

Remarks of the Hon Marilyn Warren AC
Chief Justice of Victoria
Neighbourhood Justice Centre 10th Anniversary Celebrations
Monday 6 March 2017

Around 12 years ago a meeting was convened by the Victorian Department of Justice for cross jurisdictional interest with representatives from a New York centre for innovation in the courts. Some of us who attended the meeting were puzzled as to what this was all about.

We were told an extraordinary story about the Red Hook Community Justice Centre in Brooklyn. It was a description of a 'cut through', 'one stop' justice institution which focused on solving problems rather than process.

I suspect for the judiciary in the room the concept was wholly challenging. Our judicial mindset generally uses the courtroom as the axis for justice. The meeting led to the establishment of a wholly innovative concept, the Collingwood Neighbourhood Justice Centre.

The vision, commitment and determination of those in Victoria who took the Red Hook concept and adjusted it to the Victorian context must be congratulated and admired. Their legacy through the use of the Red Hook model has had and will continue to have an enduring, reforming and innovative impact on access to justice in this State.

From the humble beginnings of the then rundown and neglected Collingwood Technical School site the Collingwood Neighbourhood Justice Centre emerged.

A key to the effectiveness of a justice system is its recidivism rate and the capacity for rehabilitation which reduces recidivism. The NJC has been an exemplar in both respects.

Over a period of ten years it has tackled and solved the most challenging justice problems that humanity can bring forward. Fundamental to the NJC's success is the experience for the individual who is in trouble. From the moment the individual enters the door of the NJC there has been a constant, embracing atmosphere of help, support and protection. The NJC is not a court precinct of intimidation or fear. At the same time, under the leadership of His Honour Magistrate Fanning an extraordinarily accessible institution of justice has developed. Based as it has been on the Red Hook model, the NJC has provided the genesis and inspiration for the problem solving technique. Here in Victoria we need only reflect on the Drug Court, the Mental Health Court and the CISP program. Most recently, the high water mark of the influence of the NJC on the Victorian justice system is reflected in the recommendation of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Neave Report, for the establishment of 'hubs' which will provide problem solving, shelter and protective centres for those drawn into the justice system through family violence.

I must confess that I did not fully comprehend the relevance and significance of the community justice centre model until I actually went to Red Hook. There I had the privilege and honour of not only meeting His Honour Judge Alex Calabrese but of actually sitting on the bench with him. His sabre-thrusting approach towards all who came before him mixed with a strong sense of justice and compassion was an inspiration. Many Victorians have visited Red Hook and met the judge. All of us have been deeply affected by our fortunate encounter. Sitting on the bench as I was with His Honour, I was astounded by his cut-through approach. At one point when a self-represented litigant was trying to explain difficulties she was having with a housing authority, the judge reached into his pocket under his judicial robes, pulled out his cell phone and called

the housing officer manager directly from the bench. Needless to say the matter was very quickly mediated and resolved to the satisfaction of all. Judge Calabrese finished his conversation with the particular housing official, advising that he had not visited the housing facility for some time and would arrange to visit soon. His Honour demonstrated a case management skill and follow up capacity that is a role model.

An anniversary is something to be celebrated. It is a time to reflect on where an institution has come from, how and what has been achieved. It is also a time to look forward to the future and contemplate how the NJC will forge a new path forward. I wish all at the NJC well in the next phase of their vision. I congratulate the founders and those who have worked in the NJC on ten magnificent years.

May I leave you with a question – given the success of the NJC is it time to consider a new one? Collingwood provides the perfect template.