

FORUM

Not Just a Degree, a Movement: The IIRP Graduate School Confers its First 14 Master's Degrees

BY LAURA MIRSKY

On June 21, 2008, the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) Graduate School held its first commencement ceremony, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA, conferring 14 master's degrees: five in Restorative Practices and Education and nine in Restorative Practices and Youth Counseling.

The IIRP Graduate School received its charter to confer master's degrees and a certificate in restorative practices from the Pennsylvania Department of Education in June 2006. Classes began that August, and 160 students have enrolled since then. The IIRP's mission statement asserts that the institute is "dedicated to the advanced education of professionals at the graduate level and to the conduct of research that can develop the growing field of restorative practices, with the goal of positively influencing human behavior and strengthening civil society throughout the world."

In some ways, the IIRP's first graduation ceremony was like any other university commencement: Led by faculty member Tom Simek, the graduates, faculty, administration and trustees marched in, dressed in academic robes, as a string quartet played Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance." From the dais, IIRP president Ted Wachtel proclaimed, "We could not be prouder of these 14 individuals."

Yet this commencement was quite different from other graduation exercises. Ted Wachtel's ensuing remarks included none of the predictable words of wisdom to the graduates about their future endeavors. Instead he took the opportunity to explain restorative practices to the audience of family and friends:

"A student misbehaves in class and her teacher asks her to leave. The student is suspended from school and comes back. Nothing is resolved; nothing is restored. But with restorative practices,

the student is held accountable and given support to resolve the issue, repair the harm and make a plan to ensure that the misbehavior doesn't happen again. Relationships are restored and community is rebuilt."

Things don't work this way in most schools, Wachtel continued, but in more and more schools they are beginning to. "We know that punishment doesn't change behavior, but restorative practices does," he said. He also pointed out that the practices can be used proactively, as with circles, to build community, and that the restorative model has implications for many settings besides education, including criminal justice, social and family services and organizational management.

Wachtel shook the hand of each master's degree recipient in turn as he presented them with their diplomas: Craig Adamson, John Bailie, Theresa Hansen, Judy Happ, Jolene Head,





IIRP president Ted Wachtel confers the Master of Restorative Practices and Youth Counseling degree upon Rev. Paul Langston-Daley.

Samantha Heyman, John Infantino, Rev. Paul Langston-Daley, Christine Meyers, Stephen Orrison, Elizabeth Smull, David Suesz, Pamela Thompson and Julie Vitale.

Most graduation exercises include a valedictorian address, in which one high-achieving or well-liked graduate is singled out to make a speech. At the IIRP commencement all the graduates were given the opportunity to express themselves, embodying both the way IIRP classes are taught and the restorative approach in general. Passing a "talking piece" (in this case a microphone) each graduate said a few words about his or her feelings at this moment, enacting a symbolic talking circle (although they stood in a line facing the audience). Here is a taste of their remarks:

Rev. Paul Langston-Daley, minister, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Pottstown, Pennsylvania: "In one of our last classes somebody asked, 'What do you plan to do with this degree?' My belief is that it will allow us to make a difference in the world in a way that even my seminary degree will not. I am now equipped to go out and make the world a better place."

Christine Meyers, supervision counselor, Community Service Foundation, Doylestown, Pennsylvania: "This is not your typical school. It's very hands-on. I gained a tremendous amount of confi-

dence in myself. Restorative practices is a simple concept, and it does work. Why aren't we all doing it?"

Julie Vitale, community health educator, Planned Parenthood of the Lehigh Valley, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: "Two years ago I saw a sign on this building that said, 'Restoring Community in a Disconnected World.' Something about that struck me. This is not just a degree. This is a movement about changing the way we do things. I'm so honored to be a part of it."



Commencement speaker John Braithwaite

ticket the other day and somebody said, 'If you win, you won't have to work anymore.' I realized that even if I won the lottery, I wouldn't quit my job as an IIRP trainer. Every generation faces challenges. Ours is the struggle to strengthen community and relationships. The IIRP and restorative practices is the way we are rising to meet that challenge."

Wachtel introduced the commencement speaker, John Braithwaite, a major force in the restorative justice movement (a subset of restorative practices). A fellow at Australian National University's Research School of Social Sciences, the author of numerous books and publications on criminology, including *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, and a recipient of the first Stockholm Prize for Criminology, Braithwaite is currently engaged in a 20-year project, "Peacebuilding Compared," analyzing the effectiveness of peacebuilding strategies in societies suffering armed conflict.

Wachtel thanked Braithwaite for his help when the IIRP was in the process of obtaining approval from the Pennsylvania

Department of Education, saying, "We wouldn't be here today without his support during a critical time," and named him an honorary trustee of the IIRP board.



Julie Vitale takes her turn in the graduates' "talking circle."

In his address, Braithwaite said he always finds it inspiring to come to Bethlehem because of the sense of history he feels there. It represents the best of America, he said, mentioning the Moravians (the Protestant church that settled Bethlehem in 1741), who came to the city to escape persecution, and through hard work established an industry that underwrote the greatness of the community. He also thinks of Bethlehem Steel and the time of greatest need for democracy: 1939-1945. Without Bethlehem Steel, he said, democracy would not have survived.

Today, though, he said, "It's not guns and steel we need to survive. The International Institute for Restorative Practices, in its work for peace, will someday be as important as Bethlehem Steel once was."

"It's very special to be a part of this little bit of history," he continued, "being present at the first graduation ceremony of the only place formally issuing master's degrees in restorative practices: the biggest, most international and energized institution for research and development in restorative practices education, all together in a very creative mix."

Braithwaite ended with this advice to the graduates, "I know you've learned how to think. Keep trying to find ways to improve. I know you've learned to care, more so than in any other program I can think of. Give back, take risks and be bold. I know you will." ☉