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Who are we?

Our Mission...

Community Justice Initiatives Association (CJI) is a community-based non-profit society located in Langley, British Columbia, Canada. Considered the ‘go-to’ place for anyone wishing to learn or understand restorative justice practices from a real-world perspective.

Our mission is: To promote peacemaking, reconciliation and the resolution of conflict through the development and application of restorative justice values, principles and processes.

With over 30 years of experience providing conflict resolution programs in such settings as the criminal justice system, organizations, schools, businesses, and for private individuals, we are driven by a unique understanding of conflict in society and have become leaders and pioneers in what we call “restorative justice.”

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My being on the Board of Community Justice Initiatives Association (CJI), let alone the Chair for this past year, was not in my long-range plan. In fact, except for one small, all but forgotten, crossing of the paths well over 30 years ago, CJI was one of Langley’s best-kept secrets!

Internationally recognized and acclaimed, CJI is just not a household name in our own backyard.

A random comment and ensuing coffee with past Chair, Jeff Christian, started it all for me. Because of Jeff’s involvement in Corrections work in Canada, I thought it was a given that he must believe in capital punishment – well you can imagine the conversation that ensued! So, began my personal paradigm shift from a punitive outlook to a restorative one.

The Victim Offender Mediation Program (VOMP) work the organization does, even after all my years on the Board, is still awe-inspiring to me. However, it’s the Restorative Action Program (RAP) in Langley Schools that caught my interest early in my involvement. In very simplistic terms, giving youth the tools to deal with conflict today seems a great way to reduce the amount of VOMP work in the future. Prevention now minimizes the need to restore later.

If you are reading this report, it’s likely because you are part of the CJI story in some way. So, I don’t need to tell you the amazing work its practitioners, supported by a dedicated administrative staff, accomplish day after day, year after year. You’ve heard the stories of lives touched and improved by CJI, that have brought tears to the most hardened of eyes.

Instead, I will tell you what we don’t do well. Most importantly, we don’t do a very good job of communicating the value we deliver or the potential value we could bring to our community and for that matter, our country. And that is holding CJI back.
From a purely monetary perspective, each program we deliver costs more than we receive in direct revenues. Some would suggest that’s why we are called a Not for Profit organization, yet the cold hard fact is that when the money runs out, so does the ability to deliver services. And without an excess of revenue over expenses, we can’t grow our programs to provide services to more people who need them. And further, if we look at a very subjective metric – the value received by those we serve relative to revenue earned – we are not only the best-kept secret but also the best bargain in town.

And then along came the COVID-19 lock down and CJI’s ability to deliver face to face programs evaporated. We have all learned that a virtual hug is not the same as the real thing, nor is participation in a Zoom circle the same as the dynamics of all being physically present.

Historically, traditional sources of funding requiring soliciting funds and writing grants applications have not been sufficient to grow CJI Programs and now some may no longer be available to simply sustain the status quo. More sustainable sources of funding are required if we hope to deliver CJI services to more people. We have had to lay staff off, and that is hopefully a never to be repeated undertaking. It was not easy for the Board or the staff.

If the lock down has given people a positive, it has been the opportunity to re-examine personal, business/other organizational involvements and the way we are living, our priorities, the way we are running our businesses/organizations. It’s given us the time away from “doing” to think about “doing better” or “doing differently”.

We at CJI have the time to consider when the “new normal” returns, what type of organization would we like to have in place? If we were tasked with starting from the ground up to deliver restorative justice programs and education services, would it look like the CJI of today? What would our funding model look like?

If delivering the Restorative Action Program to some Langley students is a good thing, then why not to all? If delivering restorative justice services to some of the community is good, then why not to all of it? How do we make that happen?

I suggest we start by doing a better job of telling our story to attract the resources that can better sustain CJI ongoing and ensure that we can grow our programs to meet very definite needs in today’s world. Because what we do shouldn’t be a “best-kept secret”.
The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say... "What are you going through?"
-Simone Weil (French philosopher, mystic and writer)

Simone de Beauvoir, having met Simone Weil while they studied together at University in France, wrote of her, "I envied her for having a heart that could beat right across the world." Capable of burying most of her contemporaries in debate, or intimidating the finest minds with the power of her writing, Simone Weil took no joy in any such thing. Most of her thought is 'shot through' with a vein of gold, the concept of caritas: unconditional love for all humankind, regardless of race or rank, a love so pure it is used to describe divine love and which came to be classed with the three primary virtues of faith, hope and charity (lit., caritas).

