

Circle Process: A Unique Intervention

By Bunny Macfarlane

We were fortunate to have Joyce M. Young join the Restorative Justice section meeting on the 21st of November. She is a trained Circle Keeper and Circle Trainer receiving her instruction from Peacebuilder's International. She is a Family Mediator and Co-Chair of the Family Section of the ADR Institute. Joyce shared one of the highlights of her Circle Keeping practice, participation in a Circle Process for a supportive housing project in Regent Park. You may read about the outcome of that experience in the Globe and Mail Article: *The Building that fought back*. Joyce is pleased to report that within nine months of implementing Circles in the Regent Park area, the group succeeded in removing drug dealers from one of its buildings.

What is a circle?

Joyce began the evening by informing the attendees of the Restorative Justice Section that a Circle is a structured intervention, built on a key set of values, the most central being respect. She explained that honesty, empathy, sharing, inclusivity, courage, and integrity are also key to the process. The underlying principle of the Circle, is democracy. Not the typical definition of democracy as we understand it, but the notion that the facilitator is at the service of the Circle. Even though the Circle Keeper is there to serve the Circle, he or she is a part of the Circle and participates as one of the members of the Circle.

Another guiding principle of the Circle is that there are no observers, due to the confidential nature of the sharing in the Circle. Disruption by late arrivals is discouraged as well. Based on the respectful foundation of the Circle, one person speaks at a time as the others listen and each speaker is allowed to do so without interruption. Typically, there are two Circle keepers, however, Joyce "kept" the Circle solo for the benefit of the members of the Restorative Justice Section.

The Centre Piece and the Speaker Piece

There are two characteristics unique to the Circle. The first is the centrepiece, which is a collection of beautiful items selected by the Circle Keeper(s). These are placed in the centre of the Circle. All items hold some connection to the Circle Keeper and are selected specifically for the occasion of each unique Circle. Participants may also be invited to bring objects for the centrepiece.

The second unique object is the speaking piece. When held, the object allows the speaker the opportunity to embrace his or her message, understand the significance of their words and sense the unique opportunity to be heard by the others.

Joyce opened the Circle with a reading, offering the group the opportunity to discuss the notion of empathy. Each Circle participant spoke about his or her experience relating to empathy for three complete rounds, each with different threads, offering each member of the Section an opportunity to contribute to the sum of the whole.

Participants found this experience moving, powerful, insightful, inclusive and breathtaking all at the same time. Participants eagerly await the opportunity to experience this unique sense of belonging at the next Circle.