

# Lessons of restorative justice aid villagers in self-governance



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There are many reasons someone experiencing homelessness avoids shelters. They come with myriad rules around pets and staying with a partner, among others. And for people with PTSD, anxiety disorders or mental health issues, a crowded shelter can actually aggravate a person's condition. The alternative for many people are tents.

There are many tent camps in the city that are frequently raided and swept by the Portland Police Bureau and other authorities. Four permanent villages that started as tent camps, however, have become communities of tiny houses.

The oldest of the villages, Dignity Village, has existed for 17 years and hosts about 50 people. With the exception of the newest (Kenton Women's Village, with 25 residents total during the last year) all villages are self-governed, as opposed to being run by social-service agencies. The other two villages are Hazelnut Grove (16 residents) and Right2DreamToo (10 permanent members and up to 60 overnight guests). A new village (Agape) with tiny houses for about 30 people is being constructed, and additional villages are planned. The vast majority of residents in all villages live with physical and mental disabilities, many have experienced major trauma in their lives. Villages allow them to live in safety – in tiny houses with locked doors and among people who sign up for security shifts at night and help each other out in multiple other ways.

Self-governance is both an opportunity and a challenge. Few models exist and most of us have not grown up in ways that taught us how to resolve conflict peacefully. Like in any other community, conflicts occasionally occur in the villages. Villages have a code of conduct and respond collectively when that code is violated by individuals.

With support from Resolutions Northwest, the Village Coalition and CareOregon, Portland's villages embarked

on a journey to learn about restorative justice, conflict resolution and mediation during the past year. As part of regular meetings, in which village business is taken care of, villagers learned about communication skills, accountability and repairing harm when a member violates community norms.

A punitive approach is all about rules and establishing blame for those who break them. A restorative approach is about relationships and accepting responsibility to repair harm when it has occurred.

A punitive approach often relies on authority figures to address problems and leaves out the person who was harmed. In a restorative setting the conflict is addressed by those who are part of it and the harmed person's voice is central.

In a punitive world people who committed harm are often isolated and excluded, whereas in a restorative approach they are welcomed back into the community and supported in making that work.

"If you come from being homeless for years you got a lot of anger and resentment build up inside and things can get really ugly," said Tequilah, a long-term resident of Hazelnut Grove. "Under a bridge you don't have mediation – you have a bunch of sad, miserable people trying to make the best out of the situation. Often the police end up being called and the issues become bigger after that.

"In environments like this you need mediation," Tequilah said. "Any community or organization should know about conflict resolution and practice restorative justice. We can't run from being social species but we will always have clashes. I learned to be a lot more patient to analyze the whole situation. Whatever people are going through – we often don't see the much bigger issues. For example: in my family there was no concept of mental illness. When people acted out it was seen as them needing some form of punishment. At the same time growing up in a multi-racial

family, I learned to always see multiple viewpoints and meet in the middle. I am black, bi-racial, gay, houseless and an atheist. I identify as trans and I wear women's clothing sometimes. If I can get along with people from all walks of life you have no excuse not to!"

"Restorative Justice is useful to address a lack of communication and to introduce us to new progressive ways to interact with each other," said Melissa, another Hazelnut Grove resident. "We look into ourselves but we also look at the positives in each other, rather than just focusing on the negatives. Being able to talk about issues when there is a conflict helps to de-escalate the situation instead of allowing the anger to increase. We learned new methods for being able to work with each other and communicate."

Tequilah, Melissa and a resident at Dignity Village who developed his own presentation on intentional listening and other communication skills, are now able and ready to pass on what they learned to people in their own and in other villages to keep the momentum going. Villages are a valuable and cost-saving alternative to shelters and preserve people's dignity and self-determination. Villagers are experts on their own lives and well equipped to help each other, which has a direct impact on the well-being of those who live in the villages. The larger community should support the villages because we all can benefit from learning how to make self-determined community living work and be a sustainable alternative in responding to the lack of affordable housing.

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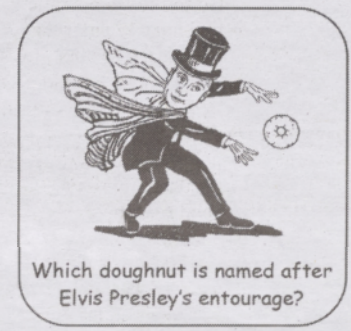
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