

Magazine Feature

HEALING THROUGH RESTORATION AND TRANSFORMATION

A community Freedom School model in Mississippi embraces transformative practices to strengthen relationships and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, illustrating the power of communities to effect change.

By Jeremiah Smith | Issue 4, Spring 2023

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Illustration by Zoë van Dijk

Lucas sat across from me in the small back office of the Rosedale Freedom Project (RFP) in Rosedale, Mississippi, after a long day at Freedom School, which included academic classes, fitness, Creative Writing Club and a restorative circle. We were both exhausted. “What I really want,” Lucas said,

leaning back in his chair, “is to build a community of men who can come together and talk about our problems and how we’re feeling.”

I laughed, not at his suggestion, but at hearing this 13-year-old student articulate so clearly what we needed—not just at the RFP, but across the world, across history. “Let’s do it,” I said.

Students of all genders are involved in our program; when Lucas spoke of building “a community of men,” he was merely describing the context of his own recent situation. Just a day earlier, Lucas and his stepbrother Jay, both ninth grade fellows at the RFP, had nearly gotten into a fight on the basketball court. A post-class game turned into a screaming match between the boys and one of Lucas’ best friends, Chris, a 12th grade fellow. “We were just playing street ball,” Jay later told his dad, Lucas’ mom, the other boys and me in the restorative circle. But everyone in the circle knew that street ball meant trash talk, shoving and anger. The conflict was in a sense quite unremarkable. Three young men got into a heated game of basketball. Words were exchanged, tempers flared, everyone walked away before a physical fight could break out.

***Note**

The names of the young people involved in the events in this story have been changed to protect their identities.

When I first began teaching a decade ago, my classroom was next to the principal’s office, so I was privy to a lot of overheard disciplinary actions. When fights like the one involving Lucas occurred, which they routinely did, they were dealt with procedurally. A physical fight meant, at most, a day or two at home. If the principal felt the situation wasn’t a big deal, he might assign in-school suspension or offer students the option to take a paddling instead. (Corporal punishment in schools remains legal in 19 states, mostly in the South, including Mississippi.) Crime and punishment were the order of the day. And yet, again and again, I saw the same young people in the office, day in and day out. Conflicts and frictions escalated into arguments, and verbal fights became physical ones. Fights became “beefs,” and those resentments could escalate even further.

The winter of my first year of teaching, I led after-school tutoring in my classroom. Late one evening, a commotion in the hallway interrupted us as we were wrapping up our program. My students and I hurried to the doorway as a student, Don, ran down the hallway in a daze. He was hollering while several adults rushed around. Although I didn’t teach him and didn’t know Don well, he came toward me.

“Somebody stabbed Wallace,” Don said when I asked what happened.

I froze. Wallace was one of my students. This was his second year as a ninth grader; frequently moving from house to house, he had missed a lot of school. But when he came to class, he was a joy—sharp, thoughtful and funny. My only struggle with Wallace was to get him to stop dancing when it came time to read. I knew his struggles at home meant he was moving fast, being swept up in things beyond his control. But I didn’t expect the consequences to be so swift and so violent.

Without thinking, I extended my arms for a hug. And though we barely knew each other, Don grabbed me, and we held each other for a long time.

As the days passed, we learned that Justin, a senior I taught, stabbed Wallace. A beef had led to an attack on Wallace and his friends, and when Wallace confronted Justin—who Wallace thought had caused the attack—Justin panicked and stabbed him. Wallace died that day.

I thought about Wallace for years afterward. What could have been done to stop that conflict before it escalated? What supports could we have given Wallace and Justin that would have led to a different situation?

Bringing Restorative Practices Home to Rosedale

Years later, in 2015, a group of students and parents came together with me to found the Rosedale Freedom Project. The goal was to provide young people with a liberatory educational space for learning, making art and traveling after school and over the summer.

In 2017, I led the first RFP spring break trip with my now-colleague LaToysha Brown—then a student at the University of Southern Mississippi and graduate of our sister program, the Sunflower County Freedom Project—the RFP’s executive director. That year, we took two fellows to Chicago to explore the city and share an oral history project the fellows had completed on the history of education in Rosedale. We had a chance to sit in on a restorative circle with young people at Paul Robeson High School on the city’s South Side. We learned how they were using restorative justice to intervene and resolve harm and violence at their school. These students met during their lunch hour to sit and talk about their feelings and the issues with which they were dealing.

When classmates were sent to the principal, they could be referred to the

restorative circle instead of being suspended. We saw how the group passed around a “talking piece”—derived from Indigenous traditions—to ensure everyone had an opportunity to share, and how they didn’t use a language of blame but instead focused on “I” statements grounded in their own perceptions and feelings. They talked about stopping gun violence through dialogue and about interrupting criminalization by creating student-led spaces for community and care.

