

---

---

## Excerpts from CHANGING WAYS / *Building Skills*

Vol 7, #2

Exploring conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Maine schools

Fall 2003

---

### Opening Remarks *By Barbara Blazej*

Some weeks ago I had the great fortune to attend a conference at the Boston Research Center for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, entitled “Re-imagining Self, Other and the Natural World.” After spending a day and a half listening to speakers share experiences from their lives—sometimes painful, always fascinating and heartfelt—I came away fully convinced of the power of *storytelling* to transform individuals and promote social healing on all levels. I witnessed this power again a few days later, when three invited guests visited my Introduction to Peace Studies class. As my students sat in rapt attention, these men spoke of difficult choices they had made earlier in their lives, of fighting in wars, and of their personal journeys toward peace. One student commented afterwards: “There aren’t even words to describe how moved I was by the guest speakers. It is so much more powerful to actually hear people discuss their experiences rather than read about them.” And the other students agreed wholeheartedly.

Why does storytelling move us so profoundly? How can stories promote change? From my own experiences and from reflecting on these questions with colleagues, I believe storytelling is transformational in its ability to:

- ❖ Remove barriers (of difference, bias, mistrust, fear) that separate us from others
- ❖ Invite empathetic understanding of others
- ❖ Foster authentic, heartfelt connections and relationships
- ❖ Teach invaluable life lessons in ways we can hear
- ❖ Elicit our deepest wisdom, courage, compassion and hope.

During times when we feel especially hopeless and disconnected, gathering together and telling stories can bring forth a sense of self-worth and shared identity that can motivate us to work for change as individuals and within communities.

The flip side of storytelling, of course, is the act of *listening*. Storytelling can only touch us deeply if we listen carefully and fully—with ears, eyes, undivided attention and heart, as the Chinese characters that make up the verb “to listen” illustrate. And while we personally gain something valuable by actively listening to others’ stories, we also offer something equally valuable to the speaker. At the Boston Research Center conference mentioned above, Kris Rondeau, a union organizer at Harvard University, told us about her efforts (with others) to gather union support through informal conversations with hundreds of employees. Rather than monopolizing these conversations by trying to convince people to join the union, Kris and her colleagues *listened* to their stories—about their families, their homes, workplaces, difficulties, fears, etc. As Kris explained to us: “Listening tells someone, ‘you’re worth listening to; your experience is important.’” Our act of listening to others provides personal validation and support, and also teaches and encourages them to listen to others. In an important article last year in the Philadelphia Inquirer, author and environmentalist Paul Hawken said this about listening:

*Listening is as different from hearing as a live animal is from a fur coat. Listening is generosity. Listening is consciousness. Listening is alive. Functionally, listening allows us to see a world we don’t know, to understand experiences we haven’t had, to reframe or drop a belief long held. It creates distinctions, and it is from these distinctions that we create new possibilities.*

He goes on to say: “The resentment that results when people are not listened to, especially those in need or suffering, arises everywhere.” We can apply Hawken’s words to individuals and groups at all levels: students who

*continued from previous page*

act out, sometimes violently; disconnected family members; local and global communities whose stories we do not attend to.

As educators, in our daily interactions with students, colleagues, parents and community members, we can lead by example as we invite storytelling—for its wisdom and power to build and mend relationships—and practice listening, an act of compassion and healing that can resolve conflicts before they escalate into violence. “Listening may be the cardinal act of giving,” says Hawken. “It is a silent quality. I think it is the source of peace.”

*Hawken, Paul. “Listening could relieve strife that leads to war,” Philadelphia Inquirer, Thursday, August 22, 2002.*

---

## ***Student Voices: Promoting Diversity, Respect and Safety through Civil Rights Teams***

*By Jenn Bigelow*

The Maine Civil Rights Team Project was started by former Attorney General Andrew Ketterer in 1996 with 18 high schools and middle schools in Maine. Today there are 188 Civil Rights Teams (CRT) in Maine: 83 high schools and 105 K-8 schools. Each team has its own style—for example, when they have their meetings, how they run their meetings, and whether they have team shirts and so on. However each team must follow the Maine Civil Rights Team mission statement: “The Mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of high school, middle school, and elementary school students and to reduce the incidence of bias-motivated harassment and violence in schools.” Each team must have at least two faculty advisors to supervise the team and at least ten to twelve students. Also the team must have a community advisor, “to provide a means of connection and support outside the school system,” (CRT website). The teams do things such as protect students or faculty from discrimination, and bring awareness programs to their schools to show what they can do to help prevent discrimination in schools. If you are interested in starting a Civil Rights Team in your school this website is helpful and gives you an application to complete for your team: [www.maine.gov/ag/?r=civilrights](http://www.maine.gov/ag/?r=civilrights).

