

Journey of Hope Through Restorative Justice

Prison is a place of deep suffering through rejection, marginalization, and misunderstanding. It is a place often devoid of hope. Eric Boldiszar, prisoner and creator of this display finds hope and peace through daily prayer, reading Scripture, and the Rule of St. Benedict. His journey of hope through restorative justice began in 2012 when Calvin Theological Seminary offered a course entitled "Forgiveness and Reconciliation" at the prison he was in. He read Desmond Tutu's book, ***No Future Without Forgiveness*** and witnessed the transformation of trauma and brokenness into healing and redemption, through the power of forgiveness and restorative justice.

Jared attends Catholic services and read an article in the FAITH Grand Rapids Magazine about Dr. Jared Ortiz, a Hope College professor and co-founder of the Saint Benedict Institute (SBI), who reconciled with friends before going to college. Eric wrote and invited him to speak to the book club he was in. Afterwards, they continued to correspond and became friends, bonding over the Catholic faith and Benedictine spirituality. Soon after, Eric was accepted into the Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI), a bachelor degree program offered to inmates in Michigan from Calvin University. He continued to study and research restorative justice, and wanted to share his newfound knowledge. One day, while writing a paper on restorative justice and Christian hospitality, he wrote Jared and asked him if he and SBI would be willing to host a restorative justice conference. Within the week, he responded that they would love to, and "Most importantly tell me your vision for the conference and we will start organizing along those lines."

With the assistance of Jared and SBI, Eric and his classmates picked out the topics, speakers, and recorded video messages to be played at what became their first annual restorative justice conference in 2017. The conference was a success with over 350 attendees from all walks of life. Their second conference was held at Calvin University in 2018 and the Grand Rapids Catholic Diocese hosted their third conference in 2019. Tricia Worrell, the Director of Prison and Jail Ministry for the diocese, helped organize this third conference. She came to the prison to meet with the restorative justice club several times and stressed that this was their conference and that their voices mattered.

"Restorative justice, compared to the current criminal justice system, seeks to preserve the inherent dignity of both the victim and the offender, recognizing that each is made in and bears the image of God, the *imago Dei*. By giving prisoners a voice, the conferences help preserve our dignity as image bearers of God and gives us dignity through telling our stories and giving back to the community." - Eric Boldiszar

The conferences built bridges between the different organizers and attendees of different groups, from Catholics and Protestants, to incarcerated individuals and public officials, to students and academics. Moreover, this current conference was able to build a committee of people to work on legislative and policy change.

This display of Eric's artwork was created as a gift to those who contributed to the conference. He prayed for each contributor while he created them. Each piece is unique and portrays some aspect of the healing power of restorative practices.



"While it is important what we as individuals can do, our success is not our own. I can hardly count the number of people who have spent their time, money, and energy into making the conferences and book club a success. Collaboration is essential – the success of the restorative justice movement will be tied to individuals working with one another toward the flourishing of the whole community."
- Eric Boldiszar