We hope that creating a strong youth-and-teacher-led alternative to corporal punishment and exclusionary discipline will be a first step toward getting police-free schools that promote genuine safety, healing and liberation for our young people.

LaToysa and I knew then that we had to bring these practices back to Mississippi, where corporal punishment is still common and retributive and exclusionary discipline techniques, like suspensions and expulsions, lead young people across the state to describe school as prison. In fact, participatory action research conducted by RFP fellows found that more than half of students at our local high school felt that way. The punitive disciplinary practices used in Mississippi schools disproportionately target Black and Brown students, students experiencing poverty, and students with disabilities, especially those with undiagnosed disabilities.

Practices to Heal and Transform

At the RFP, our restorative practices focus foremost on building a sense of safety. In daily circle-ups, fellows play games, sing freedom songs and give one another shout-outs. Here, and throughout our academic and arts programs, fellows practice trust and build community. Healing spaces like our Gender-Sexuality Alliance and Parent Community Board events deepen this sense of community and inclusivity, and they embrace and encourage conversation about all that makes us unique.

From this sense of safety and belonging, we establish community agreements based on what the Atom Fire Arts Cooperative calls the ABCs of interpersonal interaction: agency, boundaries and credibility. In our classrooms, fellows work together to identify shared values and goals, then set expectations for the space. Before we can begin, everyone must be able to agree with the expectations and set mutually agreed upon consequences if expectations are not followed.

That is where our peace-building circles come in. When there is a serious

violation of our community agreements, we bring together those who are affected and those who violated the agreements to discuss what happened. In these conversations, the goal is to identify the harm done to individuals or the community and to make requests of one another, such as an apology or a commitment to some future behavior that can begin to restore and heal the damage done.

These conversations do not simply restore our community to how it was before. They aim instead to transform our community by addressing the root causes of the violation. These circles ask: “What unaddressed conditions were present that led to this situation? What were the pressures, stresses, triggers or traumas that created a dynamic of harm?”

Then we seek out changes to implement as a community that address those root causes. Whether it is changes in our community agreements, adjustments to our environment or further dialogue to deal with the internal conditions of each person, we seek out changes that can prevent future harm and create healing.

Healing in Our Community

When we gathered our peace-building circle last summer, everyone initially agreed that playing aggressive “street ball” caused the fight between Lucas, Jay and Chris. But then we dug deeper and found that the game was merely the catalyst; the fight itself was fueled by tension between Lucas and Chris going back almost a year. After coming to a group agreement about basketball games and verbalizing how we felt, the boys made a request of one another to talk more in a separate conversation about their friendship.

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Today, Lucas and Chris enjoy a deeper, more mature friendship. They are freelance videographers, frequently working on shoots together, and have co- led other restorative conversations with their peers. Without a space for healing work, without a space for—as Lucas said—talking about their emotions, these young men might have found themselves in deeper conflict, which could have led to serious harm. Instead, they built healing and trust.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and school consolidation in the district, student conflicts and punitive discipline measures—including police presence

—increased. RFP families and staff held community-wide healing circles to discuss what was happening and the impact on the school climate. From these circles, we made decisions about how to show up for our young people. We hope that creating a strong youth-and-teacher-led alternative to corporal punishment and exclusionary discipline will be a first step toward getting police-free schools that promote genuine safety, healing and liberation for our young people.

Consistently integrating restorative practices into our relationships, not only with students but also with their families, provides a foundation for transformative justice work, addressing the underlying systems that contribute to conflict and create harm.

ROSEDALE FREEDOM PROJECT

The Rosedale Freedom Project (RFP) is an after-school and summer program for middle and high school students modeled after the 1964 Freedom Schools started by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi. RFP was founded after parents, students and educators in Rosedale, Mississippi, learned about the nearby work of the Sunflower County Freedom Project and sought to adapt the program to their community. RFP views “education as the practice of freedom”—in the words of bell hooks—and seeks to create spaces where young people and adults can articulate the terms of their own liberation and act collectively on that vision.

Today, the RFP’s Freedom Fellowship and adult organizing programs support young people, families and community members in building solidarity and critically analyzing local conditions. In struggling for educational justice at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability, the RFP facilitates filmmaking, creative writing, theater and visual arts workshops; literacy, math and college prep classes; study groups in community organizing, economics, participatory action research and transformative justice; and other community events.

Explore this resource

Toolkit: Peace-Building Circles
by Jeremiah Smith

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