

How MRJC's Restorative Practices are Changing Lives in the High Country

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For individuals who are involved in the justice system, restorative programs are offering an alternative approach focused on reducing and repairing harm rather than punishment.

The Mediation and Restorative Justice Center (MRJC) provides mediation and restorative justice services throughout several Western North Carolina communities with its goal to repair harm in a way that benefits the victim, the individual who caused the harm and community members.

MRJC Executive Director described restorative justice as an alternative way of resolving conflicts or an alternative to traditional justice processes of accountability and punishment.

“We have circle processes where we involve the community and anyone who was affected,” Marisa Cornell said. “We have community volunteers that participate because the community should be given the opportunity to support these restorative processes.”

Cornell said restorative justice handles conflict differently than traditional courts because in those processes the questions are, what law was broken, who is responsible, and what should the punishment be.

“We are less concerned with what law was broken,” Cornell said. “We want to know who was harmed and sometimes even when we work in the court system, the conflicts that we sit down with people to talk about are not always about the official charge that was filed. It's often about relationships or something else that happened that wasn't necessarily a crime, but caused more harm.”

Most of the MRJC's work is person-centered and led by the people that they are trying to help. Cornell said it is designed to help people figure out what their own goals are and how to accomplish them.

She said many participants in these programs, especially those working toward recovery, see the person-centered restorative approach.

In a time when social media and politics often divide people, Cornell said restorative practices focus on the relationship first so they can have those difficult conversations that lead to productive outcomes..

Cornell encourages everyone to look for opportunities to use restorative practices, principles and that restorative lens in their personal or professional life.

“The restorative lens shifts the viewpoint from me and you to we — which is a win-win, relationship-focused approach where the outcome ideally benefits everyone involved,” Cornell said.

Lauren Testerman, who works with MRJC and coordinates Wataugas Recovery Court and juvenile programs, sees the impact restorative practices have.

Testerman said in Watauga County, instead of having juvenile court, they use a restorative approach such as the sentencing circle program that allows for the youth that caused any harm to the community to think and work through what happened and address the harms and needs directly with the people involved or other community representatives.

“Early intervention, especially restorative approaches, or any sort of diversion to prevent youth from having contact with the traditional justice system, is proven to be more effective for their long term outcome,” Testerman said.

Because Watauga County's Recovery Court also uses a restorative approach, Testerman has noticed significant changes in participants by the end of their program.

“One of course is that they have stopped using substances. But also they tend to have gotten a job and be gainfully employed, improved relationships with family members, or have built a support networking community outside of recovery court in the systems that will carry and stick with them past when they're involved in the program,” Testerman said.

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