

Restorative Justice Graduation Speech  
New Lisbon Correctional Institution

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Good morning and thank you for joining us. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to experience the Restorative Justice program, and it is an honor to be speaker for this year's graduating group. Restorative Justice has been challenging, it has been transformational, and it has been hopeful.

Over the past twelve weeks, the volunteers of Restorative Justice have challenged us to change our perspectives of harm, to change our perspectives of who is harmed by crime, and the many ways that harm affects the lives of victims. They have challenged us to acknowledge harm done, and have emphasized how important acknowledgment is to the healing process. They have challenged us to be open and to fully embrace the possibilities for change within our circle. They pushed us outside of our comfort zones and challenged us to confront some of our deepest emotions. At times it was difficult to talk about certain things, but that was the challenge, to face what was difficult. To think about all the people harmed by our actions, all the people harmed by our crimes, all the people harmed by our violent acts and reckless disregard for life. To face that, acknowledge that, to get into the dirt, to establish some roots, and to begin to grow in that dirt; that was the challenge.

Restorative Justice has been transformational. It has taken the men of this group, many of which had never said two words to each other, and transformed us into a community. Throughout the past twelve weeks, the men and women of this group have fostered a bond that has involved deep sharing, an open trust, and a mutual respect. When I think of some of the men who began the group as quiet and guarded, and then think of how talkative and open they became in the later weeks of the group, I know that Restorative Justice has caused a transformation within them. And that transformation has come by way of sharing, by way of listening, by way of reflecting, relating to one another, and empathasizing.

The most transformational period of Restorative Justice is the three full days we spend with our victim speakers. Debbie and Peg, through the deep power of their stories of personal harm, transformed the men in our circle. They affected and moved every one of us, and the healing energy that filled our circle was something so strong and present, you could almost touch it. And it was because their intent was not to berate us, or bash us, but instead to deliver a message that would uplift and inspire us. To have Peg and Debbie join our circle and tell us that we matter, that we are still part of a community outside of prison, and that they want to see us back out there and doing well; to hear that from two people who have been deeply affected by crime---that was transformational.

Restorative Justice has been hopeful. Just as we learned about the Ripple Effect of Harm, so too did we learn about the Ripple Effect of Healing. And just as harm has unintended consequences and victims, healing can have unforeseen benefits, and far-reaching effects.

At the heart of Restorative Justice is the Triangle of Victim, Offender and Community. When crime occurs each of these is negatively affected and harmed. Restorative Justice provides hope that things can be made right, even if only to some degree. Restorative Justice goes beyond the courtroom form of justice and seeks a healing form of justice, a justice that addresses the needs of the victims, and the offenders, a justice that works to restore communities by affecting individuals. By helping to change our perspectives, and by strengthening our sense of empathy, they are helping to restore communities.

But it is up to us graduates to internalize what we have experienced over the past twelve weeks, and determine within ourselves to be better because of it. To go forth each day mindful of our actions and how they affect others. To continue to ask ourselves, “I wonder how that would make her feel;” “I wonder how that would make him feel.” To go forth and keep our light shining. To know that our past does not have to define us.

The Restorative Justice volunteers have sown seeds. They have recognized the fertile soil here within these fences, and have worked to foster a deep growth. They have taken our personal dirt, that deep, dark, rich dirt, and they have sown seeds of hope, seeds of change. But I do not regard the Restorative Justice volunteers as gardeners; they are not planting flowers or vegetables. I consider them foresters. I believe that they have planted trees. And that their hope is for us to continue to grow from our dirt. To grow tall and strong. To branch out and bask in the light. I believe that they have sown the seeds of something lasting, something to weather the seasons, something that can withstand the harsh cold, and hold its own against the whipping wind. A community of trees; a forest of change, a forest of hope—that is what they have sown here.

So, to the Restorative Justice volunteers, thank you. And to all the graduates of Restorative Justice, “Shine On.”