

Chris Donovan Trust
Changing lives, making a difference



Understanding Restorative Justice

By Ray & Vi Donovan

Registered Charity 1112759

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Preface (written by Sian West, secretary of Chris Donovan Trust)

Restorative Justice (RJ) is a different way of tackling crime, based not on punishment but on healing the harm that's been caused.

It brings offenders into face-to-face conversation with their victims – and sometimes that dialogue is so powerful it can transform the future of each participant.

Victims can get answers to questions about the crime they've suffered, which for many brings new peace of mind, and the person who committed the crime gets the opportunity to try to make amends to the people they've hurt. This has been shown to slow down future reoffending. Sometimes RJ is used as an alternative to criminal prosecution (very low level crime) but mostly it's used alongside the Criminal Justice System.

But an important principle is that the participants should come to an RJ meeting voluntarily; no-one should be forced to take part if they don't want to. And we at the Chris Donovan Trust believe very strongly that the facilitators should be properly trained and accredited, so that the encounter only goes ahead after thorough preparation of all parties, and an assurance of safety and total confidentiality.

We can gladly provide more information on request.

Our vision (Ray and Vi Donovan)

“ We want people to understand what it is like to be a victim and through that knowledge prevent them from creating more victims. ”



Our goals (the things we want to contribute to)

1. To prevent first time and repeat offending behaviour
2. Promote partnerships that empower victims to deal with a crime and raise awareness of the benefits of Restorative Justice and other victim programmes

How we will achieve our ambitions

We are an independent charity and are driven by the loss of our son, Chris.

Our approach is:

- To visit schools, youth offending institutions and prisons and speak about our experiences.
- To share our experiences and hope that in the future every victim has a voice and is heard.
- To be open and collaborative with other organisations in achieving our goals.

Every parent's nightmare

When Christopher left our house on that lovely summer's evening, little did he know that a few hours later he would be attacked by a gang of youths and die later in hospital.



Photo of Chris taken on his 18th/last birthday

Friday May 25th 2001 was just like a normal day. I came home from work, Chris was getting ready to go out and he asked me if I could give him a lift to his sister's house. I said "I was too tired and if I drive anymore today I think I may crash the car", so he said "okay not to worry, I will call around a friend's house and then we will walk down to Philip's (our other son) and maybe pop into Gills house for a coffee", which they did most weekends, and off he went and the last thing he ever said to me was "Dad I really love you" and kissed my forehead

and then he left. Vi (my wife) came home. We did things like most people; have an evening meal, watch TV and then go to bed.

Saturday May 26th: It was around 12:40am when the door bell rang. I was going down the stairs moaning like most fathers saying "how can two boys forget their door keys?" But when I opened the door, instead of Chris and Phil, there were two policemen standing on my doorstep. One asked if I was the father of Christopher and Philip Donovan. I said "yes", they then asked if they could come in as there had been an incident involving Chris and Phil and they needed to talk to both myself and my wife.

I got Vi out of bed and we were told to sit down I remember my heart was beating so fast that I thought it would jump out of my chest, not knowing what they were going to say. Then the policeman told us that Chris and Phil had been involved in a fight and Chris was badly injured and they need to get us to the hospital right away. We got dressed and went in the police car to Epsom Hospital. When we arrived, Phil was standing there with blood on his face and he was dressed in a white forensic suit and slippers. He said later that as we arrived in the police car he thought everything would be okay now mum and dad were here.

Then a big policeman came up to me and said I'm sorry you can't see Christopher they have taken him up to the operating theatre. He then led us into a small room and said someone will come soon to let you know what is happening and left us just standing there. After what seemed like hours, some doctors came into the room and said Christopher was in a bad way. Most of the bones in his body were broken and he had lost a lot of oxygen to the brain and we could be looking at severe brain damage.

We just didn't know what to say or think. We just sat there quietly. After they had gone we asked Phil what happened. He told us that "the three of us were walking to Gill's house and Chris was singing an Oasis song. As we walked along the road we came to the

hill and unknown to us coming towards us was a gang of boys and girls, about fourteen in all. Well as we got nearer, the gang opened up to let us pass. I went first but as I was walking through, one of the gang punched me in the face for no reason and broke my nose. In shock, I somehow clicked my nose back into place and the pain was so bad I fell to the floor and then three of the gang started to kick me in the head then I passed out."

The rest of what happened is what witnesses said in court. When Philip fell on the ground they saw three boys kicking him. They then saw Christopher going over to save his brother but two other lads got in his way and blocked him. Then another boy got around the back of him and pulled him to the floor and all three were kicking and stamping on his head.

They then left him in the middle of the road which is has four lanes; a road with a maximum speed of forty miles an hour. A couple of cars came over the hill and somehow missed him. Then another car came over the hill and the driver said in her statement she thought it was a bungle of rags in the road. She ran over Christopher dragging him about forty feet down the road.

When Philip regained consciousness, the first thing he saw was his brother under a car wheel. A woman came running out of a house to help. She said she was a nurse and it is best not to move him until help arrives, so all Phil could do was to sit beside his brother who was unconscious and hold his hand.

