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***Creative Response to Conflict: Restorative Circles for Incarcerated People & Those Harmed***

Creative Response to Conflict (CRC) has a long history of working with people impacted by incarceration. In Spring of 2020, we were fortunate to receive a grant from the American Arbitration Association to develop a new program called, *Creative Response to Conflict: Restorative Circles for Incarcerated People & Those Harmed*. The purpose of the program is to work with incarcerated and recently released people to enable them to take responsibility & feel welcomed back to the community and to reduce recidivism, through circles and other supportive processes.

This article will detail our experience in creating this program, especially during the pandemic.

I. History of CRC re-entry/prison work

CRC began in New York City in 1972, funded by the Quaker Project on Community Conflict, a program of the Peace and Social Action Program of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Our mission was to give nonviolent conflict resolution skills to children at as young an age as possible. We became known as Children's Creative Response to Conflict (CCRC) and in 1992 changed our name to Creative Response to Conflict, Inc. (CRC) to ensure that we worked with all ages of young people as well as parents, teachers and administrators. We often did workshops with other groups; men groups, women's groups, LGBTQ groups, and workshops for people in prisons.

In 1974, the Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP) started in Green Haven Prison in upstate New York. CRC's original four themes of: cooperation, communication, affirmation and creative conflict resolution, were incorporated into the AVP program which has grown to be a huge international program. Priscilla Prutzman, a co-founder and current Executive Director of CRC, was very involved with AVP and co-facilitated many workshops in Green Haven, Eastern Correctional Facility, Wallkill Correctional facility, Bedford Hills Correctional facility and Taconic Prison.

In the eighties, when mediation became very popular, Priscilla and Marcy May (founder of Effective Alternatives in Reconciliation Services (EARS) started teaching conflict resolution skills to the women on the AIDS unit at Bedford Hills, a maximum-security women's prison in Bedford, New York. This program morphed into a mediation training, where a select group of women were given 30 hours of mediation training and, with the well wishes of the then Superintendent Elaine Lord, started a confidential program where the women could mediate conflicts without having to go to the administration or correction officers. This was a unique program which ended when Superintendent Lord left.

In the nineties, there was interest in helping formerly incarcerated people reenter into society with new skills, resources and opportunities. CRC formed a partnership with the Rockland Parent-Child Center that had been running a Family Connections program with women inside the Rockland County Jail in New City, New York. They also worked with women coming out of the county jail and offered them a 14-week curriculum that included support for job skills, deescalating techniques, substance abuse, domestic violence, parenting and other topics.

CRC received a grant from United Way to collaborate with the Family Connections program and add a children's program to coincide with some of the themes the women were working on. We established a model where we served a hot dinner first, then had programs for both the women and the children. Sometimes, the topics would lend themselves to the women and children being together, but mostly they were two separate programs that came together at the end for comments on what they had experienced and to have a joint closing activity.

The children's groups engaged in various theatre and art projects while learning cooperative skills. We often had auctions where women and children were given equal amounts of play money to bid on certain objects. This was followed by a discussion about money management, saving and debt free living. We also did several sessions on bias awareness and bullying prevention and intervention. Due to its success, United Way funding for this program continues to this day.

Around 2012, CRC began incorporating restorative practices into many of its programs including the reentry program. We modified the CRC workshop model into a circle structure, including agenda reviews, evaluations and mindfulness moments. We spent circle time exploring our values and creating community guidelines which we revisit during each session.

At first it was very chaotic with everyone wanting to talk at once. But as the group got used to using a talking piece, where participants could only talk if they had the talking piece, this became the norm. An organic "orderliness" began to develop and people's listening and speaking skills began to improve significantly. Sessions were structured as follows:

- Welcome
- Mindfulness
- Go around check in how are you doing
- Agenda review
- Several go around questions on the day's topic (often building on prior sessions or rounds)
- Evaluation
- Closing

We also brought donations of clothing, household items, toys, beanie babies, bikes, and food for participants. One year, we arranged for moms who completed an online parenting course to receive a free refurbished computer, donated by the county.

