

A Review of *Red Hook Justice*: Part I

by

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Title: *Red Hook Justice*¹

Producer/Director/Co-Writer: Meema Spadola

Director of Photography: Justin Schein

Released: (2004) VHS, Color, 55 minutes.

Rating: NR

I hope that viewers will watch RED HOOK JUSTICE and consider the successes or failures of the defendants in the context of the neighborhood – to think about the larger question of what we need *beyond* the Justice Center; and how we can balance personal and societal responsibility. What would it mean if quality housing, education, jobs, and healthcare were available in Red Hook, and in other poor neighborhoods nationwide?



Meema Spadola, Filmmaker,
Sugar Pictures

This documentary is set in the troubled Red Hook neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. In recent years, the Red Hook community was beset with a wide range of economic and social problems including impoverishment, unemployment, and high crime rates. Additionally, the Red Hook community contains one of the state’s largest public housing blocks and “almost 80% of Red Hook’s children live without one or both of their birth parents.” In an effort to address these issues in a comprehensive fashion, the Red Hook Community Justice Center (RHCJC) opened in April 2000. The RHCJC represents a “new approach” to halting the revolving door of low-level offenders who repeatedly interact with the criminal courts, and are rewarded with short “bids” in jail.

The “legal revolution” in Red Hook enlisted the community justice movement as its ally in the struggle to confront deteriorated and crime-ridden neighborhoods: “[c]ommunity justice brings together citizens and the criminal justice system to solve neighborhood problems” (Community Justice Exchange, 2005). The idea underpinning the RHCJC – and other similar

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problem-solving, community-focused initiatives – is its multi-jurisdictional approach to addressing a constellation of community problems. Low-level criminal and/or drug offenses, housing disputes, and domestic violence cases, for example, all fall under the sway of a single judge. At Red Hook, that person is Judge Alex Calabrese.

Frequently during the film, Judge Calabrese (and others) point to some of the differences between their innovative venture at the Red Hook Community Justice Center, and more traditional criminal courts where *specific criminal acts* are the focus. Far from focusing solely on the act itself, community justice involves identifying, acknowledging, and addressing the range of problems that contribute to entanglement in the criminal justice system. The criminal acts confronted at the RHCJC also are of a less serious nature, as opposed to the more momentous felony cases dealt with by traditional courts. Additionally, more traditional courts appear concerned with settling cases by plea agreement, to either probation or a short stint in jail.

However, as Legal Aid lawyer Brett Taylor observes: “This court is set up with one goal in mind and that’s to get help for people who want the help.” The film features three of those people – brothers Anthony and Michael Ward, and Letitia Sanchez – as well as several others who are not yet ready to address their problems. The three are assigned to a variety of counseling, training, and community service programs. By the film’s end, it appears as if Anthony, Michael, and Letitia are dealing somewhat successfully with their problems. For all three, the path has been challenging, and the outcome not always assured, as they struggled to meld their personal lives to the demands of the environment in their Red Hook neighborhood.

Judge Calabrese’s worldview also includes the families of the men and women who appear before him. As he notes in the film: “In the traditional courts, defendants and their families are seen as outcasts, community outcasts, and they’re treated as such. Here we recognize that defendants are part of our community, and they’re going to be part of our community when they get arrested, and they’re going to be part of our community when the case is over with. And to a certain extent we are all better off when we try to work with those families.” This sentiment is echoed by Court Officer Leroy Davis who cautions viewers that, “[t]his is a community court and we should treat the community with a lot more respect than we would normally give them.”

Unlike traditional courts, RHCJC Court Officer Leroy Davis demonstrates that justice in Red Hook transcends the courtroom, as well as normal business hours. One clip during the film shows Leroy’s mentoring role, while another illustrates his attempt to include Anthony in a basketball program. Another difference highlighted appears to be in the “celebratory” aspect of justice at the RHCJC. The film shows Judge Calabrese shaking hands and offering congratulations to Anthony and Letitia, and uttering kind and supportive words from the bench. At one point, court personnel and others offer applause. It would seem that hearing the lexicon of encouragement and optimism, rather than that of criticism and rejection, might be more rewarding to those men and women before the court. It might shore-up rather than shatter ones self image and esteem, and thus better assist those “looking to make changes” in their lives. Such congratulations in more traditional courtrooms would seem misplaced.

