference Coordinator



**Volunteer Profile:  
Paul Irons**

When this local businessman is asked how he came to volunteer at the Barre Justice Center, he cannot help but look back at the people who believed in *him* — even when he made it very difficult for them to do so.

“Any one of us could go either way,” Paul said. “At one point in my life, I was so angry and struggling in school, I could have easily followed the same path as some of the people we see in the corrections system.” He speaks of having a difficult adolescence filled with drinking, dropping out of school, running away, and doing a lot of self-destructive stuff. He now thinks he had a learning disability.

Paul looks back on his large family of origin as a source of constant support — even when he was rebelling and running away from them. His parents were the first to teach him, by the example of sheltering, feeding and encouraging others less fortunate, that all people have value and deserve a chance to succeed.

Paul has observed that people who succeed in life can usually point to one person in their life who believed in them, talked to them, and mentored them. The mentor who changed his life was an editor/owner at the *Addison County Independent* newspaper by the name of Colonel Slater. On his own at age 17, Paul landed a job with the *Independent* setting linotype. He lived in a boarding house and Colonel Slater took him under his wing. “He gave me what others didn’t do. He made me feel good about myself, that I was of value.”

This realization makes Paul want to reach out early to struggling people, before they go down the wrong path. “Everyone needs someone to encourage them and see the good in them,” Paul said, “I think that’s why I’m here.”

Paul has served on three Circle of Support and Accountability (COSA) teams, chaired the Barre Reparative

Board in its early years, and as a landlord for several clients transitioning out of prison. He studied mediation at Woodbury College and began facilitating victim-offender mediations, motivated partly by the tragic loss of two people who were close to him. His brother John was murdered in 1991; a good friend and manager of one of Paul’s apartment buildings was stabbed to death.

The confidence Paul gained as a teenager has led him to an interesting and varied life that continues to benefit others. From the *Addison Independent*, he went on to typeset psychiatric journals at Capital City Press. In the Army Medical Corps he became trained as a neuropsychiatric specialist, assisting soldiers with PTSD and other issues in the Vietnam war. He owned and operated Arbor Gardens on the Barre-Montpelier Road for 10 years. For 8 years, he and his wife Peggy opened up their home to survivors of domestic violence, becoming the area’s first Battered Women’s Shelter.

When the economic pressures of the early 80s forced him to close Arbor Gardens, Paul got into real estate, becoming an owner of 88 apartments after reading a book on “How to Make a Million in Real Estate With No Cash.” The foreclosed properties he bought came with a lot of deferred maintenance and difficult tenants. This is how Paul met many people struggling with mental illness and/or coming out of prison without support. They were living in the worst places, with lists of restrictions from their probation of-

ficers, and the only people who came around to see them were the people they got into trouble with in the first place. Paul said he watched guys do well for a few weeks, giving them painting and other odd jobs when he could, but soon they’d start taking drugs again, and go back to jail for violating their conditions. He shared his concerns with Con Hogan, who was Secretary of Human Services at the time, and a strong proponent of innovative restorative justice programs that were beginning to take root in Vermont.

When the Barre Justice Center called Paul to join one of its first COSA teams in 2006, “I could hardly say no after complaining and agitating for years,” he said.

Paul sees that “people in the system are really no different than anyone in our community. All of us have good qualities and vulnerabilities. Acceptance is the best thing we can do.” Through the COSA program, “we get to know folks and figure out where they need help and how we can help.” He notes that, while we all have weaknesses that can get us in trouble, the main difference for offenders in the COSA re-entry program is that they will be sent back to prison if they don’t control their impulses. If a core member (the offender) has a hard time abiding by the conditions of his release, his COSA team members work together to make the message very, very clear: “Accept these limits and safety mechanisms or go back to prison — it’s your choice.”



**Members of the GBCJC Reentry Team**

Herb Hatch	Ray McCormack	Paul Irons
Lynda Murphy	Phyllis Hanley	Brian Hebert
Leighton Wass	Rod Perry	Joy McNeil
Wendy Rieger	Mike Chater	Diane McKain
Robin Hall	Ray Thomas	Diane Slora

## **Jim's Reentry Story**

*—continued from front page*

In addition to these charges, Jim also had been charged with inappropriately touching his young stepdaughter.

His crimes were of a serious nature, but he posed no physical or violent threat to either his victims or the community. Treatment providers had determined that Jim was not a risk to young children and therefore did not need to participate in weekly treatment programming for sex offenders.

Following the interviews at the facility, the final step into accepting Jim into the CJC's program was to present his case before the Reentry Advisory Board. Acceptance into the program meant carefully reviewing all important information related to his charges, his ties with the Barre community, and a positive recommendation from DOC officials. For Jim, acceptance into the CJC's reentry program began in the spring of 2008.

**An action plan was necessary if the team was going to continue working with Jim. This plan called for holding a series of Circle meetings that would explore the topics of trust and honesty in building meaningful relationships.**

Progress and problems best describes the months following Jim's release. He did find part time work, and with his COSA team's guidance he began paying back some of his debts. However, his lack of sufficient income was a constant worry for Jim and his team. Monitoring his spending and budgeting seemed to be at the center of all the COSA meeting discussions. His court fines, weekly supervision fees, room rent, and phone bills needed to be paid or else Jim faced the possibility of being sent back to jail. In addition to these concerns, Jim's reconnection with old friends soon proved to be problematic. It was not long before he was sent back to jail temporarily for a violation of his conditions of release. This was just one of several setbacks that he and his team would face in the early months of his release.