When COVID began, we moved completely online and currently continue all sessions virtually. During the pandemic, we delivered supplies such as hand sanitizer, masks, socks, and toys to participants. The group has become a weekly women's support group where they look forward to safely reflecting on the increased challenges of COVID, while continuing to learn skills to better manage relationships and situations in their lives.

## II. AAA Grant - Creative Response to Conflict: Restorative Circles for Incarcerated People & Those Harmed

We wanted to have a greater impact and continue our work both inside local prisons as well as with people who were recently released. CRC was thrilled to be awarded a competitive grant from the American Arbitration Association (AAA) in the Spring of 2020. The vision of this grant was to be able to conduct restorative circles, in Rockland County Jail, Taconic Women's Correctional Facility and Bedford Maximum Security Women's Prison. We also wanted to work with Making a Difference Everyday (M.A.D.E.) Transitional Services, which housed nine men recently released from prison.

Restorative circles provide a safe space for those who caused harm and those impacted to have meaningful dialogue. Repaired harm and mutual forgiveness are powerful tools for change that rebuild lives & communities. The circle process itself allows people to be vulnerable with each other and to connect deeply. One goal of our weekly re-entry circles is to reduce recidivism and gives participants a sense of belonging along with tools to change the trajectory of their lives to become productive community members.

Just before we were awarded the grant, bail reforms were passed in New York, greatly reducing the number of people housed in the Rockland County Jail. As a result, the number of incarcerated men decreased from 420 to 100 and the number of incarcerated women has decreased from 22 to 10. This was one factor that prevented us from working with this facility.

When COVID started, prisons further reduced their populations as much as they could to prevent the spread of the virus. They also stopped allowing outside people and organizations to work with their populations. This meant that we could not begin our circles in any of the prisons. We hoped that as everything moved to virtual environments, we would be able to begin online circles in the prisons, but to date, protocols and lack of adequate technology has prevented that from happening.

Fortunately, we had strong relationships with and interest from MADE Transitional Services that enabled us to begin circles with the men there. Our lead circle-keeper, Jennifer Mancuso, also had connections with a program called HOUR Children. Their program, "My Mother's House" serves as a transitional program for women recently released from incarceration. After a few months of arranging the logistics, Jennifer and Gabrielle Hill began leading circles for the

women there, entirely virtually. The women connected well immediately and shared deeply, appreciating the forum to do so.

### III. Restorative Circle Process Overview:

Restorative Justice circles are used to bring people together to connect, to understand one another, and to access our collective wisdom to solve problems. The circle process is a story-telling process. Every person has a story and every person has a lesson to offer. Circles also provide individuals an opportunity to be heard, to practice authentic listening, and to have equitable voices and power.

Participants are introduced to the circle process for which there is a talking object (e.g. stress ball, object of meaning to the group, or virtual symbol such as a peace sign) that is passed around the circle and held by each person as they take their turn. Only one person speaks at a time. The talking piece reminds participants they can speak when they have it, and they listen when they don't. They are also free to pass when the talking piece comes to them, if they don't feel moved or ready to speak.

Participants will be given a series of prompts or questions. After introductions, the first prompt is usually about personal values. A sense of connection starts to develop in circles when participants share ideals and vulnerabilities. As they begin to see each other more tenderly as human beings, participants also begin to discover their interconnectedness and similarities, and begin to build trust with each other. This also creates space for them to move toward honest self-assessment.

After an introductory circle, follow up circles work the same way, except the prompts vary according to the themes that emerge from the group's discussions. Each circle informs the prompts for the following week.

