

Tackling hard crime in a 'soft' way

Chance to be heard

"People need the opportunity to talk about the awful things that happen to them, to minimise the negatives and maximise the positives."

MR TERRY O'CONNELL, who pioneered the "restorative justice" programme, urges a community-based approach where relationships are used to hold an offender accountable

Proactive penance

"(A relationship-based approach) allows the offenders to take responsibility, to gain insights and empathy into their acts and reintegrate back to the community."

MR DANIEL ANG, executive director of Lutheran Community Care Services in Singapore

Rehabilitation method of ex-cop uses relationships to engage offenders

Mr Terry O'Connell hardly fits the stereotype of a former cop who left school early and spent much of a 30-year career policing some pretty tough neighbourhoods in the Australian state of New South Wales.

The 60-year-old, who rose to the rank of senior sergeant before retiring from the NSW force in 2000,

might be expected to take an old school-type hard line on law and order.

Far from it. In fact, he has pioneered a programme he calls "restorative justice", which may sound a little soft to some, but which he says is actually tougher on crime and has delivered successful results.

Indeed, the system, which involves mediation and offenders taking responsibility for their actions, is now used in schools in Singapore and worldwide.

Officials here are also looking at these techniques as a possible means to address the issue of youth gangs in Singapore.

One key belief is that punishment such as jail time can make matters worse by isolating offenders from society, undermining rehabilitation and leading to recidivism.

Mr O'Connell, who addressed a conference on the issue here recently, described a defining incident 20 years ago that provided the blueprint for this innovative approach to wrongdoers.

In 1991, as a top police officer in NSW's largest inland town of Wagga Wagga, he nabbed three male teenage delinquents who had stolen and vandalised a vintage motorcy-



Lydia Vasko

cle, causing S\$1,200 worth of damage.

The owner was furious. He had spent the previous five years painstakingly restoring the bike.

Instead of laying charges, Mr O'Connell decided to try something new – convincing the bike's owner to sit down with him, the teens and their mothers to talk through the incident.

The outraged owner told the teens how upset he was and that his bike was his prized possession. But what started as a highly tense confrontation ended with profuse apologies and offers of full compensation by the offenders.

Mr O'Connell was brought up in a working-class, Roman Catholic family in Valley Heights, a village an hour outside Sydney. He was one of 10 children of a train driver, selling vegetables to supplement their father's income. His hard-scrabble and religious upbringing influenced his later police career.

"My parents were always big on not judging others. My dad would often say, 'It is easy to judge another; getting it right is a completely different thing.'"

Leaving school on a techni-

Mr O'Connell's "restorative justice" programme is now practised in schools and justice systems in Britain, Australia, the US and Singapore.

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cal scholarship at age 13, he spent five years on the railways as an apprentice electrician. At 20, he joined the police force to "make a difference in people's lives", working in tough neighbourhoods in both inner-city areas and rural settings.

He empathised with many of the criminals he encountered. "Most of the people we dealt with were vulnerable," he said. After a couple of years on the job, seeing the same offenders again and again, he knew something had to change – a feeling that led to that 1991 experiment.

That formed the basis of restorative justice, a programme now practised in schools and justice systems in Britain, Australia, the United States and Singapore.

He argues that isolation from society in jail can exacerbate the criminal's moral disconnect as it does not address the social or emotional context of the crime. "It treats the symptoms, not the problem," he said, and often leads to repeat offences down the line.

He now urges a community-based approach where relationships are used to hold an offender accountable. "People need the opportunity to talk about the awful things that happen to them, to minimise the negatives and maximise the positives."

In the mid-1990s, he began travelling to schools and prisons around the US, Britain and South Africa to refine his programme. He now directs Real Justice, a training, consulting and resource centre based outside Sydney.

He was the keynote speaker at Singapore's first Restorative Practice Conference at Furama Riverfront Hotel earlier this month, where he spoke highly of the criminal justice system here which focuses on the rehabilitation of its offenders.

Hosted by the National Council of Social Service, Social Service Training Institute and Lutheran Community Care Services (LCCS),

the conference was aimed at training social service professionals, such as youth home administrators and prison officials, in restorative techniques, as part of ongoing efforts to combat youth crime and violence here.

In January, the Singapore police identified youth violence, often rooted in street gangs, as one of their three crime targets. In November last year, gang-related incidents in Bukit Panjang and Downtown East left one dead and seven injured when youths were attacked by young gang members with knives and choppers.

A 16-year-old boy was arrested just last week for the stabbing of a 25-year-old man in Geylang.

Mr Daniel Ang, executive director of LCCS, who has been instrumental in adapting restorative justice practices here, said the principles are currently used to aid rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents and at-risk youth.

The key to helping at-risk youth lies in the relationship-based approach. "The process allows the offenders to take responsibility, to gain insights and empathy into their acts and reintegrate back to the community," he said.

The techniques have already been implemented successfully in 25 schools here. At Ping Yi Secondary School, they have been in use since 2005, initially as a tool to manage student behaviour.

According to Mr Martin Chan, head of staff development at Ping Yi, the principles are used to build relationships which enhance student learning. "They learn how to communicate, how to speak confidently and coherently, how to actively listen and respond to others – essential 21st-century skills," he said.

Mr O'Connell relates his proudest moment in Britain: "When I saw a young student in Hull using the little question card I had developed to facilitate a meeting with his peers, I thought, 'Gee, I contributed to that.'"

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