

2019 Restorative Justice Graduation Speech

Fox Lake Correctional Institution

I am so honored to be chosen by my peers to do this, and I will try my best to make all of our voices speak as one - sort of like that “round” that Ms. Wallace taught us.

On behalf of the men who are housed here, and especially the ones who participated in this Fall 2019 Restorative Justice Program, I would like to first give a most heartfelt thank-you to all the volunteers who have made this program possible for us to even have a chance to complete it.

Your sacrifices, time, and efforts on behalf of the good of mankind are greatly appreciated by the men who sit in this room today. Without you, we wouldn't be here right now, feeling as though we are all connected to one another, and keenly aware that we share some commonality no matter what walks of life we come from. It is such a powerful, and wonderful thing that you all have done for us.

This journey that you all have taken us over the last 12 weeks has been a rollercoaster of emotions. It has been exciting, happy, sad, humbling, firm, vulnerable, caring, kind, thoughtful, and most importantly, loving.

Your pure dedication to showing up, and *restoring justice* makes it impossible for us men not to get something positive from this program. Most certainly, we are all walking away uplifted by the fact that someone cared enough to give us their time.

We would like for y'all to know that we understand it has to be hard, and maybe even discouraging sometimes, to come here and try to help us be better in our lives and communities. Even so, faced with those obstacles you all show up week in and week out. That is amazing, and it takes amazing people to do it.

Because of the selfless acts of you all, we have been forced to really think about what Restorative Justice is. I can tell you that we understand, that we get it. I feel it's the least we could do to show our appreciation.

Due to your efforts, all of us men now understand that we do an injustice to our loved ones and communities, when we sow seeds of hatred, violence, and selfish behaviors. Those things only lead to pain and isolation, which is what many of us have done so far in life.

So, on behalf of all the men in this fall's program, I send a major “shout out” to all of you, for the willingness to look around the mountain of darkness, or in this case look over the fences of doom, and see the sun shining on the inside of us human beings. Believe me, for all of us, you are God-sent, and we thank y'all so much.

To the staff here who believe in and have hope for us men – who are sometimes deemed incorrigible by society, peers, and sometimes even family members – I would like to say, thank

you so much for having faith, not in us, but in the possibility that maybe these types of programs do work, and seeing to it that we have an opportunity to seek something better in our lives if we want. Without your willingness to allow these special volunteers to come in here and teach, none of this would be possible. Let's all remember, if this program reaches just one individual then that would be one more person "restored" than there would have been, if the program weren't here. For me, that is worth it. Thank you all.

As for the loved ones who were able to make it here today, please understand this At some point in everyone's life, there comes a time when he looks at another person or several people he loves, and he thinks that someday he would like to let them know how much he loves and appreciates them. Or maybe he would like to one day make them as proud of him as he is of them. He would like to let them know that they are his heroes. For me those people are my mother, sister, and friend and mentor.

Most of the time we brush off those thoughts, figuring we got time, and she/he/they know how we feel about them already. Sometimes – or very often – we don't know what steps to take to get to that point of showing them our love and appreciation, especially when we are sitting in these prisons.

Today, however, is different. For all the loved ones who came here, please know that a lot of the reason we sit right here, right now – proud of ourselves for completing something, and getting acknowledged for it – is because of our desire to change, in the hopes of making you proud of us too.

We may not know how to say it with words yet, or you may not be able to actually see it yet. But for today we would like to share this moment with you and hope that we have done something to make you proud of us.

For the men who have chosen to participate in this program and finish it ... Congratulations! We should all be proud of ourselves. I know I am. We dug in and put our minds to completing something – something that is important not only to us, but to our community. In a big way, we did something that was not selfish. For some of us, this is our first time doing that, and it is great! We have taken the first steps towards actual *restorative justice*, in my opinion. By completing this we have showed someone that we can be depended on to see things through. We have shown great responsibility, and we should all be proud of ourselves.

I remember when we first started this program, this journey. We all came in here a little apprehensive and closed off from one another. As time went by, we slowly began to open up to one another and build a good community right here in the "worst" place on earth. We shared with each other some of our most prized possessions, in hopes that we would get to know each other a bit better. We laughed and even shed some tears, and allowed ourselves to be vulnerable. That has made us all closer to each other, with a sense of being men in a micro community, vs inmates doing time. Because of this program we all now understand, and have a bit more empathy for one another and others. That is what this is all about. At least I think so.

Some of us came here thinking we would do something to look good at PRC. Some came looking for some sort of change. Either way, it doesn't matter because we all participated and saw it through. No matter what the reason for coming, we all learned something. So, I leave you with the same words that I told so many 7th graders over my 10 years of talking to them ... Education is one of the most important things you will ever do in life. However, in order to receive a good education, you have to be willing to work hard to get one. By seeing this program through, you have worked hard and learned something positive, even if you don't know it yet – and that is *restoring justice*.

Now that we men know better, how about we all go out and do better? Please don't let this journey end with the certificates that you receive today. That would be an injustice to the volunteers, staff and our loved ones. Be the example that you would like to see in the world. The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.