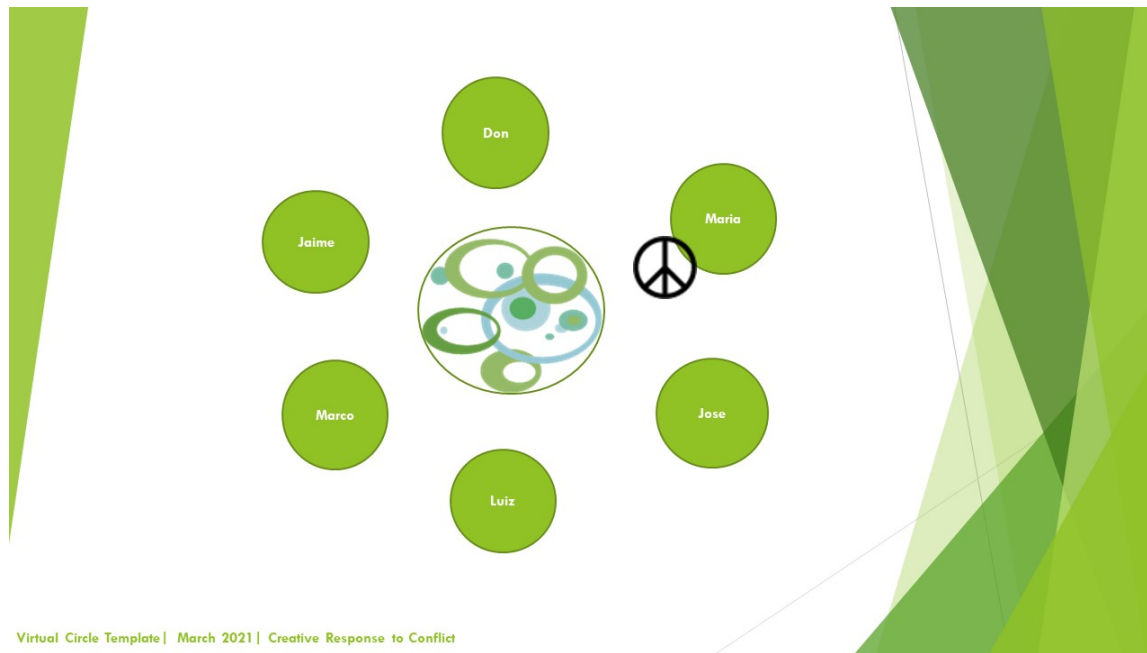
Restorative circle practitioners provide support for the needs expressed by participants of a circle. The facilitator is not presented as the expert in the room. Rather, the participants become the collective experts in their shared experience. Restorative circles enable all participants to experience an equal share of power, and to be heard fully and authentically. Restorative circles are based on the idea that we, as human beings, possess the wisdom and ability to collectively solve our own problems. Restorative circles for incarcerated people provide recurring opportunities for individuals to feel in control of themselves, be heard fully, and develop a set of tools that can help them reshape their lives and relationships.

### IV. Circles at MADE Transitional Services House

We intentionally sought co-circle-keepers, at least one of whom was a person of color. In our first session, our circle keepers, Jennifer Mancuso and Gabrielle (Gabe) Hill, distributed pre-tests to the men to assess their levels of trust, communication and relationship skills, as well as knowledge and comfort level with circle processes. Initially, our circle keepers wore masks to

protect against COVID and met the men in an outdoor circle in the yard of the MADE house. They began with dinner and then started the circle with a story or quote that everyone commented on in turn. Topics progressed with the men to include personal development; community building; consensus decision-making; personal empowerment; personal support and accountability; communication, problem-solving and culture of peaceful conflict resolution. Circles also provided opportunities for the men to practice new problem-solving skills to manage conflicts between them in the MADE house.

As conditions with the virus worsened and the weather turned colder, we switched to using Zoom with our virtual restorative circle model, pictured below. CRC's Director of Programs and Communications, Elizabeth Roberts, developed this process prior to COVID using a PowerPoint slide, to enable us to hold monthly virtual restorative circles internationally. It proved invaluable as we have now taught hundreds of educators to use our virtual circle with their students. The circle-keeper shares their screen and moves the peace symbol for each person in turn.



We initially planned to do eight circles at the MADE house, but the men wanted to continue, so we added another set of eight. The additional circles enabled the men to share more deeply with each other. One of the participants shared about how frustrated and hopeless he was about justice in this country. He was in prison when Abdou Diallo was shot and there was no justice for him. He shared about his experiences being in prison and recognizing the racial disparities. He was very emotional in his sharing and it was the first time he had actually openly shared. One of the other participants said he was, “thankful for y’all to give us space to have peace of mind.”

