

Interview with Gwen Chandler, July 26, 2023

L: So, Gwen, would you mind catching us up with what you're up to now? I mean, I haven't talked to you in years, so you don't have to go all the way back. But...

G: (laughs) Well, let's see, I'm still doing Circles whenever I can, whenever I'm invited. Currently, one of my biggest joys is going into the prison, sitting with the women and my partner, Maura Williams. We're doing two 10-week sessions with the women and, by us having 10 weeks, we have a nice amount of time to really sit with them and do some really deep work. And God, I enjoy that so much. Of all things that I've done regarding Circles, that is the best.

Then COVID happened. Once COVID happened, they stopped everybody from coming in [to the prison]. And they're just now starting to get back into letting people come in, but they've changed the criteria and everything, so it's a little more difficult to get inside now. But we finally just got approval that we can go back. I am truly excited about that. I can't wait for that. Hopefully we'll start this fall.

Other than that, there are a couple of little things I'm doing. I mostly get calls from organizations that are either in conflict or trying to develop a plan and either one of those will be doing Circles. So, I have a couple of those going on that I'm working with. I've always enjoyed working with the justice system, but I prefer the direct service piece of that. You know, I'm the person that's gonna visit everybody. I'm the one that's gonna talk to them about Circle. I'm the one that's gonna set it up. I'm gonna play the role of Circle keeper. I'm gonna do the follow-up. And I love that as well—you know, having a direct contact and building relationships with all kinds of people. One of the things that I've found over the years is you can't hate anyone once you know their story. And even though the majority of the folks that I work with in the criminal justice system have been charged with some type of offense, there's still a story behind that. So, being able to be with them in a space where they can share that story is so powerful. Any opportunity I get to do that kind of work, I jump on it.

I don't know if you know, but I have over 30 years of experience in social services, and prior to restorative justice, I ran a transitional housing program for women and kids at the YWCA of St. Paul. I did that for about 12 years. I got this feeling not too long ago, a couple of years ago, that when you're getting older, you need to really get back into your spirituality, get back into your faith. So, I started thinking, you need to go back to church. That's what you need to do. So, I let that thought marinate. I had previously joined the church and then I ended up moving to Wayzata, and it was kind of far for me to get back and forth to church, so I hadn't been in a couple of years. But I kept having the little bird on my shoulder sayin "You need to go to church," and that was around Christmas time. The first Sunday in February, I went to church and continued about every Sunday after that. The second Sunday in March is right before Easter. The minister get up and announced that he had been having this vision that he wanted to see become a reality. His vision was to open up a transitional housing program for homeless women and children. And the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. So, I immediately got up out of my seat, walked around to the woman he had identified as coordinating stuff, and gave her my

business card and said, "You need to call me." And she did. They formed an advisory team, so I'm part of that team. And we are hoping to acquire our property and open up a transitional housing program for women and kids and also a long-term foster care program.

L: Wow!

G: For kids between the ages of six and 12. We need a safe place to be, you know? So I'm heavily involved with that right now. You know, I truly believe Spirit directs you in the way you should go. So when he [the minister] made that announcement, I'm like, "Okay, all right! (laughing) You're right. What do I do next?"

L: This has my name on it.

G: Yes, has my name on it. So, I'm heavily involved in that right now. We are in the process of trying to identify some property and get it going. I'm excited about it.

L: That's amazing. Yeah, you're being led.

G: So, that's what I've been doing in terms of my work, my journey.

G: But what I've been doing for fun and relaxation that I started doing last year again after over 30 years is going camping. Year before last, I decided we're going camping as family, the whole family's going. And so last year I proposed it to everybody and they were like, "Well, okay, do they have cabins? You mean sleep outside on the ground?" Anyway, everybody showed up, cause Mama spoke; everybody showed up and there were 29 of us.

L: Where did you go?

G: We went to Baker's Park Reserve, which is out west. It's part of the Three Rivers, and we had a wonderful time. Every single person said they wanted to come back. So, you know, everybody had brought their equipment. They brought tents and sleeping bags and air mattresses, and we had it set up really nice. We had an area for the kids to play in; they had all kind of toys and you name it. We even had a first aid station. We had a coffee bar. I mean, it was really nice. We had a good time. So, after that, my honey and I went again, just the two of us, and had a great time. So, I made the promise that this year, we were gonna go once a month during the summer months. We've only been once, though our July trip is still pending.

L: It's funny, Gwen, you know, my husband and I haven't been camping in probably 30 years, maybe longer than that. And we went and took a little bike trip and went tent camping. And it was great, you know—I had my doubts. But the secret thing that we had, that we hadn't had before, was some folding cots.

