

Longmont Ledger:

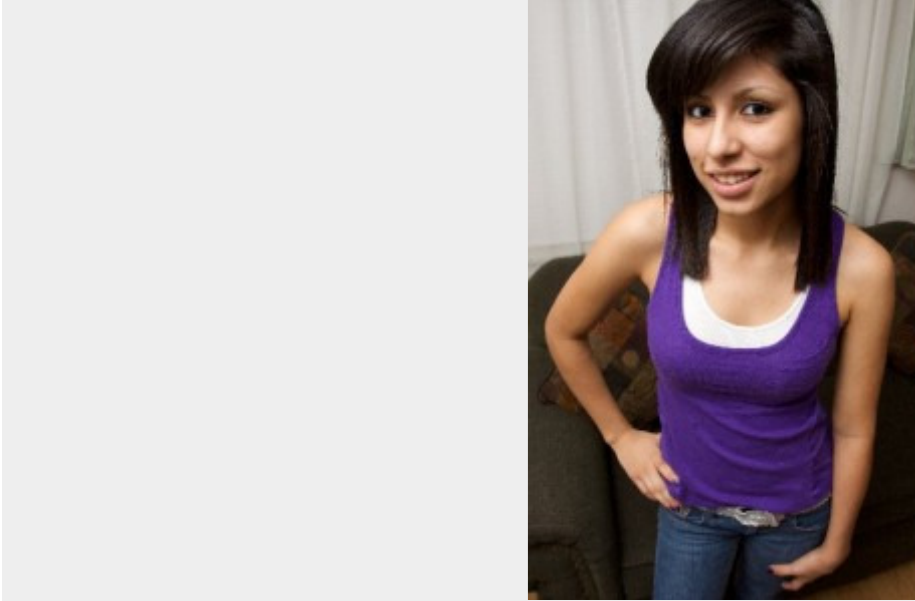
Teaching Peace seeks to repair harm of crime, restore justice

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Teaching peace.

Those two words sum up the work of a dedicated group of people in Longmont who base what they do on a set of values and principles highlighted by five words – respect, responsibility, relationship, repair and reintegration.



Brizzia Burgos, 16, was referred to Longmont's Teaching Peace restorative-justice program by her middle-school principal after getting into a fight at school. After completing the program she volunteered as a community member to fulfill a community service requirement for a school club. Lindsay J.C. Lack photo

"This is a restorative justice program for juveniles," explained Beverly Title, who was one of the founders of the non-profit Teaching Peace organization in 1994. "This way of approaching a situation focuses first on how the relationship between the offender and the victim has been harmed, rather than on what law has been violated."

The Teaching Peace program led to the formation of the Longmont Community Justice Partnership in 1996. The partnership includes the Longmont Police Department, St. Vrain Valley School District, Longmont Municipal Probation, Clearview Educational Center and Teaching Peace, which serves as the managing partner.

Under the restorative justice program, all persons involved in a crime — the victim and their support people, the offender with their support people and members of the community – come together in a circle to talk. They are then guided by trained facilitators in a three-step process: the offender tells what he or she did and why, the victim and community members tell how they were affected by what happened, and then everyone creates a plan together to repair the harm. The process usually takes about three months to complete.

"Indigenous people believe that to make a situation whole, you must find a way to bring people back together," Title said. "That's what this process does. It also gives an opportunity for new beginnings."

The plan to repair the harm includes a contract that the offender agrees to fulfill.

"It usually includes a written apology and restitution from the offender to the victim," Title said. "But the offender is not 'assigned' to do anything. They get to decide to take responsibility and discuss what restitution should be made. Everyone is involved. It's a consensual process." "There also is extraordinary respect shown in the circle by all the participants," Title added. "There is no shame or blame, and no humiliation. I think that is one key to why it works."

Restitution is important and more than 90 percent of participants are able to fully make restitution, Title said. She pointed to one case where a 10-year-old boy sold his bicycle and Nintendo to raise the money needed to pay for vandalism damage he had done. "It was important to him to make amends," she said.

The contracts also include a community service component that is "never just generic community service. It must make sense to the offender for it to be effective," Title said.

Brizzia Burgos, 16, was referred to the program by her middle-school principal after getting into a fight at school. She has completed the program and volunteered as a community member to fulfill a community-service requirement for a school club.

But she has continued her commitment even beyond the club's 60-hour requirement.

"I like to see how people change" she says.

Teaching Peace Executive Director Deb Witzel remembered one group of gang-involved kids who went through the restorative justice circle process.

"It never occurred to them that they could actually make it right again," Witzel said. "They got so excited that after their contracts were fulfilled, they continued to volunteer."

The program also offers "restorative" circles for situations where the victim and offender roles are not clearly defined. Usually those circles are used for "victimless" crimes such as alcohol and drug violations, or for crimes involving mutual responsibility such as fights or harassment.

Peacemaking circles are used for ongoing conflicts where there may not be a specific crime, but there is a history of hostility. These circles can be used for addressing conflict between rival gangs, or conflicts within or between groups. About 130 community volunteers are trained to conduct the various restorative justice circles.

Witzel said that tracking has shown that 90 percent of offenders complete the restorative justice program and fulfill their contract requirements. Only 10 percent of those offenders who complete the program re-offend, according to Witzel. By the end of 2009, the restorative justice program will have handled about 100 cases, she said.

Title has developed a new program which provides a restorative alternative to expulsion when expulsion is not required by state law. The Restorative Alternative to Expulsion (RATE) program is being piloted in the St. Vrain Valley School District. RATE addresses person-to-person offenses, such as harassment, cyberbullying and fights or assaults that don't reach the mandatory expulsion level. "This program gives the schools another tool to use to address these issues," Title said. "We are just starting to get referrals to the RATE program."

"Restorative justice is a fabulous program," said school resource officer Sandie Esters.

Esters has served as a liaison from the Longmont Police Department to the restorative justice program since May, 2004. In the beginning, she had to advocate with her fellow officers for the use of restorative justice, but now the program has become widely used in the department, she said. As a liaison, she trains officers about when it is appropriate to use restorative justice and fields any questions they may have. She and the other liaison officers also substitute for the involved officer if that officer can't attend a circle session.

Recently, she said, she has been using restorative justice practices to resolve conflicts that she sees at the school where she works. "We get to see the outcomes, and that is absolutely the best duty ever," she said. "To see the genuine remorse and apologies from the offenders is very, very moving. It gives me a lot of hope."

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