In week 12, a new house member joined the group. He was very recently released from prison after several years of a DUI sentence. Having no prior criminal convictions, he did not accept a plea deal and took his case to trial and was punished harshly for doing so with a five-year

sentence. He lost his wife and home and shared how he once was a big supporter of police and the criminal justice system, but now, experiencing it first hand, he was disillusioned. He shared a lot and the other men held a supportive container for him.

The facilitators later reflected that having built a vessel over the past 11 weeks, the men were not uncomfortable with individual and deep sharing and were able to be welcoming to someone new. One of the tenets of circle processes is to help people feel welcome, especially those previously excluded. The fact that these men welcomed in someone new, without judgment, and helped him to feel immediately comfortable in sharing deeply, shows the power of doing this work, especially in this population.

## V. My Mother's House

Jen and Gabe also co-facilitate the circles at "My Mother's House". They were immediately impressed at how deep and emotionally available the women were in the very first circle. The women felt it was so powerful that they wanted it to be mandatory for all women to attend. Since one of the tenets of restorative practices is that it is a voluntary process, we spoke about encouraging all women to try an initial circle and decide whether they wanted to continue.

In the first circle, the women shared what they wanted to bring forward into the new year. One woman spoke about forgiveness, forgiving herself so that she would not feel embarrassed with her family for what she had done. Another woman talked about her daily practice of being her best self. She also shared about all of the loss of COVID, but recognized the silver lining of being able to get out of prison six months early and be with her son.

The session ended with the women collectively creating and saying the following affirmation, "The past is over. It can no longer hurt me. It has served its purpose. I let go of what I don't need. As I forgive others, I also forgive myself. I am now free to be the woman God has created me to be. I love and approve of myself. All is well in my world. I am safe."

They had a very rich conversation about communication and reactions out of fear and self-preservation versus when we respond out of love and connection. They talked about how sometimes being confrontational comes out of a place of love. That communication can be messy and that it is hard to say what you really mean. One woman shared very emotionally about how she always felt like she was a strong communicator until she went to prison and then she just had to swallow whatever was given to her and how hard and dehumanizing that was for her and the damage it has left. Another woman was pregnant and shared a lot about her desire to be a good mom. Restorative circles gave these women an opportunity to connect openly, be vulnerable and learn from one another to improve their lives as they return to their families and communities.

## VI. Challenges of COVID

Our original vision was to conduct live restorative circles in Rockland County Jail, Taconic Women's Correctional Facility and Bedford Maximum Security Women's Prison. When COVID began and prisons ceased allowing physical access to any outside organizations, we tried working with each facility to arrange to conduct virtual circles. Due to technological and privacy concerns, there were many barriers. There was also a rise in COVID cases in the prisons and even a recent death at Bedford due to COVID, which further limited the administration's willingness to allow people to congregate, even for virtual sessions.

We initially planned to begin our program at Rockland County Jail, since we have strong ties there. With the reduction in their population, due to both recent bail reform and COVID-19, the county is not admitting anyone new in the jail, so our efforts there stalled as well.

We applied to Taconic twice with the hope of being included in a small number of virtual offerings. Priscilla Prutzman, Executive Director of CRC, was already a registered volunteer and attended a new mandatory course to enable her participation as a facilitator. We also tried to get approval for Priscilla to join Jennifer to teach via Web-X, the platform they use. Like many things, approvals are delayed due to COVID. Ultimately, we were unable to offer virtual circles at Taconic within the grant period.

We knew Bedford, as a maximum-security facility, would be the most challenging prison to start a program in, despite CRC's prior access through our program in the 1980's. Their restrictions on outsiders, coupled with insufficient technology for their population made it unlikely that we could get a virtual program started there.

