



## CIRCLE UP DC PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

### S1E1: The Fabric of Restorative Justice

February 2023

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** The fidelity of this work is important to me because there are so many narratives that are out there in opposition of what restorative justice really is all about. And if you're not really practicing it in its fullest nature, then it won't work.

**Yazid Jackson:** Welcome to *Circle Up DC*, a podcast that explores the landscape of restorative justice throughout the District of Columbia schools. We examine the challenges of implementing restorative practices, highlight innovation and commitment of school practitioners, and consider the dynamic context of restorative practices within the city.

Good morning and good day. We're excited to start our podcast series by considering the fabric of restorative justice and restorative practices through the framework of responsibility, accountability, and supporting a shift in the adult mindset in D.C. schools. Today, I'll be facilitating our podcast with our lovely guest, Dr. Ivy Hylton, who is the president and CEO of Youth and Families in Crisis and the lead facilitator and trainer for MAAT Training Institute for Restorative Justice. So, Dr. Ivy, would you like to introduce yourself?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Yes, and I am affectionately known as Mama Ivy. I got that name while working in the public school system, and Barbara Salim and I, we accepted it and now we've become the Mama and the Baba. And so I really am very pleased and extremely honored and very happy to be here this morning.

**Yazid Jackson:** My name is Yazid Jackson. I am the program manager for restorative justice at School Talk. We would like to open up our podcast in the same way we would any other circle process. I would like to ground us with a poem titled “Circle Poem,” written by Tweed Kennedy.

“People in the circle, share stories, values, dreams / Create unity / Of life ongoing universal wisdom / Wedded with hope of a world renewed / And no one left out!”

I just want to start and talk about, tell a highlight of this year for you. What has been a highlight for you with everything that you have going on?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Wow. Well, the highlight for me is the awakening of the spirit within the city to acknowledge and see the value and the significance of what restorative justice is. I have been doing it now almost 20 years in the city and much of that time my husband and I have been doing it pretty much solo, working our ways through various communities in the city and the public housing and the schools system and the juvenile justice system, and in the adult system doing this work before anyone really understood what it was that we were doing, they just knew we need what it is that you're bringing. So to me, the highlight now is the emergence of the value of what restorative justice can bring. And my work primarily has been around making sure that we are teaching the fidelity of the model and supporting community members on ways of how to do this work and to do it as effectively as possible. And I've started focusing on what I'm calling soul keepers of the circle because if we can reach one another at the heart level, that's when we're going to find the most success.

**Yazid Jackson:** I want to follow up on something you mentioned, the fidelity of practice. Why is that important to you and why is that important to our restorative justice community?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** The fidelity of this work is important to me because there are so many narratives that are out there that are saying in opposition of what restorative justice really is all about. And if you are not really practicing it in its fullest nature, then it won't work. So teaching the fidelity of this practice is critical to the longevity of the practice.

**Yazid Jackson:** What's been your focus for this year in terms of the work that you've been doing? Things have changed in the city, things have shifted from a systemic level, things have shifted from demographics. So what has been the focus for you this year and has it shifted from previous years?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** The level of enthusiasm has certainly shifted for me. The work is now around taking the practice to a more advanced level. That seems to be what I'm being called to where there are lots of incidents that are going on in the community and in various schools. And not only that within the criminal and the juvenile justice system where these complex issues come up where it's sort of challenging for people who are not looking through a restorative lens but want to and they want to find out how to address certain situations from in a restorative way. So I'm being called to come and assess, consult, support, evaluate and integrate some of the traditional practices with the restorative mind. So trying to help individuals shift the consciousness from punitive to a restorative practice is what seems to be my calling right now.

**Yazid Jackson:** And so I like how you're saying being called and for me, that can mean a lot of different things for the audience. It can be literally a phone call. If you are spiritual, it could be a different calling. So I just want you to bookmark the being called part and kind of elevate that.

