



community justice center

2020-2021 ANNUAL REPORT

CJC COMES TO LIFE

A message from CJC's Executive Director, Sheri Wiedenhoefer, on one year at CJC.

Dear Community Justice Partners and Friends,

On July 1st, 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, the Community Justice Center (CJC) came into existence in the complex, vibrant, transforming City of Fresno. We are excited and grateful to have made it successfully through our first year! In an extraordinary transition, CJC was entrusted with valuable treasures from Fresno Pacific University's Center for Peacemaking, including VORP, the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (youth diversion program) that began in 1982, and COSA, Circles of Support and Accountability (adult restorative reentry program) that got its start in 2007. These restorative justice initiatives are proven to save lives, save time and save money in the investment of community well-being.

Here's the story of how CJC came to settle in Central Fresno, at 4840 N 1st Street, across from Fashion Fair. Prison Fellowship generously donated space to COSA in 2014 that opened the door to a total of four interconnected suites by 2020. These suites were remodeled to create a welcoming space with offices and rooms for training, circles, mediations and other restorative processes. And to this day, we share our work and resources together with former Prison Fellowship staff as we welcome our family, friends and community members home.

COSA experienced the largest expansion of programming, receiving two Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) grant awards for \$500,000 for both Fresno (Round 1) and San Diego (Round 2) for "warm handoff services". This means that individuals are prepared for release from prison and reintegrate back into community with the support of a COSA circle of trained volunteers. COSA is considered the most effective evidence-based restorative reentry program in the world, implemented across the European Union, England, New Zealand, Australia and every Canadian province, and Fresno's best kept secret. Fresno replicated COSA in San Diego and Los Angeles this past year, under CJC's umbrella. For all of us that know someone near and dear in the prison system, this is an incredible opportunity to be part of the transformative work of individual healing and community wholeness.



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CJC continued the long-term VORP partnerships with Fresno Unified School District, Fresno County Probation, and Fresno County Superior Court. New young adult "Insight Awareness" programming was launched in response to probation and court's requests for more services. Trained facilitators who recently returned home from prison teach and mentor students in the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention (CBI) and DUI courses. CJC offers the only youth DUI course in Fresno County, and it is cost free to participants at our Center. Students, as well as parents, are sharing the positive impacts they experience throughout the 10-week courses.

What perfect timing for CJC! The Central Valley Community Foundation kicked into DRIVE (Developing the Region's Inclusive and Vibrant Economy) with CJC seated at various committee tables, learning and growing alongside leaders from across the city. This united effort is dedicated to strategically improve racial and economic equity for Fresno residents over the next 10 years. CJC also participated in the Commission for Police Reform and the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) Committee focused on youth prison realignment. Both have led to passionate community-driven conversations and emerging peacebuilding initiatives.

The California Endowment funded CJC for an evaluation, soon to be released, that focuses on the effectiveness of restorative justice initiatives in schools and CJC youth diversion programs intended to keep young people out of the criminal justice system. And finally, the National Association For Community Mediation (NAFCM) selected CJC as one of five mediation centers across the US that received a two-year mini-grant to develop a specific initiative with and through young adults. This is already creating greater community collaborations and pathways for the Center's identity in the heartbeat of the city.

In all the languaging of program outcomes, growth, innovation and even survival, it really comes down to the simplest of things: we all can cause harm and we all can be harmed. How we, collectively and individually, address our harm determines the trajectory of health, safety and well-being for ourselves and others. From brokenness to wholeness, trauma to healing, harm to restoration... and on we go!

830K

TOTAL FUNDS GENERATED FOR 2020-2021

CJC continues to build its capacity through funding from community and State grants, contracts, local partnerships, and donors.





I was very fortunate to find COSA. It has given me an outlet, a sense of belonging and helped me to stay focused and organized. Having spent nearly 40 years in prison I am really new to society. It is really meaningful and helpful for those like me who come out of prison aimless and wondering what to do. My goal is to help others the way that I have been helped, accepted, and appreciated in my path of reintegration into society and not causing any further harm. I am really grateful for finding this place and plan on keep coming back to help others.

