

**Testimony to the Appropriations Committee on March 3rd 2021 at 10am
Middletown YSB Student Volunteer**

Dear Chairwoman Walker, Chairwoman Osten, and members of the committee,

I am an 11th grader in Middletown and I volunteer with Middletown Youth Services and am here to advocate for their funding.

First off, I want to thank everyone for allowing me to share my experiences and accomplishments. I want to start off explaining what I am involved in, which is youth led circle keeping. I know some are wondering what a circle is? Circle is a group of people who are able to “hold space”; meaning being physically, mentally, and emotionally present for someone. It means putting your focus on someone to support their feelings as well as freeing yourself from judgment while you are engaged in conversation with them.

Restorative justice work provides an opportunity for community members to come together to address harmful behavior in a process that explores harms and needs, and necessary engagement for everyone to be healthy and successful. I am not only involved in this work and leading youth led circles but ive also once had to go through a harm circle through Middletown’s diversion program. I had so many emotions including anger, confusion, and guilt but when I left I did not only leave with a deeper understanding of the initial issue but I was left with feeling like I had an entire team supporting me (including the person I initially had a conflict with).

The harm was repaired without feeling punished or ashamed and this changed me because in my circle I was heard, understood, and supported. The way this situation was handled needs to be practiced worldwide because it makes not only the person’s immediate situation better, but their entire life is now better off. Sometimes people just need support and to be told “I understand, and we will come up with a plan together” rather than the normal cycle of... you get into a fight...you get arrested...you get punished...and once it's completed you go about life waiting for it to happen all over again.

Being in that circle and then being specially trained to be a youth circle keeper gave me a second chance while also continuing to support me beyond just that one incident. During this work I was able to build leadership, communication, understanding/empathy, patience, and self-awareness. I feel like I’ve reached a point where they've changed me to want to continue this work, not because I’m forced to (so I can be done with a “program and avoid court”) but because I want to. This is who I am now.

I can say that without restorative justice and Justin Carbonella (our Youth Services director and one of our circle mentors), our youth led circles program wouldn't have such a strong voice in our school and community as well as my situation would have turned out negatively and would not have taught me anything. But I was taught so much and now it’s my honor to give it back to my community for many years to come. In fact, our group just successfully submitted a proposal, and we will be presenting at the International Relational Schools Conference later this spring to talk about the power of giving youth the skills to run circles and build community in schools...so maybe I’m giving back to the world!