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Okay. Well, I think it's a combination of both. I am being called in a way that you can say cell phone, call me up on the cell phone. But the calling that I'm speaking to more of is the spiritual calling of my soul, destiny of

my soul purpose. Why I believe that I'm here is to address trauma, to empower emotional healing and to restore relationships. And I'm looking at my own relationships in that way. So the first calling that I'm talking about is the calling the yearning within my own heart, within my own soul to restore relationships that are around me and allowing that to spread into the work that I do to encourage individuals to restore love and healing amongst one another.

**Yazid Jackson:** And so you mentioned self, but what type of journey have you taken personally to really get you to a place where you can actually listen to the call?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** I am a graduate of D.C. Public Schools. My mother is a retired D.C. public school teacher and I witnessed her go through a lot of trauma as a child growing up just trying to teach in the classroom. And so I don't know whether that may have inspired me to want to support and guide and heal in my professional career, but it sort of started there. And then as a child, I was in the fourth grade. I was a bullied child, before bullying was a big thing. I just knew I was being chased every day that I was trying to avoid fights. I would set myself up so that I could run home and one day I just came up with this brilliant idea that they needed love, they were harming me because they didn't have anyone that loved them the way my parents loved me, the way that they've sent me to school, fully prepared, clothed well, I had transportation back and forth and a lot of the children like that or they not necessarily didn't like it.

They didn't understand it that why didn't they have that? And so I came up with this idea that I could give them some love, but how could I do that? I was going to create a love potion. So I went to my grandma's house and I took all of her extracts that she used for making cakes and things, and I was going to brew up this love potion, and then I realized, wow, how am I going to inject this love into the heart and soul and mind of my friends? I

said, "Oh," I went to my grandmother's sewing kit and I got the biggest sewing needle that I could find. And then I thought, okay, when I got to school I would just pour the potions onto my friends and stick them with the pin and it therefore would go into their body. So as a result of that, I got in trouble and I got in big trouble to the point where I had to leave the school with my mommy and my daddy.

Later on I realized that what if restorative justice had been there? Not once did any of them ask me why. If they had asked me why, then we would've found out, then we could have worked it out then that would've changed. My entire emotional makeup would've never been afraid in social environments. It just goes on and on and on what our childhood experiences are as an adult. Fast forwarding, I have personally experienced the criminal justice system with my son who right now we've been waiting 15 years in the Georgia prison system to just be called back to court to reverse an illegal plea, and I realized, okay, I was about to be set up for the school to the prison pipeline, but somehow I was able to avert it. But then I realized that I'm a survivor of that with my own child and that if I could do something to try to prevent and avoid that for someone else, then I'm going to be fully committed to that. So this is really what I think my motivation comes from.

**Yazid Jackson:** A lot of times RJ is looked at as being this magical potion or this pill that schools or organizations or government agencies kind of take, and then there's healing for all and it becomes a fairytale assumption of what the work is. Can you speak a little bit of the assumptions of RJ as being this magical potion that you try to concoct as a child to what it really is in terms of the work, the time, the intentionality, the proactive processes, sometimes the response of processes?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Well, that's a really good question because there are some assumptions that restorative justice is supposed to make a major shift. The thing that's

missing I think, is that people don't realize that restorative justice is not something to do. It is something to be. You need to be a restorative heart, you need to be a restorative mind, you have to have restorative intentions. In order for this practice and this process to work, how do you put your energy into the intention of creating healing, creating connectedness, creating inclusivity? I believe that restorative justice works because at the core of the values of it is love,

**Yazid Jackson:** And that really explains a lot, even in my journey currently working with predominantly the D.C. schools seems to be missing a lot is they're looking for something to do without changing their outlook.

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** The way they be.