As we were taking in what Philip had just told us, the doctors came into the room with two policemen. Their eyes told us what they were going to say. They told us that they were sorry, they did all they could and before they could say anymore, Vi ran out of the door. She said later that if she ran away it wouldn't be real. I remember I fell on my knees screaming with a doctor holding me in his arms.

The hospital Chaplain and police said they needed us to identify Christopher's body. This is something no parent should have to do. I remember both Vi and I holding on to each other not wanting to enter the room and see our son dead. Before we entered the room a policeman said we were not allowed to touch him. We couldn't even cuddle him. All we could do was just stand there.

I then asked if I could kiss his forehead they said that would be okay. Here I am, asking permission to kiss my own son. It was funny everyone else could touch our son but we weren't allowed to and we are his parents!

Now because it was a bank holiday weekend, we had to wait until Tuesday to see the coroner. She told us all about his injuries. To be honest, even to today, I can't remember a thing she said because all I wanted to do was see my son. So I said to her "I don't want

Every parent's nightmare (continued...)

to hear anymore, I want to see my son". She then took us to the mortuary to see Chris. Both Vi and I went into the Chapel of Rest. Again, we were told we couldn't hold him. He was wrapped up like an Egyptian mummy so all we could do was stand there, not knowing what to do or say. When we went back into the waiting room, the coroner said "Mr. Donovan, I have bad news". I looked at her and said "what could be worse than what I have just seen?".

She then went on to say: "because of the kicking and the car running over Chris, they have to prove what killed him and the only way to do this is to remove his brain and we would have to wait for a chemical to come out and this takes up to four months, so we won't be able to bury Chris for four months".

Christopher was laid to rest on September 21st 2001.

The trial

Only three boys were arrested for Christopher's murder. We then had to wait a year for the case to come to court. The Case took six weeks and all three were found guilty of murder. The ages of the three convicted of murder were fifteen, sixteen and nineteen.

We found out in court that they had been drinking and taking drugs for most of the evening. In fact, one of them said he was drinking from the moment he left school that day.

All three were found guilty of murder. Two got life in prison with a minimum of nine to ten years. The youngest got Her Majesty's Pleasure with a minimum of six years to serve.

What is Restorative Justice?

Restorative processes bring those harmed by crime or conflict, and those responsible for the harm, into communication, enabling everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in repairing the harm and finding a positive way forward.



In criminal justice, restorative processes give victims the chance to tell offenders the real impact of their crime, to get answers to their questions, and an apology. Restorative Justice holds offenders to account for what they have done, helps them understand the real impact of what they've done, to take responsibility and make amends.

Restorative processes are increasingly being used in schools, care homes and the wider community to address conflict, build understanding and strengthen relationships with young people. In these contexts it is also known by the names 'restorative approaches' and 'restorative practices'.

What is Restorative Justice? (continued...)

Since 2005, Ray and Vi Donovan have been strong champions for Restorative Justice. Their journey started with a phone call from their son Christopher's school teacher inviting them to take part in a Sycamore Tree Programme, a restorative project run by Prison Fellowship so with some anxiety, they went along to a local women's prison. The Donovans were victims of a tragic crime, and they'd been asked to share that story. Ray and Vi soon realised that this was the first time since their 18 year old son Christopher was murdered in 2001 that they felt they had a voice and that the prisoners were thinking, feeling human beings, just like them.

They now travel around the country visiting all types of prison establishments (adult and young people) telling the story in the hope it will turn someone away from crime.

Their work continues to develop: many Youth Offending Teams (YOTS) have invited them to speak directly with youngsters, spelling out how "five minutes of madness" could change their lives forever also they talk about what the Ripple effect of crime really means - family and the community are always affected by thoughtless actions. All this is in the hope the young person, whose next stop might so easily be custody, will see the effect of their actions and turn their lives around. Some YOTS are working with Ray and Vi to help train staff in how best to handle and understand victims to avoid further pain.

Ray and Vi also visit schools to talk to the pupils about the dangers of drink and drugs and knife, guns and gang life, and also tell them what life might be like in a Young Offenders Institution.

Plans for this year include running workshops for Restorative Justice Council for practitioners to help them think through how to work with victims of crime, to make sure that the restorative process is focused on, and truly meets their needs.

But best of all...

In July 2011 May 2012 and March 2013 Ray and Vi met three young men who killed their son, soon after they had been released after serving the custodial part of their life sentences.

The meetings took place in properly facilitated Restorative Justice Conferences. They were emotional and powerful meetings.

The young men said sorry and that they will never forget what pain and harm they had caused both Ray and Vi and their family. They were able to answer all the questions they were asked and after the meeting Ray and Vi were able to tell them face to face that they have forgiven them and want them to move on.

Meeting Christopher's killers

Meeting the three people that killed Chris was so positive and powerful. For the first time in years we had a voice. We were able to express our thoughts and feelings to the offenders and receive answers to our questions which we were not allowed to ask in court, because in today's court system the victims and family are very rarely asked anything unless they are giving evidence. They are made to sit upstairs in the public gallery or in the well of the court as spectators, nothing more. Sometimes you are asked to write an impact statement which very often is not read out in court and your feelings are not relayed to the offenders, as was our case.

