

**To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #19**

**Title: *Preparing and Planning....and asking for help***

When I grow up, I want to go to prison. Said no one ever.

But here you are and somehow, you are trying to craft a life of integrity inside the walls. That, in itself is challenging. Prison is a skewed environment, certainly a community of individuals having to live side by side but one with lots of rules and monitoring. I'm glad you have found your way to this circle, this community within a community. You are taking steps in the right direction to build a new kind of life, one in which you can be in control and be proud of who you are. And to start thinking and planning for the life you want to have outside these walls.

I have been in Restorative Justice circles inside the walls of several prisons many times. It has been remarkable for each and every person in the circle to make ourselves vulnerable to our own realities, our anger, fears, mistakes, regrets and to listen and hold each other's heartfelt stories carefully. That is a gift that honors our humanity and the fragile places inside each of us.

I have met many remarkable men and women who are seriously looking for a better life, a second chance to rewrite next chapters. We all carry stories that have shaped who we are, and maybe brought us to places we never intended to be. I have heard stories that made me sad, angry and sorry for the harsh ways that humans have treated one another. And sometimes, the limited choices we have. But it's time to take control of that story, to write it in a new way. And you can do this. You are already on your way by being right where you are as you read this.

I am now working with Just Dane, an organization (formerly known as Madison Area Urban Ministry) in Dane County. I am part of a team of people called Circles of Support and we meet weekly with someone who has just returned from prison and is attempting to reenter a community setting. It's not an easy thing to do. The world keeps changing while you may feel your life is on hold. There are hills to climb and challenges to be met but I am glad to be part of a team that wants to listen and coach, helping with networking and resources to meet new goals. We all show up. We ask hard questions. We navigate twists and turns in the re-entry process. And we care. Because we will be neighbors. Together, we can build communities that cushion lives in a world that can be harsh on a daily basis. You already know that. I want you to be part of building a better community in a way that strengthens all of us.

I like this quote from a book I recently read.

*"Asking for help is not giving up. Asking for help is refusing to give up."*

The road of reentry is difficult and challenging. You will be pursued by everything that landed you in prison, people, places, fears, anger, temptations that will beg for your attention. Asking for help can be difficult. We like to think we can manage everything on our own. I can't tell you how many mistakes I have made or muscles I have pulled when I have done that. I tell my children that every job is easier with an extra pair of hands. (or heart!)

And it's up to you to plan for, prepare for and craft the kind of life you want. And to be relentlessly persistent in setting goals, crafting strategies and staying focused on the life you want to live.

I have always appreciated the people who ask me the hard questions; the ones that make me think about myself and the answers I think I have along with the answers I may not want to confront. These questions, however hard, help me grow and face the realities of what has been and what will be. So, I pose a few questions for you to consider right now.

1. *Where can you go to get help to help you build a new life?*
2. *In five words, describe the person you will be in 5 years.*
3. *Who are the people around you?*
4. *Where will be you living?*
5. *List three things you will need to leave behind.*
6. *List three things you will need as you steady yourself into a new life.*
7. *What do you think your greatest challenge will be? How will you cope with it?*

Building a new life takes time, patience and perseverance. As you approach these questions, pick one or two to begin. Take some time to think carefully and write down your honest intention. Set it aside and revisit what you wrote in a day or two. Anything you want to add or change? Your response to one might impact how you approach the next question. Craft these until you feel strong about the reality you want to create for yourself.

There is power in our intentions. Accountability is a precious commodity. Writing your goals down in black and white, and stating them as carefully and succinctly as possible can be a powerful tool. If you have someone you trust, share your goals. State out loud who you intend to be and how you intend to get there. Strategize challenges and possibilities. This may be someone in this circle who has heard the tender story you have shared and holds it with respect and dignity. Revisit these statements each and every day. Picture the person you intend to be and hold that image in your heart and mind. Draw that image to mind when you hit a stumbling block.

Explore where you plan to land outside the walls. Will it be a safe place for you? Will it offer healthy possibilities and positive people? Who will you turn to when you feel frustrated and boxed in by the hurdles in front of you? What do you need to ask for? How might you deal with shortfalls in what you expect?

And best of luck.

~ Ms. O' Neal, Restorative Justice volunteer