**Yazid Jackson:** Yeah, and for myself and our team, we're really seeing that as being one of the biggest issues, but one of the biggest, the bigger shifts in terms of challenges in moving schools from a punitive to a restorative school or have restorative processes because they're just constantly looking for something to do. Historically, D.C. has had a lot of things to do, and so there's programs that come in every two to three years that don't stick around. So we are looking at initiative fatigue, we're looking at innovation fatigue, we're looking at a lack of implementation and moving from that to do to be, it takes in going back to what you said, it takes a lot of self-work,

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** It takes a lot of self-work, and this is the place where, to me, it all needs to begin. I think another challenge is that we start doing it before we understand the philosophy behind it, before we understand the theory and even the history behind it. What is it connected to and why do we need to master this? See, for me, we've in schools, we've got to master it for many, many, many reasons primarily so that our children can learn and be able to grow into successful, productive citizens. But we also have to do this in order to shift and change our own wellbeing. There's a lot of trauma

that's going on and children are bringing that into the classroom. And as adults, we don't get to be a teacher or an administrator because we are free of trauma.

So if we don't take time to really address that, it is, it's going to be very difficult to empower another child or empower one another until we deal with that trauma that we personally have experienced. It shows up looking like that same child that you want to keep putting out of your classroom because they're triggering you and pulling your buttons that you cannot tolerate. So the work really starts with us and when we go into schools, that's what we do. We start with teachers, but they want to go and do the circle, and that's another one of those myths, I said I want to do a myths about restorative justice. Is that restorative justice is a circle.

**Yazid Jackson:** Yeah.

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** And it is not. You do not have to do a circle in order to practice restorative justice, you need to practice restorative justice by seeing things through a lens that does not require punishment and harm.

**Yazid Jackson:** Because I know my experience with whole school implementation, supplemental technical assistance that we provide at RestorativeDC and that SchoolTalk, we meet with school leaders a lot. We meet with leadership teams and the first thing they say is, "I want circle facilitation. I want my teachers being able to do circles." And oftentimes I have to pull them back and say, "Well, what is your reason why?" And a lot of our work this year in terms of creating implementation plans with our schools, the first thing they want to do, our circles, the thing that we're leading them to is once we start taking a deeper dive and post walkthrough is understanding the adult culture and the adult culture is lacking and understanding of what are my triggers when I walk into a classroom? We want to be quick to identify students' triggers, but we are very slow to

name what triggers us, what pushes us to the point where we can't even connect with our peers, where we are not even saying good morning to our peers where there's a disconnect between leadership and staff where there's a disconnect between teachers and support staff. How do circles or can circles get us to that place?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Well, I believe that circles can get us there simply because of the conversation. The community building, the truth finding, and the spiritual healing that can happen in the circle is certainly an avenue for us to get there. A real conversation with the structure of the circle. There are those that are teaching circle without the elements of circle. It's not just a conversation. We have the talking piece because the talking piece has a significant meaning to it. It has significant purpose, it offers an opportunity for respect. It offers an opportunity for deep listening. It offers an opportunity for connectedness and for order and for balance because sometimes we have a tendency to speak over one another. We have the centerpiece because it helps us to recenter and redirect our thoughts and pour our anger and our anxiety into the center rather than pouring it onto the hearts and souls of those that we work with. Because sometimes when we get upset and angry, we will affect one of another with it. But so I believe that circles help us to get to the truth, help us to unpack all the dynamics and various levels of issues that come up particularly in schools. And once we all do that and we find agreement and consensus, then we are on this. We're on the same page.

**Yazid Jackson:** I've run into some situations, and I'm sure you have too, with I would say practitioners who are new to the process, new to restorative justice, and sometimes I hear things like, "I did a circle and it didn't work. Like I tried that thing you were talking about. I tried that talking piece and I grabbed the stapler or the pen or the first thing I had available because I knew that was supposed to be an element. I really didn't think about the centerpiece



because I was rushed a little bit and I just had to throw some chairs together. But I did the circle and it was still conflict." Is that something that you experienced in terms of I would say new practitioners?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Oh, it's not new. The thing is if you don't follow the process and the steps, yeah, you may end up with some disappointments, but again, that goes back to that the circle is not the end all, but it does have to do with your level of skill. And we always tell people that if you are not ready, if you haven't been properly trained, do not do it. If you just read a book and you want to do like a community building or a talking circle, fine. But if there's conflict, don't step into that circle until you are ready. If you're new, bring someone who is seasoned and understands what they're doing. And if there's still conflict, then the circle is not over.

