

I would like to introduce Jay whose mother was killed by her then-partner at a family event. Gerry suffered childhood sexual abuse at the hands of an individual well-known to her family. Both Gerry and Jay had asked the Probation Victim Liaison Unit if they could meet the perpetrators of the crimes in prison. When the EU funded pilot service started they were both among the first people to be referred. Following meetings with the perpetrators in prison they both asked if they could be involved in developing greater awareness about RJ.

Gerry – why did you want to meet the man who caused you such harm?

Gerry: I wanted to because although he was in prison, he “wasn’t accountable”. I had been contacted by Victim Support but “I hated the word victim, it took away my pride.” When I heard about RJ I wanted to take part because I felt “guilt about not speaking out for such a long time”, and I felt “responsible to stop others becoming victims”.

And Jay – why did you want to meet your mother’s killer?

Jay: “I wanted to control my own fear”. I was worried about meeting him in the street because he didn’t live far from me, so I wanted to know what I would do if I saw him. At first I only wanted to see him, but in preparation with the facilitators I realised I wanted to know exactly what happened. I wasn’t there on the day and I didn’t feel I could ask my younger brother and sister who were, so I realised I wanted to ask him about it, “to get all the details from A to Z”.

Jay – how were you prepared for the meeting?

Jay: The facilitators were excellent, we met together and by the time we went into the meeting it was like going in with friends. I knew before the meeting that “I didn’t want an apology, that was too easy.”

And Gerry - how were you prepared for the meeting?

Gerry: My life was a mess before the meeting, if you saw me you wouldn’t have recognised me. I was having panic attacks, nightmares and “I didn’t really know what I wanted to get out at the meeting”. But the facilitators were able to “contain” all of that, and they helped me put some order on what I wanted. “It was a lot of work, but it was worth it.”

I walked in expecting nothing, thinking he would deny everything. I had done CBT before, but I wanted to meet with him because it would allow me to “face what I’d feared for so long”, to see that he was “not a monster, but a pathetic man – weak”. Now I feel I can live again since the meeting. I used to fake being ok, but I was really depressed.

Preparing for the RJ meeting was easier than preparing for court. At court I was behind a screen but he kept trying to look behind the screen and was told off by the judge – this made me feel like a victim again. Going in to the RJ meeting “there’s nothing they can do they haven’t already done” and so “you’re the one that has the power”.

Jay – what was it like to meet in a prison?

Jay: For me it was about taking back control. Going in to prison was actually quite relaxed, the prison guards were friendly and made jokes as we went in. There was an observer in the meeting, which was no problem.

He wanted to tell his story, and that was another reason I wanted to hear it – because I didn't want him to have that feeling in future when he is out of prison and then approach my younger brothers and sisters. We left it that after this meeting we would not have contact again. Even though I knew this would be a condition of his license "it was important for me to verbally say it to him" rather than just happening through probation.

And Gerry – What do you feel about the meeting now?

Gerry: We went to this open prison and "saw a well-fed, well-looked after man. That also gave me power walking in to the room because I thought – how dare you?". "My partner didn't go in as he is not as understanding as me".

I didn't need him to admit it because he & I both knew that it happened. I told him about what he did, and gave more and more detail until he broke down. "I never knew he had tears in him". I wanted him to put his hands up to what he'd done to other victims. "I started being the one in control". After the meeting, that was the first good night of sleep I'd had in years.

Before the meeting I had associated myself with the wrong kind of people that put me and my family in danger, but now I have healthy barriers, and I am "protected by the morals I learnt from RJ".

Jay – How far did you get what you wanted from the meeting?

Jay: I got everything I wanted and more out of it. I saw his raw emotion, and I believed that he wasn't faking it. I didn't go for a sorry, but I know that he really was sorry. It wasn't about hearing the word, I could see it in the way he was behaving. At some points in his story I saw him rise in his chair, out of bravado, but then I also saw him sink when it was about me. I could see that he was shocked by his own emotions.

And Gerry - How far did you get what you wanted from the meeting?

Gerry: I didn't go into the meeting wanted an apology – although maybe secretly I did – because I knew he wouldn't mean it. But I could see him shaking, and could see – like Jay – from the way he was acting that he finally recognised what he'd done.

Beforehand, I was so angry with the world and with the criminal justice system that I was going to be as dangerous as him – I felt what's the point of sticking to rules if people like him can do whatever they want?

I'd seen therapists and asked so many questions, but the meeting gave me the chance to finally ask the right person. "Even if you don't get the answer you want, at least it's out there."

Now I use RJ with my children, and for dealing with the school. Sometimes they don't like it but it's made such a difference to me.

"I used to expect the worst from life all the time". But now "I want to work towards other people feeling like this."

There's this kind of instinct to attack when you're in the room with him, but I didn't want him to be able to claim victim status.

Jay: My offender said that he would never apply for parole because he deserves to be there. And he never has.

Jay – Where would you be now if you had not been able to do RJ?

Jay: Because he pleaded guilty it never went to trial, so we never had a chance to find out information about what happened. That meant that I used to think about it all the time, wondering who was where in the room and what each person did and said – I could go over and over it for hours on end. But having the meeting I now know what happened, and that has stopped me visualising it. Now when I think about it it's not for long, and I can stop thinking about it because I know what happened.

Gerry - *Where would you be now if you had not been able to do RJ?*

Gerry: I used to have panic attacks whenever I was in a room with men. I went to a cognitive therapy group where I had to go right across town and sit in a room full of men, and it used to send me into a complete state. Since the RJ meeting I am much more confident and I'm ok about being with men – now I'd probably run that group!

Audience question to both: Did RJ in any way make you feel like a victim?

Gerry: RJ didn't include the label victim, so it was never part of the process.

Jo: Sometimes people would say the word victim and then take it back, which was ok.

Audience question to both: How did you hear about RJ?

Jay: I'd seen a documentary on TV about Brooke Kinsella. So I mentioned it to the parole officer who said yes, ok.

Gerry: Two years after the conviction I got a phone call, but my family were against it so they withdrew even more. But I had to get my questions out. I had to let him know it was not ok. If he gets out he is going to remember my face and that's going to stop him doing it to other people – I said that to him "When you get out, remember my face."