

## Juvenile offenders and their victims decide how to right wrongs together

By JANE THOMPSON-SMITH  
Of The Free Press

When Stuart Woods took over as chief of the new Richland Township police department in February, 1999, he had a plan for dealing with first time juvenile offenders in the community.

Instead of sending youths caught committing offenses such as retail theft, vandalism, bullying, and assault straight into the juvenile court system, a restorative justice alternative would be made available.

Since the spring, Community

Accountability Circles have been implemented through justCommunity Inc., the coordinating agency for Healthy-Community-Healthy Youth of the Quakertown area.

Here's how CACs work.

The police department, or the Bucks County juvenile court system make referrals to justCommunity to conduct the circles, that bring victims and offenders together to discuss committed offenses, and come to an agreement over how to correct the situation.

Lee Rush, executive director of justCommunity, has been the facilitator for the circles, or conferences, since April.

"This program works so well because it puts victims and offend-

ers in the same place at the same time," Rush said. "People directly affected by a harmful act get a say in what happens next. Usually victims aren't allowed to see or talk to [the people that committed the offense against them]. This is a process that repairs harm to people."

But Rush said CACs are not held without the consent of the victim.

"This is a victim-centered approach," he said.

In CACs, the victim, the person that committed the offensive act, and supporters [usually family members] from both sides sit in a circle with no

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tables between them. The facilitator sits at one end of the circle and reads from a script that originated in Australia and was written by a policeman in 1994. The script begins with open-ended questions that encourage participants to express how they were affected by the offense.

Questions asked of the person who committed the act would include, "What were you thinking when the offense was committed?" and "Who do you think has been affected by the action?"

"The people causing the harm get to reflect on who they think was affected," Rush said. "It can be emotional."

The victim is then asked questions like what his reaction was at the time of the incident, and how he feels about the incident. Next, the script allows participants to exchange ideas, and develop a plan for righting the wrongdoing.

"As the facilitator, I ask what [the

# Real justice hits the area

participants] think should happen," Rush said. "Then we hammer it out until everyone comes to an agreement."

Once an agreement is reached, refreshments are shared.

"We break bread together," Rush said. "It's very important."

Rush, who has had 10 CAC cases since April, said the process can take up to two hours, which is one reason why the criminal justice system doesn't carry it out.

Rush said CACs stay away from juvenile delinquency labels, and separate the deed from the doer. They also build community, because neighbors and witnesses might be invited to participate, that otherwise wouldn't be involved because of fear of retribution.

An example of CACs at work involves two youths, age 13 and 14 years, who played with matches and accidentally set fire to a wooded area. The two first-time offenders,

charged with risking a catastrophe, a misdemeanor, could have entered the juvenile court system. Instead, while supported by their families, firefighters explained to them what they had to go through to fight the fire, and someone who lived near the fire site told them her two year old misses the sounds of the owls in the woods that burned.

The boys agreed to plant replacement trees in the area.

A two day Community Accountability Circles training session, hosted by Rush and Woods, was attended by 14 people on Nov. 16 at the Richland Township building.

Rush said such sessions will enable community members to learn how to facilitate circles.