

LJP: Tell me a little bit about your organization. I'm really interested in what you do there.

E: Harmony One: I founded that because I recognized that we had very few organizations that had access to both community and systems, or even knew how to approach and kind of like penetrate the walls. I call them "Alcatraz." I call all kind of systems "Alcatraz."

I'm an adult survivor myself. I knew what it was like to have that experience of an additional layer of systems, right, being failed by systems. And so being in the community, being a child, being a teen, being a young adult, into my adult life, we never called law enforcement.

I never called even an 800 number for mental health or domestic violence or anything like that.

Community always, we relied on each other, and I always say that community is what came to my rescue. So I really wanted Harmony One to be community-centered and community-led by people with lived experiences. I think that's the other piece that we're always up against. I always say this is like a swim upstream. It's tiring, it can be exhausting. But one of the things that we experience often is people say that we're the experts of our own lives until we don't agree with them anymore. Until we don't agree with their plan or their process or the outcomes. And then people in systems and in fields and providers then take that power back.

There's this mentality and this mindset that goes back, you know, to the history of what power looks like. Even if we think back to the days of colonization: "I'm going to give you land, I'm going to take it back." "I'm going to give you life. I'm going to take it back." There's this embedded mindset that is literally in the DNA of America. And I wanted something different.

I looked around at the amazing practitioners I could learn from, especially my teacher and mentor, Eric Butler. He came down and trained me and a handful of other local practitioners. And he didn't just do an eight hour, or 40-hour training, he did real work with us. I was there as a community member, and I had something to give, and I have so much to learn. I realized what a terrible listener I was, that I wasn't listening at all. I was waiting for my turn to talk.

Throughout that time, I had begun a genealogy journey in my own family. My father abused my mom when we were young, and when he left, it was kind of like everything left with him. His side of the family left with him. There was a big gap, and when I started learning about the process and the history of restorative justice coming from Indigenous roots, I also learned that my grandmother is 100% Kickapoo. I also learned that my grandfather was part Apache and was from Mexico.

I got curious and did the DNA test, and I was like, "Wow, I'm 56% Indigenous." Then I was like, what does that mean? I started learning about my mom's parents, and then I started recognizing and remembering my childhood days. I remember my grandmother doing some of this work. I remember how she held conversations with us. I remember her decor in her room. I remember the smell of sage now. It all just came back, flooding back.

I served first as a restorative practitioner, in partnership with others, with Life Anew, the University of Texas, and Eric Butler. We worked on a couple of projects getting restorative practices in schools and in

communities. And then, you know, we grew apart—which is okay, right, people grow apart. I said, you know, this isn't done. This wasn't just a job for me. This is my life and my roots. This is my ancestral right to continue to do this work and to do it in a way that honors my people: my ancestors, the generations of people within the indigenous communities.

This is our right.

So I decided to launch Harmony, and I really prayed and thought about the name. “Harmony” and “One” kind of go together. Harmony is the synchronization, right? Of sound or movement. And when we as a community and as humanity can move in synchronization towards addressing harm and achieving intergenerational healing, then we can really see the outcomes that we want and need in those spaces. I know that we're not always going to get an “I forgive you” or an “I'm sorry,” but we can move synchronously in that direction.

“One” means that I as an individual, as one, can remain one in a group that becomes one. Even though I can synchronize and move in a group that becomes one towards a goal, I don't have to lose my individual self in that process. So that is the name, “Harmony One Restorative Justice”: to move together without losing ourselves.

LJP: Do you have collaborators, actual staff, or do you mostly work with people outside of your organization?

E: That's a great question. When I launched, I was full-time and had staff. Then I decided to go local to stay local because my daughter was in high school, so I subcontracted out a bunch of my huge projects. I have been hiring since then—facilitators or practitioners—to partner with me. I'm relaunching full time; I just made that transition [because] my daughter's about to graduate high school. I'm so excited. I have an amazing group of followers and people and friends and communities that are saying I want to, I want it, I want to go to your training, I want to become a volunteer, I want to become an intern, I want to be hired on. So I'm really looking at rebuilding, I'm rebuilding to restaff.

LJP: Do you mostly work with families, or do you work in school, or all of the above?

E: All of it. I work with individuals who have no children, no family. I work with families with minors and adults. I could be referred a teen and then work with the family, or I could be referred a family and then work with all of the family members; then I would work from the center out, that ecosystem of support, and then the people who are their support system, and then whatever intersections that they're having to navigate. If they're navigating school and homelessness and a system and custody and all of that, then I'll work with the whole gamut. If I receive the referral from a system to work with the family, then I will do the same. I'll work with the MDT, the multi-disciplinary team, and then support the family.

LJP: So you're actually helping folks to navigate through all the different agencies. You seem to have a fluidity with that, and it must be very helpful for your clients.

E: It really is. I tell people all the time that well-intentioned restorative practitioners can also cause harm, unintentional harm, when we don't know the systems that families are navigating. For example, I'm serving

a family who's navigating multi-systems, it might have been domestic violence, right? Someone called law enforcement, a couple may have just been having an argument, right? Now what happens? Law enforcement is a mandatory reporter, so they report to child welfare. So now somebody has to leave the house, but this family wants to be together. Maybe children are removed or placed with a grandparent. So working with the entire family, a practitioner that doesn't know the law can actually jeopardize those cases.