**Yazid Jackson:** And you hit on something where a lot of times we think that we do one, it's the healer of all. And so what are some situations where there may need to be perhaps a series of circles or a series of processes that will support the circle? What does that kind of look like if that one circle didn't get the outcome that maybe we felt that it should?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Well, I want to go back if I can, because the circle is not the only restorative process that or practice that one can use. A lot of times we missed the first step, which is suitability is a circle, the most appropriate practice for this circumstance. You may have needed another type of restorative practice or restorative process or restorative conversation to address that conflict. Doesn't mean that the circle was unsuccessful. Perhaps we did not take all of the steps that we needed to do before we got to the circle. Did you talk to everybody that was in that circle? Did you pre-conference with everyone that had a challenge? Did you discover what the harm was for each and every person before they got there? Did you already have a plan of action of where they were going to sit, how you were going to set the structure of the circle? Did you decide that the

centerpiece needed to be food because this child is upset every time they get into the circle? Was it something that was relative to the conflict that you used a talking piece that was, had a story behind it to help you reflect before you even start the conversation, did you use mindfulness to calm the heart, to soothe the soul, to prepare the brain for the work that needed to be done? And my answer usually that I receive from most people that tell me that is no.

**Yazid Jackson:** And I'm glad we were able to kind of spell out some of those steps because oftentimes we go straight to conflict to the circle. I've seen conflict happen in schools and five minutes later they're using a circle to figure out exactly who the players were. And then they're like, "Okay, well it was your fault." And then we report back and say, "We did a restorative circle and this is how I'm going to punish that person because the circle highlighted who is the harmer in that situation."

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** And now I'm hurting over here. The listeners are hearing me moan and groan.

**Yazid Jackson:** Going back and kind of reteaching the process. And the circle process is to highlight some of those things you've mentioned, like looking at the harm, looking at the impact, looking at who was affected by the actions that took place and the positioning of where people sit, strategy behind putting the harm and the harmer or the victim and or offender maybe across from each other so they can look at each other face to face, maybe putting a parent of the victim next to the offender and what type of energy is being created. Because of that, I've had a really, really, really powerful experience where it was a conflict between a teacher and a student and the mother was defending the child to the point where she couldn't hear any other perspective. And so in that particular conference, I actually placed her right next to the teacher and the energy that was felt by that parent, if that parent was sitting somewhere else, that level of energy

wouldn't have been there and the impact of the circle wouldn't have been as powerful. And now he's actually a full-time English teacher at the school doing RJ every day multiple ways.

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Oh, that's awesome.

**Yazid Jackson:** I mean it was amazing. And when you mention where participants sit is that's really something that I think our practice is missing.

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** That's the structural creativity or the structural creative art of circle practice really. I mean there's so much to talk about around this because I now am in trainings where I say, "By show of hands, how many people have been in a restorative circle before?" [inaudible 00:24:58] raises their hand. So then we start the training process, the structural elements, and by the end of the day we're told, "Well, you know what? I need to take something back. I actually thought I had been in a restorative circle before, but now that I received my training, the answer is I've never been in a restorative circle before." And we find that we're constantly working between what people believe group is and what circle is.

And I saw myself in a video not too long ago explaining that somebody had taken the video and I was going, "Circle is not a group, and group is group and circle is circle." The circle process unpacks it, not you, you have to know the structure so you can set it up just like a surgeon. You got to have all the right tools to get in and get out and be successful at it. We have practitioners walking around doing circles, but leaving without securing the agreements, we have to have agreements. You can't just have a talk or a conversation. Then you make those say that restorative justice circles don't work because all you did after he punched me in my eye was gave him a good talking to no, that is not restorative justice. That's just a good talking to conversations.

