

## Redwood County restorative justice program expanding

The idea of restorative justice is gaining ground nationwide, as more experts see the value in helping people overcome obstacles rather than just handing down punishment.



*Submitted photo - A mural painted by artist Donna Larkin symbolizes the journey those who are on the restorative justice path are taking.*

In Redwood County, the concept of restoring those who have committed a crime or who are facing addiction issues has led to alternative options, including what is known as circle sentencing.

Through circle sentencing, youth who have been convicted have a choice to make.

They can spend time in jail, or they can get together with community volunteers to develop a program that creates a level of accountability and hopefully gets them back on track.

Eric Johnson, who coordinates the restorative justice program in Redwood County, has been working to expand the circle programming by taking the concept into an area school to help students develop levels of trust, resolve conflict and address personal life challenges.

Johnson, along with Belview Learning Center teachers Tony Miller and Alissa Runke, talked about the program with the Redwood County board this past Tuesday.

“By working closer with the students we can get a better picture of them,” said Miller, adding in the circle students and staff are on an equal level.

Having options that provide preventative measures for students is great, added Runke.

Johnson said there are students at the Belview Learning Center who are part of circle sentencing. That, he said, has been a help for some of the students, as they have taken the lead in helping show others how being part of the circle works.

The Belview Learning Center focuses its education on students with emotional and behavioral issues, with the goal of getting those students back into mainstream education. The school circles, which started at the elementary level and recently expanded to the middle- and high-school students, has been deemed a success.

Johnson said it is his hope to expand the circle program to other schools in the area, and he is currently having discussions with area school leaders.

The school-based circles are not focusing on youth who have been convicted of a crime or who are dealing with addiction issues. Rather, they are intended to offer another tool for educators and for the students.

“In schools, students who are looking for help can be confused about who to see,” said Miller, adding he thinks a program like this could be a huge benefit for those students who just need that extra help dealing with stress or other day-to-day life challenges.

Johnson said the circle program has been patterned after a similar one that was developed in Yellow Medicine County. The students involved are there voluntarily, just like they would be in more traditional circle sentencing programs.

“I truly believe this is a program worth implementing,” said Miller, adding it offers a way for the students to face concerns in a safe environment. Johnson recognizes schools are pressed for time and have limited budgets, and so he knows schools may need to be creative to find ways to get the program started. Yet, he believes it can make a difference

re·stor·a·tive jus·tice noun - a system of criminal justice that focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large.

<http://www.redwoodfallsgazette.com/article/20150224/NEWS/150229868>