

## Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

### Restorative Justice and Community Corrections

My name is Grahame Chaseling and I work as a Community Corrections Officer [NSW Attorney General and Justice]. I spent 17 years as a Corrections Officer and the last 8 years in probation and parole, now known as Community Corrections.

I have been asked by Terry O'Connell to provide a letter explaining how I became [as he describes] a 'Restorative Probation Officer'. I am pleased to do so because my restorative journey has had a profound impact on me personally and professionally.

This journey began with my interest in mediation. I needed a better way to engage prisoners and others so I undertook and successfully completed a Graduate Diploma of Mediation. It was when I met Terry O'Connell that I began to realise that restorative justice [or what I now know as restorative practice] had a lot to offer in my work with prisoners. I was fortunate to observe a restorative conference in 1997 facilitated by Terry. It involved a serious home invasion where the elderly victim had been assaulted.

The power of this process reminded me about the importance of having the 'right conversation'. I remember writing to Terry to share a little of my observations:

*"It is my observation that the various theories and practices proposed by the conferencing literature were duplicated in the conference, and that the outcome, particularly symbolic reparation were to the satisfaction of the participants. Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming was applied in that the shaming, or condemnation of the behaviour occurred in a continuum of support.....I think it is fair to say that everyone present achieved closure because when invited to do so, nobody had anything to add, no material reparation was sought, and everybody mingled freely after the formal part was closed."*

I soon realised that restorative practice was not a program but a practice, one that has transformed how I engage offenders and their families. I now enjoy great satisfaction and confidence in my work as a community corrections officer because I have become more effective- and my results more predictable. Through greater influence over offenders to make significant changes to their thinking and lives, I have assisted them to reduce the likelihood of further offending and in a practical sense contributed to community safety.

I think that working with relationships, rather than concentrating only on rules and restrictions have been the key. My greatest challenge however, has been supervising the more difficult offenders, such as violent sex offenders. I have found that by having an explicit restorative practice framework, what I actually do and how I

do it actually makes sense. I'd like to share a few observations on the importance of being able to explain and share my practice.

When managing the more serious offenders, rather than concentrating only on compliance with strict schedules, and restrictions on movements and activities, I focus on establishing who is significant in the offender's life, then emphasise the importance of building healthy and sustainable relationships, as this is fundamental if offenders are to be challenged and held accountable for their behaviour. This has allowed me to find a balance between supervision issues such as monitoring and surveillance, and the more strategic relational and lifestyle aspects of supervision.

The restorative questions Terry developed shape every conversation I have with offenders and families. In fact I give every offender the small restorative card and encourage each offender to use the card when talking with family and others.

The restorative questions allow me to consistently challenge offenders and families so that:

- Offenders think about harm to others and therefore are less likely to minimise or deny the harm, or move responsibility for the harm onto others, such as victim/s.
- The focus is on their relationships with the emphasis on ensuring that the offenders recognise and accept the obligations that those relationships entail.
- Where there is serious wrongdoing such as sexual violence, offenders gain a clear and full understanding about the unacceptability of their behaviour because this conversation happens with those significant in their lives.
- They learn to deal with their shame and vulnerability in positive and constructive ways so that relationships can be built. This is fundamental to what helps minimise the potential for further offending.

A strong feature of my practice is that I now have a clear and logical set of working assumptions, all of which are mediated by relationships;

- Harm is undeniable and irrefutable in the context of relationship.
- Where a relationship exists, obligations ensue, because just as wrongdoing damage relationships, healthy and responsible behaviour builds relationships. Relationships entail obligations and responsibilities.
- Wrongdoing is unsustainable within a context of healthy relationships. Similarly, healthy and respectful behaviour can only improve difficult relationships or impoverish anti-social relationships.
- If victims and offenders are engaged within a continuum of healthy, respectful and supportive relationships, wrongdoing can be challenged strongly, and healing can begin for the victim and/or others affected by the event.

Whilst I consider that my practice is still a 'work-in-progress' I feel that how I now engage with offenders and their families is far more effective and professionally much more satisfying.

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