

**“Red Hook Community Justice Center:
The Anatomy of a Legal Experiment”**

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A great red and white flag hangs from the façade of what used to be the neighborhood Catholic School, at 88 Visitation Place, in the center of Red Hook, Brooklyn. The brightly-colored drape heralds the location of the “Red Hook Community Justice Center.”

No one could mistake this place for your typical, throw-‘em-in-the-slammer courtroom. And it isn’t.

A legal experiment founded in April 2000, the center is, according to its founders, the nation’s first multi-jurisdictional court — designed to tackle civil disputes, misdemeanors, and low-level felonies that would normally be adjudicated under three separate legal authorities: New York City’s criminal, family, and housing courts.

The rationale: to give a single judge the ability to oversee all aspects of a particular case, allowing the Center to provide the most efficient and effective sentencing. But its purpose also goes deeper than that.

Largely spearheaded by Greg Berman and John Feinblatt of the Center for Court Innovation during the mid-‘90s as a creative solution to longstanding community problems, the goal of this court is to attack the roots of crime by handing down sentences that do more than exact retribution. In fact, at Red Hook’s Justice Center the sentences handed down are more like penance than punishment, more like community service than castigation.

Its goal is to make legal authority as accountable to the community as possible by having one judge oversee every case.

The lone judge, Alex Calabrese, who has presided at the Center since its founding nearly five years ago, is authorized to mandate sentences of up to one year of jail time, but he reserves this harsh punishment only for the most serious cases. Instead, many defendants are ordered into community service, career training, drug rehabilitation, and even GED programs, with the goal of setting their lives back on track and making a positive contribution to their South Brooklyn neighborhood.

Convicted offenders can receive judgments ordering them to plant trees, paint over unsightly graffiti, or use their time working at a non-profit — they can also receive up to a year behind bars — and those relatively less common defendants must serve their time elsewhere, since the justice center does not even contain a jail.

Based on a model originally implemented at the Midtown Manhattan Community Court, the Red Hook Justice Center takes that concept — giving low-level lawbreakers sentences that allow them the opportunity to give something back to their community — and expands upon it by adding housing mediation, community groups, after-school activities, and the most ambitious goal of all: changing the community.

This new expanded Red Hook model is now being replicated all over — there are now centers in Harlem, Philadelphia, and an ocean away, in Liverpool, England.

With the understanding that many community issues are not solvable in an ordinary, single-jurisdiction court, the center's founders chose to make it multi-jurisdictional, allowing its single judge the power to manage important aspects of cases involving family law, tenant-landlord problems, and civil or criminal issues.

According to a 2003 report by the Bruner Foundation, which awarded the center with a silver medal for "urban excellence," the court serves an estimated 80 people each day. With this "high-volume" approach that spends only a few minutes on each case, Judge Calabrese hears approximately 16,000 cases every year. In fact, the foundation said, the center handles up to 80 percent of the cases in its jurisdiction, which encompasses an estimated 200,000 people living in the 72nd, 76th and 78th police precincts of Brooklyn.

And that 16,000 doesn't include the 100-plus cases each year heard by the Red Hook Youth Court, which the justice center houses. Here, young people aged 14 to 17 can mandate their peers to take anger management workshops, write letters of apology, or do community service as restitution for low-level offenses. Surprisingly, the Center for Court Innovation reports that an impressive 85% of the offenders sanctioned by the Youth Court actually comply with their sentences, which, like the larger court, are intended to promote individual rehabilitation and community healing.

But the center does more than that. Neighborhood residents come here for after-school programs, counseling, mediation between tenants and landlords, and more. In other words, they've tried their best to make this a "community center" in practice as well as in name.

And they've succeeded.

According to a 2001 survey conducted by the Center for Court Innovation, just a year after the Center's opening, neighborhood respondents who had heard about the Justice Center, were already reporting higher feelings of safety and more positive opinions of the criminal justice system as a whole. In fact, positive views of the criminal justice system had doubled since the previous survey in 1997.

As you move through the metal detectors past the armed guards reading the morning issue of *The New York Post*, you just might forget you've entered a courtroom. You can clearly see that the light inside is warm and bright. It is softened by the sun. And through the building's myriad windows, you can see the sky.

Seated on the soft, wooden benches in the courtroom, you would hardly know that you weren't waiting for a third-grade class to begin if not for the stocky brown-haired man in a black robe at the front of the room or the odd person standing in handcuffs.

The building's design, I suspect, has something to do with the history of this south Brooklyn waterfront neighborhood, which, during the '80s and early '90s, contained what was considered by some to be one of the most dangerous, drug-infested housing projects in the nation. Not too many years ago, Red Hook was a name that made stomachs churn, notorious for its violent drug trade and the warring gangs that senselessly shot down the beloved elementary school principal, Patrick Daly, in 1992.