The court says that the person who causes harm in that situation, even if it's [only]an argument, has to leave and can't visit without supervision. Right? So, they have supervised visits. But if a practitioner is not aware of the punitive systems, and brings the family together for a Circle, the family could be penalized because they have now violated a court order. I always ask practitioners and trainees, what do you know about mandatory reporting? And do you know how to make a report in a way that still supports the protective parent? Because again, that's something that could backfire.

There's a whole bunch of layers to consider: conditions upon release, alternatives to criminal systems, restorative practices that could be offered to a person while they're serving time, the plan for reentry, and a practitioner who just wants to facilitate a Circle could miss them. So when I train practitioners to do this work, we do a deep dive into all systems because the truth is, families navigate these systems every day, even if they're not addressing harm, even if they're asking for help, even if they're just saying, "I need counseling." What gets put into motion by just asking for counseling?

We need to build bridges. We need to build bridges so that community and systems can have a way to communicate and understand each other. That's how the intersectional work began in Harmony [One] and why intersectional systems are really the foundation of the work that we do. Everybody is addressing that every day, right? Our skin color, our gender, our race, ethnicity, social class, language: every day we walk into every room with these.

LJP: How do Circles fit into this multi-layered situation? Do system people sit in Circle with you?

E: Oh yes. Judges, attorneys, law enforcement, child welfare folks, DBSA, and human trafficking folks have sat with me. I've had an FBI agent in Circle, educators, TABC (which oversees bars and alcohol consumption). We were doing human trafficking training and we said, hey, these are the risks. These are the red flags to look out for. I worked for an organization where I managed the crisis response team, which means that my team would go out in the field when there was a human trafficking recovery. We saw them in all types of places—massage parlors, bars, clubs, hotels, schools, you name it.

L: How does that work out? I imagine that they're coming willingly, right? They're not mandated to come to Circle. How do you prepare them?

E: I really believe that the success of the Circle starts before the Circle. I do the pre-work in many ways depending on who I'm working with. I can send a survey form that helps to capture the demographic of the group and what the group's understanding of restorative justice and transformative justice is. I also capture what their reservations are, so that we know what we're walking into and where to begin. I ask if there are any triggers that make them feel body tension, shortness of breath, or sweating.

The week before the Circle, I'll send out a preform on what to do to prepare and then I'll send another one out on what to do the night before. I'll talk about the importance of getting rest, the food and drink that we put in our bodies, waking up with intentionality. My favorite term is "don't wing it." I do the pre-work the night before, and depending on the intensity of the group, I will host a prep discussion. It could be virtual, it could be in person. If I am not able to speak with every individual, I will postpone the Circle until I can.

L: You've covered every base that I can think of. Do race, ethnicity and social status show themselves in difficult ways anyway? I assume that they must.

E: They do, I think, me being a woman of color, usually the one invited into their space, leading a conversation, especially if the participants are predominantly white. I do the pre-work to prepare myself for that space, because of power and control dynamics, right? I pretty much know where to start—back at the beginning. We need to go all the way back to talk about the importance of the root of restorative justice and the importance of acknowledging Indigenous people and colonization. And I find that that is what can make people uncomfortable. It can also give people a better understanding of why it's so important for them to be a part of the conversation.

I think what triggers and sets people off is just walking into the unknown. And the more we can be trauma-informed about our practice, the easier it is to co-create safe spaces, because I don't believe one individual can create a safe space. It might feel safe to me, but it may not feel safe to you. The more we prepare ourselves and the participants, the better we can co-create safe spaces.

LJP: Do you use your own training materials, or have you had occasion to use *Circle Forward* or any of our other books?

E: In the beginning, I used *Circle Forward* when we were working in a couple of local schools. That's when the board of trustees for the district that we were piloting in wanted to know more about what we were doing. So we showed up there with parents and students, and we said, "Hey, here's this book, it's *Circle Forward*. Many people are using it." It snowballed from there. We advocated for providing training and then it spread statewide. So in the beginning we did use *Circle Forward*. I think it was a very fundamental piece to break the ice in schools.

I have read *Colorizing Restorative Justice*, as soon as it came out, of course. I was ecstatic to see the group of authors and how many contributors I knew. I was like, wow, I got to work with this person, and that person, and we've done this and we've done that. Reading their stories was very nostalgic. When CCP [*Colorizing Circle Practices*] was proposed and my contribution proposal was accepted, I went back and read CRJ again. I felt like those voices were holding me accountable to my practices as well.

LJP: That first group of authors has really supported each other and a lot of them stay in communication. They have formed a community, if not geographically close, they're still in communication all the time. And I would imagine you probably already have experienced that, right? Because you guys meet and talk about what you're writing?

E: We do. I love that opportunity, even if I don't say a word for the hour. I'm so used to giving out that it's my space to just take in and absorb the strength and energy and power in the room. I feel renewed when I leave. The other practitioners are amazing. I love hearing their stories and sharing life transitions and changes.

It's a beautiful thing when restorative practitioners can share space in a way that is non-competitive because it can be very competitive in your room. I remember in the beginning I was like, "Hey, we're RJ people, what are you doing?"

LJP: Well, it occurs in a culture where competition is more prevalent than cooperation.

E: I think I understand the difference between the older material we had and the material that has been released [more recently] and posted on LJP. I remember a person of color, in the beginning, we were talking about material we use and trainings and all of that, and she said, "I'm only willing to learn more about restorative justice tools and practices from people of color." And I didn't understand at the beginning. And today, I'm like, "I get it, I get it, I get it!"

So, my material has changed, and I do write my own. I have 20 years of work in multi-disciplinary systems. I've worked law enforcement, educators, sexual assault, human trafficking—specialty areas that I can incorporate in my writing.