

# Restorative Justice in Wisconsin Prisons:

## Perspectives from Offenders, Volunteers, and Victim Survivors



# A Report from The Prison Ministry Project

## Fall 2020

# Introduction

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**Restorative Justice** programs in prisons are concerned with healing the harm caused by crime. This is a wide and inclusive view of justice that goes beyond traditional ideas of crime and punishment and seeks to involve all of those affected by crime—**victims, offenders, and community members**—in purposeful discussions that explore and repair the harm.

The roots of Restorative Justice reach deep into human history and can be traced to indigenous cultures throughout the world. These cultures understood that harm ripples out to affect relationships throughout the community, and that thoughtful community dialogue is needed to restore trust, mutual respect, and balance.

Founded in 2006, the Prison Ministry Project's (PMP) Restorative Justice initiative brings these basic Restorative Justice principles into prison settings throughout Wisconsin. The non-sectarian program, sponsored by the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Madison, has reached over 1,000 incarcerated men and women, bringing them together with hundreds of volunteers from outside the prison walls. In weekly circle discussions, participants gradually develop trust in their fellow group members as they meet to share stories and talk about the ripples of harm.

Restorative Justice in Prison allows us to take the stories of the men and women inside to the outside world and take the outside world to the men and women inside. Through sharing, caring, and purposeful discussions healing can take place.

## What are the goals of the Restorative Justice in Prison program?

Although there are many different models of doing Restorative Justice, the goals that drive the Prison Ministry Project's model are:

- To understand the harm that is caused by crime to victims (and their families), offenders (and their families), and the community.
- To understand the values underlying Restorative Justice--*Respect, Responsibility, Relationships*--and to help participants live lives of integrity no matter where they reside.
- To create within the walls of prison a safe space for all participants to share their stories, express their feelings, describe changes that they want to make, build empathy and self-knowledge, and support others in the circle who are also working to change.
- To learn different strategies and tools that will assist all participants now, and in the future.

## What happens in the 12-week Restorative Justice program?

Group members meet weekly for two hours to hear personal stories, engage in discussions and activities that help them examine their own lives, and talk about the changes that they want to make. An essential part of the program is a three-day intensive experience where, by interacting with victim survivors, participants truly come to understand the harm that has resulted from crime. The prison residents who successfully complete the program attend a graduation ceremony and celebration to which their family members are invited.

- All discussion happens in a circle format; prison residents and volunteers fully participate; it is a safe space for exploration, reflection, and change.
- The program is based on the acronym RICH: Respect, Information, Community, Hope.

- Session topics include: Concepts of Restorative Justice, Respect, Perspective, Family Matters, Legal Questions, Life on the Outside.
- Circle members hear stories from survivors of crime and respond verbally and creatively.

## **The Survey**

The idea that Restorative Justice aims to help heal the harm done by crime assumes that everyone is harmed--**victims, offenders, and community**. To be truly restorative, we must seek to restore the dignity and relationships of all involved. With this understanding, it is important to learn how the program has affected each group. This report endeavors to do just that. In the summer of 2020, the PMP designed a set of survey questions asking for feedback from participants who had gone through the Restorative Justice program. The survey was sent to:

- graduates of the Restorative Justice program at Fox Lake Correctional Institution,
- community volunteers who have been part of the program in various institutions from the beginning, and
- victim survivors who are essential to the program.

## **Something about the people who responded to the survey:**

- All of the Restorative Justice graduates who responded are still living at Fox Lake Correctional Institution. A few of them were in the program in the earliest year, 2009-2010. Most participated in the past five years.
- The volunteers' participation ranges from a few who began the program 14 years ago to one who began in the past year. A few have been volunteers for over 10 years.
- Four victim survivors have told their stories in the Restorative Justice program. All have responded to the survey.

The survey summary report is in three parts, with each of the responding groups telling its own story. In addition, we have provided some summary and analysis. As in the Restorative Justice circle, the stories we each share become the way that we learn about ourselves and the way that we begin to heal. By sharing the comments from survey recipients, we hope to convey the ways in which this program can successfully heal the harm so that:

- offenders are able to live well wherever they are living, in prison or out;
- a community is better able to receive offenders when they are once again our neighbors; and
- victim survivors find a healing that might have, at one time, seemed elusive.

