



# CDI Restorative Practices

## Case Study 1

Restorative Practices as a mindful and empowering process to build community





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Geraldine Conlon is a volunteer community leader in Tallaght West. She works at developing and building community spirit in her area. She has been involved in her community since she was a child. She was a youth leader and helped run summer programmes for children. She says that *“growing up in that community was fantastic. Within the late eighties and early nineties, Tallaght was a village, everybody was looking out for each other and there was that support there.”*

She was less involved during her late teenage years and early twenties but, when she had children, she got more active in her community again and realised that the sense of community was gone. When trying to understand what happened and asking questions of older generations, she found out that most problems came from a breakdown in communication, *“fallings out that weren’t resolved, people had arguments and stopped talking to each other, silly things grew to the fact that this community was ruined.”*

When Geraldine found out about Restorative Practices, she thought that it was exactly what was needed *“to build that mentality of community spirit in people now, but also to give them the sort of skills to cope with what is involved when having to deal with other people’s situations and characteristics and what’s going on in their life.”*

She also believed that RP would be a constructive answer to anti-social behaviours and began advocating for the local Gardaí to be trained and to use restorative meetings with young people involved in anti-social behaviour and with their parents.

Geraldine was trained at CDI about five years prior to being interviewed. She completed the full programme of training and became a trainer herself. She is extremely enthusiastic about the training and says that she cannot emphasise enough how much RP have had a positive impact on her life and on her project for the community. She reports that she uses RP in every aspect of her life: with her four children, her partner, and in the community. She has worked

on setting up a parents' network in Tallaght West and has a very active role in and out of the different schools dealing with Home School Community Liaison coordinators and parents.

### *Building better relationships*

Geraldine first noted that by modelling a certain way of interacting with people, they would reflect it back to her. She says that her partner is a good example: *"He is now using it and would start conversations with me with 'right, what's happening?'. It works out brilliant."* The same applies to the other parents she meets in her role as a community leader. According to Geraldine, *"When you're doing the same thing over and over again, people start to get used to what to expect from you. People automatically reflect it to me now. So, I would walk into a room and I would be the only one trained in RP, but they all know what way I am going to hold the meeting, they all know how to approach me, to talk to me to get the best results out of it. I think it is the most amazing thing. It's one of the things that keeps me in a volunteer role and pushes me to do whatever I can to implement it, especially in my area. It's natural to us all, it's completely natural to us all. If I am treating you the way I would like to be treated, people just automatically respond to it so well."*

In parents' groups, Geraldine noticed that there could sometimes be a lot of competition between women and she has found herself in difficult situations, having to have tricky conversations. Since she got trained in RP, it has been very different for her. *"I found that with these women who would be a bit more difficult to deal with in the past, they wouldn't know how to take me when I started being restorative, let's say, coming in with my language and giving them more of a chance actually. I talk a lot so, with RP, it reminds me it's ok not to talk and to give people a chance.... Active listening is a big thing for me. You can see them being a bit wary of it, 'what is this, what is she up to?' and when they started being a bit used to it, they would be the first people to come to me and say 'what are you up to, what is this, what are you doing?' They liked how it would have changed me. In circles we have introduced the talking piece and remind people that we are here for the same reason, to show respect and to listen, and I found that amazing because the people you would think you'd get more conflict out of changing things were the first people to go "hold on, what are you doing?" I found that fascinating."* RP helped Geraldine build good relationships with the people she found challenging initially and *"it opened up a whole new platform to me to get information to be shared back in my community."*

She says that she notices the difference by reading the diaries she kept all her life. She can see how her communication with some people has improved, and how much mutual respect there is in their interactions, and it gives her *'passion and excitement'* to push other people to take the training.

### *Dealing with conflicts*

Geraldine tells a story of the time when her friend Evita, who had just been trained in RP but was not yet confident in using them, managed to de-escalate a very conflictual situation. Geraldine was walking to Evita's house and saw a group of around twenty boys of different ages and backgrounds standing in front of the house. Evita's partner came out of the house very angry and there was potential for an explosive situation. However, Evita came out too, turned to the boy who appeared to be the leader of the group and invited him into the house to have a proper restorative conversation about what happened. It resolved everything. Evita's son had been in an argument with the leader's younger brother over him hitting his sister and, when all stories were heard, the older brother actually apologised. In the next few days, the mother of the two boys came to Evita to thank her for having dealt with the problem in such a positive way. For her, it was tangible proof that RP had 'worked' because it would be a very common situation to see conflict escalating very badly, from arguments between children in the streets to violent altercations between parents or older siblings.

*"It did build that sort of bond in the community. It's amazing, it's absolutely amazing that such a simple thing like that can make such an impact, especially on these young fellows in teenage years who are looking for a reason to let go all the aggression in them. They were happy with the outcome, they were happy with the way they were dealt with, their relationship is grand since, there is no more hassle between the families, there is no more arguments..."*

### *Empowerment*

Geraldine says that being trained in RP was an empowering process for her. *"It gives me the confidence to actually use my voice more, in my community. I know myself that, when I got my training, I got that light bulb moment of "oh my god, this is so simple in one way, but so, so extravagant and it can do so much... It took away that 'I am from Tallaght, there is nothing I can do to change things, no-one is going to listen to me'. I know now, I can sit with guards, I can sit with council members, I can sit with people who are the service providers in our area, and I have a structure in what way I am going to communicate myself, and that's going to be constant, and they're going to know then that I am reliable and that there is a better understanding."*

### *Parenting, managing emotions*

Geraldine also attests that RP were very helpful to her in parenting. She has three daughters in their teenage years and manages to de-escalate conflicts that arise. *"They are not coming straight back at me, because they know I am going to give them the opportunity to tell me what happened. I am going to listen, they are going to be heard, and I am going to deal fairly*

*as well. And they do the thinking themselves, and I am, like, I could be succeeding there in raising decent adults."*

She also reflects that RP gave her coping skills to manage the frustration and anger building up throughout the years, when she was fighting to get services for her seven-year-old, severely autistic boy. *"If I hadn't had these coping skills that RP gives you, take a breath, pause, 'what's happening here?', to sort of reflect on how you are going to deal with the situation, I would have probably marched down and start screaming at everybody that 'this is not fair, my son deserves this', but I didn't. I did it the right way, I was calm with them and I was able to express my emotions without getting emotional, and it's a very big thing."*

For Geraldine, RP are also a mindfulness practice which allows for pausing, taking a deep breath, looking at things in a different way and being aware of her own emotions. It helped her in facing difficult emotions, decluttering her mind and getting focused. *"They are life skills, ... a coping mechanism, ... an understanding of how we should be looking after ourselves and how we should be looking after each other..."*