

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Spreading the message

Nigerian officials visit to learn about program

By Amy Carboneau

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There is a Nigerian proverb that goes something like this: Punish a child with one hand; pull him close with the other.

That's the basic concept behind restorative justice, a global alternative to a harsh and failing penal system.

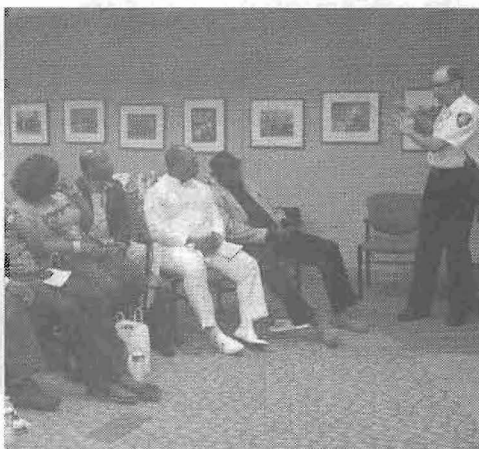
The idea in Concord started 11 years ago with former Police Chief Len Wetherbee, who returned to the Concord office Tuesday to explain the benefits behind Communities for Restorative Justice (C4RJ) to roughly 25 Nigerian guests.

Led by UMass Boston Associate Professor of Conflict Resolution Darren Kew, the group of lawyers and justices visited the police station to compare what they knew from their home justice systems to the local community-police partnership here in Concord, which offers some offenders an alternative to jail time while also offering the offender the chance to become a better person and the victim the opportunity to heal.

"This program has really allowed something to happen that's always been missing — at least in the decades I've been around," said Wetherbee, who has served for 34 years. "It has really filled in this missing piece."

In Concord, the system works slightly under the radar, said C4RJ Executive Director Jennifer Larson Sawin. Legislation is under way, but the system itself is not yet state-approved. But they have seen success with the program, and are continuing to push the idea to area communities, said Sawin, and to more urban settings such as Boston and Cambridge.

To introduce the system to her guests, Sawin began with a video titled "Burning Bridges," which told the sto-



Former Concord Police Chief Len Wetherbee explains Concord's Communities for Restorative Justice system to a group of Nigerian lawyers and justices who visited the police barracks Tuesday. PHOTO COURTESY OF KATE CARR

ry of six boys from Buck's County, Pa., who set fire to a local beloved bridge. After they were caught, but before they were sentenced, the boys took part in a large circular gathering where they talked about what they did and how they felt.

In the story of Mood's Covered Bridge, one of the boy's fathers, who also took part in the circle, likened the story to yet another African proverb: It takes a village to raise a child, he said. "It certainly doesn't look like this village is doing a good job," he added.

If it works right, everybody wins, said Concord Police Lt. Roy Mulcahy.

The victim wins, because the offender offers some form of restitution, either financial or service-related. In the story of the six boys from Pennsylvania, all six helped to build the town — the victim — a new bridge.

The offender wins because they learn from the situation, and may never enter the penal system again.

The police win, because they no longer have labeled the offender a "bad guy," which often times is more the catalyst behind the offender's behavior, then a remark on it, said Wetherbee — "We play the roles that we're cast in."

And the system wins, because there is less strain on it; and fewer bodies mean fewer dollars.

Criminal justice is an idea that dates back to the Middle Ages, when a king felt threatened, said Sawin. It looks at who broke the law, how to prove it, and what should be done to him or her.

Restorative Justice, on the other hand, looks at what the victim wants. It assesses the harm, sees who was affected and determines the needs of the victims.

But it is not a therapy session, or mediation, said Sawin. And it's not easy — particularly for the offender who has to voice what he or she did, and how they felt.

In Concord, there is a police officer who sits in on the circle to act as a safeguard for the victim, but also to take part in the process. This is not always the case in other areas of the country or world that offer similar systems.

In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was started. In Rwanda, a system was put in place to handle genocide.

It is a system not yet in place in Nigeria — at least in the state of Benue, where Iorhemen Hwande works as a chief judge. But he is hopeful it is in the works.

"It will happen," said Hwande. "It will be cheaper for the state...it helps the victim, and the offender — he gets restored back to the community."