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## **Restorative Justice Graduate Surveys**

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### **Background**

The Restorative Justice program, which has existed since 2008 at several Wisconsin prisons, has been perceived by many as very successful. Graduates of the program have provided informal feedback on specific changes that they are making. Volunteers and prison staff have shared comments about significant life changes that they have observed. Men in the Restorative Justice circle have also shared how many years it took for them to be able to participate in a group. For instance, at Fox Lake Correctional Institution, over 200 men typically apply for the 30 available slots. Because of this history

and the strong interest to participate in these groups, it seemed like the right time to collect data on the impact of this program.

In the spring of 2020, plans were in place to run focus groups at Fox Lake and refresher groups at New Lisbon Correctional facilities. These had to be cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic. In their place, the Restorative Justice Planning Group put together a survey, which was tested with 37 men at Fox Lake who had graduated from the Restorative Justice program some time during the past twelve years.

The preliminary findings in this document align the survey results with the goals of the Restorative Justice program. In the future, it is our hope to send this survey to more Restorative Justice graduates and volunteers.

### **Overall Goal of the Survey**

***To document the impact of the Restorative Justice experience and assess whether the program is meeting its goals.***

#### **Survey Instrument: Graduates**

1. When you think about the Restorative Justice experience, what three words would best describe it for you?
2. On a scale of 1-5, how did you feel about the Restorative Justice program?
3. Why did you sign up for the Restorative Justice experience?
4. What is one of the most important things that you learned during the Restorative Justice experience?
5. To what extent did the program change your views of your *victims* and the *community*?
6. To what extent did the program change your views of *yourself*?

### **By the Numbers\***

In addition to written comments, questions 2, 5, and 6 asked participants to rate the program on a graduated scale.

#### **On a scale of 1-5, how did you feel about the Restorative Justice program?**

Not that valuable	Somewhat valuable	Extremely valuable
<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>28</b>

#### **To what extent did the program change your views of your *victims* and the *community*?**

Not that much	Somewhat	To a great extent
	<b>5</b>	<b>27</b>

#### **To what extent did the program change your views of *yourself*?**

Not that much	Somewhat	To a great extent
<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>23</b>

\*Not all participants responded to the first and third questions.

## **GOAL I: To understand the harm that is caused by crime to victims (and their families), to offenders (and their families), and to the community.**

One of the clearest themes that emerged from the survey responses was an awareness by an overwhelming number of participants that the impact of their crime reached far beyond the specific harm done to the victim. Throughout the restorative justice experience participants learned about the *Ripple Effect*. By listening to each other's stories and the experiences of the volunteers, the incarcerated men in the circle came to the realization that their decisions and crimes have impacted the victim, the victim's family, themselves, their families, and the community. For many of the men, this was a totally new concept, and it changed their perspective and their desire to behave in different ways in the future.

### **Comments from Participants**

#### ***Ripple Effect***

- *The program helped me understand my actions are a ripple effect and hurt not only myself but the victim, the family, and the community.*
- *As simple as it sounds—the Ripple Effect was huge. Thinking about all the people who were directly and indirectly affected by my and others' actions.*
- *I learned that my actions good or bad can cause ripple effects in my community.*
- *How the impact of my crime affected my victim and everyone around us. Not just their family, but my loved ones as well.*
- *While being able to understand the impact of my crime on a victim, I began to see many more victims, which has allowed me to think about the ripples my actions can lead to.*
- *I always knew I had caused a negative ripple effect with my bad choices, but I gained a whole lot more understanding of the impact.*
- *Of course, anyone who has committed a crime realizes his/her victims, however, not many realize the ripple effect! This program gave me that vision and/or understanding as to that impact on the community.*
- *I am made to stop and think of all the victims I have made through my selfish actions. The ripple effect is devastatingly profound when one stops and actually looks at all affected by crimes committed.*