- COSA Core Member

COSA

THE YEAR OF GROWTH

*The word that best encapsulates COSA this year is **growth**. Growth in the number of people served, the number of counties we have a presence in (Fresno, Los Angeles, and San Diego), the number of volunteers engaged, and the growth of infrastructure to better do this work in an effective and efficient way.*



\$157K

VOLUNTEER HOURS CONVERSION

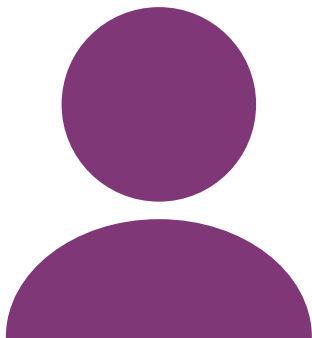
Volunteers are essential to COSA! On average, a volunteer donates 2 hours a week, totaling 104 hours annually. The value of one hour of volunteer time is \$28. This conservative figure, does not do justice to the work and heart that volunteers bring to this work and our communities.

35 54

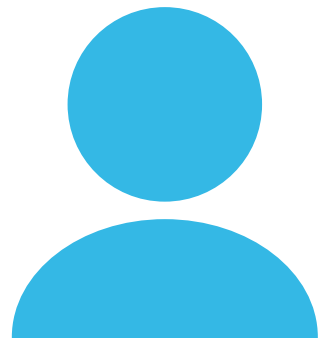
CORE MEMBERS

VOLUNTEERS

In a year full of unknowns, COSA pivoted and served a record breaking number of core members and volunteers in Fresno, San Diego, and Los Angeles. This trend is only just the beginning, with more releases, partnerships, and trainings on the horizon for further expansion.



COSA case management and volunteer training has grown exponentially this year. Over **250 hours** of case management has been dedicated to working with individuals pre-release. Activities include: accountability and insight counseling, wellness planning, and referrals. Volunteer trainings included: Phase 1 volunteer trainings (8 hours), Phase 2 volunteer trainings (3 hours), skills shares (2 hours), and orientations for volunteers (1 hour). Totaling more than **100 hours** of training!



VORP PIVOTS TO MEET NEED

*With schools and courts being closed, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the VORP team pivoted during this time to respond to the needs of the community in a new way.. The program expanded its services in the Fresno community by offering **Insight Awareness** and DUI courses to youth. This restorative intervention offered individuals the opportunity to explore their behaviors and make different choices in the future. This transformative opportunity was the first of its kind in Fresno County.*

The 12-week courses were taught by formerly incarcerated and system impacted counselors who utilized their lived experience and cognitive behavioral interventions to empower the participants to live prosocial lives. Topics covered in the courses centered around healthy relationships, setting boundaries, communication, goal setting, victim impact, and connecting emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

At the conclusion of the course the students celebrated with a graduation party, filled with fun, food, and friendship.

41

TOTAL PARTICIPANTS

In its first year, the Insight Awareness and DUI classes hosted a total of five, 12-week courses, totaling **240 hours** of restorative, rehabilitative programming for youth in Fresno county.

