

Peacemaking circle pilot shows new path for juvenile justice

[KCYouthJustice](#) / [November 2, 2016](#)

King County Juvenile Court and the Prosecuting Attorney's Office tried its first felony case through a peacemaking circle, which incorporated victim advocates, mentors, family members and community leaders through months of what became a transformative mediation. A moderator who led a peacemaking circle movement in Boston is growing the practice here in King County.



Rimon and his mother both invested in the first King County Juvenile Court felony case to be resolved through a peacemaking circle, a process inspired by Native American traditions.

A week before Rimon's 16th birthday, his mother was busy in the kitchen when she heard her son heading out the door. "We have a dental appointment today," Nura Sayed reminded him. "We need to leave soon."

"Okay, I'll be right back," Rimon told her. Fifteen minutes later, he returned, and the two drove to the dental office, located in the building

where Rimon's family used to live in Seattle's New Holly Park.

Outside the dental office, SWAT teams surrounded the building.

"What's going on?" Nura wondered, piqued by the police cars taking up all the patient parking spaces. "Now we're going to be late for our appointment!"

Nura's cell phone rang and a man identified himself to her as a detective with the Seattle Police Department.

"Are you related to Rimon?" the man asked.

"He is my son," Nura said.

The detective told Nura her son had been accused of robbing another kid with a gun. Law enforcement tracked down the family's former address and coincidentally showed up to the residence where their dental appointment was located.

"I'm going to hang up with you now," SPD told Nura. "A detective is coming toward you to arrest your son. Do not let him try to run away."

A life-changing mistake

Nura tears up at the memory of that August day in 2015 long after it passed.

"We were just talking about what we were going to do for his birthday when this happened," she said. "I'm a single mom. I've worked and put aside other things in my life to pour everything into my sons. I couldn't believe this was happening. I was shocked. I was in disbelief. This was not how I raised my boys."

When Rimon had left the house for 15 minutes, he and a friend went to a nearby park to buy Nike tennis shoes from another teen. Instead of purchasing the shoes, Rimon pulled out a gun and threatened to shoot the boy. He and his friend then took off with two pairs of shoes. Rimon slipped upstairs and hid the gun and shoes in his room before leaving for his dental appointment.

The gun was actually a BB gun, but real gun or air gun, he had threatened

someone's life in the midst of a robbery. Even with no prior convictions, Rimón could have spent a minimum of 103 weeks – or about two years – in a juvenile detention center for his crime under state sentencing guidelines.

Two years in jail for the 15-year-old would be followed by a lifetime of notifying future employers and landlords that he was a convicted felon. Two years in jail and the legal process along the way would cost taxpayers somewhere around \$200,000. And two years in juvenile detention could turn a teenager hard and bitter.

Peacemaking circles as an alternative to juvenile detention

When Senior Deputy Prosecutor Jimmy Hung heard about the case, he was moved to try something entirely different. This was the teenager's first and only arrest. As chair of the King County Juvenile Court Unit, Jimmy had been participating in a growing movement that promotes the use of peacemaking circles, process that aims for restorative justice instead of retribution. Included in the circle are family members, victim advocates, community leaders and mentors so that the youth has a well-rounded support system as they reflect on their past and their future.

Jimmy thought, "What if Rimón could participate in a peacemaking circle?"

Rimón would need to commit himself to the hard work of fully confessing his crime, offer apologies, and ask for forgiveness. He would have to be utterly accountable to adults in the justice system who would mentor and monitor him.

In an unprecedented move, Jimmy and peacemaking circle moderator Saroeum Phoung pulled together public defenders, probation officers, Seattle School District representatives, victim advocates and a whole army of people

to try something different in the juvenile criminal justice system.

“People hear about peacemaking circles, and they think it sounds like all this kumbaya stuff,” says Saroeum, who has [successfully led](#) peacemaking circles in Boston for years. In 2012, Saroeum brought the peacemaking movement to King County where he is teaching families new ways to relate to one another and providing insight to managers and employees on how to have healthier conversations in the midst of conflict.



Saroeum Phoung brought the peacemaking circle movement from Boston to King County.

In an act of grace, the victim of the robbery agreed to let King County prosecutors pursue the peacemaking circle process with Rimon instead of moving forward to prosecution and sentencing.

Again and again, Rimon owned up to his mistake and apologized for it. As he started to understand the magnitude of what he had done, he followed the knowledge with action.

He wrote a letter of apology to the victim. When his mother was notified that they would have to move out of their apartment because of his crime, Rimon wrote a letter to the housing authority asking for forgiveness and another chance.

Peacemaking circles offer hard-won opportunity for lasting transformation

In the year since his arrest, Rimon has met every requirement of the restorative justice process and more. He found a job and has been working during his off-school hours.

“Rimon has matured over this year,” says Chief Juvenile Court Judge Wesley Saint Clair.

“People worry peacemaking is being soft on crime,” Saroeum says. “It’s not. It would have been far easier for Rimon to take his punishment and be done instead of having to stand up and talk about his crime. It took a lot of courage for this young man to be humble and apologize so many times.

Adults have a difficult time doing that! It was hard, hard work that Rimon did this year.”



Judge Wesley Saint Clair presides over a formal community hearing at the conclusion of the peacemaking circle process used to resolve Rimon’s case.

In October, some 200 people gathered in the lobby of the juvenile court building in Seattle for Rimon’s sentencing after more than a year in the Peacemaking Circle. There were public defenders and prosecutors; probation personnel and police. There were leaders from protestant churches, the Catholic Archdiocese, and Seattle’s Greater Church Council. Several judges from New Zealand attended the sentencing hearing to witness the pilot case resolved through community Peacemaking.

Judge Wesley Saint Clair gave his sentence: 12 months of probation with on-going accountability to Rimon’s Peacemaking Circle. 96 hours of community service.

“Take a look around you,” Senior Prosecutor Jimmy Hung told the assembled crowd. “I’m borrowing the words of our county prosecutor, Dan Satterberg, when I say, ‘This is what criminal justice reform looks like.’”

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