#### ***Perspective***

- *It gave me a different perspective on my crime and the ramifications of my actions.*
- *The safety of neighbors and strangers is as important as my immediate family.*
- *Every offender can gain something from seeing things from the victim's and community's point of view.*
- *When using the word survivors in place of victims, it was powerful. It helped me realize that I myself was a survivor of many traumatic experiences and that I was creating victims/survivors all around me—a hurt person hurting people. I needed to change that.*

#### ***Taking responsibility***

- *That other people are affected by your choice to do wrong to others and in that your choice is the one that set off a chain reaction to offset a lot of people's lives.*
- *It made me realize the magnitude of what I had done, on top of the fact that I could never apologize, nor make it right. There will always be a void in my victim's family life. It really opened my eyes to the harm that criminal judges speak of when speaking about what a crime has done.*

- *I view things differently because I know the effect that my actions had on not just the victim but the victim's family, the community, my family and myself.*
- *Never did I realize the extent of my selfishness. This included petty crimes for said selfish gain.*
- *It showed me how much pain, harm, suffering, destruction I caused to many people, places and things. It exposed my selfish disposition and my lack of respect for others. It taught me that every thought and every decision has to be evaluated and scrutinized before acting out. That love has to rule my life.*
- *I don't believe I'll ever forgive myself for that BUT if I can help someone...maybe it might chip away the hatred towards myself.*

**GOAL II: To understand the values underlying Restorative Justice--Respect, Responsibility, Relationships--and to help participants live lives of integrity no matter where they are living.**

The cornerstone values of Restorative Justice--*Respect, Responsibility and Relationships*--were woven throughout the survey comments in responses to all of the questions. A new sense of respect for others and self grew out of conversations about recognizing the harms caused by crime. This, in turn, led to acknowledging responsibility for the participants' actions, but also taking responsibility for making a difference in the future because of past actions. The focus on relationships connects to what happens in the circle and to building trust among participants so that they can share their truth and their stories.

**Comments from Participants**

***Respect***

- *I've learned to respect others in my life, including my community. Because if I didn't, others affected by my actions will hurt others as well.*
- *I learned to look at the world from both sides instead of being selfish and thinking only of me.*
- *That we need to care more for one another as just plain human beings. We need to show respect and stop and listen to others. We need to try to lift others up rather than drag them down.*
- *It made me look deep into my soul and ask myself, would I want to be treated the way I treated my victims and the answer is no, I wouldn't. Thank you for allowing me to enter this program. It truly opened up my mind and heart.*

***Responsibility***

- *RJ helped me to come to terms with the damage I caused and who was affected and helped me set goals to improve who I am and take responsibility.*
- *Now knowing I have a choice in it all helps me make day to day choices big and small and I hope I will be ready for the world once again.*
- *On this journey of evolving and being the best version of the man God meant for me to be, my goals and purpose in life changed. I am determined and motivated to have much more of a positive effect in this world than I had a negative.*
- *I kept thinking of what I didn't do in the action of our crime. Now I see my part clearly and understand how I still had just as much blame as others. I may now truly atone for my crime.*

***Relationships***

- *It allowed me to see where other people were coming from, what they thought, what they'd gone through. It made me realize so many people are hurting that try to hide it and "act tough."*

- *This group taught me to listen to other people and their stories. To never “judge a book by its cover” and that I had a lot in common with people I did not know.*
- *That everyone has a story and a voice and that we are truly all in this together.*

**GOAL III: To create a community within the walls of prison that is a safe space for all participants to share their stories, express their feelings, describe changes that they want to make, encourage empathy and self-knowledge, and support others in the circle who are also working to change.**

While the participants did not comment specifically on the group dynamics of the circle, their comments reflected what they were able to learn and experience by being in a group where the guiding principles focused on building trust and vulnerability. This unusual group experience in a prison setting led to powerful outcomes for group members. Many comments focused on new learnings, leading their lives differently, taking care of each other and themselves, and being hopeful about the future.