When people see Restorative Justice meetings on the TV it looks like it is put together in a very quick fashion which is not true. It can take months of mediation meetings until the mediators feel the time is right for both parties to meet. This is a voluntary meeting on both sides and anyone can walk out if it gets too hard to handle. The meeting place has two rooms; one for the meeting to take place and a get out room. Both sides can bring someone to act as a supporter. They are not allowed to talk during the meeting but are a great help.

When we met all three offenders and told them what it was like for us and the things we went through and are still going through and told them about the ripple effect and how it affected everyone from our family to the community, it made them realise the amount of people that were affected by their actions. Then to hear them say sorry made us both feel like a ton of coal was taken off our back. We felt free for the first time because we got all we ever wanted. We got answers to our questions and the truth. Now we hope we can leave those questions in the past and move on into the future.

Restorative Justice is the best thing that has happened in this country because victims get a voice and it is also victim centred.

Why did it have to take all these years for us to meet with these three people and hear and see their remorse? We know it won't bring Chris back, but it will give us hope knowing these lads understand what they did to us and our family and hopefully will not commit another crime.

We would recommend Restorative Justice to every victim of crime. You may want to wait a while and that's okay. It took us eleven years to meet our offenders.

People think that a sentenced offender will get some time taken off their prison sentence for taking part in a Restorative Justice meeting; this is not true; it won't affect their prison sentence. But it could change their way of thinking about their victim because for the first time, you are not a sheet of A4 paper in a court room; and for the first time, they see you as a human being. We would also love to see Restorative Justice been used in Schools and work places up and down the UK.

A letter from one of the offenders

“ My name is Stephen Andrews and I along with other associates was involved in the death of Christopher Donovan on 26th May 2001. I was subsequently charged, convicted of Murder and given a life sentence.

During the first couple of years in custody I found it too difficult to accept what I had done and fought against the sentence I received. I was approached to become involved with Restorative Justice at that time but I was not ready and the thought of meeting Christopher’s family was something I could not contemplate. I was scared. However as time went by I began to realise that in order to move on in my life I had to face up to the death of Christopher, take responsibility for the person I was then and try and develop myself to lead a more positive life in the future. I started to approach courses with a greater motivation, I wanted to understand and make changes. I found the more I took responsibility the better I felt inside.

I worked through my sentence and was able to develop my skills by completing educational and trade based courses as well as completion of offending behaviour programmes.

I was released in December 2011 and again given the opportunity to get involved with Restorative Justice. I discussed this with my probation officer Samantha and she agreed to be my support. Together we were in touch with an organisation called CALM who act as mediators throughout the process. I continued to feel very anxious about this mostly because I did not want to cause the family any more hurt and pain. Despite fearing that they would think of me as a monster, I felt if Ray and Vi wanted to meet me then it was the very least I could do to demonstrate my regret and remorse for what happened to Christopher and acknowledge the impact upon them and their family.

Despite my fears the meetings with the mediators reassured me and helped me to find the balls to meet Ray and Vi. During the preparation meetings we exchanged messages and I knew some of the things that they had questions about before the face to face contact. One of the things they wanted me to know before we met was that they felt no anger and this really helped me to relax and prepare to face them. I too was able to pass on to them that I wanted them to feel free to ask anything.

All our meetings with the mediators and then the final contact with Ray and Vi were held in a neutral place and was quiet, which seemed to help too.

At all times the mediators made it clear that it was a voluntary process and I knew that if it got too much I could withdraw. The meeting itself was amazing, emotional and went so well. It exceeded all my expectations in so many ways. Some of the questions were very difficult about the offence and what happened to Christopher, but I understood and respected why Ray and Vi need to know.

Hearing the family's experience at the time of Christopher's death and the impact that losing him in such a horrible way had upon them made it real and I was able to hear and see their pain for myself.

Being part of the Restorative Justice Process and meeting Ray and Vi Donovan was more powerful than any victim awareness course and something that I will remember and no doubt influence the rest of my life. It also gave me the opportunity to apologise to them for their loss and give some background to my own experiences and what I have done since.

When Ray and Vi told me they forgave me it meant everything. It meant that they understood that what happened to Christopher was an incident that never should have occurred. Hearing them give me permission to have the best life that I can made me feel like a human again, a good person with a clear focus and a positive future. I owe that to Christopher. Meeting Ray and Vi has helped me to accept that I owe it to myself too. When I committed this offence I was lost with no direction or purpose. That is no longer the case. ””

Stephen

Chris Donovan Trust

Changing lives, making a difference

The Chris Donovan Trust is a charitable organization.

Working name of Forgiveness Ministries, registered charity 1112759.

For more information please log onto our website:

www.chrisdonovantrust.org

“If you have been moved by this booklet please take the time to tell us. If it prompted you to think or have a discussion about victims, the ripple effect of crime or forgiveness they would love to hear about it.

Thank you so much.”



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