Weil wrote at a time of enormous suffering in the world, and always in solidarity with the ‘little people’, the victims of violence, of war, of oppression, of disease as rampant at the time as the plagues of earlier history. A time very much like our own, as we now face into the chaos and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, another time in which “The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say... "What are you going through?" A time in which we are reminded of the impact of this disease upon our neighbours, locally and globally, and which calls us to compassion and hearts capable of beating “right across the world”. In this time of distancing and isolation, CJI staff find it difficult to have our service to others in need so sharply constrained. There are times when we can do no more for those we usually serve in person, and in myriad ways, than to contact them remotely, to simply evidence our care for them by asking “What are you going through?”, and listening, listening – sometimes unable to do - in ways that speak of caritas.

The first eight months of the past fiscal year were replete with opportunities to serve our clients, in prisons, in the community, in area schools, in far-flung places as we trained others in our processes. The reports to follow attest to a sampling of those things. But the last four months have been a challenge, testing all of our capacities for creativity, for patience, for ingenuity. One can only speculate – while attempting to anticipate – what the year to come will bring. It will be challenging, that is for certain, for CJI, as well as for virtually all other service organizations.
All three of our divisions, as you’ll be aware, have long depended upon interpersonal engagement: the ability to bring people together in groups for training; for peacebuilding and skill building as in the Restorative Action Program in the district schools; and in the prisons, in facilitated dialogues between the trauma survivors and the prisoners who caused them harm. None of those services can be delivered in the way they previously have been, at least not for the foreseeable future.

As a result, all of our staff will need to be hard at work to conceive of ways in which we can re-conceptualize how we’ll continue to meet the needs of our clientele in the current ‘distancing’ climate. Some creative ideas have emerged. A week ago, for example, I facilitated a ‘face-to-face’ meeting - using a video-conferencing platform - between a mother and father who lost their son to manslaughter and the prisoner who took his life, one of his own longtime friends. In the face of his evident remorse, repentance and moving letter of apology, the family members are prepared to dialogue with him in order to get answers to their questions and, ultimately, to offer him the words of forgiveness. Each of these participants was disappointed that they could not meet in person, but all are agreed that – even as a second best – the ‘virtual’ process they experienced was a powerful example of what restorative / transformative / healing justice can accomplish.

Each of our other divisions will be up against similar challenges in the months to come, needing to find creative ways to enable ‘encounter’ between CJI staff and the people we serve.

But CJI has long been known as “the little engine that could”, reminiscent of the child’s story book. We intend to do everything in our power to ensure that that description is not simply past tense, but is lived out as “the little engine that can, and will.”

We invite you to stand with us as we face into those challenges. In the meanwhile, we hope you enjoy this year’s reports of what transpired during the past fiscal year. We would love to hear from you, as we hold out to each of you this same question: “What are you going through”? Perhaps in this time of quietude and reflection, each of us can be about the work of caritas, tending and looking to enlarge our own hearts, ’til they are capable of beating “right across the world.”
**Program Overview**

As the 2019/2020 school year comes to an unexpected close, I value the opportunity to reflect on the past year for the Restorative Action Program. It has been one of growing our connections as an initiative, deepening and strengthening our practices and relationships, evaluating our impact, and contemplating the goals and direction of the program on a larger scale. The Restorative Action Program continues to operate as a unique partnership between the Langley School District (SD #35) and CJI, where staff jointly carry out the work while building curriculum and capacity. In September 2019, I moved into the full-time role of Program Coordinator and began working in collaboration with long-time SD #35 Restorative Action Teacher, Cristy Watson. In the last year, Cristy has continued her dedicated work across the district on a part-time basis, and it has been invaluable to have her support, skill and insight. Between us, Cristy and I have had the privilege of working alongside over 2250 students and staff in the district to build capacity through Peace Circles, offer training and professional development, and restoratively support those experiencing conflict and harm.

