

GUEST COMMENTARY

'Even harder to stand up to a friend'

By Christy Barbee

Communities for Restorative Justice (C4RJ) is in its 11th year of service, and we feel very fortunate to be working in Concord and nearby communities with victims, offenders, and police officers after crimes have been committed. We bring together the person harmed with the person who did the harm, and we help them come to an agreement about how the offender will make amends — and also how the offender will learn from his or her mistakes. These agreements might include service to a victim or community, financial restitution, letters of apology, research, and reflective writing. We always include work on decision making, and we sometimes refer offenders to counseling.

In most instances, offenders referred to C4RJ avoid a criminal record if they complete their obligations to the victim and the community. It's not easy; many a young person has told us, "Gee, I didn't think it would be so much work." We usually respond with something like, "Real accountability takes time, time to recognize the harm you've caused, and the ripple effects. Time to rebuild trust. Time to build empa-

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thy."

Occasionally, offenders opt to write letters for newspapers to talk about their offenses and what they've learned. What follows was written by a young person who attended a party in the home of people who were out of town. We promise all participants in our program confidentiality, so we offer it here with the young person's name withheld:

All teenagers make mistakes at some point in their high school years and, unfortunately, my friends and I made a terrible mistake last winter. A friend of mine invited me to a party at our other friend's house. Without obtaining more information, I ignorantly went. When I arrived I was told that the house's owners, including my friend, were away on vacation; it was an unpredictable predicament. In the moment, it was hard to understand the immorality of my actions, but the Restorative Justice program has helped me to reflect on the issues of this

dilemma.

Since the incident, I have thought a lot about what I could have done differently. The biggest problem was that I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I didn't know that there would be alcohol or that the homeowners were on vacation until I arrived. This was my first mistake. In the moment, it's hard to break down a sticky situation and contemplate the ethicality of it, which is why you should make this decision prior to a party. Don't wait until you're there to make the decision! What if you arrive and the family is on vacation? What if there's underage drinking or drugs? What if you get arrested? Teens don't think of these things in the midst of a party, which is why teens should always get the details before attending a party.

Once I was there I found it hard to leave because my friends were there. Everybody knows it's hard to stand up to an enemy, but it's even harder to stand up to a friend. I knew the party

was wrong and I knew that there could be consequences, but I never stopped to think. I should've left, and convinced others to do the same. Unfortunately, I didn't do either. I made the wrong decision. It's my own fault for getting into the situation and it's my fault for not getting out.

The restorative justice program gave me time to think about my actions, and the program let me listen to the homeowner's perspective. I now realize that the party was illegal, immoral and, above all, selfish. We disrespected the homeowners and their home just to have a night of fun; selfish.

So please take it from someone who knows: next time you think about going to a party, think about how the choice could affect your future, whether it's college, your job, sports, etc. And most important, think about how your choice will affect others; especially your own family. It is not worth it.

We — and the young person who wrote it — hope his letter will help others. To learn more about C4RJ, visit www.c4rj.com.

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