The '80s and early '90s were a depressing period of time for anyone here old enough to remember it — a time when crime hung over the neighborhood like a gloomy cloud. But the soft white walls here at the Center, the warm natural lighting that streams in from its windows, and the inviting charm of its schoolhouse wooden benches have the power, for just a moment, to make you forget the area's tragic history of crime, drug infestation, and government neglect.

Crime is much lower today, but it still makes some sense that the Center's planners and funders saw fit to spend a hefty \$4.8 million to renovate the dilapidated schoolhouse to create an atmosphere that gives the visitors more pleasant feelings: freshness, openness, calm.

One might wonder whether the Justice Center has had the same calming affect on the surrounding neighborhood. Or is it all just pretty architecture?

The building's history and location may shed some light on this. Its former incarnation as a neighborhood parochial school often used as a site for community gatherings has contributed to giving the Center its reputation as the place to go to get your problems solved. Also, its placement in the middle of the neighborhood has side-stepped the potential race and class tensions felt between people living in “the back” of Red Hook — many of them newer, wealthier, fairer-complexioned residents who have moved to the area from Manhattan to take advantage of the cheaper rents and slower pace of life — and people living in “the front,” home to the mostly low-income, black and Latino residents of the Red Hook public housing development.

Still, in the beginning, the Justice Center was an idea that not everyone liked. In fact, many folks were downright suspicious of the city's intentions for the neighborhood.

“What kind of justice are you talking about?” asked Alice Tapia, 50, when she first heard of the proposal for the center. “What's going to happen to our young black and Latino men?”

Tapia, who is a Latina herself, has lived in Red Hook for 32 years, and through that time had grown to mistrust any new proposals for Red Hook, which has suffered for decades with a lack of economic development resulting in a 20% unemployment rate, an unpopular waste transfer station, and the dangerous and noisy Gowanus highway that virtually cuts off the neighborhood from the rest of Brooklyn. The people of Red Hook, Tapia included, had reason to be suspicious of another great idea from New York City government.

Tapia suspected this great new idea for a “Justice Center” was just a fancy name for a local jail, to make it easier for the police to throw racial minorities behind bars.

Tapia, who was until recently the Justice Center's housing resource coordinator, took a while to warm up to the idea of “a new kind of courtroom” for this once-forgotten section of Brooklyn.

With time, and in her experience working with the center, she soon came around. And she's not the only one.

Walking through the Red Hook housing projects, you just might overhear average neighborhood residents talking about the Justice Center, too. And what they're saying is surprisingly positive.

Here is one of those typical conversations gleaned from a random moment in real life.

Several friends sit around a table at the Red Hook Senior Citizen's Center, just a few blocks from the Justice Center. Emma Broughton, 74, is one of them.

"Miss Emma" is a well-known community activist, but everyone here knows her as the "mayor" of Red Hook. Each weekday, her routine begins at the Red Hook Senior Citizens' Center, right across from her home, where she volunteers her time from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., helping to serve subsidized breakfast and lunch to disabled and low-income seniors, as well as just doing whatever else needs getting done at the center.

Pitty-pat is the preferred game here, where American flags deck the walls and unlit Christmas lights hang under the soft glow of fluorescent tubes.

Joan Idlet, whose long gray hair and oversized glasses distinguish her among the rest of the card-players, casually complains from across the table about recent problems with her landlord.

"I don't know how come you don't call the Justice Center," says Miss Emma, who shares with the group a story about how the center helped solve a problem for her not long ago, when a leak in the roof of her apartment damaged one of her rugs.

“You got to know who to call, Joan,” adds Miss Emma with the authority of a parent speaking to a child.

“But I called the rent office,” pleads Idlet.

“I don’t go to the rent office,” snaps Miss Emma.

That’s the end of *that* conversation.

And that’s how many people here talk about the Red Hook Community Justice Center. But, arguably, the Justice Center’s most life-changing work does not lie in its skills at repairing cracked ceilings.

It also has a knack for fixing broken lives.

Without Judge Calabrese’s special knowledge of her case, Tina Benbow says she thinks she might not have survived to tell her story.

In fact, for the traditional court system, Benbow was a lost cause: a single mother from the Gowanus housing projects addicted to \$10 bags of crack. And heroin. And methadone. And alcohol.

Sexual molestation as a child, she said, is what drove her to substance abuse.

At her lowest point, Benbow was often seen raising money to support her varied habits on the corners of 3rd and 4th avenues and Baltic Street, the area known as the “ho stroll” of Red Hook, Brooklyn. She lived this way for almost 10 years.

And like so many other lost causes, Benbow could very likely have fallen forever through the cracks of a broken justice system, trapped in her deadly cycle of crime and addiction. But with the Justice Center’s intervention, Benbow has gotten her life back.

