

To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #35

Title: *Hope Behind the Walls*

The early morning was overcast and foggy as I left Madison heading to the Columbia Correctional Institution, a maximum-security prison for men about an hour north of the city. As we drove through the countryside, the sun came out and it became a clear, crisp Wisconsin day.

I was going to prison to attend the graduation ceremony of the Restorative Justice program directed by Rev. Jerry Hancock. The program promotes healing by helping prisoners understand the full consequences of their crimes summarized in the acronym RICH – Respect, Instruction, Community and Hope.

As we arrived, we were processed into the prison. All personal items were locked in small individual lockers and we entered through a metal detector. It was my first time “behind the walls.”

The scripture from Matthew 25 kept running through my head, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

We were brought to a large, brightly lighted room with windows on two sides. Just outside the windows was a grassy area on the prison campus. You could see the razor wire on the top of the tall fence around the perimeter. As we entered, the nineteen inmates who had completed the course were

already seated on one side in their green uniforms. The inmates were talking with each other, joking around and in good humor with the anticipation of the recognition they were to receive.

With everyone seated, the program began. There was the usual graduation welcome made by Rev. Hancock and introductions of prison staff and volunteers. One of the graduation speeches was given by an inmate, “Michael,” representing the class.

“Michael” had served sixteen years of a life sentence. He spoke with passion about his time with the other men in this class and how it had changed his outlook. His main theme was HOPE! Hope that life for these men would be better, hope that the transformation they had experienced would continue and hope that those on the “outside” would begin to see these men and all those incarcerated in a more human way. Hearing him talk about his HOPE was profoundly moving. What a witness to the ministry of caring that is Restorative Justice!!

As the graduates’ names were called, they came forward for their diplomas. This was the first time many of these men had been recognized for anything positive in their lives. What smiles were on their faces! Each one had an opportunity to speak to the group about what this program and the experience of the class had meant to him. Some

remarks were short. Some had important things to say using comments they had prepared with much thought. Several mentioned how they hoped the perception of those on the “outside” would change and that those in the community would recognize the humanness and individuality of each inmate. This would always get applause from the other inmates!

One young man shared that after he was released, he hoped to be able to talk with young boys about his experiences and help them not to make the same mistakes he had.

Another inmate shared a greeting card that he had made with beautiful three-dimensional pieces. He was quite an artist and hoped to do something with this talent when he was released.

As all this was happening, I had to stop and remember where I was. Except for the green uniforms and the guard in the back of the room, it could have been any school or community center where people had completed a course of study and were celebrating the accomplishment. The inmates were just as pleased with themselves as anyone. The transformation was evident.

As they were lined up to be taken back to their units, I was again brought back to reality and the recognition of the structure of their lives. And yet, I sensed a true sense of community and new HOPE. A HOPE that when the opportunity to tell others what they had learned about Restorative Justice came, they would have the courage and skill to share it.

For me it was a true blessing to be part of this morning in prison. As I look back, the fog of the early morning turning to bright sunshine was a prediction of my experience with and understanding of the men whose lives brought them to incarceration. My eyes, ears and heart have been opened to the circumstances of those about whom I knew truly little. I now know nineteen men who were able to step out and share an experience of transformation, love and, yes, HOPE.

~ Susan Ingle, 2008 RJ graduation attendee