

# The Restorative Justice Project

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## I. Introduction

The Restorative Justice Project (“RJP”) at the University of Wisconsin Law School is a direct-service clinic specializing in restorative justice dialogues<sup>1</sup> primarily in the post-adjudication setting of the criminal legal system. RJP facilitates restorative justice dialogues between crime victims/survivors or surviving family members (“harmed parties”) and responsible parties<sup>2</sup> in the aftermath of serious and sensitive crimes, predominantly all types of homicide (first-degree homicide, homicide due to operating a vehicle while intoxicated) and sexual harm (sexual assault and abuse of adults and children, including incest). RJP’s restorative justice dialogues are nationally recognized and have

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1 See DANIELLE SERED, *UNTIL WE RECKON: VIOLENCE, MASS INCARCERATION, AND A ROAD TO REPAIR* 135 (2019) (explaining that in most restorative justice approaches, the central method of involving “those who have the most on the line [. . .] is a dialogue process [. . .] that includes the responsible party, the harmed party, and support people. In this process, people identify the harm that was done and begin to define a pathway to repair”). The author of this article intentionally uses the term “restorative justice dialogue” instead of “victim-offender conference/dialogue” to recognize individuals’ humanity and avoid reducing them to a single identity as solely a “victim” or an “offender.” See also SERED at 139 (“[Restorative justice] requires a fundamental belief in the humanity of those who have been harmed and those who have caused harm. People who have been harmed have to be regarded as worthy even if they are imperfect, even if they have caused harm themselves, even if they owe repair to someone else for what they have done. It is not the harmed party’s innocence that entitles them to repair, it is their humanity”).

2 See *supra* text accompanying note 1. The author of this article intentionally uses the term “responsible party” instead of “offender” to recognize individuals’ humanity and avoid reducing them to a single identity or a specific act of harm. It is also crucial to acknowledge that many responsible parties have been harmed parties themselves in the past, and while that does not provide an excuse for the harm they cause, it does provide context. For the purpose of clarity in describing the restorative justice dialogue process in this article, however, individuals who cause harm will be referred to as “responsible parties.”

been featured on *60 Minutes* on CBS and *The Redemption Project with Van Jones* on CNN.<sup>3</sup>

RJP is a full-time restorative justice clinic operating as an academic year-long experiential immersion opportunity for law students.<sup>4</sup> RJP offers law students experiential learning through preparing for and facilitating restorative justice dialogues, combined with substantive classroom instruction on restorative justice.

This article describes RJP's unique clinical model, which pairs restorative justice pedagogy with meaningful and rigorous experiential learning opportunities. This article also explores the profound impacts this model has on students' legal education, specifically how law students think about the criminal legal system through restorative and transformative lenses and the way they personally approach care and compassion toward themselves and others.

## II. The RJP Program

### A. System Actor Partnerships

Founded in 1987,<sup>5</sup> RJP is one of the longest-running restorative justice-related projects in the country. The current clinical model is built on a contract awarded in 2014 for RJP to be the sole service provider for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections for corrections-based dialogues between harmed parties and responsible parties in the aftermath of serious and sensitive crimes. RJP receives most of its dialogue requests from the Department's Office of Victim Services and Programs when harmed parties indicate an interest in restorative justice processes and the Victim Services office assesses them to be a potential good fit to be referred to RJP.<sup>6</sup>

The restorative justice dialogue process through RJP's partnership with the Department of Corrections is completely initiated by harmed parties. Most of RJP's dialogue requests occur in the post-adjudication setting of the criminal legal system, typically at least several years, and sometimes decades after,

3 *Restorative Justice Project*, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON LAW SCHOOL, <https://law.wisc.edu/fjr/rjp/> (last visited Mar. 4, 2025).

4 RJP contributes to a long history of clinical education within the Frank J. Remington Center at the University of Wisconsin Law School. The University of Wisconsin was one of the first law schools to initiate a clinical program, and the Remington Center, which houses clinics that utilize a variety of teaching and learning models related to the criminal legal system, was among the law school's first clinical programs. RJP is one of over fifteen experiential learning opportunities available for University of Wisconsin Law School students to participate in after completing their first year of law school.

