

Reiki in a Juvenile Temporary Detention Center

BY HEATHER MCCUTCHEON
PHOTOS COURTESY HEATHER MCCUTCHEON

TWO YEARS AFTER I FIRST APPROACHED the Illinois Cook County's Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC), I received permission to teach a Reiki Level I class to six residents and two staff inside the facility. It was an incredible experience for our organization, the Reiki Brigade—which raises awareness of the benefits of Reiki through demonstrations and presentations—and hopefully, the first of many more like it.

Background

I first met with Anna, JTDC's Director of Gender Services, in January 2017. The Chicago Police Department and minority-male violence had been in the spotlight nationwide with slogans including, “Hands up, don’t shoot,” and “I can’t breathe.” The situation in Chicago had become so dire the Attorney General of the State of Illinois, Lisa Madigan, filed

I discussed all of this and how Reiki could be a means to provide some relief to this population. The facility is a temporary home to over 350 youth, aged ten to 21. There’s a high school within its walls because residents may find themselves confined there for over two years before receiving a trial and a subsequent determination of guilty or not guilty.

Strategy

Anna and I agreed that introducing Reiki to the resident population would be a slow process. The first step was to educate staff, and only if that went well (I was sure it would) would we try to convince the powers that be to give us access to the youth housed there. I began by orchestrating a wellness fair for all the staff at the JTDC. It included 13 practitioners generously offering craniosacral, acupuncture, nutrition advice, movement therapy, hypnosis, and, of course, Reiki.

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a complaint against the City. The response was a promise for dramatic reform within the Chicago Police Department’s policies, practices, training, and accountability mechanisms. I contend that we cannot regulate away trauma stored up in individuals. The root causes of excessive use of force, which could easily be categorized as “acting out,” include shouldering too much fear, anger, and stress for too long without relief. To help ease some of this pressure, the Reiki Brigade volunteered to help Chicago Police officers let go of energetically stored trauma.

But that’s just one side of the coin. Because of this climate, minority males in Chicago have also experienced higher than usual levels of fear, anger, and stress of their own, and those locked up in the JTDC are no exception. Anna and

This event was a huge success and paved the way for the Reiki Brigade to give a presentation and share Reiki with a group of residents ages 18-21; those old enough to sign the waiver. The group comprised twelve African American youth, by far the predominant demographic among JTDC residents. Half an hour into this event, one of them said to me, “You need to talk to our mental health professional.” I was so impressed that he put that together so quickly, tapping into my grand plan.

Two young men asked if they could learn Reiki themselves. Thrilled at the prospect, we offered another Introduction to Reiki event for the rest of those in the 18-21 age group.

I could connect with the JTDC’s mental health professional via email. She wrote, “The residents just



All the volunteers for the JTDC Staff Wellness Event, with Anna.

LOVED your program—I swear they were telling me about it for a week straight, all about how much they enjoyed it, how helpful they felt it was, and just KNEW I absolutely HAD to learn more! I'd be happy to attend the next demo session, and I am happy to help in any way that I can!"

Despite all this momentum and my desire to move forward as quickly as possible, circumstances beyond our control caused these next steps to take over a year.

During that time, I had to retake the state-mandated Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) training. All staff and volunteers must complete this class annually. We are reminded of the incidence and nature of sexual assault within the correctional system and learn how to respond quickly and appropriately should we notice such a situation. It's an unpleasant three hours. When I'd first taken the class, I thought I would hear about older residents abusing younger residents. Afterward, I understood that volunteers play a crucial role in interrupting a cycle of abuse because sometimes, the guards perpetrate these crimes. Friendships among colleagues make reporting instances of abuse to staff dangerous for the victims. The weight of this information and its implications took the wind out of me and reignited my commitment to do everything in my power to bring Reiki to this community.

Patience paid off. The second Introduction to Reiki event was also a success, and a date for the Reiki I class was finally scheduled.

Special Rules

Anna and I had already talked through all the modifications to my usual process for the Reiki class to be allowed:

- No touching for initiation or student practice

- No staples, paper clips, or metal of any kind
- No laptop
- No smudging
- Not my schedule, but theirs

No problem. I retooled my entire class accordingly.

The Big Day

On the day of the event, I arrived early, eager to get started. Anna guided me through the two sets of Transportation Security Administration-style security checks, during which the tin of Altoids I keep in my class project box was flagged. "No metal." I dumped all the mints into my plastic box and surrendered the offending Altoids container.

Besides Anna, another staff member, and the six young men, there were two security guards in attendance. They



I recruited Reggie and Edit, two Reiki Brigade volunteers, to photograph upright, non-touching hand positions for the student handouts. Anna appreciated that Reggie represented the demographic makeup of those attending the class.

were not participating voluntarily; it was their assignment for the day. I wondered if they would be receptive to Reiki or if there would be eye-rolling.

Half the class was late, which allowed me to interact with the two already seated residents. Because a special activity was bound to sound more attractive than the daily routine, we had interested residents complete an essay about why they wanted to take the class. Anna chose the participants based on their responses, which were not shared with me. So I took this opportunity to ask these young men what they were hoping to gain from the class.

“I’m here to work on my anger,” answered one. My heart warmed. I had not expected that level of openness so quickly.

When the rest of the students arrived, and introductions were made, it became apparent that some of them were excited to be there and others were not. One young man sprawled his feet out towards me, hooked his elbow over the back of his chair, cocked his head to the side, and alternated between looking bored and staring at me aggressively. It wasn’t difficult to imagine that he was wishing me harm or even planning for it. I’ll call him Jimmy, and I’ll freely admit I was intimidated by him. As I enthusiastically explained the wonders of Reiki and the potential it has to make the world a calmer, safer place, Jimmy’s facial expression remained stone-like. There was a moment I felt ridiculous. These guys were hypervigilant because their safety was constantly at risk, and the outcome of their trial—their life—was hanging over them like a lead gavel. There I was talking about high-vibrational, loving energy.