**Peace Circles**

Peace Circles offer an opportunity for an entire classroom to come together over the course of 8-12 weekly sessions to build community. Through these sessions, students develop a hands-on understanding of the principles of restorative action through experiential activities and games that connect to district-wide social emotional learning competencies. In the last year, the Restorative Action Program facilitated Peace Circles at two secondary schools, ten elementary schools, and two middle schools, with Cristy and I working with 34 and 27 classrooms respectively. It was a highlight of my year to be able to facilitate 64 peace circle sessions with over 250 secondary students at D.W. Poppy Secondary and Aldergrove Secondary; this is the greatest number of secondary students reached in a year by the program to date. Of the 153 students who completed a feedback survey after 6 weeks of Peace Circles, 86% said they would want to participate again in the future, with students sharing insights such as:

> “The atmosphere was very calming and respectful, and I liked how everyone had the chance to be included” – Grade 9 student

> “I enjoyed the openness and how we could share our opinions without judgement”  
  – Grade 10 student

> "Peace Circles helped to realize everyday problems/events we face and learn how to deal with them" – Grade 9 student

> “I enjoyed learning about people’s perspectives on topics which you would normally never hear about” – Grade 11 student
Elementary, middle, and secondary school Peace Circles share the connective tissue of being values-based processes that create space for connection through sharing stories and insights. While elementary school Peace Circles translate restorative action principles through the OWN IT acronym and the Talking Peace curriculum (a joint venture from SD #35 and CJI), Peace Circle activities and curriculum at the high school level have been based on aspects of the Conversation Peace peer mediator training and are tailored to align with the core competencies of the class in which they are being facilitated. Main themes have included values, perspective-taking, conflict styles, communication, empathy, anger, and identity.

This past year, at the suggestion of a group of social justice students, four special “drop-in” Peace Circle sessions were held with students at Aldergrove Secondary to create space for students to speak on the topic of sexual harassment. Discussions revolved around consent, safety, boundaries, peer pressures, experiences with sexual harassment, and were overwhelmingly well-received by participants, who shared:

“**I could see the peace circles making a change in front of my eyes and even in the aftermath, later on, I was being approached by participants asking for more circles.**”
– Youth, 17, participant in Peace Circles on sexual harassment

“**I believe peace circles should be offered to students at Langley schools because I believe the comfort and non-judgmental space they provide is extremely beneficial. Also, they make us communicate our thoughts and understand others’ views and opinions.**”
– Youth, 16, participant in Peace Circles on sexual harassment.

**Peer Mediator Training**
This year marked a significant revival of the Peer Mediator Training, with a total of 52 students and 3 staff completing the four-day intensive program focused on equipping participants with the skills to act as strong communicators and peer mediators in their school communities, making these environments safer, more connected places to learn and grow. Three cohorts were trained, with participants representing five out of the nine secondary schools in the district. This indicates that more schools participated in comparison to last year, while suggesting that next year’s district-wide peer mediator training offerings could be further promoted to the four schools who did not participate this year. One of the three trained cohorts was comprised of a group of students at Vanguard Alternate School, where long-time Restorative Action practitioner and advocate Mindy Janzen and I co-facilitated a site-specific training. We hope to see this cohort put their skills to use by mediating conflicts at neighbouring elementary schools.
Of the students who completed a post-training survey, 100% indicated that they felt the training would be useful for communicating and resolving conflicts that they face in their personal lives, as well as for helping other people resolve their conflicts. Participants reflected on the training with comments such as:

“I really enjoyed the inclusiveness and skills training, but in a fun way, getting to know everyone and developing a new way of facing hard situations”

“I liked that Zofia had a personable approach, was knowledgeable, able to adapt and think quickly, and had many different types of activities and games”

“It opened mine and the other students minds about another way to help people”

“I loved everything about this training. I really loved Zofia, she did an amazing job training everyone and was able to connect to all of us”

“The most useful thing for me was the active listening and empathetic listening responses, because it can show someone you care when they’re speaking to you”

We understand that staff support and guidance from within the school is crucial to the success and continuation of the program at each site. Moving forward, each school’s RA team skill development, facilitation experience, and continuous engagement will need to be an ongoing and coordinated task shared between CJI and Restorative Action Team leaders.
Mediations/Referrals

