



JUSTICE

for ALL

Rehabilitating inmates in America's prisons and jails may seem like a lost cause. But one innovative program has helped them empathize with their victims and turn their lives around.

BY KATHLEEN KENNA

All photos by Timothy Wheeler

EMARCO WASHINGTON WAS ONE OF THE FIRST teens in California to be tried as an adult for a violent crime. His rap sheet is long: assault and battery with robbery, hate crime against a gay man, assault with a deadly weapon, assault on police.

By the time he was pushing 30, Washington had served time at San Quentin State Prison or city jails almost every year since he was a teenager.

"All my life, I've been in and out of trouble, but I was convinced I wasn't violent," he said.

"I thought I was tough, not violent. I lied to myself for so long I should have been dead."

Then in 1997, as part of his sentence for possessing stolen property, the San Francisco County Sheriff's Department ordered Washington into a jail program called RSVP: Resolve to Stop the Violence Project. In his first week there he met a former skinhead, Aaron Moscovitz, who had already undergone a dramatic transformation through the program. Moscovitz



went from perpetrating violent hate crimes to becoming a public speaker against violence. If the program could take violent racists like Moscovitz and return them to society reformed and peaceful, Washington was curious about what the program could do for him.

Like most of the 2,000 men admitted to RSVP since it began in 1997, Sheriff's Department administrators placed Washington in the program's 62-bed jail dorm in San Fran-

cisco County's San Bruno jail for a strict regimen of violence reduction training, 14 hours a day, six days a week. Some men take 12 to 16 weeks before they're deemed ready for release. Washington signed on for 52.

Offenders can volunteer to enter the program but are usually selected by administrators as likely candidates for turning their lives around, said George Jurand, RSVP manager.

"It doesn't mean their sentence is shorter. It means their sentence is more creative," he said. "They're in a program ordered by the court rather than doing nothing [in jail]."

The program, offered only at San Bruno, involves an innovative mix of individual and group therapy, relaxation techniques such as yoga and acupuncture, and "victim empathy" or "victim impact" sessions, where inmates meet crime victims who describe their suffering, such as a grandmother whose daughter and infant grandson were stabbed to death.

RSVP was created as a model of restorative justice, a philosophy that advocates rehabilitating offenders and having them make amends with their victims rather than simply punishing them. Restorative justice aims to make offenders acknowledge their violent behavior and the harm it's caused, recognize violence and learn how to avoid it, and make a commitment to repair some of the damage they've caused.

"The victim impact sessions are one of the most powerful parts of the program," Jurand said. "It's very emotional. For many men, it's the first time they get the connection between their crime and the victim. It's very personal."

Critical to the program is helping men understand why they've resorted to violence in the past. Some learned violence in their youth as a way of preserving their self-esteem—to the point that they'll kill or die to avoid "losing face" in a confrontation, Jurand said.

"One of the best things I learned was that violence was, the different types of violence, like mental and emotional violence," said Washington. "I learned the injustice caused by violence is tremendous. It was, 'Wow! I hurt all these people. I was blinded by my own stupidity.'"

After reaching a better understanding of the roots of his own violent behavior, Washington reconciled with his mother when he left jail. He had long been verbally and emotionally abusive with her, especially when she wouldn't give him money for drugs.

"I was addicted to crack, marijuana, alcohol—anything to get high," he said. "I phoned her after [RSVP] and told her I had been angry when she wouldn't send me any money before. ... I told her the last thing I wanted to do was to hurt her, and it was like a

"I learned the injustice caused by violence is tremendous," said Emarco Washington (below). "It was, 'Wow! I hurt all these people. I was blinded by my own stupidity.'"



rain washing over me. That told me if I changed my behavior, my language, I could prove to myself and to others that I wasn't a bad seed."

Washington's transformation embodies the highest goals of the RSVP program: violence prevention, victims receiving restitution for their suffering, and offenders taking responsibility for their crimes. For years, men in San Francisco jails were rarely a part of anything so constructive. They were far more likely to be caught in destructive cycles of violence, according to RSVP founder Sunny Schwartz, an attorney in the San Francisco Sheriff's Department.

"We were seeing the same repeat offenders coming back with the same very sorry excuses," she said. "I was seeing the third generation of incarcerated people—the grandchildren of people I saw before."

Rather than addressing the problem, the jail system was making it worse, she said.

"Jails are really unhealthy places for any human being to reside," said Schwartz. "Spend 18 months in San Quentin, and you come out after being

surrounded by the underbelly of humanity all that time. We're all products of our environment. After that, we can't be surprised if a man acts like an animal."

Schwartz said San Francisco's progressive sheriff, Michael Hennessey, agreed that the jail system wasn't helping offenders but was teaching them to be better criminals. It was doing very little to prepare them for re-entering society.

A 1990 internal study of 2,200 offenders in six San Francisco jails and post-release community treatment centers showed that at least 80 percent of offenders were substance abusers. Their reading and comprehension tests showed an average reading level of Grade 5 to 7. Eighty percent of them were victims of violence, perpetrators of violence, or both. With those demographics, they seemed ill prepared to succeed in the real world and stay out of jail.

"We knew we needed to create programs that would release prisoners more responsibly," said Schwartz. "We needed to put dignity back into the treatment of offenders and their families."

