

JRP ONLINE MAGAZINE-April 2007
INTERVIEW WITH JENNIFER BISHOP-JENKINS

Jennifer Bishop-Jenkins is a victim-survivor of violent crime who lives in Illinois. Her sister, Nancy Bishop Langert, her brother in-law, Richard Langert, and their unborn child were murdered in Winnetka, Illinois in 1990. The killer was 16 years old. Jennifer has been working in the violence prevention field as a victims' advocate ever since the crime. She works to prevent gun violence nationally and actively supports efforts to end the death penalty in the U.S. Jennifer became a board member of JRP in 2006. She fully supports restorative justice.

The interview~

JRP: Jennifer, thanks for being with us. After the violent death of your sister and her family, what led you to do the things you have done nationally in fighting crime?

JB: My sister Nancy was a beautiful, talented and joyous woman of 25 when she and her beloved husband Richard found out they were expecting their first child. It was the happiest time of their lives. But one night after celebrating my father's birthday, when they returned to their home, they faced a killer who had broken into their home with only one motive – a thrill kill – he wanted to see what it would feel like to shoot someone. After watching her husband shot point blank in the back of the head with a .357 magnum, and then have the gun turned on her, my sister, Nancy, begged for the life of her unborn child. The killer shot her directly in her abdomen, destroying her baby, and mortally wounding her, and then he fled. She had 20 or so minutes in her last moments of her life to lie there alone, bleeding to death, her baby dead within her, her husband dead beside her, at just 25 of years of age, dying alone. And in those final moments, she left us a message in the blood – a heart and a U – “love you” – before she died.

I was completely changed by that – totally transformed not only by the violence of the crime, but the power of her final words. Her last word on life was love. And I know now what that was about – that love is the more important thing in the world. I have tried to live every moment since that time to honor that – to honor my sister and to help prevent other such tragedies.

JRP: What issues have you been most drawn to and why?

JB: Actually I have been drawn to several areas of activism in the ensuing years since her murder – one has been opposing the death penalty, which they wanted to give my sister's killer. But I knew more killing and more bloodshed was not the solution to this problem. The three life sentences without parole he received were good sentences for this crime, and they allowed for our family to not have to spend

the rest of our lives fighting this man in courts and parole hearings. We wanted to focus instead on prevention of these kinds of tragedies.

So we also became involved with gun violence prevention. The easy access of kids and criminals to guns in this nation has made this a very dangerous place to live. No one should have to live in fear, and yet many Americans do, every day, because of the proliferation of easily obtainable and extremely powerful weapons.

I have become very involved with crime prevention programs and intervention programs such as victim impact programs with young offenders who seem to be headed for trouble in their lives.

Also advocating for victims rights and human rights has been a vital component of my life's journey since that awful day. It is only when we all embrace the dignity of each other, and every single life, that we will move ahead as a society.

I work on these issues some would even say obsessively because I just cannot rest until we solve these problems. They are too serious.

JRP: How do you view the “victims’ right movement in the U.S.?
Do you think it has changed over the decades? What do you think is the biggest focus today of the movement?

JB: I actually have come to a much better understanding of the victims’ rights movement in recent years. At first since I had not any denials of my rights as a victim in my personal case I did not get as involved with it (the movement). But then I began to see how others were not as well treated as our family was. We were from a prosperous community where there were excellent services. But I came to see in time that most do not fare so well.

There is too much to say about this issue in a short article – victims services is a huge field, and there are many complex issues. But overall, a lack of funding, a lack of proper notification and counseling support, and a lack of consistency across the nation continue to seriously plague victims everywhere.

Everyone should be a victim advocate.

I do not use the term “victim” in a disempowering way. I use the term as a legal description. Victims by definition did not choose what happened to them. The reason why restorative justice as a model is so incredibly important is because it treats all crime as a community problem where the victim is fully at the table.

Right now nationally in most places victims services are tied to the offender. If he goes to trial, victim advocates can step in and inform the family, perhaps even escort them.

But if the offender is not caught, or tried, there often are no victims' services. And that is in 80% of the cases of violent crime! No wonder we are a broken and hurting society!

JRP: How did you first learn of restorative justice? Do you believe you have experienced some kind of healing or restoration in your life as a crime survivor?

JB: I started being asked to speak at Restorative Justice conferences because of my visits to prisons, my work against the death penalty, and my public forgiveness of my sister's killer. Though I do not ever want him to be free because he is unrepentant and still a very dangerous sociopath, I have released his power over my personal healing and journey by forgiving him. I did that for me, and for my sister, and for my whole family. And when I have seen the very positive things that have come for other families in cases where a true restorative justice process was possible, even independent of them serving their sentences, I have tried to work to make that possible for as many families as possible.

JRP: Have you ever considered victim offender dialogue in your own case with the offender? What was the sentence your offender received? Has there been any contact? Would that be valuable to you? Under what conditions?

JB: The killer in our case, though definitely guilty, has not admitted officially to his crime. A few years ago when my father was dying of cancer I thought I would take the chance of reaching out to him again in the hopes that he would finally take responsibility for his crime. He was still not willing to admit it officially, and so I left it with him the thought that if he ever changed his mind, he knew where to find me.

