Law and Justice Interim Committee
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Victim advocate

Background: I became involved with the restorative justice process in 2002 after my son, Brooks Todd, was killed as a passenger in the car of a drunk driver. The driver left Brooks in the car and hid for hours after the crash, leaving a multitude of people to clean up his devastation. A probation and parole officer, who supervised the offender, referred me to Anita Richards, a crime victim who helped start the victim impact panels at Treasure State Correctional Training Center (boot camp) and thus began my journey with restorative justice.

Involvement: The DOC director appointed me to the Crime Victims Advisory Council and I also began speaking at boot camp. As Anita Richards became unable to attend every victim panel at boot camp, I became one of the volunteer facilitators. I have had many roles in the DOC restorative justice efforts. I started my own victim impact panels in Madison County and just recently began to do these victim impact panels with referrals from Gallatin County. I speak monthly at Southwest Chemical Dependency Center in Dillon at its ACT (assessment, course and treatment) classes. I have received basic and advance victim-offender dialogue facilitator training, served on the RJ committee that oversaw the pilot program, was an advisory council member/co-chair during the debate about starting the victim-offender dialogue and offender accountability letter programs, served as a longtime boot camp volunteer, participated in a victim-offender dialogue with my offender (at my own expense because the program funds were depleted), and was involved in ongoing efforts to receive answers from the DOC about restitution and visiting lists.

I believe victim impact panels are effective with a twofold benefit. Victims can express, in a safe setting, their feelings and emotions, the consequences of the victimization, and their present new life. Often this is the only venue where they can freely tell their stories and express their emotions. Offenders actually see these victims as real people with faces, families, emotions, and how their actions have caused consequences for them. In the end, it is my personal goal to have victims exhibit to offenders that they, as victims, have emerged stronger and confident even though they have suffered at the hands of offenders. In the end victims end up powerful and offenders perceive this empowerment. I still have a letter from one trainee who told me my face actually turned into his victim's mother's face while I was speaking. He conveyed how he felt her pain through my presentation.

I participated in a victim-offender dialogue with my son's offender this year. This process is a highly personal experience and provided me with the ability to ask questions and receive answers that I would not have been able to receive in the normal legal proceedings. Brooks' brother, Shawn, also participated in a dialogue with this same offender and since doing this I have witnessed a freedom, a sense of peace, in him that I had not expected. These two sessions were recorded and I would offer to let you view them if you would find it helpful in your investigations of restorative justice.

The training I received as a victim-offender dialogue facilitator, provided by Eddie Mendoza from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, provided me the opportunity to have him feed back to

me my experience with an understanding I have yet to have duplicated. I remember listening to him speak with tears uncontrollably running down my face as he mirrored my feelings to me.

Enhancements: It is my belief and opinion that victim impact panels should be continued and expanded to all DOC and contracted facilities that deal with offenders. I believe teaching offenders about victims, hearing their experiences give victims the venue to help heal and provide offenders with first-hand experiences of how their actions have caused harm and damage and encourage them to not reoffend and be accountable. I would like to see more victims participate and learn of the opportunity available through victim impact panels and victim offender dialogues. My county victim/witness advocate did not tell me of the program and I believe we need to advertise this availability throughout the state. I feel victim-offender dialogue training should be offered again. Many of us who had the training in 2006 have not yet been involved in facilitating a dialogue and now need a refresher course. Thank you for your time and allowing me to present my views.