5 *Restorative Justice Project*, *supra* note 3.

6 While referrals from the Victim Services office account for the majority of RJP's dialogues, RJP also receives requests from other sources, including harmed parties reaching out directly through the online contact form on the RJP website, victim/wellness units, district attorney's offices, defense attorneys, judges, and other Department of Corrections staff.

the conviction and sentencing of responsible parties.<sup>7</sup> The majority of RJP's responsible party clients are incarcerated, while most harmed parties live in the community.

RJP's scope of work covers the entire state of Wisconsin, as well as harmed parties who live outside of Wisconsin if their corresponding responsible party resides in Wisconsin. In the past decade, RJP has grown from a part-time clinic conducting restorative justice dialogues in a localized region to a full-time program serving harmed parties in the aftermath of state and federal crimes across Wisconsin.

### *B. Parties' Goals and Initial Outreach*

Once RJP receives referrals for harmed parties potentially interested in a restorative justice dialogue with their corresponding responsible party, RJP reaches out to the harmed party to understand their goals and answer questions about the process. Harmed parties' goals for the restorative justice dialogue process vary based on their circumstances and the circumstances surrounding the harm, but common themes involve discussing the impacts of the harm, obtaining answers to questions about the harm and the responsible party, and developing a plan to address needs that resulted from the harm.<sup>8</sup> Some harmed parties seek to tell the responsible party that they forgive them as one of their reasons for starting RJP's restorative justice dialogue process, but forgiveness is not a requirement or an expectation to participate in the process.<sup>9</sup>

With the harmed party's permission, RJP then reaches out to their corresponding responsible party through a mailed letter with introductory materials and a phone call. RJP explains the restorative justice dialogue process, answers any questions the responsible party may have, gauges if they are interested in participating in the process, and assesses their potential appropriateness for the process based on how they think about taking accountability for the harm they have caused. RJP, with assistance and

7 However, not all of RJP's dialogue requests take place post-adjudication—some occur as concurrent processes or when prosecution is ultimately barred for some reason, such as the statute of limitations passing.

8 See SERED, *supra* note 1, at 138 (“[Restorative justice] contends that crime causes harm to people, relationships, and community—and this is different from thinking of crime primarily as a violation of the law. If the primary understanding of crime is about a legal infraction, then the most urgent concern is to reassert the power of the state through the enforcement of the law. But if the core concern is that people have been harmed, the priority is to repair that harm”).

9 See FANIA E. DAVIS, *THE LITTLE BOOK OF RACE AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE: BLACK LIVES, HEALING, AND US SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION* 28–29 (2019) (explaining that harmed parties should feel no pressure to forgive and that coercion “has no place in restorative justice processes. Contrary to popular notions that conflate forgiveness with restorative justice, forgiveness is neither required nor guaranteed in restorative justice processes. Nor is it a determinant of success. Success happens in well-prepared and well-facilitated encounters where persons who have been harmed feel safe enough to freely share their stories and express their needs and persons causing harm tell the truth, express remorse and responsibility, and offer reparations”).

permission from the Victim Services office, other Department of Corrections staff, and the Division of Community Corrections when applicable, ultimately determines if the restorative justice dialogue process is appropriate for the parties in a particular request. RJP reserves the right to end the process at any time if the actions or motives of any party are deemed inappropriate or harmful.<sup>10</sup>

### C. Program Policies

Parties participating in RJP must agree to the program's policies. Once the harmed party and responsible party have agreed to pursue a restorative justice dialogue process, they are provided a participant acknowledgment of understanding document to sign.<sup>11</sup> RJP's program policies include:

- Participation in the process is completely voluntary and either party may discontinue or put their participation on hold at any time.
- The process is confidential for both parties, except the information that parties expressly give RJP permission to share with the other party for purposes of furthering the process.
- RJP does not and will not provide legal representation or legal advice to any party in the process and will serve only as third-party neutral facilitators.<sup>12</sup>
- Participation in the process is not guaranteed to produce any particular outcome.

<sup>10</sup> This screening occurs throughout the process and applies to both the harmed party and the responsible party.

