

To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #20

Title: *Staying Connected*

For four years, I was a regular restorative justice volunteer at the New Lisbon Correctional Institution. It changed my life in ways that I cannot adequately describe in a few short pages. Suffice to say that I am forever grateful to the many men and volunteers in my circles who have trusted me with their stories. I carry those stories with me; they are a part of who I am now.

Unfortunately, a few years ago, changes with my job prevented me from regularly volunteering at NLCI. I have, however, been able to remain connected with the restorative justice program by leading a session at NLCI and at Fox Lake Correctional Institution called "Family Matters." In fact, were it not for the COVID-19 pandemic, I would have met you all at FLCI this spring.

In the Family Matters session, I ask two very important questions: **(1) Name one person whom you consider to be part of your family (this person does not need to be biologically related to you) and tell us a little bit about that person and (2) Think back to when you were 12 years old. Who were you and who loved you?** These two simple questions always elicit honest and emotional responses from all circle members, men and volunteers alike, and I have often been told that the Family Matters session is transformative because many circle members share very personal and often painful details of their lives. The session solidifies a bond of trust amongst the members and observing this transformation as it happens is truly magical.

As we have been living in a COVID-19 world for the past few months, the notion of family is often first and foremost in my mind. I am currently living with my husband and my 19-year-old son, who had his freshman year in college interrupted by the virus. This necessitated his earlier-than-anticipated return home. Because my husband and I are working from home, and my son is taking his classes online, and because we are all social distancing as a way to help contain the virus, we are together ALL THE TIME. Because of that, I think that I sometimes take for granted what it means to be together. I often yearn for time away from them, as odd as that seems.

On the other hand, social distancing has also made me understand what it means to be apart. Right now, I cannot see most of my extended family members. I cannot travel to where they live. Even for the few who live close by, I can only see them while outside, masked up, and six feet apart. We cannot embrace each other. We cannot even touch. My 83-year-old father lives in another state and has pancreatic cancer. If he gets very sick, I will not be able to visit him or hold his hand. This makes me very sad and hits me like a slap in the face as I recall the stories of many men in my restorative justice circles who have described their feelings of deep sorrow at losing a loved one while they are in prison.

The COVID world has also made me understand what it means to be apart from the restorative justice program that has been an important part of my life for so many years. I have created loving relationships with other volunteers who feel like family to me. Driving back and forth from NLCI or FLCI, I have gotten to know them on a deep level as we discuss our lives, our

families, our work, our hobbies, and our emotional responses to what we see and hear in our circles. Even though the restorative justice program lasts only 12 weeks, I have also come to feel like the circle members are part of my family. We learn and grow, laugh and cry together, and it is quite painful to say goodbye.

Of the stories that I hear in the Family Matters circles, the ones that most stick with me are those that describe the longing for human connection. Some men have been able to maintain strong family connections, even while incarcerated. Others have connections that are more tenuous, and still others have lost all connection (if they had any at all when they arrived). I also see these same connections, or lack thereof, in the circle volunteers. We often discuss how to maintain connections or how to repair connections when they have been lost. I know that it is difficult under the best of circumstances. In the COVID world, it is even harder.

So, I challenge us to think about how we might maintain or repair connections with those we consider family even when we are all—inside and outside of prison—being forced to isolate. In fact, is it even possible to strengthen those connections?

Here is a question that might help: If you cannot be in the presence of those you love due to your incarceration and/or due to COVID, what does a hug or other physical contact look like, either through written or oral words or some other depiction? Is it a poem? A painting or drawing? A love letter? A song?

One of my favorite sessions in restorative justice is the third day of the “three days with victims.” Each circle member is asked to bring something to the session that expresses their feelings after hearing the victims’ stories. I am always amazed by what I see (paintings, drawings, beaded, knit, or crocheted work) and hear (original songs, poems, spoken word, letters). These representations, to me, express love and support to the victims, acknowledge their pain, and attempt to heal the harm. They are beautiful and deeply meaningful and expressive. Is there any reason that you and I cannot use these same forms of expression towards people we love but cannot see right now? Is now the time to send that love out to the universe?

The COVID world has made me more fully aware of what the lack of human or family connection can look like and feel like, deep in my bones. I know that someday I will return to FLCI to lead a Family Matters session. Maybe I’ll even lead it with you in the circle. I certainly hope so! As much as I wish the virus would immediately go away, I am trying to see how it might make me a better person, someone more able to focus on the things that matter most. To me, family matters most. And I think that when we reach the other side of this, COVID will have made me a better, more empathetic leader for the Family Matters session. I will have had first-hand experience with painful separation and attempts to maintain connections during that separation. I look forward to telling you my story, and to hearing yours.

I hope you, your family members, and all those you love stay well!

~ Ms. Davis, Restorative Justice volunteer