On a personal note, I joined the Nokomis Civil Rights Team my sophomore year of high school, so I could get out of class and go on some field trips. Little did I know that this team would help me grow into the person I am now. The team experience helped me become a leader and helped me learn more about myself. The conferences we attended were filled with speakers from all different situations and places. There were some speakers from Germany, some who analyze movies, some African dancers and some programs like Outright who came to inform students about gay/lesbian/bisexual issues. At the conferences we learned how to deal with bullying situations, and how to handle things such as sexuality, gender, and race.

At Nokomis my team did as much as the administration would let us. We helped place staff members in the bleachers during assemblies to prevent talking and fights. We also spoke to our principal about the reasons for our new school logo, which we had to change because we were using the wrong symbol. Our school mascot is the Warrior and our symbol was a Native American profile wearing a headdress. One of the Native American groups in the area spoke to our principal and asked us to change the symbol to the correct depiction of a warrior. So now our symbol is corrected to a Native American profile with two feathers. The team also worked hard to keep an informational bulletin board up in the school hallway every year. On the board we put up quotes and our meeting times, and we also did a display for Black History Month in February. Everything else we did was on an individual level, which we reported back to the team, such as stopping a fight or helping out a student in need.

The presidency of my team usually went to the seniors on the team, so when I was a senior I was elected as

*continued from previous page*

president along with a junior who was also elected for the 2002-2003 school year. We were co-presidents together until second semester when she left the team. As president I worked hard to keep the team up-to-date on current issues in the school.

If you are interested in starting a team in your school, I would suggest that you publicize the team to show people what a civil rights team is all about and how much fun it is working on such a helpful team. And finally, enjoy yourselves. You may discuss difficult topics sometimes but just make it a place for students to support each other and be themselves.

*Jenn Bigelow graduated from Nokomis Regional High School in June 2003. She is currently attending the University of Maine at Presque Isle as an English major. You can contact Jenn at terminator4499@hotmail.com.*

---

---

## **School Discipline: Renewing the Purpose and Updating the Process**

*By Eileen McCue*

As a third grader, I sat on stage in the middle of a school production of *Oliver*. We orphan boys pretended to sleep while Fagan sang about his clever pick-pocketing operation. From the beginning of the scene, Nancy, right next to me at the crowded table, had her elbow right in my face. Nancy was a spoiled only child and had trouble relating with the other girls in our class. As the youngest in my family I was used to getting my way. I was frustrated about not being able to carry out my “sleeping boy” performance with an aggressive elbow in my face, so I pinched at it in the hopes it would move. Nancy started to cry and I got in trouble. The next day at school I ended up in the principal’s office, only feeling bad because I got in trouble and completely missing the point of the stern-yet-concerned speech the principal gave. I still thought Nancy had deserved it, and even felt a bit smug that I had gotten away with it. Nancy had no part in the after effects of the pinching episode and consequently did not gain the pro-social insight that might have helped her with friends.

My passion for a paradigm shift in school discipline is driven by my own experience in public school. In addition my mother has been a teacher or principal my entire life. It seems that we have come to a point in our schools where most classrooms include many children who not only have different learning styles from those the traditional system caters to, but also have many other issues at home and with their peers that make it nearly, if not completely, impossible for them to learn. When punitive discipline—the threats of punishment and ostracism—are heaped upon them, it is a wonder that so many students make it to their high school graduation. For those who would normally flourish in the school environment, the chaos and safety issues make for less than ideal classrooms.

As I made my way through primary and secondary school, I was very careful that my actions did not get me into trouble. Despite my ability to bypass it, I was deeply affected by the discipline system. Every time one of my classmates was misbehaving, I would cringe, shrinking down into my seat, waiting for the inevitable scene to disturb the regular ebb and flow of teaching and learning. The tension in the faces of fellow classmates was always visible. After the situation was “dealt with,” the next half hour was spent in righting the course of the disturbed class. The teacher, usually ignoring the effect the disruption had had, would keep teaching, unconcerned that much of the education was lost. Not only was it the conflict itself that bothered me, but I felt that it also only served to: 1. Embarrass a student who didn’t usually misbehave, but was having an off day; 2. Totally shut a troubled classmate down because this was the sort of treatment they got at home which in turn contributed to their misbehavior at school; or 3. Vent the teacher’s unassociated frustration on a somewhat innocent student. Some teachers were better than others, but for the most part they did not have the knowledge, training, or support to deal with conflicts

*continued from previous page*

without belittling or even scaring students. My intention is not to make the teachers or anyone for that matter look like the “bad guys.” Teachers have so much to be concerned about with testing standards, rising class sizes, and increasing behavioral issues, it is no wonder that alternatives are not sought.