<sup>11</sup> Both parties are given an opportunity to ask questions about the document's contents before they sign it to indicate that they understand RJP program policies. These policies are also explained in detail during separate introductory phone calls with each party.

<sup>12</sup> RJP is governed by the Wisconsin Supreme Court Rules ("SCR") on third-party neutrals. RJP students and supervisors act as third-party neutral facilitators/mediators rather than filling the traditional "advocate" role of lawyers within the criminal legal system. SCR 20:2.4, "Lawyer serving as a 3rd-party neutral," states:

(a) A lawyer serves as a 3rd-party neutral when the lawyer assists two or more persons who are not clients of the lawyer to reach a resolution of a dispute or other matter that has arisen between them. Service as a 3rd-party neutral may include service as an arbitrator, a mediator or in such other capacity as will enable the lawyer to assist the parties to resolve the matter.

(b) A lawyer serving as a 3rd-party neutral shall inform unrepresented parties that the lawyer is not representing them. When the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that a party does not understand the lawyer's role in the matter, the lawyer shall explain the difference between the lawyer's role as a 3rd-party neutral and a lawyer's role as one who represents a client.

This SCR explains that the parties RJP works with are not "clients" within the technical meaning of that term in the legal system, but "client" is often still the term used internally to refer to the parties that RJP works with in the restorative justice dialogue process for ease of student supervision and discussion. Nonetheless, RJP students and supervisors maintain their status as third-party neutrals and do not act as parties' advocates.

- Participation in the process does not alter or reduce the length of a party's sentence or terms of supervision.
- Parties must notify RJP of any no-contact orders or provisions so the appropriate modifications or permissions may be pursued to allow the process to occur.

Parties must also inform RJP if they are currently appealing or plan to appeal their case or sentence, or if they have obtained or plan to obtain legal counsel. For parties represented by an attorney, RJP requests the attorney's permission to contact the party. Relatedly, a party who is incarcerated may request legal assistance from another University of Wisconsin Law School clinic, but their participation in RJP may limit or disqualify them from obtaining such legal assistance if there is a conflict of interest between the services.

### **III. RJP's Approach to Experiential Education**

#### *A. Selecting and Training Students*

Rising second-year law students apply to University of Wisconsin Law School fall-start clinics, including RJP, during the second semester of their first year. All prospective clinic students submit a resume, cover letter, conflict-of-interest form, and ranking of their top clinic choices. Prior knowledge of restorative justice is not required to be selected to participate. RJP students are selected based on their clinic application and individual interviews, which focus on why they are interested in restorative justice and what they would bring to restorative justice work.<sup>13</sup>

Once students are selected, RJP requires them to receive broad training. Due to the serious and sensitive harms that RJP works with, such as homicide and sexual assault, the clinic implements safeguards and support mechanisms to assist students with potential vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue and ensure that students are trained to facilitate restorative justice dialogues. For example, when dialogue requests are assigned at the beginning of the academic year, RJP students can volunteer to work on particular requests or types of harm. Students can also opt out of dialogue requests involving specific types of harm at the beginning of the academic year or any time throughout the year. Additionally, students are assigned to work on restorative justice dialogues in pairs, so they are never solely responsible for a dialogue request.

Next, before RJP students speak to clients, they must complete a mock interview process with one another and RJP supervisors. Students are given a client interviewing rubric to understand interviewing expectations for all

<sup>13</sup> Second-year law students who are selected to participate in RJP after the clinic application and interview process enroll in the clinic for four to seven credits per semester. Students can enroll in RJP for a variable credit load to fit their academic course schedule. Students are expected to work four hours per week per clinic credit. This includes time spent on restorative justice dialogue requests, as well as on preparing for and participating in RJP's classroom component. All University of Wisconsin Law School clinics, including RJP, are graded on a pass/fail (S, S+, S-) basis. All clinic credits that law students earn apply to the ninety credits required for their graduation. *See Clinical Programs: Frequently Asked Questions*, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON LAW SCHOOL, (last visited Mar. 4, 2025).

client meetings. Then they conduct a mock interview of a past RJP student based on little to no information about the client to simulate an introductory meeting with a harmed party or responsible party. Every mock interview conducted by a new student is also observed by at least one other new student so they can see different interviewing styles and learn from one another. These mock interviews are filmed so students can review their performance and complete a post-mock interview reflection<sup>14</sup> that asks them to consider how well they listened as an interviewer and what they could do to make the client feel comfortable and heard.

