



# FORUM

## Restorative Practices in Hungary: An Ex-prisoner is Reintegrated into the Community

BY VIDIA NEGREA

As the representative of Community Service Foundation of Hungary, the Hungarian affiliate of the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), I participated in a group session of the Hungarian Crime Prevention and Prison Mission Foundation in summer 2009 (Sycamore Tree Project — [www.pfi.org/cjr/stp/introduction](http://www.pfi.org/cjr/stp/introduction) — or Zacchaeus Program in Hungary). There I met the governor of Balassagyarmat prison, where inmates were working in groups on issues related to their crimes and exploring ways to repair relationships they had damaged. Some inmates began accepting responsibility for what they had done and were motivated to make things right and earn forgiveness of victims and their families. Prisoners made symbolic reparation in the form of community service within the prison, but there was still a lot to do to create opportunities for offenders to make contact with victims and shed the stigma of their offense by means of direct reparation. Also, prison management believed it important to support processes, acceptable to victimized families and communities, to help prisoners regain control of their lives and prevent reoffending.

As a first effort, the prison governor suggested we work with János, a prisoner who had demonstrated dramatic improvement and who, unlike most long-term prisoners, had maintained contact with family through regular letters and visits. The governor and department manager agreed the prisoner and his family could benefit from opportunities before release to plan their future

together, discuss potential issues and experience what it felt like to be together again after János's more than 12-year imprisonment for the crime of murder.

When I met János, he articulated his ideas and worries regarding his release. He also asked for help restoring the relationship with his family and earning the forgiveness of those he'd hurt. While the intervention would require more time, effort and human resources than any previous program, the cooperative attitude of the prison management, János's attitude and favorable relationship with his family, and my positive experience with family group conferencing/family group decision making (FGC/FGDM) encouraged me to launch the pilot program.

The prison governor was willing to release János for a couple days around Christmas 2009 to allow him to strengthen his family ties and prepare for his final release in mid-to-late 2010. The governor first wanted to make sure that the short leave would not pose a risk to anybody, and he also wanted to assess János's family's feelings towards him.

The first phase of a three-phase intervention plan involved preparing and running a circle meeting with János and his family to prepare for his temporary release. This hybrid restorative circle came out of my experience with FGDM and less formal restorative circles and was designed to meet the needs of prison officials, the prisoner and his family.

I held preparatory meetings with János in the prison, his partner Mária, their two children and Mária's parents in her family home. János's son, struggling with tears, talked about how he had been

stigmatized as a small child for what his father had done and how hard it was for him not to respond with violence. Mária's mother summarized how the family related to János: "I condemn what he did, he committed a crime. But János is a kind man, and we would be happy to have him with us again, as long as his intentions are good. The children need him, and so does Mária, who still loves him." All five agreed to attend the circle meeting.

**This case reinforces the idea that family and community members should be involved in reintegration efforts and related decisions, because they have the means of turning the problems of ex-prisoners and their families into a process of taking responsibility for the future.**

The meeting took place in the prison in September 2009. The prison governor, department manager and probation officer from the Zacchaeus Program also attended. The governor spoke about the process; then I facilitated the circle using restorative questions: What happened? How did it affect people? What should be done? Every participant shared their thoughts, feelings and needs, recent major achievements and difficulties, as well as the consequences of János's actions.

The whole family was moved by the governor's report on János's behavioral change. Everyone brainstormed how to strengthen family ties, enhance communication and ensure the family spend the holiday happily together.

During discussion of expectations and specific plans, János brought up a topic the family had never talked about in the presence of the children or strangers: his two other children, whom he said he wanted to care for. The children were shocked, having known of only one half-sibling. The family showed strong emotional responses — from speechlessness to anger to blame. I encouraged everyone to take turns expressing their feelings about this information. Mária expressed her formerly hidden disappointment, anger and shame about János's actions. The revelation of the secret resulted in a positive turn in the conversation, making communication more open. The family dealt with the real needs and expectations for their future and prioritized issues.

They decided that János would first observe interactions between the children and other family members, and only later, after discussing what he saw and consulting with his partner or his mother-in-law, actively deal with the kids. The children said they wanted János to appear with them on the city streets "so everyone can see we have a kind, strong and handsome father who we can introduce to our friends."

The governor said he had never had an easier decision about a release because he had never been able to observe how a family operated. The cohesion of János's family assured him they would be able to provide control and support for him.

János and Mária reported minor conflicts during his stay at home, but they regarded them as a chance to improve their relationship. János was especially proud of this because previously he had resolved conflicts with aggression and domestic violence.

Everyone regarded the family meeting and home visit as successful. During the second phase of the intervention, a formal FGDM was planned to help restore János and his family's status and value

in the community and prepare for final release. An FGDM requires active participation of family members — the main stakeholders in the decision-making process — who help with preparations, invite participants and manage the meeting. Mária contacted relatives and other potential supporters, while I approached professionals and representatives of the community. I also provided brochures and informed everyone about the purpose and structure of the meeting and the roles of the participants.

The main purpose of the conference was to identify resources János could rely on after his release in his efforts to become a law-abiding citizen. The group would work out a plan for János's reintegration into his family and the community. Key issues that arose during preliminary discussion included how to build community, how to prevent prejudices, worries and fear from spreading around town, and how János could find a good job, pay back his debts and make reparations to those he'd harmed.

The FGDM included eight family members, six professionals (probation officers, social workers, including one who knew the victim, and the district notary) and three supporters (the village chaplain and his wife and a psychology student who worked with János).

János began the conference by introducing key discussion issues and presenting his plans and major concerns. During the information-sharing phase, the professionals provided support and demonstrated an open-minded, solution-oriented, supportive attitude.

During "family alone time" the family met, without the professionals or community members, to develop a specific plan regarding where the family would live, where János would work, how he would pay his debts, and how he could maintain positive relationships and make reparations to his family, the community

and the victim's relatives. The professionals approved the plan and agreed that, should János breach the conditions of his release, he would face serious consequences, including returning to prison to complete his sentence and losing his family's support.

Evaluation questionnaires completed by all participants were positive. The social worker from family services, who said he had been afraid of János before the conference, said, "When you can be part of a process like this and see such cooperation and commitment, you feel that you can really make a difference. This day gave me back my belief in my profession."

The outcomes of the meetings and the satisfaction of the participants lead us to conclude that all these types of restorative processes are suitable for helping prisoners who are about to be released deal with problems related to reintegration, while also taking all stakeholders' interests into consideration. We saw that relatives and community members have a lot to offer to help the ex-prisoner, including work, financial help, and legal or life guidance, as well as finding ways to repair harm. This case reinforces the idea that family and community members should be involved in reintegration efforts and related decisions, because they have the means of turning the problems of ex-prisoners and their families into a process of taking responsibility for the future.

Based on the success with János, as of November 2011, nine other prisons in Hungary are experimenting with this process and will organize at least two FCG/FGDMs per prison, not just for inmates being released from prison but also for those facing difficulties or crises during imprisonment. Accordingly, as part of a governmental project supported by the European Union, more people are being trained to facilitate FCG/FGDM in Hungary. ☉