Cristy and I have been glad to see the district utilizing the Restorative Action Program’s mediation services over the last year for instances of conflict or harm occurring in schools at both the elementary, middle, and secondary level. Cumulatively, the program received 23 referrals (12 referred to Cristy Watson, and 11 to CJI) with approximately 142 involved individuals in total. Referral sources included school administrators, Langley RCMP, district principals, and self-referrals, with harms ranging from online harassment, to bullying taking place at school, to assault and robbery. Successful outcomes of completed processes have included face-to-face conferences or communication through alternative means such as letter-writing. We continue to encounter many high-needs and at-risk youth in the processes of mediation and restorative action, and we strive to support these participants with a flexible and trauma-informed approach to practicing restorative action. In light of this, over the past year we have dedicated a significant number of hours to thorough prep-work in our initial meetings, with a focus on relationship-building and empowerment for all participants. We are also incredibly grateful for the counsellors and support staff who often provide invaluable support in walking alongside students through the process of mediation or restorative action.

Professional Development Offerings

Together, Cristy and I facilitated a two-day professional development training for the Vancouver School District #39 in June of 2019, a workshop at the Odyssey Langley Teacher’s Professional Development Conference in February of 2020, and a full-day Pro-D opportunity for staff at Glenwood Elementary. Cristy also facilitated a series of three after-school sessions supporting staff at Uplands Elementary, and a session for support staff at Langley Meadows. The goals of these various Pro-D offerings have ranged from presenting tangible Restorative Action resources to use in the classroom, to support following a VTRA, to more intensive training on facilitating community-building circles. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and there continues to be a demand for Professional Development offerings in the district which the program will need to grow to accommodate in the coming years.

Zofia Switkowski and
Cristy Watson
Community Engagement and Awareness Building

This past year, The Restorative Action Program strove to connect with both school and broader community agencies to share about our work. I have had the pleasure of presenting on the work of the Restorative Action Program and CJI to various groups, including district counsellors, Surrey School District #36 district principals, school staff at staff meetings, and secondary students in Law and Social Justice classes. In the interest of building further awareness about the program, I created and continue to maintain a Restorative Action Instagram account, where youth are able to follow along with our work and services, stay connected after training, and reach out to program staff directly. CJI has also maintained involvement and presence on a number of district and local committees, including the Langley Middle Years Committee, the Child & Youth Mental Health & Substance Use Collaborative (Langley Local Action Team), the Langley School District LGBTQ+ Committee, and the BC School Centered Mental Health Coalition. Our community connections continue to provide valuable opportunities to collaborate, stay up-to-date about local issues, and expand awareness of our services and program.

Looking Forward

Despite the current climate of uncertainty affecting our community, our hopes moving forward are to continue supporting students, staff and families with access to restorative processes and opportunities. We anticipate further emotional impacts of the current health crisis on our school communities and intend to meet these needs as best we can by creating spaces for individuals to come together and connect, grieve, process, and grow. We eagerly await re-connecting in person with our teaching partners, Restorative Action teams, and the brave, inspiring children and youth with whom we are privileged to hold space.
It has been another great year for the Training and Education Program, in developing relations with various organizations, providing training opportunities for practitioners in many places throughout BC and across Canada, as well as being involved in notable initiatives that support the development of restorative justice in each of those places. I had the privilege of visiting various communities across the province to offer trainings in restorative justice and victim offender conferencing, restorative action in elementary and high schools, and anti-oppression principles and practices in restorative justice spaces.

Feedback from those who attended the trainings indicate high levels of enthusiasm for restorative justice and support for its practice as a response to harm and conflict in these diverse and unique communities, as shown in the following comments from participants:

“I found that the role-plays and coaching was very constructive. Pointed out ways I can continue to learn and areas I need to focus on.”

“It was incredibly valuable to hear stories relating to specific subject matter as it made it more relatable.”

