

## **CHRISTA PIERPONT LIGHTBURN – Lived Theology Interview**

*Christa Pierpont Lightburn is the founder of the Restorative Community Foundation which “has been organized to create a structured process for local governments, social agencies, schools and community leaders to evaluate the strengths of the Restorative Justice movement, educate themselves, and decide how to apply its practices”. For more information about the Foundation, visit [www.restorativecommunity.org](http://www.restorativecommunity.org).*

Bekah: Tell me about your work...What does your daily work entail?

Christa: I am helping to organize the Restorative Community Foundation. Restorative practices or restorative justice is a response to wrong-doing that emphasizes repairing harms by focusing on the needs of the victim. It does so in a manner that respects the value of each person involved when repairing harms and allowing for healing. That is why we include the statement “Restoring Justice and Healing to Our Community” on our materials. Much of what I do day-to-day is organizational administration and supporting or networking with others who are using restorative justice practices.

Bekah: Tell me the story of how you came to be at the work you do? What experiences in your life have led you to the work you do?

Christa: My family has built a solid reputation for progressive leadership in healing professions and business. These values were nurtured and it was assumed that we would do so as well. They were/are deeply spiritual people although this did not always align itself with a particular church’s creed; yet we were raised in Christian denominations. This is where I learned leadership skills. For example, my mother helped organize and open one of the first Head Start programs and later worked to establish the Visiting Nurses Association. My father helped build the medical school at George Washington University, established the medical ethics committee and taught surgery there. With such strong personalities and commitments one begins to feel like a stage hand yet when we take our kids along we model commitment not just fill a room with lacy words.

I began teaching children with special needs in rural Appalachia where I lived for several years. When I returned to Virginia to study for a Masters in education it was because there many questions about how children learn and what intrudes on their being the full persons that they were meant to be. I had learned a deep respect and love for the families I’d worked with and it seemed I needed to feel more assured of the answers I was giving them when it came to their children.

As I studied and continued to teach school, I was also struggling with the responsibilities of my own family and children. These experiences helped me develop patience and empathy.

After graduating from UVA, I worked at several schools with many talented educators (this includes every employee in the building) in Albemarle County. I spent the longest time at Greer Elementary working with an exceptional administrator, Fulton Marshall. We worked on

finding ways to reduce student's misbehaviors because time off task was so costly to everyone's instructional time. We worked to more carefully screen for learning differences. We'd decided that we could do a better job keeping the students in the regular classroom with more classroom aides and less time out of the classroom for separate instruction. The students wanted to be successful and part of the regular classes. We looked at 'token economies', social skills training, and direct instruction. Each had some effect but the most dramatic improvement for me was when we made the commitment to a full-school training in conflict education. There was such a remarkable change that we were taken back a little. One of the teachers who I had developed a high respect for even when we did not agree (for she set very high standards for the students) later thanked me because she said she could teach now. What she meant was she could teach all the children not just those who were more socially skilled.

I'd completed training to be a mediator and had started working in the courts after seeing its advantages in the schools. It seemed many of our student's families had such complicated lives due to involvement with courts. There was a sense of hopelessness, shame and frustration that kept people paralyzed. The students themselves exhibited signs of what we term Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (hyperactivity, detachment and inattention). They could not settle easily into their studies. But managing the full school program took time and a decision had to be made where my focus would be.

The more successful the school was the more we seemed to be asked to do. Then with funding cut backs we began to lose essential teaching aides. I'd also learned the value of visiting parents when they could not come to school or felt uncomfortable doing so. Many had struggled in school themselves and had ambivalent attitudes toward schools which they communicated to their children unless we were meeting on a fairly regular basis. I'd learned this when teaching in Appalachian. When I recently heard Dr. Ishmail Conway speak of the power of the black educator who lived and went to church with the families of their students, I knew he was addressing a major truth. I enjoyed teaching more when I could work with families both outside and at school. Yet, the press for time on each of these responsibilities was being squeezed out by new layers of bureaucratic forms and justifications that almost implied negligent intent on the part of adults in a student's life. Meetings with parents were spent both explaining and half apologizing for the stacks of forms and educational terminologies we were required to complete. As we talked, even I began to question some of its value or truth.

