

To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #22
Title: *How Restorative Justice Changed My Life*

That title seems a little dramatic, but it's true. The summer of 2019 I volunteered to participate in the RJ program at the Wisconsin Resource Center in Oshkosh. I had read numerous books on restorative justice issues, but I truly was not prepared for what I would learn behind bars. Hands down it was one of the best learning experiences I have had in my life...and I'm 70 years old!

The twelve-week curriculum was excellent and the format of interactive dialog was essential. When would you ever have the opportunity to sit in a discussion circle with so many adults of different races, backgrounds and experiences? It was an opportunity of a lifetime. The discussions were deep, sensitive, emotional, sincere and draining. I would leave prison thinking, "Gosh, I haven't had this deep of a discussion with my husband and best friends."

Our first Restorative Justice meeting is imprinted in my memory. Here we were, mostly older, white and female volunteers sitting among a circle of prisoners, mostly young, brown and black. They looked at us and we looked at them. We smiled and shook hands, but what on earth did we have in common? After a brief warm-up introduction, our first topic was to describe our favorite food. We all shared and listened with honest, respectful enthusiasm. A simple non-threatening question, yet a peek into the window of our lives. I wept, but I was not alone.

As the weeks went on, we discussed deeper questions, such as: "*Where were you when you were 13?*", "*Who loved you?*", and "*How did you know they loved you?*" Wow, wow and wow did our backgrounds bubble up to the surface. Is everyone in the circle learning from me as much as I am learning from them? Each week brought us closer together as our own community. Trust and mutual respect continued to grow. We were finding more things in common. There wasn't a session I didn't leave drained. There wasn't a session I wasn't brought to tears... but I was not alone.

Before participating in Restorative Justice, prison reform was about numbers. For example, it cost \$30,000 to keep a person in prison, and we only spend \$13,000 per student per year. Why aren't we spending more on schools to help children stay out of prison? I am ashamed to say that I didn't really care if prisons were nice places. Prison is a punishment, not a reward. Prison does not deter crime; it's where you go if you get caught committing a crime. For me, prisoners and prisons were "out of sight out of mind." Now that I have been behind bars, met the people who are incarcerated, talked with them, listened to them, and shared with them, I no longer look at prisons in terms of cost. I now know about the bright, talented, caring, and reformed people we keep locked up inside. What are we doing to help incarcerated people become who they deserve to become? Prison reform for me is no longer just about saving money and incarcerating fewer people, but about changing the system to help the people already behind bars. They are no longer "out of sight, out of mind." I think about the people in prison every day. They are in my heart and actions.

As an educator, schools and teaching were my mission. I really felt if everyone learned to read, our prisons would not be as full. Education is the key! Well guess what, the men I met in prison were bright, talented, caring and very well-read. Not one of them talked about the importance of schools or teachers. Not one pointed to a teacher who saved their lives or lead them in the right direction. They did not blame their schools or society for their problems. They took ownership for their behavior and mostly impulsive decisions. Through their stories, I discovered that they were victims of poverty, victims of homelessness, victims of hunger, victims of drugs and alcohol, victims of parent abandonment, and victims of easy access to guns. Our schools are NOT the pipeline to prison. What prevents poverty, homelessness, hunger, lack of health care, easy access to guns, and parent abandonment? Our prisons are full of victims of government policies that did not value or save them when they were children. We can do better, we must do better....I now have a new mission.

The participants in Restorative Justice taught me about hope, redemption and forgiveness. Throughout the twelve weeks, I saw hope, redemption and forgiveness first-hand. I heard prisoner after prisoner express regret about their crimes and the hurt they caused others. I heard victims share their losses, pain and forgiveness. I heard incarcerated men serving life sentences share how they wanted to become better men and help other inmates become better people. They wanted to live a better life behind bars. Many of the men had found themselves—they were not the impulsive angry young men that were incarcerated many years ago. They had changed. I saw prisoners learn and change in front of me. I saw myself learning and changing. We were all teachers; we were all learners. As Muhammad Ali said, “A man who views the world the same at 50 as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life.”

One of the most pleasant and unexpected surprises about volunteering for Restorative Justice was that I, as an older retired person, had something to offer prisoners. Coming from a middle-class family, my parents loved me, they fed me, they encouraged me, and they protected me. Nothing awful ever happened to me. The only law I ever broke was driving too fast. I was embarrassed that my life was so good. Would my privilege be resented? I discovered that showing up every week, being present, listening and sharing was humbling and enlightening. The residents were not resentful, they were respectful and thankful. EVERY class the prisoners would thank the volunteers. They would express their dismay that we were free to do whatever we wanted, yet we chose to be with them. Our presence made them feel less like throwaways, and they were surprised that there were people on the outside who cared about them. We did make a difference in their lives. They certainly made a difference in mine and truthfully it doesn't get any better than that!

Restorative Justice did change my life. Thank you to all the participants for the hours we spent together sharing stories. You all made me a better person.

~ Ms. Planner, Restorative Justice volunteer