Changing Her Ways, Set to Graduate

Improv Justice circles were key to Bonnie Robinson's ability to strive, but...
Earlier this year, Thompson Heights introduced restorative justice circles. Students were asked to volunteer for the circles and to work on a short training video about restorative justice. "If we could do a training video and show it works here, it can work anywhere," said Beth Olszewski, a social worker on classroom assignment at Thompson Heights. Robinson was one of the students who worked on the video and started attending the circles.

"This was probably one of the more challenging environments I've ever worked in," said Nancy Reitmeier, a violence prevention specialist with the state's education department. She worked with the circles during the film's production. "The kids' social skills vary greatly. And their desire to use those social skills varies widely from one minute to the next," she said.

Getting the students to follow the rules of restorative justice circles wasn't easy, said Lois Swanson, president of the South St. Paul group that's facilitating the circles. A talking and circular policy in circles traveling around the group and giving students the opportunity to talk uninterrupted. Even then a lot of challenges, but the students continued to show up for the twice-monthly meetings.

One thing that seemed to help her cause, Swanson said, was "Newly trained." "When I said I was a volunteer, there was dead silence. It had much more of an impact than I expected."

FROM BOOT CAMP TO A JUSTICE CIRCLE

Robinson credits the diagnosis of a bipolar disorder a little more than two years ago, her foster parents and the restorative justice program that's been introduced at Thompson Heights for her turnaround.

She arrived at Thompson Heights from Texas late in her sophomore year, but problems at school had started years earlier. She can still recall an incident in kindergarten with a school principal in Ohio to whom she threatened to give a piece of candy. As he called her mother, she ran out the door and several blocks home in snowy weather without her jacket.

She regularly got in trouble for fighting. During several years in Texas, she says, she made two trips through "boot camp," a military-style program for kids who are habitually in trouble. The youths wear camouflage gear and spend a good part of their day running, doing calisthenics or traversing an obstacle course.

On her second stay, Robinson was at her worst for four months. "They want you to realize you're going to be here again if you mess up," she said. "Most people will work for, but for me it didn't." Just a few months before leaving Texas for Minnesota two years ago, she went through a lengthy evaluation with a licensed psychologist and was diagnosed as manic-depressive. After a long struggle to find the right medications to help her control her mood swings, Robinson says she's finally struck a balance.

"I always have the extra time to think, 'Do I want to do that?'' she said.

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Swanson, the facilitator for the circles, equates the changes the Thompson Heights students are trying to make with losing weight or quitting smoking.

"Even the little things are not easy to change, but these kids are taking a close look at changing," she said. "It's just the beginning."