G: So you didn't have to sleep on the ground. (laughing)

G: We have an air mattress. So that works really well. And I mean, you would think I was at home in my bedroom, 'cause I got a table, and the lamp, the whole nine yards. It's more glamping than camping. I enjoy just being out. I enjoy being in nature, feeling the dirt under my feet, looking at the water, looking at trees. I think I'm gonna become a tree hugger in my next life. (laughing) There's something about being out there: it takes you away from all your devices and takes you away from all the distraction that you usually have.

L: That sounds so good, Gwen. I'm really glad to hear it. We all have to sort of switch gears in our older age.

G: I try to stay as active as I can. I'm a lot slower than I used to be. It takes me a little bit longer. And I constantly tell myself that's okay. It's okay, take your time, slow down. You will get it done when it needs to be done.

L: That's right.

G: I have to really talk to myself, out loud tell myself, okay, you're gonna sit here for five minutes and you're not gonna move. You're just gonna sit. Just calm down.

L: So, does anything feel different for you about the whole RJ field now from, say, 10 years ago or 15 years ago; does it feel the same or has it changed?

G: Well, for me it has changed. I have this belief that there is a huge divide. There are people who do the work from the head—they prefer to have a script. And there are people who do the work from the heart—whatever happens, happens. I think that has happened as a result of institutionalizing the process. People trying to make a living doing it— money will corrupt you. It'll make you do things you don't want to do. Make you do things that you know aren't right. Just for the sake of money.

And then again, there's another factor in there for me as well. I truly believe after the murder of George Floyd, here in Minneapolis, that people aren't as careful about what they say to you and how they say it. The issues of power and control exist in all processes, even in restorative justice. And I think we have to be very mindful of that, because it's so easy to fall into that trap—doing things from the head and not the heart. One of the reasons I got into this work in the very beginning was because I recognized it as a model for people in my community to start a healing process. Their experiences of trauma, domestic violence, and chemical dependency taught me that it could be used as a model to start healing. And if it was presented to folks in a good way, they would be able to engage in it. That's why I started doing this. I wanted to bring it to my community the best way I could.

Now I see more organizations and institutions that use the process, and it's still a hierarchy system. You know, there is a person at the top that's calling the shots. For me, that's just so conflicting because in Circle, all decisions are made by consensus. So, where's the consensus if you got somebody at the top making all the decisions? I struggle with pieces of that. I think in

terms of what it is now, and what it was 20 years ago—it's just more blatant in your face now. You can name it: power, control. So, people are acting that out, you know, and I think that's where the harm comes in. We don't realize that even in this process, great harm can be caused: when you have issues of power and control and institutionalizing the process, doing it from the head and not the heart.

L: Do you have an opinion about ways that could help to break that down? We know that the notion of hierarchy and power-over has been causing harm for millennia. And, somehow, we haven't managed to get at that. Our culture is built on it. What do you think about that?

G: I think we've got to be willing to listen to each other—start listening to each other and hearing each other's stories: why we are the way we are, why we hold positions of regard, and I don't mean in terms of employment. I mean, just our position in life. Why we hold that position so tightly, why we behave in the way we do—there's a reason for everything.

I'm working with a group who is looking at parts of the criminal justice system. Within this group, a third of them come from the criminal justice system, a third are RJ practitioners, and another third of the group are community members who use them. They're coming together to look at certification of youth. In other words, when should youth who commit violent acts be charged as an adult? What kind of crimes would you look at? Things like that. You've got these three groups of people, and they don't know each other's story. I feel, if I'm in that group, that I don't want to see that happen. I don't ever want to see that happen. And the reason I don't wanna see that happen is because my child was in that situation. My child shot somebody accidentally, or in retaliation, or trying to save his own life— kills somebody, and now my child is being charged as an adult. If you know that about me, if you know that's my story, you understand why I'm holding so tight to that position. And then that becomes an opportunity for us to sit and talk about it and find something that works for everybody. But if we don't have those types of conversations, it's not gonna happen. We just go off and do our own thing and make judgments about people. So, I believe that if we could just create spaces in communities where people come together—you know, the cops, the community, the people in the criminal justice system, the doctors and nurses—they will start having conversations and understanding each other. It'll make the world a better place. And the agreements and guidelines that are native to a Circle are really important, because there's so much potential for friction and miscommunication.

L: I think we're on to something, Gwen.

G: I always had this dream of being able to go to the United Nations—engage them in a Circle training and see how far we could get with that. That opportunity hasn't presented itself yet, but if it does, I'm there.