Once released again, Jim's COSA team began to notice a more serious problem. He began avoiding his team and lying to them regarding his daily routines and responsibilities. Caught in his lies, Jim became even more defensive and angry. So serious was the problem that the COSA team began to question their role in supporting his reentry, and at the same time hold him accountable for what was needed.

An action plan was necessary if the team was going to continue working with Jim. This plan called for holding a series of Circle meetings that would explore the topics of trust and honesty in building meaningful relationships. The members shared some of their own experiences with issues of honesty and trust. These discussions began to allow Jim to see his team members differently. As time passed, he no longer felt threatened by his team, and began to make steady progress towards reaching his earlier goals. Through conversation, his team also helped him to understand how his offenses affect people, and how living his life based on restorative philosophy could help him make better future choices.

By the summer of 2009 Jim had graduated with his high school diploma, had a full time job, and had begun making his restitution payments. Progress and positive changes were truly happening. The relationship with his family had begun to heal again, and he and his new girlfriend were expecting a baby at the beginning of the New Year. They both enrolled in parenting classes, and Jim petitioned DCF to review the original charges against him with his stepdaughter.

Jim's success in the CJC's reentry program can be measured in the goals that he set out to accomplish when he was first released. He now can proudly say that he has his high school diploma; has paid back thousands of dollars of his debts; and is a loving and responsible father. Along with his many accomplishments there is always the concern for some setbacks for this young man. Helping Jim to overcome his compulsive need to spend money is a major concern. Yet the COSA team believes that Jim has learned to save and budget his money. He just needs to hold true to his next major goal in his journey. That goal is to someday give his family their own home.

## Reparative Boards at Work

*The Greater Barre Community Justice Center coordinates Reparative Boards that meet 4 to 5 times a month. At these meetings, trained citizen volunteers facilitate conversations with offenders who have committed non-violent crimes, and work with each offender to create a plan for repairing the harm caused by their wrongdoing. Referrals to Reparative Boards come from 3 major sources:*

- *From the Court, as a condition of their probation, or as an alternative to probation*
- *From the State's Attorney, as an alternative to court*
- *From the Police, instead of being referred for prosecution*

*Offenders must take responsibility for their crime in order to participate, and the Justice Center contacts victims (when possible) to make sure they have a chance to tell how they were affected by the crime. Each offender meets with the Reparative Board twice. In the first meeting, the offender collaborates with Board members (and victims) to come up with a Reparative Agreement that is designed to:*

- *Deepen the offender's understanding of who was harmed and what he/she can do to make amends.*
- *Take steps to make a positive connection with the community, and to make better choices in the future.*

*The offender returns to the Board 2–3 months later to discuss how he/she fulfilled the Reparative Agreement, and any insights that were gained in the process. Upon completion of the agreement, offenders are asked to fill out an exit questionnaire. Here is a sampling of their comments.*

"Thank you for understanding me and not judging me, and for helping me make amends with my victim."

"The Reparative Board members were amazing. They made me feel comfortable and really listened to what I had to say. They also helped by allowing me to choose activities to do that would benefit all parties."

"I learned my actions affect a lot of people... I love my freedom and I don't want to hurt other people."

What was most meaningful: "Having to own up to my kids and ex-boss for what I did."

"The meeting had the most impact on me — talking to different people from the community and knowing that yes, I made a mistake but it's not the end of the world, and not to give up."

"Community service helped me meet more people in the community and made me feel more accomplished."

"This process was the best thing for me to get my life back in order... a meaningful way to give back to people and the community for what I've done wrong."

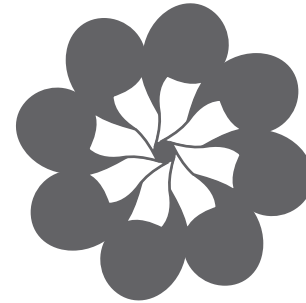
"It helped me realize the seriousness of my crime and how others' lives were disrupted."

"I feel so much better about myself. I am glad that I am able to move forward in my life and be a better person."

"I had a vested interest in completing my contract because if focused on my strengths."

"I thank everyone who has helped lead me to the right path of being sober and making an effort to see me continue in treatment."

"I have become more aware of community caring. Coming here was a great experience for my well being, and with the help of others, has taken a lot off my back. Thanks."



### Some comments from participating victims and other affected parties:

"I got the chance to share my feelings and emotions about the situation. The board was very accepting and friendly."

"It seems like a good process with a lot of opportunity for input, and it's great that there is a successful end to the situation."

From a store owner/victim: "It is great to have a community outreach program which helps kids find the proper direction and turn things around."

From a witness: "I am happy that (the offender) gained insight into the dangers of driving under the influence. One more safe and smart driver on the road is a great success."

"We all had a chance to voice our opinions and help make things right."