Schwartz credits Hennessey with the bold decision to build a program aimed at helping both offenders and victims escape the hold of violence.

"It was biblical," she said. "It was what a lot of us were hungering for. We had to engage everyone hurt by crime, make offenders accountable, work on victim restoration, and get the community involved in an effort to heal the harm caused by crime."

Schwartz designed RSVP with key members of the San Francisco community to reinforce a message that reducing violence and showing restitution to victims is a community service. Devising the program took more than a year of weekly meetings with an eclectic team that included Baptist ministers and Orthodox rabbis, Republicans and Democrats, victims and ex-cons, police officers and former gang members, homemakers, doctors, and others. Meetings always began with a moment of silence for victims of violence, Schwartz said.

While Hennessey was equally enthusiastic about restorative justice, he wasn't



Tagi Qolouvaki, a survivor of a violent crime, addresses an RSVP class during a "victim empathy" session.



RSVP founder Sunny Schwartz and program manager George Jurand.

thrilled about an experiment that put 60 violent men in one dorm together. He often says the department feared a riot or worse when RSVP was launched.

"In the first year, we had no fights inside—we usually get three a week in our jails," Schwartz said. The RSVP jail "became the safest dorm to work in."

The program's success swiftly proved Schwartz's belief that "violence is learned. It can be unlearned."

A five-year study of RSVP showed a reduction as high as 80 percent in the number of graduates arrested on violent charges after their release, according to the study's author, James Gilligan, founder of the Center for the Study of Violence at Harvard Medical School. A former prison psychiatrist, Gilligan is the author of the recent book, *Preventing Violence: Prospects for Tomorrow*.

Gilligan's RSVP study also showed that the longer an offender was involved in the program, the greater his chance of not committing another violent crime. A two-month program saw a 42 percent reduction in re-arrest for violence; a three-month stint had a 50 percent reduction.

The sheriff's department estimates that RSVP adds about \$1,400 to the annual \$30,000 cost of incarceration for every inmate. But it also estimates that RSVP saves the city \$4 for every \$1 spent on incarceration, because the reduction in violence saves on medical, legal, and other expenses incurred by the community whenever a violent crime is committed.

All of these numbers are promising, but Sunny Schwartz is not satisfied.

"I'm deeply appreciative of the path we have broken," she said. "But we should not be complacent. Inside, this is a dress rehearsal. We need to escalate our effectiveness at the [release] gate."

RSVP has won numerous awards and has been featured on national television shows, including *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Larry King Live*, and Schwartz has given public lectures internationally and across the United States. One of the program's greatest signs of success is the RSVP internship, which trains former offenders to work as anti-violence instructors with the same men who used to be their jail mates.

Emarco Washington interned for a year as an anti-violence trainer at the San Bruno jail, where he once wore the orange jumpsuit of an offender. Afterwards, he left the jail system for a job at a San Francisco non-profit agency that works with families going through divorce. Agency staff spotted him while he was working at RSVP and hired him last year.

"RSVP has a great impact," said Washington. "Some of the guys who were in the program when I was there still come up to me on the street and say, 'Thank you.' They show you a lot of respect. They tell you that you changed their lives. That's very powerful."

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For the Victims of Violence

BY KATHLEEN KENNA

The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP) does something unique in the field of rehabilitating violent offenders—it offers help to their victims.

Some might describe the award-winning program, run by the San Francisco County Sheriff's Department, as "the guys get acupuncture and yoga and the women get nothing," said its founder, lawyer Sunny Schwartz. But such a description would be wrong.

Instead, RSVP reaches out to women victimized by violence. It offers free help to those who suffered from violent crimes committed by men enrolled in the program. Aid comes in many forms, including job training, legal services, psychological counseling, clothing, food, acupuncture, yoga, and beauty sessions with other women.

"We go to court with them if they need it," said Delia Ginorio, who coordinates RSVP's outreach to victims. "We get them medical help. We've provided reconstructive surgery from doctors and we'll get them out of transitional housing into better housing for them and their kids."

Because the assistance is confidential—RSVP doesn't tell the offenders that it's working with the women—it enables the program to reach women, such as undocumented U.S. residents or substance abusers, who are reluctant to deal with the police.

After making sure the women are safe and no longer in a crisis situation, there's a 12-week program that includes classes on financial planning, parenting and healthy relationships, self-defense, self-esteem, and group support. It often leads to empathy for offenders, said Ginorio.

Twenty-five women accepted RSVP's offer of help in its first year, 1997. Now the program reaches out to about 500 women a year. It has 1,000 active and follow-up cases annually, ranging from teens to pensioners.

One of those women is Sylvia. Her husband of 24 years threw a knife at her when she discovered him cutting up heroin for his previously-secret addiction. He went to jail for a year, then drug treatment; she went to RSVP's 12-week program, finding it "something like Alcoholics Anonymous." The mother of two teens received psychological counseling and learned that her husband's drug addiction and his long-time verbal and emotional abuse were not her fault, as she had imagined.

"I don't want to hate him for the rest of my life," she said. "I see now what drugs do to a person—how it's a sickness, a disease. After RSVP, I feel empowered. I'm not afraid. I'm ready to move on."