22

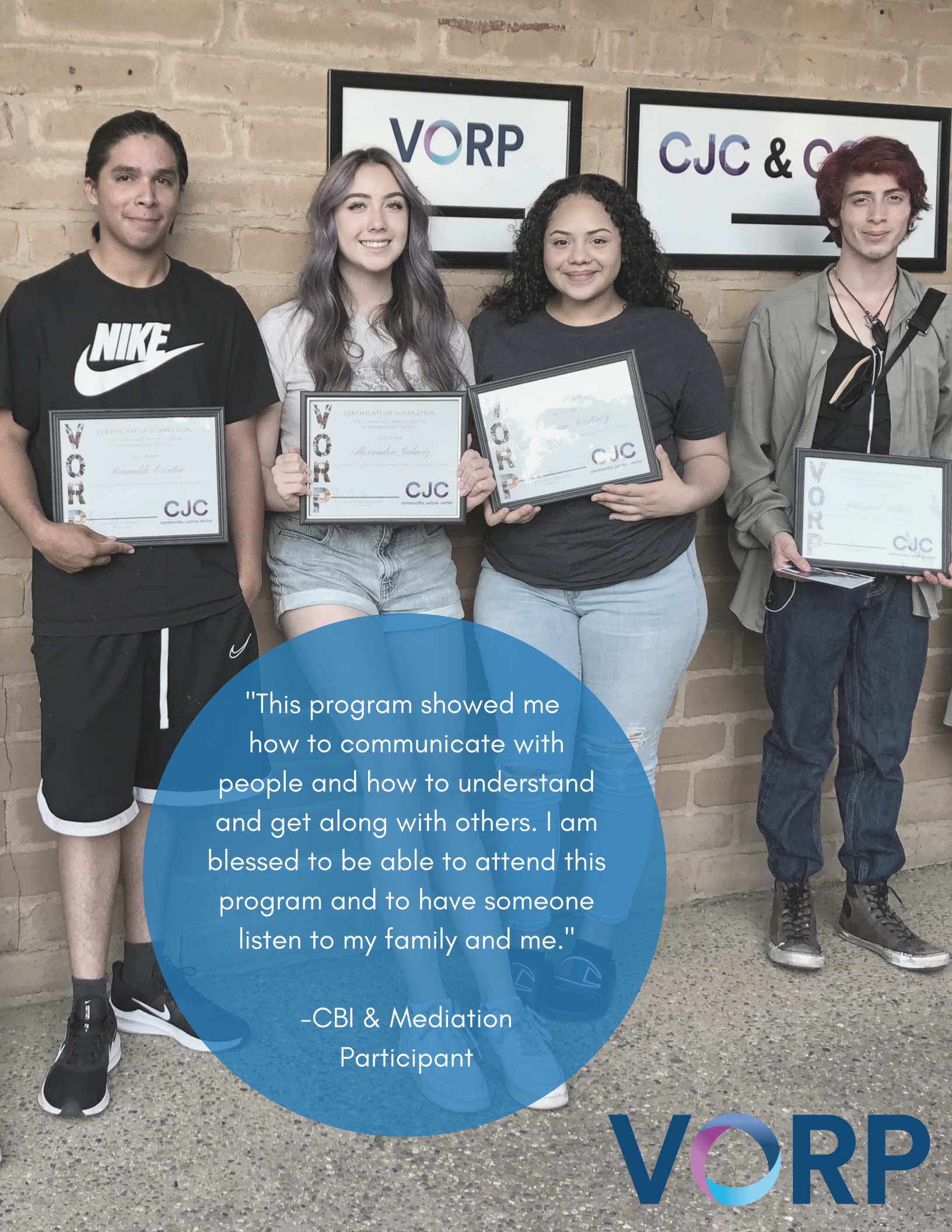
COMPLETED MEDIATIONS

Despite the challenges with COVID-19, **over 100 people** including: youth, victims, families, and community members were able to go through the VORP restorative process.

1,000

VORP HOURS

These hours were dedicated to the VORP process of: family group conferences, mediations, meetings with the responsible party and harmed party, documentation, and reporting to the courts or probation.



"This program showed me how to communicate with people and how to understand and get along with others. I am blessed to be able to attend this program and to have someone listen to my family and me."

-CBI & Mediation Participant

VORP



FAMILY REUNITES AFTER 10 YEARS

By: Kimberly Gragston, COSA Program Director and Ahimsa VOD Facilitator

This past year Jaime Leyva (COSA case manager) and I had the privilege to co-facilitate a Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD) ten years in the making. Making this VOD even more special was between a current COSA core member and her family seeking to find healing and connection. In October 2020, the survivors reached out to CDCR's Victim Services and requested a dialogue with the hope of reestablishing connection with their mother. Because of Community Justice Center's partnership with The Ahimsa Collective, we were given the opportunity to facilitate the dialogue. It was a natural fit given the relationships that COSA had formed with the family because of the reentry support staff and volunteers were providing.

