

here to help

Community Justice Center

Agency gives voices to victims and shows offenders the harm crime causes

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JODI FUSON

James Jones robbed to support his cocaine addiction and served three years in a state prison for his crime. Ten years later, he met one of his victims face-to-face while working at Lincoln Action Program and had a chance to apologize and start to repair some of the damage he had done.

That discussion was the catalyst for what is now the Community Justice Center, a non-profit agency founded in 2000 by Jones, who considers himself a public safety advocate.

Jones incorporates what is called restorative justice, a concept he started

to explore with the Victims First Team he created while at Lincoln Action Program. His goal was to teach at-risk kids and offenders how to meet the needs of crime victims by taking them to meet victims and having them help repair the damage caused.

"We wanted to show them the harm the crime created," Jones said. "We used surrogate victims to speed up the process."

"When we separate them and become adversarial, it becomes a no-win situation on both sides," Jones added. "Both parties remain broken and damaged after the process."



Jones shares with Nebraska Department of Corrections staff how his Offender Motivational classes are making a difference in the criminal justice system and takes them through an expedited version of his eight-hour class. Pictured (from left) are Konda Young, Layne Gissler and Denise Skrobecki, warden of the Lincoln Community Correction Center.

Restorative justice is a way to address the victim's needs first, the community's needs second and then the offender's, he explained. "Victims are at the center of the process, not on the sidelines."

Getting victims to share their stories is the first step in restorative justice.

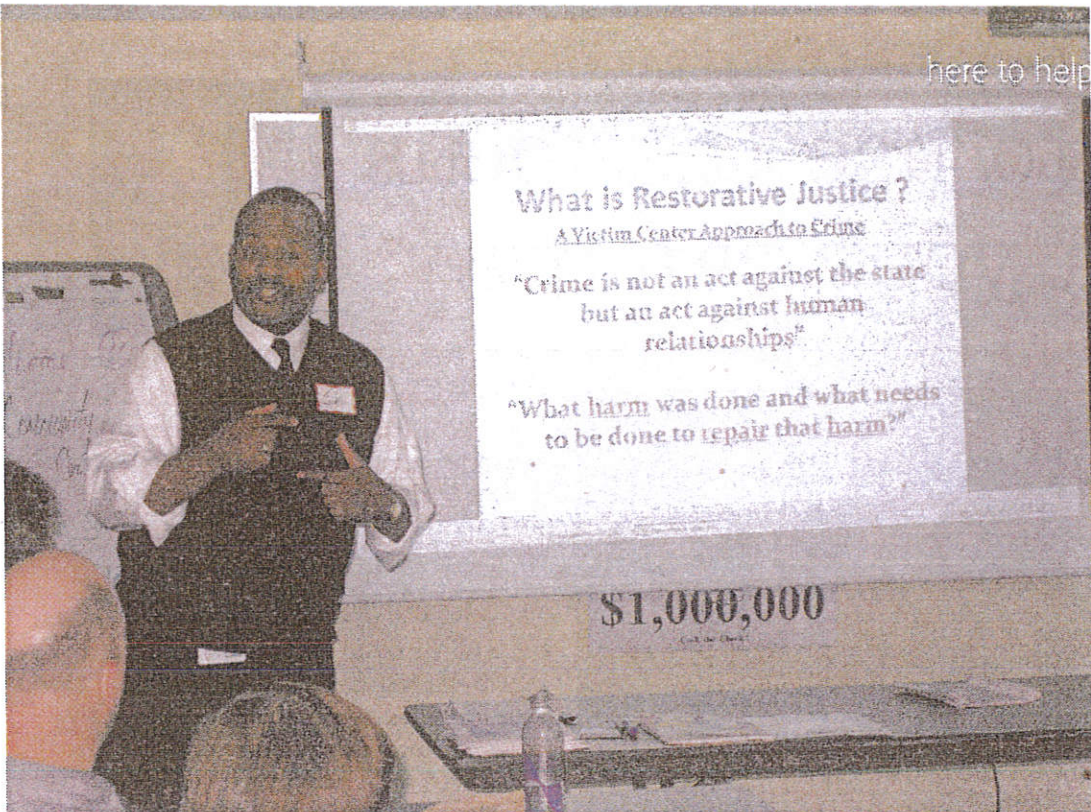
"We just want to make sure if they're ready to make a statement, we want them to have a voice," Jones said. "Individuals need to hear what crime causes in communities."

His organization seeks to restore control and voices to victims in two ways: 1) by providing web-based victim services, and 2) by educating offenders about how their crimes have affected their victims and their communities. Jones uses victim impact statements posted on the Center's web site when he teaches classes in the state's prisons, correctional facilities and probation programs.

Jones is a graduate of the National Victim's Assistance Academy, has completed restorative justice training and served as a consultant with the U.S. Justice Department. He also holds associates of arts degrees in drug/alcohol counseling and youth specialization.

The Midtown Sertoma Club recognized him in 2009 with the Service to Mankind Award for his work with the Community Justice Center. He was later awarded the state and national level awards as well. Jones' expertise has been tapped on several committees and boards in the Lincoln area, such as the Youth Attention Center Advisory Committee, Lincoln Lancaster Drug Project Board and Juvenile Justice Task Force.

Jones calls what he offers a habilitation program. He tested it first in state prisons like the Nebraska State Penitentiary, York Women's Prison and Nebraska Correctional



James Jones, founder and executive director of the Community Justice Center, is passionate about his job. Through his Crime Victims Impact and Offenders Accountability classes, he gives victims a voice and helps offenders realize the harm they have caused their victims and the communities they live in.

Facility for Youth in Omaha. The program's success allowed it to expand to other institutions, and in 2006 to probation programs.

Eighty percent of Jones' effort is spent with offender-based programs.

"Instead of asking what crime they've committed, we ask them what harm they've done," Jones explained. "It's easier to see the damage – emotional, physical and financial – if they can take better ownership of their crime."

His eight-hour Victim Impact Classes complement Nebraska Department of Correctional Services' existing programs and are now being used in nearly all 12 of Nebraska's probation districts with youth, women and men. Entities such as Goodwill Industries, Lincoln Foundation, Cooper Foundation and Woods Charitable Fund have made key grant contributions to help sustain the Center, but Jones is hoping that class contracts will eventually fully support it.

Statistics compiled from state and

federal databases show that participants are more open to additional treatment programs after they've taken Jones' class. They're two times less likely to repeat their crimes than those not attending the class, too, found University of Nebraska-Lincoln associate professor of psychology Dr. Dennis McChargue. He is analyzing the statistics and also found that more than 60 percent of class participants showed some level of empathy and/or insight into the effects of their actions on the victim/community.

Gage County judge Pat McArdle had the following to say about Jones' work: "As a judge who has been using the accountability class in my juvenile cases, I have found this class to be invaluable. The juveniles learn what it means to be a victim and to appreciate what they have done to others. I have had many positive responses from the juveniles who took the class as part of their probation. Jim is truly making a difference in the lives of the juveniles he

teaches."

Denise Skrobecki, warden of the Lincoln Community Correction Center first saw Jones' program in action when she was an associate warden the Lincoln Correctional Center. Now she oversees inmates who are soon to be discharged or close to parole.

"What he's doing is preparing the inmates for entry," Skrobecki said. "The first step for them is understanding what their responsibility is to the victim."

The U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Corrections is looking at the data from Jones' program to see if it can be used on a national level.

"We are definitely interested in the program," said Lorie Brisbin, correctional programs specialist with NIC. has shown it could be a very effective training or teaching model.

"We're all about keeping people out, not engaging in activities that continue that cycle – that revolving door of coming back," she added.

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