**Yazid Jackson:** What is our responsibility? And one thing that I leave my training sessions with now and I highlight and I continue to say, "Widen the circle, bring more people into the circle so we can do this work."

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Wow, Yazid. When you said that, I realized that I have been involved in training each and every one of those groups that you've spoken to. And I think that for me, I get so involved in doing the work that I very seldom have this opportunity to talk about what it looks like. And the first thought that comes to my mind, first of all, agencies that really want to do this, we've got to push for the funding and the resources to continue the training that they receive in a five-day period because it takes more than that. Accountability is not a solitary journey. It is something that we all have to be engaged in.

**Yazid Jackson:** Every time I'm in the process like a new awakening, and it never gets old, I'm always filled either with more questions, more curiosity, self awakening, and it's constantly changing me and how I work and how I approach things and how I do it people, how I do with my family. Well, before we close out, what's highlight one of your goals for this year is something that you're really looking forward to?

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** What I am looking forward to is offering some innovative concepts about how to think outside of the box to charge the atmosphere with love, how to recreate a culture of calm, and to activate the shift as a personal responsibility. We've got to create that shift for ourselves first and then it will emanate and pour into the hearts and the souls and the minds of the children that we serve.

**Yazid Jackson:** But I definitely appreciate having this conversation. It felt like sitting at the kitchen table, talking to a neighborhood community member that has been around for-

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** A long time.

**Yazid Jackson:** ... 30 plus years. For a few years, and really triggering my thinking and how I can do things differently. We appreciate all the work that you do for school talk, RestorativeDC, but more importantly, our city, you and your husband, Celine, can't leave him out. So definitely, and I appreciate you guys kind of laying the foundation for me. I'm not from D.C. but I've been able to come into a space that was already carved out and I'm definitely reaping the benefits of that. So I appreciate what you're doing for us.

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** Thank you. And I will be remiss this if I didn't say that my husband, Saleem Hylton, almost 20 years ago now was a representative from Washington, D.C. for the beginning of the national movement at the federal level for restore restorative justice. And we are very grateful to have had this opportunity.

**Yazid Jackson:** And as we close our conversation for today, I would like to honor our process and close with the following reflection by Kay Pranis, Barry Stewart, and Mark Wedge. "Each circle is different and no one can predict what will happen in any given gathering. On one hand, circles have no formula. On the other hand, definite factors, inner and outer unseen is seen help create their unique dynamics. The more group comes to know and use circles, the less obvious some of these factors become. They get woven into a community's way of being together until they seem almost invisible. Just second nature."

We'd also like to remind our podcast listeners that we have several resources, including short videos with written material, skill-based Padlets, and implementation guide that is on our resource page at [restoratedc.org](http://restoratedc.org). We also encourage you to visit [LivingJusticePress.org](http://LivingJusticePress.org) for a range of books and other resources, including the *Circle Forward* book by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis.

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** May I close the circle?

**Yazid Jackson:** You may close the circle.

**Dr. Ivy Hylton:** The circle is now officially completed.

**Announcer:** Thanks for joining us. *Circle Up DC* is made possible by RestorativeDC, a program of SchoolTalk, with funding by the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Our host, Yazid Jackson, is the senior restorative justice program manager at RestorativeDC. This episode was co-produced by Inaam Avant, restorative justice program assistant with SchoolTalk. Special thanks to this episode's guest, Dr. Ivy Hylton from Youth and Families in Crisis. Thank you to our producer, Ahmed. Our music is by student musicians, Mark Brown, Shane Outlaw, and Giovanni Ramos of Education Unlimited LLC, who created the track during a work-based learning experience supported by Arts to Advocacy, a program of SchoolTalk with funding by the D.C. Department on Disability Services' Rehabilitation Service Administration. And thank you for listening. And be sure to follow us on Facebook and Twitter at RestorativeDC.