Many schools have made significant progress in changing their school culture from an adversarial to a cooperative one that supports learning. These schools are implementing a wide range of programs including curricular infusion, conflict resolution education, peer mediation, talking circles, and restorative justice. They offer hope that the system can change and that cooperative discipline can make a difference in many children’s lives. Not only are students in these schools less violent and less likely to break rules, they also begin to do better academically and show a decline in truancy. The students learn how to deal with conflict among their peers, which empowers them, teaches them responsibility, boosts their self-image, and gives them important tools to help them get what they want from life and be conscientious participants in our society

Restorative justice provides a different set of questions for considering conflict than those of traditional school discipline programs based on a retributive (punishment) model:

Restorative justice focuses on repairing the harm caused by an incident. The victim’s needs are primary, and others who may have been affected such as parents, friends, teachers, those close to both victim and offender, and the offender her/himself are considered as well. The main focus of restorative justice is to repair relationships. This is especially crucial in school communities, since children need to be shown how their words and actions affect those around them. Restorative justice is also a way to empower students to resolve their own conflicts, helping them to become more self-confident and self-reliant. When children learn the real impact that an action has on others, it can help them to make better choices and to see the interconnectedness that we all share. This is a stark contrast to the current system, which does the opposite. Most often, punishing students further alienates them. They feel victimized, picked on, and are not aided in understanding the reasons behind the rules and the punishments that follow for breaking them. Students tend to be labeled as either “good” or “bad” kids, where the bad are already doomed to failure and ridicule, so they don’t bother to follow rules. Often, the good are ridiculed as “teachers pet” but they can also subtly use their positive label to get away with behaviors that would normally be unacceptable. This further deepens the cycle because the “bad kids” see others getting away with things that they would be strictly punished for. These polarizing stereotypes break down the relationships among the student body and tend to create an image of teachers and staff as disciplinarians. Trying to learn when you are afraid of being punished or ridiculed by peers is very difficult to negotiate

An aspect of restorative justice that is especially important in schools is that misbehavior is dealt with by taking into consideration the effects on the whole community. Instead of simply removing a violent student (although that may be the immediate action) a restorative process would work with the whole community so that when the student is reintegrated, the students and staff will feel safe and thus the incident is less likely to have long-lasting effects. Community and victim needs, as well as those of the misbehaving student, are taken into serious consideration. The most common application of restorative justice in schools is through *conferencing*. This is a meeting in circle form that takes place after an incident in which there is a clear victim and offender. The participants include the victimized student and his/her support people, the misbehaving student and her/his support people, and community members who were affected. Preliminary meetings are held with each of the major parties (misbehaving student and victimized student) to be sure that guidelines are understood and that they are each participating voluntarily. When the group comes together each person is given as much time to speak as they need. A consensus about what will be done to make things right in the school is reached by giving priority to the victim of the misbehavior, and taking the misbehaving student and community needs into account. While concern for those harmed by misbehavior is primary, restorative justice (especially when dealing with children) focuses ample atten-

*continued from previous page*

tion on the child who has misbehaved. Usually, when a child acts out, there is an underlying reason that may not be readily apparent. Whether it is some disruption at home, or difficulty with a peer group at school, restorative processes work to uncover this underlying issue and work to resolve it. Without resolving the underlying issues, such a student is likely to continue to act out, possibly without realizing why or knowing a more constructive way to deal with the issue and the emotions.

Had I been exposed to restorative means of conflict resolution as a student, my experience at school might have been much less tumultuous. I probably would have had better relationships with my teachers. Instead of seeing them as intimidating disciplinarians, they might have been more like mentors. I would have gotten to know the “trouble” kids better since they would have been in class more instead of out on suspension. Because of this, I am sure my perspective would have been broadened since most of these students came from more diverse backgrounds than my friends. There would have been a greater feeling of community and a greater understanding among the “cliques.” Disciplining students today will shape how they deal with conflict and view people from other backgrounds for the rest of their lives. It is crucial that we are conscious and deliberate about what discipline in schools looks like and how it feels to students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the rest of the community.

*Eileen McCue is an Americorps\*VISTA with the Maine Council of Churches working to bring the principles of restorative justice into Maine schools.*