After RJP students complete the mock interview process, they prepare for client meetings throughout the academic year. Preparation includes outlining discussion topics beforehand to streamline the conversation between the pair of students and the individual client, as well as to emotionally prepare for the potentially traumatic and triggering topics that may emerge during the conversation. Furthermore, at least one RJP supervisor is present with students during client meetings, and depending on the planned topics or issues that emerge, the supervisor may take a more active role in facilitating the conversation with the client.

### *B. Substantive Classroom Instruction*

RJP students also receive training through the required classroom component of clinic, which is twice a week for one hour and twenty minutes per class period.<sup>15</sup> RJP class sessions are discussion-focused and include substantive instruction by RJP supervisors on the following topics:

- Restorative justice
- Restorative practices facilitation
- Client interviewing
- Working with harmed parties in the aftermath of serious and sensitive crimes

<sup>14</sup> The post-mock interview reflection is completed after RJP students write an initial interview reflection that asks them to consider their own experiences being interviewed (such as by a healthcare professional or in another setting) in which the experience felt uncomfortable or unpleasant, why it felt that way, and what the interviewer could have done to make them feel more comfortable.

<sup>15</sup> RJP's classroom curriculum is based on the Wisconsin Crime Victims Council's guidelines for restorative justice dialogues involving serious and sensitive crimes, specifically the minimum qualifications for facilitators:

1. At minimum, programs should have facilitators with training in the following:
  - a) The signs and effects of trauma
  - b) The behavioral characteristics and dynamics of offenders
  - c) The dynamics involved in the crimes being addressed
  - d) Victimology
  - e) Interpersonal communication

WIS. CRIME VICTIMS COUNCIL, WIS. DEP'T JUST., GUIDELINES FOR VICTIM/OFFENDER CONFERENCING INVOLVING SERIOUS & SENSITIVE CRIMES 4 (2002), <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/sites/default/files/ocvs/specialized/victim-offender-conf-guidlines.pdf>.

- Dynamics specific to intimate partner violence and sexual harm cases
- Trauma-informed lawyering and practice
- Accountability, apology, and forgiveness
- Self-care and resiliency
- Transformative justice and non-carceral approaches to addressing harm
- Therapeutic jurisprudence
- Positive psychology and delivering bad news well
- Narrative development

RJP also invites guest speakers to class to discuss topics like restorative justice in schools, community restorative courts and diversion programs, and victim/survivor rights.

RJP's classroom component includes case rounds discussions for students and supervisors to collaboratively work through complicated dynamics that may emerge in particular restorative justice dialogue requests. RJP classroom conversations that combine knowledge of substantive topics with case rounds discussions enhance students' ability to build relationships with harmed parties and responsible parties in preparation for face-to-face dialogues between them, especially given the varied and non-linear ways that people often process trauma and healing after harm.

To prepare for class, RJP students regularly submit individual written reflections. Prompt questions ask students to reflect on themselves as RJP students, as restorative justice practitioners who are learning and growing into their role as facilitators, and as complex humans who have specific needs and boundaries just like their clients do.

### *C. Supporting Students and Cultivating a Community of Care*

RJP supervisors support students in their experiential learning by cultivating a community of care that includes and extends beyond classroom discussions about self-care and resiliency. This community of care means intentionally creating a clinic environment in which student wellness is meaningfully valued and supported rather than merely being an after-thought. For example, during individual supervision meetings with students throughout the academic year, RJP supervisors begin each meeting by checking in about how students are doing and feeling—personally, academically, and in the clinic.

As part of this conversation, RJP supervisors prompt students to provide updates on how they are progressing toward the self-care plan that they set for themselves at the beginning of the academic year in one of their first written reflections, if their self-care goals have shifted, and whether they would like to revise their goals before their next supervision meeting. Students are encouraged to count progress toward their self-care plan as part of their clinic hours. To ensure that self-care is not presented as simply another task for students to check off a to-do list, RJP supervisors frame these discussions through curiosity and thoughtfulness rather than judgment or criticism.