### **Comments from Participants**

#### ***Intended changes***

- *It was a much needed chance to actually put in some real work towards rehabilitation, an opportunity to discover some new ways of thinking and living well.*
- *It gives hope to those who find flaws in themselves and want to change. Everyone can get something out of it, even if they think they can't.*

#### ***Caring for each other and themselves***

- *Emotionally healing and taking responsibility for one's own actions.*
- *We are all one people, sharing a limited life together. We can either go on hurting each other or we can come to an understanding and help one another. After all, we only have one shot to make it right.*

#### ***Building empathy and self-knowledge***

- *That victims learned to use their traumatic experience(s) they faced to strengthen themselves and not let the abusers have power over them.*
- *I've learned a lot during the experience, but I think the most important thing I learned was listening. In another program here at Fox Lake, I was taught to listen to understand and not listen to respond.*
- *That people will forgive for the harm we commit.*
- *To actually be confronted by actual victims of very serious crimes and to hear the story of suffering and violation was very real and piercing to my soul. To feel their pain and experience the misery though a verbal rendition was heart wrenching and it made you understand the extreme I once partook of.*
- *Hearing the stories told from other than the offender hurt a little but was needed. It showed me personally how great of a reach each of my actions have.*
- *Learning what I did I expected to be beat down by my actions but that isn't what the program is about at all. People do bad things doesn't make them horrible people without redeeming value.*
- *The Restorative Justice program will not only help you understand life itself, but it will help you understand “yourself” most importantly. You will start to look at things differently and*

*just have a totally different way of viewing things. You actually learn a lot about yourself and your community.*

- It really allowed me to see where other people were coming from, what they thought, what they'd gone through. It made me realize so many people are hurting that try to hide it and "act tough."*

#### **Providing support**

- The power of forgiveness. The power of love. The power of hope. The power of community. The power of understanding.*
- That everyone has a story and a voice and that we are truly all in this together.*
- Even though still hesitant, I was amazed and still am about how people are reaching out to help inmates to commit themselves to a restorative relationship with their families and communities so as not to create more victims or even become one.*
- That there are people on the streets that do care about our rehabilitation and that gave me even more drive to succeed in prison. To take responsibility.*

#### **GOAL IV: To learn different strategies and tools that will assist all participants now, and in the future.**

Responses from the RJ graduates indicated that they felt that the Restorative Justice program gave them new ways to live while they are in prison. In addition, they looked forward to having the opportunity to use these tools when they are no longer in prison.

#### **Comments from Participants**

##### **Self-awareness**

- That we need to care more for one another as just plain human beings. We need to show respect and stop and listen to others. We need to try to lift others up rather than drag them down.*
- I've learned to respect others in my life, including my community.*
- It showed me that I was open to the truth and a positive way of thinking before I act. It was a great program to me!!!*
- It helped me realize and empowered me—I possess the power and the knowledge to heal and change the negative ripple effects I once created, with a far more positive influence and determination to restore justice every opportunity I have a chance to.*

##### **New skills**

- Listening to understand was what I did because it helped me understand the people more and actually visualize their character and the things they went through.*
- It's a great tool for those who want greater understanding of the consequences of every action.*
- This group taught me to listen to other people and their stories. To never "judge a book by its cover" and that I had a lot in common with people I did not know.*
- I take the time to think before acting and consider all my options and consequences.*

##### **Making changes**

- That other people's stories are important and that people in this group really worked hard to change how their stories ended.*



- *Though I have yet to experience life outside post-offense, I've gotten a glimpse of what life has been like for my victim and how a community without myself doesn't move forward as a whole.*
- *Now knowing I have a choice in it all helps me make day to day choices big and small and I hope I will be ready for the world once again.*
- *It changed my views to the greatest extent 'cause now I can be considerate of how my victim felt or how much I can go to my community now and try to make a difference. Try to change and teach my community on a more positive note.*

#### **Future actions**

- *I would like to start a program in the community with what I learned in the program. I hope the abusers can change from the incarceration and learn to better themselves and serve their community in a way to prevent situations or help the victims.*

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## **Restorative Justice Volunteer Surveys**

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Restorative Justice volunteers were asked to respond to some of the same questions as the RJ Graduates. In addition, there were extra questions that would apply only to the volunteers. This part of the report is organized the same way as the report for the RJ Graduates, using the goals of the Restorative Justice program.