“I enjoyed the people and the time together, and the trainer made each section interesting – that is significant especially since they only have one voice for so many hours.”
The Training & Education department also had the amazing opportunity of hosting the second of CJI’s Widening the Lens symposia on the topic of “Colourizing Restorative Justice” for practitioners across the province. The symposium was held at Kwantlen Polytechnique University and enabled participants to choose from a number of learning and engagement opportunities. Those who attended were able to connect with and hear perspectives from diverse speakers and workshop presenters on topics such as “white privilege and fragility, intersectionality, cross-cultural relations, and invested community conference facilitation. The event was well attended and feedback from participants indicated the desire for more events and training opportunities around topics of anti-oppression, anti-racism, diversity and inclusion in the future. Amidst the challenges and uncertainty that we are all experiencing during this Covid-19 pandemic, the training and education department at CJI remains committed to supporting the communities we serve, fostering the relations we have, and continuing to advance the practice of restorative justice.

**YOUTH BLACK BOOK**

Every year we make the Little Black Book, now renamed the Youth Black Book, available and accessible to more community agencies, service providers, community policing, institutions that serve youth, and secondary as well as elementary schools via the web. The objective is to make youth aware, in the easily accessible format of the internet, of useful information about services available to them in their communities and to provide a pro-active tool in helping them independently make healthy and responsible choices. We distribute wallet sized information cards, free of charge, to all schools and community service organizations in in Langley, Surrey, White Rock, Delta, and Maple Ridge. Youth are encouraged to access the website for any help, questions or useful information they may need. The website and important numbers are listed on the card and can easily be carried in a wallet or purse. We have designed the card to be a convenient reminder that the Youth Black Book is available online at www.youthblackbook.com Each year we distribute over 15,000 of the information cards. Our goal is to replenish the supplies of these cards annually. This project is not only a beneficial resource guide, but is also essential for the youth in our communities. We are dedicated to ensuring that it continues to provide the assistance that they need. CJI would like to thank the generous financial supporters of this project in 2019/2020:

- City of Langley Community Grant
- City of Surrey Community Grant
- Township of Langley Community Grant

**COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

The faithful, ongoing support of individuals, organizations, foundations and community groups helped to sustain CJI’s programs over the last year. The Board of Directors and staff would like to acknowledge, and extend appreciation to these contributors:

- Chris Spencer Foundation
- Correctional Service of Canada
- Edith Lando Foundation
- Hamber Foundation
- Langley Mennonite Fellowship
- Langley School District #55
- Province of British Columbia
- Private Donors
I am humbled by the patience of Dave and Susan as they walk through all the processes that have been carefully constructed over the last 30 years.

In this year I have had the privilege to learn under Dave and Susan, to be introduced to a world that few have entered. I have been taught the how-tos of negotiating through the maze of prisons, the who's who of CSC staff and how to meet with the residents of the institutions. I have learned how to input data to complex encrypted systems, who to consult with in the institutions and who to call regarding victims. I have learned how to listen intently and what to listen for. I have learned that there is no comprehending the depth of pain a victim of violent crime must negotiate. I have learned that for both parties my word must be truth and that my friendship can be a lifeline. I take none of this lightly. I have learned that hearing a kind word and belief in healing and hope are non-negotiable. The details of people's lives who have stepped into this process are to be held as confidential and holy, these are their stories. Our role is to respect their stories, and each of them as persons, and to hold whatever they share with us in trust.

Statistics can be comforting, numbers on a page that indicate what has been accomplished or where improvements can be made. CJI’s Victim Offender Mediation Program (VOMP) is a program that is full of statistics. Statistics that break your heart, give you hope, push you to continue, and reflect on some of the greatest pain of humanity; a reflection, often, on the prisoners’ side, of people at their worst. But what statistics don’t reveal are the nuances of the story: the depth of humanity; the relentless ache of regret and shame; the inner journey from crippling guilt to Freedom. And the possibility of the transformation of the profane to the sacred.