RJP supervisors also model self-reflectiveness and self-compassion during class sessions and individual supervision meetings so students can develop their own healthy habits to address work-life balance, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue. RJP supervisors seek to authentically model these habits, which often requires being vulnerable with students. For example, RJP supervisors admit when they, too, are struggling with the dynamics of a particular dialogue request, and they are honest and transparent when they do not have all the answers because they are also constantly learning and growing.

*D. Preparing For and Facilitating Restorative Justice Dialogues*

With support from RJP supervisors, students are responsible for preparing for and facilitating face-to-face restorative justice dialogues between harmed parties and responsible parties, as well as debriefing separately with each party following the dialogue meeting. RJP prepares parties for dialogue through individual in-person meetings, phone calls, video calls, and written preparation materials. Since most of RJP's responsible party clients are incarcerated, students' clinic work involves traveling to prisons across Wisconsin to visit clients in person.

During the dialogue preparation process, RJP expects all parties to speak openly and honestly about their lives, including the harm, the impacts of the harm, and the ripple effects of the harm. Additionally, all communication between parties during the dialogue preparation process must go through RJP—parties are not permitted to contact one another directly or through third parties outside of RJP's screening and assistance.

RJP's dialogue preparation process takes at least several months and usually one academic year or longer.<sup>16</sup> The preparation process includes taking time to research and integrate information from court records and news media, allowing time and space for reflection about new information and the exchange of parties' questions and answers for one another in developing a potential shared narrative between them, and getting to know and understand the parties. Getting to know each party separately in a dialogue request involves learning who they were before and after the harm, who they are now, how they think about the harm, the goals they hope to accomplish through a dialogue with the other party, and whether a dialogue will satisfy those goals and meet their needs.

Once RJP students complete the dialogue preparation process and the harmed party and responsible party are ready for a face-to-face dialogue meeting, students take the lead on facilitating the dialogue, with at least one RJP supervisor present during the dialogue to support the pair of students and the parties. The dialogue meeting typically takes four to eight hours, with an hour lunch break and several shorter breaks throughout the day. Both

<sup>16</sup> In certain dialogue requests, depending on the circumstances surrounding the parties and the harm, the preparation process can take more than one academic year. See SERED, *supra* note 1, at 135–36 (describing how meaningful restorative justice processes require robust and thoughtful preparation).



parties can bring a support person with them to the dialogue, but proposed support people must meet with RJP facilitators before the day of the dialogue to discuss their role. Through the dialogue preparation and facilitation process, RJP students cultivate skills related to client interviewing, asking difficult questions, multi-party communication, identifying creative solutions to complex issues, and managing conflict in challenging situations.<sup>17</sup>

#### **IV. RJP's Impact on Students' Legal Education and Personal Approach to Care and Compassion**

To evaluate the impact of RJP's clinical model on law students, an anonymous survey was emailed to nineteen recent RJP students—the ten total students from the 2022–2023 academic year, and the nine total students from the 2023–2024 academic year.<sup>18</sup> Nine of the nineteen total students across the two academic years submitted the survey—four responses were from the 2022–2023 cohort, and five responses were from the 2023–2024 cohort. A hundred percent of the students said that participating in RJP was beneficial to their overall legal education.

In the open-ended responses to survey questions, common themes emerged. Some of these themes included that RJP had a profound impact on how students thought critically about the criminal legal system through restorative and transformative lenses, as well as how they approached being caring and compassionate toward themselves and others. One student reflected:

RJP has been the most beneficial experience in my legal education. RJP enabled me to think critically about how the law and systems affect people. Crucially RJP helped me understand the lack of power afforded to those most impacted by the law and the traditional criminal legal system: the harmed party and the responsible party.

Other responses elaborated on the significant impact of RJP's multi-party work:

This clinical experience will let you work directly with harmed parties and [responsible parties] in a way that few other criminal [legal system]-related clinics do, by getting into their motivations and lived experiences. It is heavy work. You invest a lot of yourself

17 *Restorative Justice Project—Students*, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON LAW SCHOOL, <https://law.wisc.edu/rjp/students.html> (last visited Mar. 4, 2025).