Restorative Justice volunteers were purposeful and focused about why they chose to spend their time volunteering in prison. Many were invited by friends who thought that they would be interested in this kind of experience, while others were curious after they had heard someone speak about their experience. Volunteers were very clear about wanting to make a commitment to volunteer in some capacity that involved doing social justice work or trying to understand and improve the criminal justice system. Finally, a number of volunteers were looking for a meaningful opportunity to give back to their communities, and were open to an experience that was very different from anything that they had done before.

All volunteers agreed that they learned a lot from their RJ experience. This comment sums up many of the thoughts from the volunteers:

*One of the most important things I learned (and share with people who show interest in the RJ program) is what a waste of human potential occurs in the course of incarceration. As the men and women who are incarcerated experience trust and community in the course of the 12 weeks, they develop amazing insight into their past, what led them to crime, and who they would like to become in the future. This is not to argue that reasonable consequence is not due those who have committed serious crimes. But the people I have met are clearly capable of building skills while incarcerated, to better support success both personally and in societal contribution during the time they are in prison. And those who have extremely long or life sentences can benefit from building character, self-respect, skills, and talents that will benefit the entire prison community.*

One of the "jobs" for RJ volunteers is to share their experience with people outside of the prison walls. They want to tell the story about the humanity, intelligence, creativity, and remorse they find among the men in prison. Volunteers have talked with friends and family, educational and church

organizations. They can usually talk for a long time about their experience, impressions, and learnings garnered in the Restorative Justice circle. It is important to share the hopes and fears of the men who will one day be our neighbors.

#### **Survey Instrument: Volunteers and Victim Survivors**

1. When and where did you participate in Restorative Justice?
2. When you think about your Restorative Justice experience, what three words best describe it for you?
3. Why did you sign up for the Restorative Justice experience?
4. What is one of the most important things you learned during the Restorative Justice experience?
5. To what extent did the program change your views of victims and the community?
6. How did the program change your views of people in prison?
7. Did participation in the program change how you understand yourself?
8. How have you been able to tell the story of Restorative Justice to people outside the walls? Family? Friends? Community organizations? Others?

#### **GOAL I: To understand the harm that is caused by crime to victims (and their families), to offenders (and their families), and to the community.**

Volunteers described becoming more aware of the impact of crime on not just the victims, but also on the victims' families, the community, and themselves. They were able to observe how the behavior of the participants in the circle changed as they became more aware of this new knowledge and the importance of taking responsibility for their crimes. By representing the community in the RJ circle, volunteers came to understand the wider impacts of criminal behavior that ripple out to the community.

#### **Comments from Volunteers**

- *It expanded my view of victims, for sure. I never really thought about the ripple effects of crime, and how a crime can affect not just the immediate victim, but the victim's family, friends, and community as well as the perpetrator's family, friends, and community. So, focusing on the ripple effects of harm and how to heal that harm was very eye-opening to me.*
- *I saw a level of willingness on the part of the people in prison to try to understand the victims and the effects their actions had on their victims. I saw a level of remorse and earnestness to dig deeper within themselves for moral responsibility and a way to make it up to the victims and to the community.*
- *I hadn't really thought much about the power of healing by giving back to the community. I always understood that there were victims of crime, but I hadn't thought much about how the community was also harmed by crime.*

#### **GOAL II: To understand the values underlying Restorative Justice--*Respect, Responsibility, Relationships*--and to help participants live lives of integrity no matter where they are living.**

The overriding sentiment of volunteers was an increased respect for people who participated in the RJ circles. Their comments highlighted a recognition of assumptions that they had made prior to coming to volunteer in prison, only to have those assumptions turned around as they became more familiar with the hopes, dreams, and actions of the participants who tried to make better decisions for their families

and themselves. Volunteers also noted that offenders increased expressions of compassion for their victims and for those in the circle.

