

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Growing a restorative community in Canberra, Australia

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In 2019, *The International Journal of Restorative Justice* published a special collection of Notes from the Field on restorative cities (Dighera, 2019; Lepri et al., 2019; Liebmann, 2019; Mannozi, 2019; Read & Straker, 2019; Saywood, 2019; Straker, 2019; Van Cleynenbreugel, 2019). A concluding paper by Chris Straker synthesised the reflections offered by contributors from six 'restorative cities' (Straker, 2019). This Note picks up on some of these observations and lessons in relation to another emerging restorative city: Canberra, Australia.

Canberra is a city of approximately 400,000 people, around a third of whom were born outside Australia. Australia's First Nations, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, comprised over 500 nations before colonisation, and today make up about 2 per cent of the Canberra community. The Ngunnawal peoples are recognised as traditional custodians of the Canberra region.

Canberra as a city is coextensive with the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The ACT has been self-governing since 1989, with its own Legislative Assembly. The city is also the seat of Australia's federal legislature and executive government and home to a world-renowned research university, the Australian National University (ANU), as well as the university legislated for Canberra, University of Canberra (UC), and campuses of several other universities. As Canberra's suburbs have spread, they increasingly form part of a larger conurbation with the neighbouring New South Wales town of Queanbeyan.

## 1 Origins of Canberra as a restorative city

The origins of Canberra's restorative city movement date back at least 25 years and are documented in detail elsewhere (Purnell & Northam, 2023; Tito-Wheatland, 2019). In the 1990s, ANU researchers conducting experiments on reintegrative shaming, community-based conflict resolution practitioners working on diversionary conferencing in Queanbeyan and political leaders in the new Legislative Assembly came together to advocate for restorative justice legislation.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Reintegrative shaming experiments were a partnership between ANU researchers and ACT Policing from 1995-2000 (Sherman et al., 2000; Strang et al., 2011).

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The resulting *Crimes (Restorative Justice) Act 2004 (ACT)* led to the establishment of a dedicated Restorative Justice Unit (RJU) within the ACT government in 2005. Since then, the role of the RJU has expanded to include conferencing for adult as well as youth offenders and for a wider range of offences, including violent and sexual offences (Justice and Community Safety Directorate, 2022a).

Alongside its main role of conducting restorative conferencing within the criminal justice system, since 2008 the RJU has served as the nucleation point for a series of workshops that led, via a gradual process of relationship-building and ‘circle widening’, to the development of an active Canberra Restorative Community (CRC) network (Canberra Restorative Community, 2022). This network today consists of around 550 practitioners, professionals, academics and others with an interest in expanding restorative justice principles and practice in a range of social, economic, educational and legal fields.

In 2016, the ACT Legislative Assembly made a bipartisan commitment for Canberra to become a restorative city and commissioned community consultation by the ACT Law Reform Advisory Council to develop policies to achieve this goal (Hansard, 2016). The Council’s 2018 report identified priority areas including child protection, public housing, Indigenous justice, public enquiries, human rights and coronial reform. It called for ongoing community consultation and robust accountability measures to ensure that agencies disclose steps they are taking for the management of any dispute with restorative practices (ACT Law Reform Advisory Council, 2018).<sup>2</sup> In November 2019, the ACT government issued a vision document and incorporated information on Canberra as a restorative city into the ‘Justice Programs and Initiatives’ section of its Justice and Community Safety Directorate website (Justice and Community Safety Directorate, 2022b).

## 2 Theoretical and conceptual basis

Our concept of community – whether referring to the broader Canberra community or to the CRC – has no hard boundaries. Rather, we resonate with Straker’s description of community as ‘a series of overlapping, shifting groupings’ in which fragmentation is countered through understanding and dialogue (Straker, 2019: 330). Like the other restorative city initiatives, the CRC started with people ‘coming together to respond to a perceived need within their communities’ and to ‘give back to the community the ability to manage and resolve conflicts’ (Lepri et al., 2019: 314, citing Wright, 2010). The CRC has been strengthened as individuals with personal experience in the criminal justice, child protection and other relevant spheres have become involved and found their voices respected.

All the pioneering groups represented in the 2019 Notes from the Field collection are, like us, working in contexts where restorative justice is already established in some form. All have interpreted restorative justice as something broader than a focus on repairing harm caused by criminal conduct. Likewise, in Canberra, we see the applicability of restorative approaches as extending beyond

<sup>2</sup> See also Tito-Wheatland (2019).

the criminal justice system to other contexts such as coronial processes, hospitals, educational institutions, social services, community groups, neighbourhoods and workplaces. Deep relationships supported and nurtured by restorative justice researchers have encouraged the growth of our community.<sup>3</sup> Like the restorative community in Whanganui, we view restorative work as proactive – not just reacting to conflict and harm as it happens but aiming to build ‘a resilient community that can manage diversity and conflict’ (Saywood, 2019: 322).

### 3 Operationalisation and ongoing processes

The CRC was originally coordinated or ‘convened’ through ANU. This role has recently passed to the authors at UC. Network meetings have been held consistently twice each month since 2015. During the pandemic we met via Zoom; as pandemic restrictions ease, we are returning to a mix of online and face-to-face gatherings.

In our regular meetings, we dedicate a lot of time to circle introductions. Each person may speak uninterrupted for several minutes, beginning with a brief personal reflection and moving on to talk about topics such as critical incidents in practice, new developments or initiatives, upcoming events, invitations to consult, and so on. ‘Needs and offers’ arising during the introductions round may be addressed in a second round, which often doubles as a check-out round due to time constraints. Guest speakers are also often invited to speak about specific topics, but this does not displace introductions. Actions or submissions are typically coordinated out-of-session by small groups of interested members, thereby channelling the wider network’s contributions to the ongoing cross-sectoral work of becoming a restorative city.