About an hour into my presentation, I ran through some questions on the quiz I’d be giving them at the end of class. It’s not a difficult quiz, and it’s unusual for my students to get more than one answer wrong. But this situation was different. I started asking questions about the material I’d covered and received a couple of blank stares from the two kids who had

been most talkative all morning. But from his reclined position and without moving a muscle, Jimmy spoke up.

“What are the energy centers in the body called?” I asked.

“Chakras,” he said calmly.

“Who went up on the mountain and had the epiphany, then brought the system of Reiki down to share with the world?”

“Mikao Usui,” he said. The pronunciation was off, but it was close enough.

He knew everything. He hadn’t been planning to shank me all morning; he’d been soaking up everything I said. I

may have teared up a bit, and not for the last time that day.

Emboldened by my exchange with Jimmy, I spoke about Reiki’s more esoteric components and the information available in energy. The security guards had been sitting quietly in the back of the room, rousing only to pat down anyone requesting a trip to the restroom. This point was the part where I thought I might provoke their derision. Rather than rolling his eyes, one of the security guards perked up and asked me enthusiastic questions about clairvoyance, clairsentience, etc.

Shortly afterward, it was time for the initiation ceremony. We put eight chairs in a straight line a couple of feet apart, and I asked the students to sit in the chairs and put their hands in Gassho position, palms together in front of their chests.

Then I turned to move a table out of my way. When I turned back, the same security guard had his hands in the Gassho position and was scootching his chair forward into the line with his feet.

“Can I do it, too?” he asked.

“Of course!”

The two young men who offered the most participation earlier in the day were friends; they sat next to each other, and despite several pleading gestures from me, chatted, joked, and poked each other throughout this sacred ceremony. This situation was by far the greatest test of my stability all day. It

The following are transcripts from handwritten letters written by attendees of the Introduction to Reiki event.

The Reiki program was excellent to me because I actually believe it really works and I had a good night’s sleep that night.

Reiki was a good program. I believe that you can take your mind off a lot of things when you are trying Reiki.

It was a good program. I say that because it really gets a lot of bad thoughts out of our minds and gives us some relaxation.

The Reiki program in my opinion was very good. I think they should come and show some more people.

I liked it because it made me feel free.

would be one thing not to take this precious gift seriously, but it seemed to me they were actively ruining it for others. Had we been in my classroom, I would have asked them to leave. As it stood, without an escort back to their rooms, which would have taken who knows how long to summon, there was nowhere for them to go. There was nothing I could do.

Following the initiation, the students were marched to the dining hall, where they were served lunch. Anna and I compared notes on how things were going so far. “Jimmy!” I said, incredulous. “Yes,” she nodded knowingly, then explained to me that some of these guys had never had to learn active listening skills. It was such a simple thing to take for granted, and I was grateful for the lesson and humility this experience had given me.

We met another hiccup as half the class was trapped in the elevator on the way back to the room. We waited 45 minutes for them, during which I made periodic adjustments to my itinerary to accommodate for the lost time.

The last part of the class included pairing up and taking turns offering Reiki to each other, with the recipient sitting in a chair. I used the photos taken with Reggie and Edit’s help to show how different energy fields could be accessed and turned on soft music. Predictably, the two jokesters paired up and continued their boisterous activity throughout.

Anna and the other staff member paired up, leaving two other pairs of newly attuned Reiki channels. Vacillating between making myself available and allowing autonomy to explore and share experiences, I sometimes walked from group to group and sometimes sat in the front of the room and straightened out my course materials. Before long, I heard snoring. I looked up to see Jimmy’s partner slumped over in his chair, fast asleep, and Jimmy’s face, for the first time that day, broken into a big smile.

Afterward, each person shared their experience with the group. Jimmy’s partner was profoundly relaxed and a little embarrassed he’d let his guard down enough to fall asleep. Jimmy described feeling a big ball of static above his partner’s

head and realizing he needed to focus his work there. He was astonished. And proud. And I was crying again.

The class ended in the evening. After participants filled out their course evaluations, I thanked and congratulated everyone and asked if there were any last questions.

“When is Level 2?” was the only response.

When indeed.

Aftermath

It’s been nearly two years since this class took place. Anna, for personal reasons, no longer works at the JTDC. And the enthusiastic health care professional from earlier? She is no longer at the facility either. I’m left with these priceless memories and a few bits of encouragement from the feedback forms:

“I came down with bad energy and now leaving with good vibes.”

“My favorite thing was everything.”

And in answer to the question, “How would you improve upon this course?”

“By putting it out to the media worldwide.”

Indeed. 🌸



Heather McCutcheon is founder and president of the Reiki Brigade, an organization that offers Reiki presentations to civic groups including police officers, homeless veterans, medical students, those who are incarcerated, survivors of domestic violence, and at trade shows and corporate wellness events. She is also author of Connecting the Dots: From Ad Exec to Energy Practitioner. She has also received Distinguished Service and Humanitarian awards from the Illinois Chapter of the American Massage Therapy Association for her work with veterans and raising awareness of sex trafficking under the guise of massage therapy within the massage industry. She can be reached through her web site at: <http://www.heather-mccutcheon.com/reiki-brigade> and by email at: heather@reikibrigade.org.