

Jon Wilson helps crime victims talk with their offenders. Victims find closure – sometimes even seeds of forgiveness.



JEAN FOGELBERG

A boat builder by trade, Jon Wilson uses Victim Offender Dialogue to effect healing.

By Josh Allen / Correspondent

On the night of Jan. 31, 2001, a 19-year-old named Joel Turner was in an apartment in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood when three young men broke in. One of them carried an unusual knife, a foot-and-a-half long. A driver waited in a van outside.

In moments, the lives of these young men were viciously broken. Mr. Turner had been stabbed to death. Three of the men would go to prison for their roles in what happened that night. The crime left Turner's family in confusion and pain.

The thought of being able to face in person someone who has committed a horrible crime against you or a loved one can stir dark instincts. But it also can be a path toward resolution, healing, and, for some, even forgiveness.

Janet Connors, Turner's mother, has met behind bars with two of the men involved in her son's death. It is not the sort of meeting a grieving parent is likely to want to experi-

ence alone.

That's where Jon Wilson steps in.

Mr. Wilson owns a business dedicated to boats and boat building, a craft as artful and precise as the taking of a human life is violent and horrid. Wilson was there with Ms. Connors, as he's been with dozens of victims of violent crimes, because he believes such meetings are crucial to the healing process. This concept, called Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD), lets agonized victims or their surviving loved ones do something the justice system rarely lets them do: talk with the wrongdoer.

"I believe that the process of giving voice is therapeutic," says Wilson, who is not a professional therapist. "When a survivor is able to give full voice to their feelings, they suddenly feel heard in a way they never could have in any other context."

VOD brings together victims, or their surviving loved ones, and their imprisoned offenders to discuss the acts that bind them: domestic violence, rapes, and killings.

The dialogue happens in a secure setting

at the inmate's prison. It's the survivor's day, Wilson says, their time to ask, to describe their loss, to speak with measured anger – whatever they want. Convicts listen, answer, sometimes try to explain.

At her first meeting, Connors brought pictures of her son, full of life. "I think for every one of us, when something horrible happens to us and so devastates our worldview, we want an explanation," Wilson says. "Almost every survivor wants to know why: 'I need to know why this violence happened, and why it happened to me.'"

"Everything I do is about enabling the survivor to be heard and preparing the offender to respond in a way that's more substantial than 'I can't explain it.'"

Through his nonprofit group, JUST Alternatives, Wilson has worked with clients in Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Texas, Virginia, and Vermont. He does the work pro bono.

In many ways the VOD work is sustained by his other occupation. Along the west side

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of Brooklin, Maine, a tree-edged field slopes to the cold sea. Overlooking the view is an early 20th-century house, its rooms decorated with images of sailing vessels; everywhere is the grace of moving water and curved wood.

This is the home of WoodenBoat Publications, which publishes magazines and runs a boat building and seamanship school, boat shows, and a mail-order store. Wilson, the owner and chairman, launched WoodenBoat magazine in the mid-1970s out of a cabin with no electricity and no running water. It now has a circulation of about 80,000.

His life in Maine provides ballast for his work traversing the emotional storms of VOD.

"If I couldn't come back to this home, and this work, and boats, and art, and love, I couldn't do the facilitation," he says.

Wilson first grew intrigued with VOD when he was researching an article for Hope, a human interest magazine he published until 2003. In 2000, he attended training led by a pastor named David Doerfler, then with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Victim Services Division. From the first day he was hooked.

He began working cases in Texas, which operates one of the oldest and largest VOD programs in the country. (At the time, six states offered VOD programs, Wilson says: Today, just over half the state corrections departments in the country support VOD programs.)

The programs are a delicate subject with state correctional officials. Some report widespread satisfaction among participants, but others refuse to discuss VOD at all.

As the mother of a victim, Connors welcomed a chance to take part in VOD. "Don't take my choice away," she says. "We [victims] are used to getting upset - our whole lives have been upset. But don't take away my choice to meet with the person who caused me harm."

Victims, often women, initiate the VOD process through state victim services agencies. In a series of one-on-one meetings, Wilson helps his clients shape what they want to say to their victimizers. "The iconic story of the victim forgiving the offender is a story that a lot of people like," Wilson says. "But for most victims, forgiveness is the last thing on their minds."

Wilson takes months to help the victims

How to get involved

Below are places to find out more about Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD) programs:

- The National Association of Victim Service Professionals in Corrections (navspic.org) provides lists of resources, including some states that offer VOD programs.
- The National Center for Victims of Crime (call **202-467-8700** or go to ncvc.org) is a great resource for information related to the survivor experience.
- The Victim Offender Mediation Association (call **612-874-0570** or go to voma.org) helps individuals and communities who are working on restorative justice.
- Texas is one of the leading states for VOD programs. VOD is run by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Victim Services Division (go to tdcj.state.tx.us or call **800-848-4284**). The site includes helpful information highlighting the victim/survivor experience.
- Restorativejustice.org is run by Restorative Justice Online, a service of the Prison Fellowship International Center for Justice and Reconciliation. It contains useful information, including articles about VOD.

- J.A.

prepare. Their words to the offender must not be said too forcefully: Rail or shout and the offender might withdraw.

"I think Jon doesn't know how good he is at what he does," says Jean Wall, former director of victim services in the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections. "He says, 'All I do is listen,' " but he's also doing much more to prepare the victims for the meeting, she says.

The jailed offenders receive no shortened sentences or any kind of credit for their involvement. No dialogue occurs if an offender doesn't fully accept responsibility for the crime. What they do get is an opportunity to think more deeply about what they've done.

Wilson also meets ahead of time with of-

fenders. "When I start out [with an offender], many of them will say, 'I don't even know if I have feelings,'" Wilson says. "Of course they have feelings, but that's how far removed they are from them. Describing their feelings is new to them."

"This is the problem with our system: These guys can do their whole sentence without ever having to think or talk about their crime. We do not insist [that] that person think about what they have done."

Connors's life in an inner-city Boston neighborhood gives her a perspective on the consequences of crime and corrections. "I was really struck by the waste of ... five young people's lives," she says. "My son was dead. But their lives, and the lives of their families, were also permanently altered.... What became the most sensible thing for me was to have my son's life mean enough to these people so that they could honor and change their own lives."

In a complex case, two of the four men involved in Joel's death pleaded guilty to various charges, including manslaughter. Connors met the younger of the two with Wilson on two occasions, the first in 2005.

"I told him he had a piece of my forgiveness, and that he could have the rest when he walked out the prison door and caused no more harm," Connors says. "The dialogue helped me be able to say, 'I expect you to live a good life because you still have yours.'"

Adds Wilson: "Their dialogue was amazing in that he was so respectful of her and blown away by her generosity to him, which in some ways he felt he didn't deserve."

Connors also met and talked with the older of the two. She asked him to stand with his parents, her, and Wilson at her son's grave after the offender was released.

"This process has brought a significant measure of peace of mind to me," Connors says, "that has helped me let go of a lot of the anger I had toward those responsible for Joel's murder and toward the system that I feel retraumatized my family and our friends. In this VOD process my son's life mattered; I did not feel like it really did in the court process."

■ To learn more, go to justalternatives.org.

Next week's difference-maker:

CATHERINE ROHR founded Defy Ventures, which helps ex-convicts start business careers through a training program that includes mentoring from successful businesspeople.

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