L: Yeah, you'd be the one, it would be great. And for me, it resonates because I've been working on editing another interview with a Circle keeper who has worked with corrections a lot. And I asked her if she had sat in Circle with members of upper management for that structure, you

know, with a warden or a commissioner. She said she had, and I asked her how that felt. Do they usually rise to the occasion, or are they just so far away from that scenario they can't relate? She said it takes a lot of time because you have to get to the layer of that person that's not connected with their role in the structure. And she doesn't often have enough time to do that, but when enough time is afforded, they can get there.

G: It does take time. I mean, when we first started some of the University of Florida and community Circles, where I initially got my training and learned how to be a Circle keeper, and started to train into the organizations and institutions, it took us an entire year of just sitting together, being together as a community before we could take our first case. We had issues with the criminal justice system and the criminal justice system had issues with us, so we had to work through those issues before we involved ourselves in someone else's life.

We were working with African-American men between 18 and 34 who lived or committed an offense in St. Paul, in Ward One, specifically. These men could automatically be committed to prison. And our role was to try, if at all possible, to keep them out of prison, to keep them in the community. We really rallied around these young men. We were just all over them, you know, supporting them, teaching them, modeling for them. It was a hard role in the beginning. We had to get through some stuff. One of the things that I found is that there's a lot of trauma out there. Oh my God, there is so much trauma. People are traumatized and don't even know it until they're triggered. They're like, "Oh, where'd that come from?" And you know, a lot of us just don't take that time to delve into why we feel that way. What's going on inside? What is happening in our lives to make us feel like that? Once we're able to do that and recognize it as trauma, then we can start moving away from it. But if we never identify it, it just sits there and festers, and it spews out to everybody that we interact with. Being able to identify that and start working on it is helpful, that's why it took us a year, 'cause we had to listen to each other. We had to hear each other, we had to feel each other in order to be able to work together in a good way.

L: Is there something specific that needs to be done within restorative justice to help it progress? We all know we need to sit in community more often. We know that we need to afford the time for relationships to be worked out on a larger scale. What direction should we be going?

G: Well, we first need to recognize that power and control exists. We need to call it out for what it is. And we need to move away from it. Now, I know for some that's hard because it's their livelihood. They've made it their livelihood. They've made it their job. So, it's hard to walk away from it. But you got to live with yourself. If you decide you can't walk away for whatever reason, that's something you're going to have to deal with yourself. If you can walk away, if you have that opportunity to walk away, walk away. It'll be like giving a party and no one comes. You know what I'm saying? If we band together for the good of RJ, for all the good it can do, and do that in a good way, do it from our heart and not our head, I think absolutely we can change stuff. Absolutely.

I had this conversation with someone yesterday about how organizations and institutions state how much of RJ is within their institutions and systems. But there's a hierarchy system. One or two people call the shots, and that's not RJ to me. That's not the way I learned it. It's not what I took to my heart. So, looking at it from an institutional perspective is not helpful. It's not to say RJ as a field is not helpful, because it's really more personal than that. If you're doing it from the heart, yeah. But if you're doing it from the head, you don't have time for the heart.

L: I was going to ask, is more harm being done by people who do it from the head?

G: Oh, absolutely. I'm not gonna say that it is just being done by White people, because I have met people of color who exist also in those same structures. It just hits home a little harder for me when it's somebody of color.

L: Yeah, there's nothing that's happening in the world in general that isn't reflected in RJ and Circles. All these tensions and changes—from climate, or racism, or anything else, you name it. It all comes to bear on the process.

G: That's right. You know, even the name; I mean, I had an issue with the name when I first heard it, “restorative justice.” I mean, you can't restore something that I never had. You got to give it to me first before you can restore it. So, I tend, depending on who I'm talking with, to separate it. I say Circles are a model of RJ, but Circles are very different from RJ.

L: I always think of Circles as being the purest form of RJ. You know, other forms and other processes might have a rubric. They might have steps and rules and all that, but you can actually just go through the motions and still get through it. Read the script.

G: Right. Read the script. Living Justice Press published a book that has scripts in it, you know, and lots of people need that. You got some people who only can do this work from the head yet. How they figure out internally how to make that work for themselves, that's them. My only concern is when harm is being caused. So, if using that script is gonna help you get started having conversations, then you use the script. Because one thing about it, after a period of time, you no longer need the script. But if you're starting out and you're a linear thinking person, you need the script, and that's okay. That's where Living Justice Press comes in. They provide people with that. We need that.