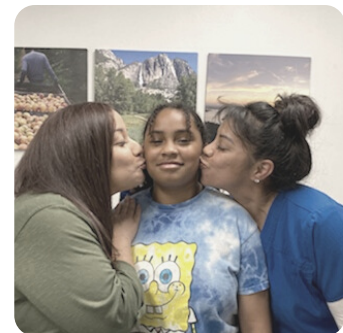
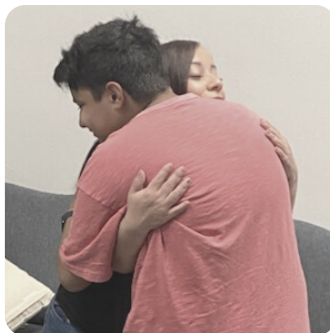
This VOD process is often described as "victim/survivor centered and offender sensitive". The survivors in this case were young adults and Jaime and I sought for ways to encourage and affirm their agency in the process. Prior to the face-to-face dialogue, we were able to meet with each participant and listen to their experience around the harm caused and the impact it had on their life. We inquired about their goals for the dialogue and what they were hoping to get out of the process. The survivors came with a few specific questions they wanted to ask their mother regarding what happened and why. They let us know that they mostly sought to rebuild their relationship. The responsible party was open, accountable, and willing to answer any questions that the children wanted to ask. From our initial meetings it was clear that despite the harm caused and impact that rippled through the family, everyone had been seeking healing, understanding and reconciliation in their own way over the last 10 years and they were ready to meet face-to-face.

During the dialogue everyone was able to share, listen and ask important questions surrounding the events of the harm and what healing and restoration looks like moving forward. It was incredible to witness the survivors in this case take steps of courage towards healing and forgiveness by engaging the difficult conversation and asking vulnerable questions. It was humbling to bear witness as the mother took full responsibility and was accountable for what happened. She shared about her commitment to make amends and the actions she has taken to make things as right as possible. There was a shift in the room as this happened; healing was taking place.

It was a very moving experience to be a part of a process where so much hope, love and grace were present. It was an honor to watch this family take courageous steps towards personal and collective healing.

WHAT IS A VOD?

A Victim Offender Dialogue is a face-to-face meeting between a person who was harmed and the person responsible for the harm incarcerated in any California State Prison or on State Parole. Talking in a safe setting allows those harmed to give full voice to their experience and all that was endured in the aftermath of the crime. People responsible for harm, no matter how severe, are given the opportunity to face the often wide-ranging and complex impact of their actions, take accountability and formulate their own response.



A Father's Heartstrings

There is a heartstring that everyone has. It is painful when we get hurt and makes us laugh when something is funny. This incident caused these children to be wary of the adults who are supposed to take care of them. We were devastated when we heard what had happened we knew we had the means to raise these children. We have watched these two amazing children grow up over the last 10 years, and they will succeed beyond our expectations.

My heartstrings broke in 2010, when these children were assaulted. No child should ever have to go through that. However, knowing his mother, I knew that something else made this happen.

And, with the help of COSA, we have been able to reunite in the right way. My noble son has been able to forgive his mother, his sister has been able to connect, and my two biological kids have been able to know a flawed family member and I love that.

I know in my heart that she will continue to verify her love of life and her children.