### **Comments from Volunteers**

- *I also believe – and have seen it happen again and again in our circles – that people can get in touch with that inner potential to be and do good if treated as a person of value. Often the men say, “We are treated like animals not human beings.” Our program tries to tell them they are worthy of respect and capable of redemption.*
- *As a lawyer, I participated as a defense attorney in a few criminal cases in \_\_\_\_\_. This was a number of years ago, but I’ve always been drawn to criminal defense work due to the injustices in the criminal justice system. Because I’m no longer practicing law, I felt that participating in RJ would allow me to make a small difference in the lives of incarcerated men in Wisconsin. Little did I know what the experience would bring!*
- *I had had experience in the criminal justice system with my “foster” son, and I thought that participating in RJ might help give me insight into his prison experience and into ways I could help him to take ownership of the harm he had caused to heal that harm.*
- *I have always believed (and placed hope) in the power of caring relationship to build resilience, self-esteem and positive outlook as well as foster healing from stress and trauma. Plus, I just like people.*
- *Through learning about the lives of the men in prison, I have come to truly understand that we have more in common than we have differences. And by this, I mean our common humanity, and our need for love, understanding, family, beauty, belonging, etc. I do not in any way mean to say that my privileged upbringing as a white female with a loving and supportive family is in any way similar to a black man growing up in poverty in Milwaukee. But when we dig deep in our circles, I feel our common “human-ness” in ways I never thought possible.*
- *I also saw that RJ has the possibility to allow victim and perpetrator to see each other as human, come to understanding one another, come to forgiveness, and experience possible healing.*
- *RJ allows us to appreciate the humanity of those who are incarcerated and come face to face with the life tragedies that have influenced the behaviors which led to their crimes. Listening to the stories brings us face to face with how most of the people we incarcerate have been failed by society and deprived of the education, safety, opportunities and resources needed to “Succeed” in life.*
- *I have learned that people can show incredible resilience. Hearing the stories of both the victims and the men has taught me that even though terrible things can and do happen to people, forgiveness and healing can occur. The men have often indicated their acceptance of serving time in reparation for their crimes and their resolve to make the best of their incarceration while they prepare for their futures on the outside.*

**GOAL III: To create a community within the walls of prison that is a safe space for all participants to share their stories, express their feelings, describe changes that they want to make, encourage empathy and self-knowledge, and support others in the circle who are also working to change.**

Volunteers found the circle format to be a powerful, receptive, safe, healing, and enriching space. They were grateful to the circle process and for the ways it encouraged their own personal growth, and for the growth opportunities it afforded the prison residents. Many were surprised by the strong sense of community that developed among participants of very diverse backgrounds. All were impressed by the

intelligence, creativity, wit, candor, and sincere effort that participants in the group contributed as fellow community members.

#### **Comments from Volunteers**

- *The willingness, earnestness and vulnerability that people in prison will go through to learn about themselves and their victims in order to heal and learn and grow. Also, the vulnerability, courage, and willingness that victims are willing to go through to heal and forgive in order to build a bridge to true restoration and justice. The willingness on both parts – the people in prison and the victims – to deeply understand one another and possible transformation.*
- *I have always had an understanding that, at our core, we are all good and that circumstances nourish or damage that. In these circles, I have been reminded of the life shaping effect family and community have on one's life.*
- *I found the inmates, by and large, to be articulate, interesting, and interested in changing their perceptions about themselves and the effects of their actions on their victims and the community. They were more open than I had anticipated.*

#### **GOAL IV: To learn different strategies and tools that will assist all participants now, and in the future.**

Volunteers were strongly motivated to advocate for the men and women they encountered inside the walls. Listening to men's and women's stories in the circle illuminated the social, economic, and political forces that lead to incarceration, and strengthened their commitment to continued participation as volunteers, and their resolve to learn more about the criminal justice system in order to actively advocate for change.