Another feature of this production is its online, supplemental “RED HOOK JUSTICE Discussion Guide”². The 28-page Discussion Guide offers information on the film itself, like the various characters in the video, and the background to the RHCJC. However, the online manual also appears intended to explore the film, and guide subsequent discussion. In a Section titled “Exploring The Film,” the booklet offers suggestions, or “prompts,” for both “Youth Audiences” and “General Audiences.” The final section of the Guide provides a list of useful resources, complete with URLs, that should assist anyone in learning more about “problem solving courts.”

Which surely must raise the question: Are problems in Red Hook actually solved? Beyond praise for the work that transpires at the Red Hook Community Justice Center, there are legitimate questions regarding “outcomes.” A facile attempt to measure the success of the RHCJC might focus on the time from arrest to arraignment, the number of clients “cured” of their substance abuse problems, and/or the timely resolution of “disputes” that arrive in Judge Calabrese’s courtroom. A more appropriate and realistic approach, though, would be to concentrate on ancillary measures of the success of the Red Hook initiative (i.e., more socially constructive and personally realistic outcomes). As Spadola’s film makes eminently clear, justice in Red Hook marches to the beat of a different drummer; outcome measures logically, therefore, should be rooted in a nontraditional arena as well.

One indicator of the success of the RHCJC can be found in its replication elsewhere. There are approximately two-dozen community courts already in operation in the United States, with several more slated to begin. Significantly, a Community Justice Centre also recently opened in Liverpool, England. According to Former RHCJC Director Adam Mansky (2004): “Officials ranging from the Home Secretary and members of Parliament to the Lord Chief Justice and the Attorney General, have all traveled to New York City to see the concept of community justice in action.... How and why did Red Hook, Brooklyn, a neighborhood with a reputation for drugs, crime, and disorder, become the most sought-after travel destination for British officials?” (p. 254).

The answer to the question Mansky poses might lie in the recognition that justice is complicated, at times fickle, and, most always, not easily achieved. As John Jay Professor Todd Clear notes in *Red Hook Justice*: “The thing about our punishment system is that it imposes a punishment, then it’s done. And the thing about a system that’s trying to make places better places is that it takes two steps forward and one step back. One is really easy to do and the other not so easy to do.” Especially, keeping in mind that: “...community courts focus on bringing citizens and the criminal justice system together in order to solve community problems. By integrating the work of traditionally separate agencies—criminal justice operations, social service providers, public defenders, police and community members—community courts are a product of collaboration” (PBS, 2005). Such a partnership, then, quite accurately is “not so easy to do.”

One of the film’s most promising uses might be the debate it should engender over the role of such courts. For instance, this documentary can easily shepherd students and others into discussions on “the larger question of what we need *beyond* the Justice Center,” and how the balance between “personal and societal responsibility” can best be achieved. A responsible and

non-polemical discussion also might entail a search for answers about whether a community is well served by the “new approach” featured in *Red Hook Justice*. When all is said and done, this is an inspiring production about an innovative and reasonable community justice program. Coupled with other published (e.g., Berman & Feinblatt, 2005; Clear & Karp, 1999; Karp & Clear, 2002) and online (e.g., Center for Court Innovation, 2005; Community Justice Exchange, 2005; PBS, 2005) resources, *Red Hook Justice* carries the potential to be a useful and valuable learning aid.

NOTES

1. *Red Hook Justice* can be obtained from First Run/Icarus Films: <http://www.frif.com>; 800-876-1710.
2. *Red Hook Justice* Discussion Guide can be found at http://www.reentrymediaoutreach.org/pdfs/redhook_discussion.pdf

ENDNOTE

In preparing this review of *Red Hook Justice*, I contacted the former Director of the Red Hook Community Justice Center, Adam Mansky, for additional background information. Mr. Mansky, who currently is the Director for Operations, at the Center for Court Innovation (<http://www.courtinnovation.org/index.html>), responded graciously to my questions, and then made me an offer that I could not refuse: Come down to the Justice Center for a first-hand look at the court. I did, and the trip to the RHCJC illustrated that there was much more to add to the story of dispensing justice in Red Hook. Accordingly, Part II to the story of the Red Hook Community Justice Center will be forthcoming in a subsequent issue of *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*.

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