To summarize my first year as a staff facilitator in the VOMP program I land on one word, humbling. It is humbling to be invited into another human’s worst moment and sit with them as they take ownership of their decisions and its consequences. It is humbling to hear the journey of a victim as they summon the courage to sit across from the offender and ask all the unasked questions. To share the stories and emotion that have consumed them, but were considered irrelevant in the courtroom. I am humbled by people’s capacity for compassion. I hope that never changes.
I understand that in past years for this report, Dave has often focused on one story that was particularly dynamic from the previous year, but I hope to walk you through moments that were pivotal to me this year. Often when we sit with a prisoner in a first meeting they are unable to talk us through the details of the crime that they were sentenced to prison for. Not infrequently, shame and pain hold the details captive. We met with a somewhat younger gentleman who had asked to be referred to VOMP after having heard from another prisoner in the AA program of the possible restorative outcomes the process can produce for both the prisoner and the crime victim. He was covered in tattoos. It became evident very quickly that life had not been easy for him. He spoke of the index offense almost immediately but as he spoke he paused in his telling of the story; it was evident that he was right there - in the moment of the offense. His body tensed and his eyes closed as if reliving it. This was a sacred moment and we felt that we were on holy ground. This was his story and his perspective on the harm he had caused his victim; we were the bystanders and the process facilitators whose only role was to grasp what we were being told and were observing in that moment. It was a brief, but powerful moment. The file now sits idle, to allow additional time needed for the family to heal. They have asked for time before they consider if this is a process they want to take part in. So, we wait, suspended in the moment with the inmate.

In the first month of my employment I tagged along to an astounding ‘Elder assisted’ parole hearing that took place in an indigenous community. The community was invited and sat in the outer circle as the parole board members, the offender and the victim’s mother sat in the inner circle. We sat next to the community’s skeptical RCMP officer. The hearing was powerful. The victim’s mother spoke to the growth and responsibility taking she had seen in the offender over time, the Elder spoke to the offender’s growth and maturation and the offender’s family spoke to the healing their participation had brought their family. At the conclusion of the hearing the Parole Board granted day parole, each member hugged the offender, and together with the gathered community, shared a meal. The RCMP officer - who acknowledged that he had attended to resist the offender’s release - was in tears, blown away that healing like this was possible. The offender’s family came together for the first time in years. It was an amazing experience, one that set the bar outrageously high for all parole hearings that were to follow. None, since, have measured up.

I experienced my first face to face meeting as it was gently led by one of our Prairie Region counterparts, Jennifer Haslett. In the midst of the victim’s mother’s religious fervor and intense desire for the offender to “find Jesus” she extended her forgiveness.
We paused the conversation; the offender was asked “What is it like to hear this? He responded,

“I never could have anticipated that there could be any forgiveness for what I did.”

This was a healing moment for the offender in a setting that had involved hours of difficult process during the meeting. For the victim’s mother, she was satisfied that she had been able to talk with him but unsettled that he didn’t seem to have a plan for a job. It’s interesting to me to see how the mundane task of a prisoner’s training for a job and future employability can have such significance in the healing of a broken heart.

Not all family survivors of homicide wear their pain in grief. One wore hers with rage and a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She spoke a repetitive diatribe of promised pain to the offender. She had joined groups that gave her the opportunity to speak to the desire she had for vengeance and for harming or killing the offender. There was no room for forgiveness. Nevertheless, after consulting with the prisoner, a face to face meeting was scheduled, the prisoner having stated that he was open to whatever she needed to say and whatever she needed to ask. In a sense, the face to face was chaos. Nothing seemed to flow, nothing seemed to come together and it ended abruptly. Everyone, including the offender, was left wondering what had happened and “what comes next?” What came next was the victim saying to Susan that she had come to an understanding of her own behaviour during the meeting: she had been fighting the empathy she felt toward the offender! Any conversation with her after this was calm. There was no more rage or endless iteration of the harm she wanted to do to him.

He no longer was taking up the enormous amounts of space in her mind. There are plans for a follow up face to face one day and I believe this will be one to remember.

I have met CSC employees who have gone above and beyond to support victims and offenders in their respective journeys. Victim service officers, both institutional and community parole officers, aboriginal liaison officers, Elders, and so many others working with us to create restorative opportunities for these offenders and their victims. I have also experienced the flip side where parties cause the process to grind to a halt and it seems at every corner we turn we hit another closed door. Sometimes those ‘closed doors’ represent parties who don’t want to participate (or whom we are unable to find), and sometimes they are closed doors involving red tape, and government processes. This seems to be where we are at now: at a closed door with a notice exclaiming “Closed, due to COVID-19.” So, for now, we turn from that door and look for possibilities to re-open it. I look forward to the other side of the door and what the next VOMP report will contain, post COVID-19.