18 The survey was considered program evaluation by the Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) and thus did not require IRB approval. The survey was sent after student course evaluations through the University of Wisconsin Law School were submitted and after final grades were submitted for all students. The email with the link to the survey explained that filling out and submitting the survey was completely voluntary, and that by filling out and submitting the survey, students were indicating their approval of the inclusion of any of their anonymous survey responses in this article. The email also instructed students that if they decided to complete the survey, they should not reference clinic supervisors specifically in their responses, as the most helpful responses would focus on RJP's structure and students' experience in the clinic outside the clinic supervisors.

into the people you work with. But it is also incredibly rewarding. You will be a better lawyer, and a better person, for it.

RJP was extremely beneficial to my legal education because it helped me to see how important people's humanity is and how important it is to provide space for people to be heard. The people we interact with in RJP have experienced a lot of trauma—both responsible parties and [harmed parties]—and RJP is often the first space in which they have ever been able to confront that trauma and discuss it.

Additional responses contrasted students' experiences in RJP with other law school classes and clinics. Students reflected on how RJP exposed them to trauma-informed lawyering through multiple sides of the criminal legal system and emphasized how RJP allowed them to think critically about systems in a way the rest of law school did not afford them the opportunity to do. As several students described:

I think a big part of what makes RJP different from other clinics is that we discuss models of systemic change despite our clinic model being part of the traditional legal system. Our discussions of abolition, [restorative justice], and [transformative justice] informed by our clients set us apart from most clinics [. . .] the length of time we spend with our clients and our access to them and the relationships we are able to build [with them] makes us different from other clinics.

[Restorative justice] was singlehandedly the best experience for challenging our baked-in norms of punishment and justice and was crucial for me being able to actually separate myself from traditional structures/give me confidence to envision alternatives. Law school discusses the ideas of unequal outcomes [. . .] in courses, but this was the only course to meaningfully explore the reasons why law often is enforced along those lines [and] STUDY how people have already been advocating for change. It gives courage to divorce ideology from assumed unchangeables.

RJP doesn't ask student facilitators to advocate for a side or make a determination on 'truth' or 'fact' the way a typical legal education does. Instead, it teaches us to listen, acknowledge, and understand our complex humanity to truly meet people's needs. This is countercultural to law school. It offers a vastly different version of justice and provides a new lens in which we can evaluate, critique, and change our current system.

RJP felt like a balm to the routine and helplessness of [the first year of law school]. I felt like I was finally doing law—but not just law, something beyond law, something much more human than law. It helped me realize my own skills as a lawyer; I’m no longer afraid to help people because I’m confident that I can learn from my clients and adapt to their wants. Finally, it helped me articulate the shortcomings of the law in a much more concrete way than any classroom.

The survey was also designed to capture information about the skills students gained through RJP. One of the survey questions provided an alphabetical list of thirteen options and asked students to select the top five skills they gained from participating in RJP. In order of rank, the top five skills that students selected were:

- Facilitating potentially difficult face-to-face conversations between clients/managing conflict in challenging situations (seven out of nine students selected this).
- Interviewing clients—asking clients difficult questions and responding appropriately to their answers, taking notes effectively during client interviews (six out of nine students selected this).
- Building relationships, rapport, and trust with clients (five out of nine students selected this).
- Developing restorative and/or transformative responses to harm and violence (five out of nine students selected this).
- Understanding and applying knowledge of multiple sides of the criminal legal system—supporting harmed parties while also exploring responsible parties’ motivations and lived experiences (five out of nine students selected this).