Even at the MADE house, the virtual circles presented some new challenges as not everyone has a phone or computer equipped to participate. Sometimes two men sit together sharing a screen to participate in virtual circles. We applied to get donations of computers, which we eventually received, though most of the sessions had been completed by then and the computers didn't come with monitors, creating an additional challenge. In the interim, some of the men shared phones or iPads to enable more people to participate. *(Is this accurate?)*

Also, one of the men wears a hearing aid, which caused some static feedback. It was resolved by using a computer instead of a headset and phone. We are trying to get a computer connected to a TV in their common space. Mid-way through, one of the most enthusiastic residents got COVID, so he temporarily couldn't participate and the rest of the house needed to quarantine. The men have grown to appreciate the opportunities presented by the restorative circles and have asked for them to continue.

My Mother's House also had delays due to COVID outbreaks, which required the women to quarantine, so they weren't allowed to be in common spaces to use the technology for our virtual circles.

Like many, we continue to be flexible and understanding with the ever-changing landscape of the virus. We have persisted and have been able to hold circles in at both MADE and My Mother's House, which have been well-received. AAA has also been flexible in allowing for

modifications to our original grant intentions to reflect both the necessity of the situation and responsiveness to requests to continue services at MADE.

## VII. Next Steps

In the later phases of our grant, which we are working on at the time of this writing, we envisioned offering harm circles to participants with family members and also training participants in leadership roles as circle-keepers. We are reaching out to members of the MADE circles, My Mother's House and also our women's support group to determine who may be interested in a restorative circle with family members who have been impacted by their incarceration. This can provide the opportunity for healing by implementing the accountability and welcoming that are central to restorative work.

Some circle participants are interested and ready to take on leadership roles, so we are planning to train them to become circle keepers, a skill they can continue to utilize upon their release. This free training, called "Introduction to Circle-Keeping", has goals of supporting the growth and development of formerly incarcerated people *and* raise awareness about and increase capacity for restorative justice in Rockland. We are looking into providing stipends for participants from the reentry community to further support their financial goals. We also hope to get more people familiar with the value and concepts of restorative practices so we can help shift the county's focus away from a punitive and criminalizing model. In addition to formerly incarcerated people, we are inviting a small number of others who have a stake in promoting alternatives. By giving formerly incarcerated people skills in restorative practices, it may spur insights into how to apply these principles, and encourage steps toward listening to and repairing harm with people in their lives and discussing the value of this process in their communities.

In March 2021, we learned that MADE Transition House received permits to open a second location where they were excited to have us offer circles to up to 24 new residents. Unfortunately, we also discovered that the second location was near a church that is actively trying to prevent them from opening. Unknowingly, the permit restricts the number of inhabitants to seven, which would not bring in enough money to pay the \$6,000 a month rent. CRC tried to organize circle process to discuss it and reached out to some of the people involved. As is often the case, people who are unfamiliar with circle processes can be resistant to using them to resolve conflicts. Some of the essential elements to a successful circle in pre-work with each participant and that they each come willingly. We are seeing this resistance in this situation, while the conflict continues, delaying the opening of the location.

We will hold close-out sessions for each of our groups and plan to administer post-tests to all groups and analyze the results with our evaluator. We will continue to connect recently released people with community resources and re-entry support. Hopefully we can solidify the relationships between community partners and formerly incarcerated people to ensure strong ties in their communities.



As we look forward, following the term of this grant, we will begin discussions for continuation and expansion of our programs at all locations and new funding opportunities. We hope to utilize the information gleaned from this work to advocate to the Rockland County Reentry Task Force and District Attorney's office, to expand the benefits of restorative circles throughout Rockland County and beyond.

## VIII. Conclusion

Restorative circles lead people to profoundly value each other. When we connect and truly appreciate one another, we are more likely to find ways to communicate that honor differences and the complexity of human experience. As people exercise compassion more and more, they are capable of greater patience and tolerance. Someone else's outburst or unkind words, which previously might have triggered a more violent or disrespectful reaction, are not as easily taken personally. Through the circle process, CRC built a community among incarcerated people that emphasizes listening, trust, and empathy, and which prepares the ground for creative problem-solving and a culture of harm repair and forgiveness to take root. As participants re-integrate back into their communities, they take with them new skills and new ways to relate to those around them to lead productive, fulfilling lives.