JRP: Was there initial contact through letters or what? Who made the first contact? JRP has found that most prisons, guided by a department of corrections or the equivalent, victims are discouraged from any contact with their offenders.

JB: I was friends with another prisoner, because of my work against the death penalty, in the same prison where the killer was serving his three LWOP sentences. He arranged for me to be able to write the killer – so the first contact was mine. I wrote a very short letter simply stating that I had been working in Restorative Justice since my sister's murder and that I would be willing to receive a letter from him if he was interested. He wrote back that he was very interested in having a friendly correspondence but that he was not ever going to admit he had killed them. Without going into too much detail, there was lots of evidence that the sociopath diagnosis of his earlier years had not at all been ameliorated. I wrote back a very short note that it seemed to me that he was not where he needed to be in order for us to use a restorative justice approach, but that if he ever changed his mind, he knew where to reach me.

JRP: Do you think there is value in encouraging more contact between victims and offenders? Do you think it leads to more accountability in the offenders regarding their crimes?

JBJ: I do think that there are few things more healing to victims than a truly repentant offender willing to be fully accountable for their crimes. I would never force this process on anyone, because all sides have to enter into it fully open to the process, I think for it to really work. But if it can work, few things could be more meaningful or helpful. That is why I work out the pain in our case, where it has not been possible, by helping others where it is possible.

JRP: You work for the Brady Campaign to stop gun violence. Do you see a connection between restorative justice and violence prevention on this level?

JBJ: Though many in the gun violence prevention movement are not fully aware of what the restorative justice movement is all about, some of us are, and it definitely has overlapping priorities and ideals.

The problem of gun violence in our nation is particularly insidious. There is a real “bad guy” in the NRA, and they truly, truly do not care about victims of violence – at all. They have taken the most unreasonable positions on issues of concerns to all of us trying to live safe and happy lives – like unrestricted access of criminals to the most powerful of weapons, and supporting everything from armor-piercing bullets to protecting gun dealers who knowingly traffic weapons to criminals. And because we have far, far more gun violence deaths than any other nation in the world – by the largest margins imaginable – and it is the number two killer in the nation behind cars, we have to look to community based initiatives to address the problem holistically. Prevention is vital. And common sense gun laws actually make a huge difference, but they won’t happen until we take back the control of our law-making bodies from the financially dominated influence of the powerful gun industry.

But when gun violence does happen, all too often, it is a particularly violent form of injury and trauma, and the damage it does to victims families runs so deep that restorative justice is needed more than ever to address the wounds left behind. Otherwise the cycles of violence are just perpetuated.

JRP: Your husband Bill Jenkins also works in the violence prevention field and has a personal story. Can you mention that briefly?

JBJ: I met my husband in 2001 at a conference for victims called “Healing the Wounds of Murder”. After Bill’s son was shot in the robbery of a fast-food restaurant, he wrote a book called *What To Do When the Police Leave: A Guide to the First Days of Traumatic Loss* (WBJ Press) which has become the “bible” for victims of violent death. He has won awards for it, and now travels all over the country teaching victims and victim advocates how to live in the wake of such horrible losses. Before we even met, we were both working against gun violence, for

human rights and against the death penalty, and for victims' rights. So meeting him has just been the greatest blessing because we now work as a team. And it has been for us what Bill calls a "redemption of tragedy".

JRP: There are many views of restorative justice in the victims' community nationally and abroad. Why do you think this subject is sometimes misunderstood?

JB: Without a doubt! One example of how it is misunderstood is happening right now here in Illinois. A group of prisoner advocates who are advocating for widespread releases from prison of long term sentenced offenders are trying to use lip service to Restorative Justice as a token nod to the victims they are frightening here, without really understanding it or embracing it at all.

Restorative Justice is hard work that takes a long time – it is not a quick easy fix. And it is not just a ticket for release from prison. And it cannot be tossed into complex political discussions in only a shallow way. These prisoner advocates we are trying to talk to here in Illinois actually only understand restorative justice as something that could just get their prisoners easily released. They do not see the long journey that victims have to take, and the need to fully engage victims in every step of the process that affects their loved ones' killers' sentences.

These prisoner advocates have actually tried to hide their legislative efforts from the victims and the public they are most affecting, and they are showing open hostility to victims who are worried about what they are doing, instead of trying to bring them to the table. All this, while only paying lip service to the need for restorative justice. Restorative justice cannot work under these conditions. Everyone involved has to be at the table. Everyone has to be fully engaged that is touched by the process.

JRP: Thanks so much for being with us. We have a long way to go to build bridges necessary to see restorative justice fully embraced and implemented nationally and around the world. You are a part of that process! If readers want to reach you how can they contact you?

JB: You are welcome and thanks for the great work you are doing at JRP. Folks are welcome to email me at jenniferbjenkins@aol.com or we have an Illinois Victims Rights website at <http://www.illinoisvictims.org/>