When an opportunity came up to return to school and study conflict resolution education in hopes of strengthening its potential on a school policy level I left teaching to return to school and part-time work. That is how the Restorative Community Foundation has emerged. I know that communities need to make a decision to support conflict education and restorative practices for there to be real change in the quality and safety of all our lives.

Bekah: Could you talk a bit about the hopeful nature of the work?

Christa: Restorative justice is about hope and the potential for healing. It is not about cheap grace and yet it can be about grace. In a world filled with anxiety and mean spirited or cynical language, I would say that restorative practices are about survival. And to those who are

interested in the survival of the few I would challenge them to understand that this is *a serious error in thinking and should not be indulged*.

Restorative justice and restorative practices is really about ministering to justice in a way that can restore communities.

Bekah: What is discouraging about the work you do?

Time wasted and cynicism, they are the biggest struggles. Watching people fill a day with empty activity is tough because too often their personal frustrations can absorb life and energy from others. Cynicism is an intellectualized form of inertia. I have to catch myself on this one too particularly when I am tired or not getting what I believe is the best course of action.

Bekah: Who have been strong influences in your life?

My family members have set a positive stage for being influenced by others. Many of the people I have worked with or are working with now also strongly influence my life. I don't think they realize how much they amaze me. I enjoy working and have been fortunate to have evolved into the restorative practices field at this time in our history. Right now I am most influenced by Dennis Wittman, the recently retired Director of Genesee Justice. Most of the people I connect with have strong quiet spiritual lives. I also find encouragement and direction from reading historical biographies. Reading about peoples lives helps me put mine in perspective otherwise I get too caught up in my personal frustrations.

Bekah: How does your faith/spirituality inform or influence your work?

Christa: Watching people quietly live out their faith creates an environment for becoming stronger in ones own understanding. I find it necessary to work intentionally on keeping myself in that frame of mind particularly when it seems everything around me is a sand storm of negativity and fear. When you are involved in the crucible of man's inhumanity to man (both individually and institutionally) along with a lot of just plain selfish and impulsive behaviors it is easy to get overwhelmed. When I don't stay properly spiritually informed though, I miss seeing the miracles.

In greater clarification to the spiritual questions that justice raises in our minds and hearts, the process of reconciling our daily lives to justice and injustice cuts to the heart of living. As we are born into a world much too complex for us to understand we must learn to weave the cultural and spiritual beliefs of those who care for us until we have matured. During this time our lives are frayed and crossed by questions of justice. Who is to blame for losses? Personal betrayals and selfishness leave us separated from one another and deeply disappointed in the reality of God's governance. Justice is a call for reconciliation within ourselves and our community as they conform to spiritual principles. When justice does not offer a means to be reconciled to others or ourselves we remain broken or numb to life's goodness. Spiritual teachings and churches may guide us in our thinking but it still comes down to being both reconciled to God and to one another as a result of our own journey. Restorative practices allows individuals a

chance to actively participate in restoring 'shalom' by facing some of the painful experiences in our lives and asking that they be made right, even on a symbolic level so that we may move forward in love.

Bekah: What is your hope/vision for this community?

Christa: Life seems to be fragmented these days, particularly where there are harms and conflict. When you are looking for responsible answers from agencies it is common to hear “We don’t do (or we’re not responsible for) that you’ll have to call \_\_\_\_\_” I have some patience with this but after awhile you find yourself looped back to someone you’ve already talked to and realize that it is another dead end. I believe that we are a lot more capable of handling problems and solving conflicts when we can sit down together and come up with solutions. Nils Christie, an international criminologist, says that legal institutions see conflict as their possession rather than something that can often be settled by the individuals themselves (with support and guidance). This means even the more serious crimes.

My hope is that people in this community would come to an understanding of this and adopt restorative practices as the first response to conflicts in our schools, businesses, courts and government. It does not take away from the importance of existing systems for addressing wrongs but it allows them to work on problems that no one is willing to try to make right. I see this as community building but we’re going to have to re-think some of our attitudes and not see each other as an enemy.