Of these top five skills, three skills are arguably unique to RJP over other criminal legal system clinics—facilitating difficult conversations *between* clients, developing restorative and/or transformative responses to harm and violence, and understanding and applying knowledge of *multiple sides* of the criminal legal system. On the other hand, two skills—interviewing clients and building relationships with clients—are theoretically applicable to most client-centered clinics. Students’ open-ended responses highlighted what makes RJP different from other law school clinics that teach similar transferable skills:

Without having participated in another clinic, and only from hearing other classmates’ experiences in other clinics, I think that RJP provides a truly unique experience. I feel like I got to know my clients on a very deep level, particularly because many of them shared things with us that they have never shared with others before [...] the work that RJP does feels transformative and life-changing. [...] The entire RJP experience certainly changed my outlook and perspective. My first reaction when I see people who cause harm to

others (verbally, physically, etc.) is to wonder/ask what the person causing the harm has experienced themselves in their own lives. I think that probably speaks to how RJP has strengthened my sense of compassion and empathy for others because I recognize that people who cause harm often do not do it out of malice or with the intent to cause harm. Because of my RJP experience, I see how context is often a critical component, but that talking about context does not mean it is excusing the harm, nor that the responsible party avoids accountability. RJP creates a space for all of it.

I believe that the way I respond to conflicting information or viewpoints is different than the way my classmates who did not participate in RJP do. [. . .] Having to be multi-partial in working with our clients and hearing about the ways that parties responsible for horrible things have been themselves on the receiving end of horrible things has, I think, truly changed my brain chemistry. The way that we learn to hold multiple things to be true and examine the way they show up and impact behavior while at the same time never using those things as an excuse is unique to RJP.

Finally, many responses centered on how RJP impacted the way students approached self-care and self-compassion, as well as how they cared for others:

RJP was the most beneficial part of my three years [of law school]. I explained what it meant to me from a legal education standpoint in [my response to another question in this survey]. But, selfishly, more important[] to me was the way that it forced me to really be vulnerable, rely on support from others, build and exist in community, and ask for help. People that go to law school often are high-achieving, competent, figure-it-out-yourself type of people. I know I was when I got here. This experience broke that down and empowered me to understand myself within the context of my community. I know now that when we harm others, just as much as when we uplift them, we do so reflecting the people and structures and culture around us. There is no brute forcing your way through this work (or any work) alone, and I am so grateful that I no longer feel that that way of living is aspirational.

I spent years prior to law school working in helping professions and, for me, I experienced the greatest amount of vicarious trauma during RJP. It required an immense amount of intentional work on my end, including therapy, journaling, and other forms of self-care. RJP is not for everyone. That being said, it was one of the most rewarding experiences of my lifetime.

RJP changed my life. I was so afraid of my own shortcomings, I couldn't countenance working directly with clients because I thought I would fail them. But when I worked with clients, I realized I just had to show up as myself and let my care for them lead the way. I love people even more than I did before. I believe that people can change even more than I did before. And I feel even more strongly than I did before that the system we currently have in place cannot stand.

## V. Conclusion

RJP's unique clinical model pairs meaningful and rigorous experiential learning opportunities through preparing for and facilitating restorative justice dialogues with substantive classroom instruction on restorative justice. RJP students communicate with harmed parties and responsible parties in the aftermath of serious and sensitive crimes to progress toward an eventual face-to-face restorative justice dialogue between the parties. This experiential learning process allows RJP students to gain a unique perspective on multiple sides of the criminal legal system by supporting harmed parties while also exploring the motivations and lived experiences of responsible parties.<sup>19</sup>

The restorative justice dialogue process can be difficult, but it often results in profound and positive impacts on the lives of everyone involved—including the law students. As one student summed up in their survey response, restorative justice “ultimately provides a sense of hope for the future”:

RJP is an undertaking that you have to be committed to. If you are willing to commit to it, you will meet some of the greatest people, both clients and classmates, and be able to actually help people move onto the next step in their lives [. . .]. You will be further radicalized about the systems we have in place, in a very good way, but be bolstered by the ways [restorative justice] can help supplement, and hopefully eventually usurp the place of, those systems and by your fellow classmates who will encourage you to think harder about our systems and provide a space where you can brainstorm and parse out your own nuanced views. [Restorative justice] will allow you to find space outside the right/wrong binary that you can work within. Despite how frustrating some days will be and some of the things you will hear from clients about the ways they have been treated, [restorative justice] ultimately provides a sense of hope for the future. Seeing people come together and share a space of empathy for each other reminded me that people are fundamentally good and do fundamentally care about each other.

19 *Restorative Justice Project—Students*, *supra* note 17.