#### **Comments from Volunteers**

- *In the group exercises that look at ripple effects to victim, perpetrator, respective families, community, I am impressed by how often I have not considered the full impact of crime. The spectrum is so much broader than just arrest, conviction, incarceration. If there is to be healing, it needs to address all those affected, as much as possible.*
- *I think the program allowed me the opportunity to be the "witness," to watch the process and see the potential for growth and healing on both parts...How can I be a better bridge-builder in my own life and create "restorative justice" with the people in my own circles of social interactions? I also truly enjoyed bringing the gift of meditation to the men and presenting it as a useful tool in their stress management. I enjoyed reaching out to them and connecting in any way that I might be able to help with their situation of living in prison.*
- *I have talked to a lot of people in my world about the program and what it tries to do. I have answered lots of questions about being "inside" and what it is like. I've talked about what I have learned, and I have become a lot more interested in prison experiences in general and hope to learn more about the whole system in the future. I'd love to learn more about how the prisons operate in Wisconsin and how our program fits into the whole system.*
- *It taught me the importance of being present and helped me to become a better listener.*
- *Through self-reflection and listening to the stories of others I've grown in understanding of myself and how I relate to others.*

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## Restorative Justice Victim Survivor Surveys

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Four survivors of crime have been regularly involved as speakers during three three-day intensive victim survivor circle—two of the four since 2011, one since 2015, and one since 2018. Although they responded to the same set of questions as volunteers, we have isolated their responses because of the unique role they play in the Restorative Justice in Prison program.

All four are deeply committed to the principles of Restorative Justice and have found its practice to be healing and transformational. They have written and spoken about their experiences widely in public venues in an effort to convey their experiences to the outside community. They agree that Restorative Justice in Prison has allowed them to transition from victim to thriving survivor. And they feel that it has given their fellow circle members—volunteers and prison residents alike—the same opportunity. Restorative Justice has allowed them to rebuild their lives and relationships and create the hopeful, resilient, compassionate community they want for themselves and their fellow men and women.

This comment sums up many of the thoughts expressed by the victim survivors:

*My grandmother's murder 30+ years ago launched me on a journey toward RJ, though I didn't know that at the time. What I did know, quite viscerally, was that my worldview had been shattered by the cruel event and by my experience of the trial that followed, and that I felt a personal responsibility to respond. Restorative Justice has provided the rational structure, the tools, and the venue to rebuild my worldview by addressing the harm and restoring hope in the human community. I understand ever more clearly that what I do matters, what each of us does matters, and that each individual life choice connects us inextricably—for good or for ill.*

### **GOAL I: To understand the harm that is caused by crime to victims (and their families), to offenders (and their families), and to the community.**

In large measure, victim survivors came to the program because they wanted to process and make sense of their experience as crime victims. They found that sharing their stories with fellow crime victims was liberating and empowering. They also came to understand the importance of a supportive community. Perhaps most surprisingly, they found that hearing the life stories of offenders was eye-opening and transformative.

#### **Comments from Victim Survivors**

##### ***Ripple effect***

- *Prior to that first experience at CCI, I had thought my world was completely separate from that of the men in prison. In prison I learned that we are all part of the same community, victim and offender alike.*
- *I signed up...because I realized I had only been telling my side of the story and had no acknowledgement of my offender's side.*
- *I saw them as someone who, given the opportunity and accountability, they too wanted to be thriving survivors. Once they understood the ripple effect of harm and the positive ripple effect of better choices, it was like being around excited children as they grabbed onto hope to be 'difference makers' for those around them, for their families, and for their children. The circle with victims, offenders, leaders, teachers, etc. make this possible. Together, we instill the hope of new chapters in our lives because we believe in them! Best medicine ever.*

- *As a rape victim, it became a way to represent voices of victims, but also to connect with inmates who had their own stories to share, some as fellow victims, some as sisters or sons of victims.*
- *It humbled me, it helped me forgive myself from survivor's guilt and the feeling I carried that I hurt my family. It took years, but the healing process I encountered was all about being in that circle and what happened in that circle each time!*

**GOAL II: To understand the values underlying Restorative Justice--Respect, Responsibility, Relationships--and to help participants live lives of integrity no matter where they are living.**

Victim survivors agreed that participating in a circle of trust, where respectful listening and shared responsibility for addressing harm were foundational, helped them embrace a more expansive definition of community, one in which all members, despite significant experiential differences, were united in their desire to rebuild and restore healthy relationships.