CJC 20-21 HIGHLIGHTS

- CJC became a nationally recognized mediation center with NAFCM, the National Association for Community Mediation and was selected as one of five centers across the U.S. for an innovative 2-year grant to develop conflict resolution skills in young adults (ages 21-35), creating opportunities to address institutional or community conflicts around racial and economic equity.
- CJC Executive Director, Sheri Wiedenhofer was an integral team member with Developing the Region's Inclusive and Vibrant Economy (DRIVE), with the Central Valley Community Foundation, serving as an active member in the Executive Committee, Race Equity Committee, Governance Committee, Community Justice Network 10-year Initiative
- COSA Program Director, Kimberly Gragston, participated on a panel for California State University, Fresno's Criminology Department on restorative justice
- VORP established a partnership with Focus Forward, Advanced Peace and Live Again Fresno for mediation training.
- COSA San Diego presented to California Association of Public Defenders
- COSA Case Manager, Jaime Leyva presented to USC students, Unchained Scholars about community and personal restoration
- CJC Board member, Morghan Velez-Young hosted a webinar about her new book, Beyond Punishment and White Supremacy: Alternatives that restore and heal us all, featuring COSA's own Jaime Leyva
- CJC joined forces with Prison Fellowship, Welcome Home and Serving USA to provide a warm hand off to returning citizens.
- COSA San Diego participated in circle core member panel presentation at the National Catholic Mobilizing Network Restorative Justice Conference on reentry and reintegration. COSA San Diego's own Andrea Travers, presented and hosted two Q & A exhibit booths and facilitated closing Circle Keeping Group
- COSA San Diego awarded the BSCC Adult Reentry Warm Handoff grant for 30 clients over the next 3-1/2 years
- CJC staff worked alongside community partners on consulting projects with Fresno Unified School District, Fresno Commission for Police Reform, and Title IX consultation to Fresno Pacific University
- COSA, ReEvolution, Fresno Pacific University, and Valley State Prison's Youth Offender Program signed a collaborative letter of agreement to provide university accredited courses and wrap around reentry services to increase a level of credibility, incentive, and opportunity for successful reintegration of young people back into community





VORP IN ACTION IN THE COMMUNITY

By: Seya Lumeya, VORP Director

Restorative Justice allows us to address the harms and needs of those harmed, as well as those who have caused harm. One Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) case recently resolved by our mediators Seya Lumeya and Elfega Duarte highlights the power of restorative justice perfectly. At a local high school a teacher's wallet was stolen by a student in their classroom in June, 2019. This case was referred to CJC through Fresno County Juvenile Justice Court after the youth was arrested at school. It is CJC's goal to mediate more of these types of cases on campus prior to the student's entrance into the criminal justice system.

Prior to bringing both parties together the mediation process requires individual meetings with all parties involved. Both parties agreed to VORP in February 2021. When the student and teacher finally met on the 4th of July, the student admitted that he was having a long day and wanted to hang out with friends. In order to do this he needed money. For that reason, he saw the opportunity to take the teacher's wallet. Sadly, the teacher herself was blamed for the theft for leaving her wallet unattended. When addressing the student in person, she told him she was unaware she had been victimized by somebody she trusted. After finding out, she immediately felt disappointed, hurt, and violated.

The student then expressed his goals, working to provide for his new son. He understood that he was in the wrong and caused her pain and he will always be sorry for that. While reading his apology letter to his teacher he became emotional as he genuinely asked for forgiveness. He also wanted to ask her to not label him based on the incident because he considers himself a good person who made a terrible mistake. The victim stated that during the meeting she felt her concerns were addressed and eased as well. She communicated to the offender that she would like to see him continue the path he is on now, and encouraged him to think positive because she has truly forgiven him.

Both parties agreed to restitution of \$250. The student in this case decided to pay more than the victim asked for because he felt that it was the least that he could do to make things right. The outcome of this case was beneficial for the student because he feels that this incident has impacted him greatly. It has helped him set goals and think clearer about his decisions - he wants the best for himself, his wife and son.

These outcomes are great examples of why restorative justice is the most effective way to solve conflict. The best moment was when the teacher advocated on behalf of the student to the judge. Seeing how the teacher was able to gain closure, forgive and heal the genuinely remorseful student, was rewarding and gratifying.



community justice center



circles of support & accountability



victims offender reconciliation
program

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