The restorative practice of ‘going around the circle’ is deceptively simple. It does a lot of work in setting and maintaining group norms and allows relational trust to be built over time through incremental disclosures and collaborations. This is important in our network setting because people who attend meetings do so not only as private individuals who are personally committed to restorative principles, but also as members, affiliates or representatives of other groups – community organisations, universities, businesses, government agencies and so on. The custom of extended introductions ensures that everyone, including newcomers and one-off attendees, can learn who is in the room and which ‘hats’ each person may be wearing. Besides facilitating useful connections, this can help people identify and navigate potential tensions or conflicts of interest.

Given that other restorative communities are also composed of individuals who may have overlapping affiliations with different groups or sectors (Straker, 2019: 330), it is useful to articulate some of the potential tensions that could arise, which we seek to forestall by using simple restorative processes in our meetings. All relate to issues of trust and power. For example, academics could be suspected of using the platform and prestige of their universities to appropriate or control ideas

3 This support is ongoing. For example, Professors John Braithwaite and Jennifer Llewellyn were guest speakers at the first ‘Towards A Restorative Community’ conference held at the ACT Legislative Assembly in July 2015; both are still actively engaged with the CRC network.

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or intellectual products generated by the group. Government employees could be suspected of observing but staying aloof from the work of the group or of withholding useful strategic information. Private practitioners could be suspected of using knowledge or connections obtained through the group to gain a competitive edge.

Spending time with each other in restorative circles helps us prevent potential conflict by fully communicating our intentions and constraints and articulating the value that our different roles bring. For example, when academics publish in international journals, we spark new connections and help the network refine and develop ideas about how to solve ‘wicked problems’ (Head, 2022). When we teach the ideas we learn from others in the network to our students, we amplify knowledge of restorative practices and values in the wider community. When government employees comply with codes of conduct requiring them to refrain from certain kinds of comment or disclosure, they can bring their expertise to bear in the community in ways that enhance integrity, accountability and trust in government and thus enable more productive collaborations (Public Sector Standards Commissioner, 2022). When private practitioners leverage relationships in ethical ways to move from one engagement to another, they play a key role in widening the circle and creating new opportunities for restorative work.

Of course, we are not our roles or positions, but whole people, with shared values and a shared hope of forging a city community that values and supports everyone – especially the most vulnerable. Our Canberra network includes those who have the power and security of occupation, income and home, and those who do not. Some of our members come with lived experience of trauma, harm or injustice: a child has been removed, a family member has died, a person has been incarcerated or experienced discrimination or been a victim of sexual violence. Some are retirees, motivated to contribute to the community and to experience and promote kindness, respect and belonging.

#### 4 Achievements and challenges

At the time of writing, it is not yet clear what the government’s moves to officially embrace the idea of a ‘restorative city’ will mean in practice. In December 2019, following years of drought, catastrophic fires on Australia’s east coast impacted Canberra directly through many weeks of heavy smoke pollution and the destruction of regional homes and pristine environments (Nguyen et al., 2021). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic followed hard on the heels of these events and – as elsewhere – has compounded existing troubles and traumas (Biddle & Korda, 2022). Whatever comes next, it seems to us as members of the CRC that our network has entered a new phase in which disruption and change are giving rise to new hopes, opportunities and challenges.

One challenge is that becoming a genuinely restorative city requires a change in existing patterns of engagement. So far, engagement by government with the idea of Canberra as a restorative city has occurred largely – though not exclusively – in line with an established paradigm that we, like the other restorative groups

represented in the 2019 collection, hope to change. Living in a small city that is home to two levels of government and their associated institutions and bureaucracies, we see citizen agency and mutually respectful relationships between government and individuals or community groups as central to the idea of a restorative Canberra. We aspire to a paradigm shift whereby government and other powerful actors will default to 'working with' the rest of the community, instead of 'doing to' (McCold & Wachtel, 2003).<sup>4</sup>

To bring about this change, we need to model principled relationships and what it means to be restorative in all our interactions. Increased government engagement raises the stakes while simultaneously bringing new people into the conversation. It prompts us to ask how we can best communicate and model restorative values and a restorative approach for a wider audience. Straker's observation based on the reflections of other restorative city 'agents' applies to us, too: until now, we have been doing 'interesting and important work, changing culture, enabling individuals and groups to engage in their own solutions for conflict and building relations, but ... outside of the scope of the projects, other citizens may [have not been] aware of a change, or a 'new' way of working' (Straker, 2019: 328).

This challenge is brought into sharp focus by the experience of the Ngunnawal Peoples, traditional custodians and owners of unceded Country in the ACT. We have many First Nations members in our group, and we have worked hard to listen deeply and learn from those who have cared for the land for tens of thousands of years. Intergenerational trauma resulting from deliberate policies of systematic child removal, incarceration and stamping out of identity is evident in relationships throughout Australia. This problem demands action to establish pathways for just and principled relationships and for harm to be recognised and truth to emerge. In this important work we look for guidance to the wisdom of Ngunnawal Elders:

Our Unity is a journey of healing. We have taken the first big step and along the path people will join with us (and leave) but everyone is welcome ... In this Journey we strive for Unity. We do this by empowering people, creating confidence, self-esteem and room for difference so we can work and laugh together, moving forward all the while (United Ngunnawal Elders Council, 2003).

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4 But see Straker (2019: 326-327): as a network, the CRC has more work to do to clarify precisely what this looks like in our context.

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