**Comments from Victim Survivors**

***Deepened my sense of shared humanity—emphasized commonalities, respect, trust***

- *I had encountered the concepts of RJ and found that they resonated with my own experience as a family member of someone who had been murdered. The murder--and especially the trial that followed—had left me with a profound sense of personal responsibility to reconstruct my own worldview and the community structures/relationships that had been so inexplicably upended by violence. In the Prison Ministry's RJ program, I found exactly the philosophy and the opportunity I craved.*
- *RJ has taught me that all community members suffer harm and that individually and collectively we can and must recognize and address the harm in order to rebuild a healthy community. Sometimes victims are offenders; sometimes offenders are victims, but all of us are members of the human community.*
- *Although we are now living in such divisive times, the RJ program gives me hope that widely different communities can come together, given the right encouragement and leadership.*
- *It rewrote the paradigm that if you were incarcerated you were a "bad" person. These people are not bad by definition but have made bad decisions and are capable of getting back on track and being an inspiration to the world.*

**GOAL III: To create a community within the walls of prison that is a safe space for all participants to share their stories, express their feelings, describe changes that they want to make, encourage empathy and self-knowledge, and support others in the circle who are also working to change.**

Victim survivors felt they were *heard*—often for the first time. In being heard, and in hearing the stories of other circle members, they gained confidence and empathy. They found common ground with others who were also struggling to process trauma, loneliness, and loss, and who were seeking to rebuild lives of hope, agency, and resilience.

**Comments from Victim Survivors**

- *Being with other victims gave me great comfort. You weren't alone. Your stories, though different, created almost identical harms that wounded deeply. I understand that communities in*

*general, have a difficult time being open with victims – wanting to ignore what they have been through, the mental health issues that they encounter, and the fear they may live in day to day. RJ changed that for me.*

- *The Restorative Justice experience was better than any counseling I ever received. It provided a healing that I would have never experienced if I had decided not to participate.*
- *It gave me my own hope back, my life back that allowed me to also give the men in the circle the same hope. I learned we were more alike than different and being in a circle gave us the opportunity to be 'equal', to be real, to be vulnerable and empathetic for each other.*
- *I'd never spent much time thinking about, much less meeting prisoners. I have been so moved by their stories, and, in the RJ program, by their willingness to both accept and welcome volunteers from very different backgrounds, most of whom are white and privileged.*
- *I am not that different than those offenders that I work with (including my own). I have learned that we are all just one bad decision away from being on the other side of the table and I need to advocate for healing and restoration to become the best version of myself (and inspire the same in others).*

#### **GOAL IV: To learn different strategies and tools that will assist all participants now, and in the future.**

Victim survivors were deeply committed to taking the RJ story outside the walls. Several spoke of using the skills and practices when interacting with family members, in the workplace, and in their volunteer lives. They eagerly sought opportunities to speak about their RJ experience in schools, churches, and other public venues.

#### **Comments from Victim Survivors**

- *I signed up to speak because I wanted to bring reason/purpose to our tragedy. I continue to work with RJ because of the expansive impact we have on the world.*
- *It empowered me to be a survivor and to want to help others knowing that it was possible to turn a horrible situation into something that could/would touch another life.*
- *I attempt to make myself available whenever there is an opportunity to work with RJ because I believe that if people only knew how impactful and transformative it can be, they could look at problems (large or small) through a whole different lens.*
- *I live, eat, and breathe Restorative Justice. I use it with my children when parenting, encourage it when working with my colleagues, work practices into my daily classroom life with my students. I'm a better person, a better listener, a better mom, grandma, and wife because of RJ. Can I fully explain it? Nope. It's like having a miracle happen. It just came into being because I was willing to be a part of it.*