“She’s been clean for a year and a half,” said Vernice Kirkland-Young, 48, a social worker stationed at the Justice Center, who was assigned to coordinate Benbow’s drug treatment through the Phoenix House live-in drug rehabilitation facility. She still keeps track of the 36-year-old success story.

“She’s now on the staff at the Phoenix House in our Yorktown facility... [as] a dental assistant... and in college to be a dental hygienist,” Kirkland-Young added. “She’s also celibate and in church. I’m so proud of Tina.”

Community members say the new approach has been noticeably successful, helping to reduce repeat offenses in the neighborhood by addressing the reasons people commit crime, like untreated drug addiction and lack of job skills. In Benbow’s case, for example, the root of the problem was her habit, and after 16 misdemeanors for prostitution, Judge Calabrese gave Benbow a final chance to make a new start: he sentenced her to half a year of drug rehab.

But after only five months in treatment at the Phoenix House, Benbow fell once again into the grip of addiction, and when the authorities brought her back into the courtroom, she was more of a wreck than ever: her face covered in acne, her feet adorned with disposable, paper slippers, her habit out of control.

“Her lawyer suggested that when she go back in front of the judge that she fight for her life,” said Kirkland-Young. “She went in front of the judge and cried and pleaded to be sent to Phoenix House.”

So Calabrese set down an ultimatum: she could choose to go to jail for a year or complete a year of in-house drug treatment. Benbow chose the latter and

transformed her life. Changing people's lives is what happens everyday at the Red Hook Community Justice Center, employees and clients of the center say.

“There are so many people who... have gotten clean, gotten their GED, gotten a full-time job,” said James Brodick, the Justice Center's director. “There's hundreds of stories like that. It becomes par for the course.”

In fact, Brodick said, the turnstile of assembly-line justice is all-too-typical of many other New York courtrooms overloaded with repeat offenders whose names and faces no judge could remember from one court appearance to the next. But here, behind the bright, white walls of this former schoolhouse, it's different.

“The judge has tools that he wouldn't have downtown,” he said.

Even members of local law enforcement say they have noticed a difference in the neighborhood. Police Officer Carlos Quintana, 40, who is in charge of community affairs for the 76th Precinct and has been a cop for 19 years, said he has observed a marked decline in the number of repeat offenders being arrested since the Justice Center was founded. For this, Quintana credits the good relationship the center has with the police force and the surrounding community.

“Judge Calabrese is the only justice there...” he said in a telephone interview. “Police can feel comfortable going to the judge and telling him, ‘This is the guy that did three burglaries in the last week.’ It doesn't let defendants fall through the cracks.”

“In one way, it's helping the community with a crime,” Quintana added, “and in another way, it's helping a person clean his life up.”

Benbow has certainly cleaned up hers.

Without the Justice Center, “I probably would have been dead,” says Benbow.

But now that she’s no longer caught in the grip of addiction, she’s got big hopes for the future. Though she’s still working as a dental assistant at Yorktown’s Phoenix House, she’s also studying for a degree in dental hygiene in the evenings at Orange County Community College, and she’s got her sights on a future \$75,000 annual salary from her new-found vocation.

And, most important, she considers herself a role model for other folks in trouble.

Though it’s not officially part of her work as a budding dental hygienist, Benbow ends up acting as a counselor and shoulder-to-cry-on for many of the young people in her work at the Phoenix House — where until recently she had been living in-house for 32 months, after completing a 12-18 month recovery program — and working to give back, including being on-call for emergencies 24 hours a day.

“I encourage them and I tell them the impact” of not taking care of themselves.

She feels that many of them are members of a traumatized generation of children who grew up in the midst of the crack epidemic in the city.

These young folks “get a lot of pain from that, about how their parents were on drugs.”

The pain is especially bitter when she thinks of her own 13-year-old daughter, Dionne, who now lives in Red Hook with her aunt.

“It’s difficult to just reappear in her life.”

When Benbow thinks of her years of drug abuse and prostitution, she said she feels guilty that her daughter had to see her in the streets plying her former trade with strange men, higher than the moon.

I “understand that maybe she’s angry,” Benbow said. “I had no regard for her being there,” watching, “because I was in my own little world.”

“She watched the nodding [to men] and the crack-speeding around and the looking really, really bad.”

But she is working to heal the relationship and to set things right, especially as she recalls the sexual abuse she experienced as a child, saying, “I was unable to move forward in my life as a young teenager.”

Benbow hopes that other troubled youth will be saved by the work of the justice center, as she was. This could be done, she said, by providing even more one-on-one counseling and support for teens, especially for survivors of sexual abuse.

“You have young women that are 15 or 16 years old that have major issues, that have already been out there prostituting.”

But even without changes, Benbow said, the center provides hope for many people, like herself, who would otherwise have had none.

“They really give you the opportunity to get your life together. And they give you multiple chances. I think that every community should have that.”