

NEWS

Denver woman feels the power of restorative justice after son murdered

By **KEVIN SIMPSON** | ksimpson@denverpost.com | The Denver Post
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“The harm he caused me was through his hands,” said Evans, whose 3-year-old son, Casson, was slain in a 1995 drive-by shooting. “The fact that he actually pulled the trigger, it was something about the hands that kept coming to me.”

But when the opportunity arose May 23, Evans hesitated, uncertain whether she could follow through with her request of Raymond Johnson, the man serving life without parole for the murder.

There was so much else Evans needed from Johnson, and it had been so long. He was 16 at the time of his crime, but he now stood a month shy of his 33rd birthday. She had spent the years grieving and adapting to the loss of Casson before realizing she had gone as far as she could on her own.

When legislation last year cleared the way for a pilot program in restorative justice with the Colorado Department of Corrections, Evans — who had testified on behalf of the measure — embraced the opportunity to go first. She and her older son Calvin Hurd, who was 6 when gunshots peppered the car where he sat sleeping with his brother, began more than six months of preparation for a direct dialogue with Johnson.

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Part of that involved revisiting the crime. Evans had driven with her two children to a northeast Denver duplex to pick up her grandniece because there had been a drive-by there the previous night. She left her sons in the car.

While Evans was inside, three teens drove by and sprayed more than a dozen shots at the house and car. One struck Casson in the head. It was later determined that Johnson fired the fatal shot.

Beyond a sheer willingness to participate in restorative justice, the offender has to meet a three-part test for acceptance based on demonstrating accountability, genuine remorse and willingness to repair harm. Johnson met all the criteria, though on the last count the only reparations he could offer were honest answers to a mother's unanswered questions.

Evans had no idea how the process would unfold — only that she needed to do it.

“I felt I’d reached a peak in the healing process from counseling, prayer, the support of my church,” Evans said. “This was one final thing to receive my complete closure in the grieving process.”

Effects kept quiet

Whatever impact the meeting has had on Johnson, the public won't know for a while, if ever. The DOC has declined requests to interview him pending conclusion of the process, which includes debriefing of all parties and assessment of the outcome — something that may take until the end of the month.

From initiation to completion, every aspect of the sequence remains victim-driven.

“This is not a short process,” said DOC spokeswoman Katherine Sanguinetti. “We don’t want this to be a venue for the offenders. This is about the victim, for the victim.”

Although the DOC previously had expressed interest in restorative-justice options, funding has always been a stumbling block. Even the recent legislation, pushed by Rep. Pete Lee, D-Colorado Springs, came with no money attached — only a provision that all facilitators would be trained volunteers who wouldn’t even be reimbursed for travel expenses.

Lee, a former criminal-defense lawyer, had his first experience with restorative justice as a volunteer. He saw how victim-offender conferences worked with juveniles and had an “epiphany” that they could be just as valuable in an adult setting.

“Restorative justice is equally effective with severe and profound crimes as it is with minor offenses such as theft of property in a school,” he said. “The effectiveness of the process depends on the mind-set of the offender and the willingness of the victim to participate.”

The pilot project, in which victims or their relatives initiate the process, has no impact on an offender’s sentence or status within the DOC. But Lee, who met with all parties before and after the Evans-Johnson session, noted that such conferences also can transform offenders and make them better candidates for rehabilitation — or, in the case of those serving life sentences, less of a management risk.

The preparation with Lynn Lee, the state representative’s wife who served as facilitator, was exhaustive.

“There were so many issues,” Evans said. “When it came to every emotion, she’d ask me where was I at. What did I want to say to him? I really had to dissect every emotion so there were no surprises.”

Hurd underwent the same drill with his facilitator, Peggy Evans.

“They were trying to make sure I had my head clear about what was going on,” said Hurd, who works as a landscaper. “I was ready to see results.”

Though his participation was powered mostly out of concern for his mother’s emotional needs, Hurd — who has only a few memories of his brother — still harbored his own anger and skepticism about Johnson’s remorse.

“If he wasn’t seriously remorseful,” he said, “then I wouldn’t care less what happened to him.”

On the morning of May 23, neighbors drove Evans and Hurd to the prison, where they waited two hours while final arrangements fell into place. Then, Evans got to the door of the meeting room where Johnson awaited — and froze.

She felt pain and fear envelop her. She suspects her emotions must have shown on her face. At the table, Johnson rose from his chair.

“He dropped his head and shook it with such sorrow,” Evans recalled, “as if to say, ‘Look at what I’ve done to this woman.’ That gave me the courage to start moving.”

Opening with prayer

Evans requested that they open with a prayer.

Johnson recited an Abrahamic prayer, reflecting his conversion to Islam more than a decade earlier. Evans prayed in Jesus’ name, asking that the dialogue go well.

Over the course of an intense morning, they each recounted the crime from their individual points of view. Evans talked about Casson — she had nicknamed him “Biscuit” — and what he meant to the family. She felt her voice tremble as she talked about how she had reared her children, how they shared their days.

Those difficult hours laid the emotional foundation for what would come later, as they worked through all the ways their lives had changed.

“At times,” said Evans, “I let him feel my anger. And at times, we discussed the divine. Does God have a plan here? How did our paths meet?”

She told him how, long ago at his trial, she had forgiven him — had seen through him, straight to his heart, and knew he was more than the sum of his ill-fated actions that December night.

“And he asked me, ‘Why do you think God showed you who I really am and didn’t show my mother or grandmother?’ ” Evans recounted. “He said it in a very painful way.”

They answered questions and exchanged explanations: Evans about how she had found the strength to forgive him; Johnson about everything that happened on the night Casson died, about the better man he had become in prison.

Hurd felt his anger abate and got the confirmation he sought — that Johnson's remorse was authentic and that he was "doing something right with his life." Evans and Johnson resolved to continue their relationship, a process she told him would require time and patience.

Afterward, she retreated to a downtown Denver hotel and unplugged the phone to rest, recover and reflect. The experience strengthened her belief in restorative justice — a message she now relays to the community.

Evans, who became an advocate for juvenile sentencing reform in the years after her son's death, was excited to hear the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision striking down automatic life without parole for juvenile offenders. She hopes it could mean a second chance for Johnson.

"I'm not at peace with him spending the rest of his life in prison," Evans said. "I'd like for him to receive another opportunity to come back into society and be functioning. I did let him know that. I'd like to see his case be reconsidered."

Although she now describes her restorative-justice experience as a "mission accomplished," it wasn't easy: There was that one particularly difficult moment late in the day when she had to overcome her early hesitance and deal with her need to touch his hands.

She and Johnson rose from opposite sides of the table and approached each other. He extended his arms. She asked him to turn his palms facing up.

Then she clutched his hands and said a prayer.

"I prayed that they would cause no more harm," Evans said, "that they'd be hands of comfort, that they would bring help and serve people and that they would no longer be hands of destruction but hands that bring life."

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Evans to speak

Sharletta Evans will speak and answer questions about her experience with the pilot project at the 2012 Colorado Restorative Justice Summit, which runs Aug. 9-11 at the University of Colorado Denver student union. Evans is scheduled to speak from 11:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. during the Aug. 10 session. Information on the conference can be found [online](#) or by calling Dayna Scott at 303-776-1527.

Kevin Simpson

Kevin Simpson has covered a wide variety of topics at The Denver Post while working as a sports writer, metro columnist and general assignment reporter with a focus on long-form pieces. A graduate of the University of Missouri, he arrived in Colorado in 1979 and spent five years covering sports at the Rocky Mountain News before joining The Post.

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