

Greetings. My name is Craig Sussek and I am writing to you today with the hopes that you will take my story into consideration when deciding whether or not to support the passing of Bill HB997.

In 1995 I was a troubled youth. I didn't know how to deal with what I felt, at that time, was a life not worth living. This was due to many, many reasons and I will spare you those details here. As a result of my traumas I quit caring and gave up on life. I eventually wound up breaking into a stranger's home and shooting a woman that was in the home. I was sentenced to 80 years in the Wisconsin Prison System.

I entered my new, strange, life in the Wisconsin Prison System in 1996 as a 17 year old kid. I still had no hope. For anything. I still saw no future. I had no reason to better myself as I thought that I would die in prison. I did not care. I lived my new life much like what the movies portray zombies as. Only I was angry. I didn't know why, but I was. I carried on like this until 1997 when, one day, I was called to my social worker's office. He said that he had spoken to my appeals attorney and they felt I should participate in a group through the University of Madison called the Restorative Justice Project. This project was to help create healing for the victim(s) of a crime and the offender. I felt terrible for hurting my direct victim, as well as the indirect victims, of my crime so I jumped at the chance to apologize for my actions. I met with the lady I shot and that is when my life was saved. My life was saved by the very person that I had attempted to kill.

During this first meeting the lady I had shot forgave me. She told me that I had worth and value as a person. That I wasn't a bad kid: I had just made some terrible decisions. She said that where others had given up on me in life she would not. She showed me a mercy and love that I had never known and it made me rethink all of the thoughts that were going on inside of me. Her and I would meet at least once per year. I'm not going to sit here and tell you that I became the man that I am now that day, after all, who among us became the person we are today overnight, but due to her mercy and the Restorative Justice Project I slowly began to take the needed steps to change.

This program has helped me to see the consequences, directly, of my actions. Many people in our justice system are never forced to see what their actions have wrought. The RJP holds a mirror up to the individual and helps them face what they have done. Normally, in prison, a person does their time and is never really challenged with what they have done. I could see, standing in front of me, a person that was now legally blind because of my actions. I saw a person that had speech problems. I saw a person that would never know the type of life that they had before. Slowly I started to see value in my own life. I began to see that I could make a difference in life even if it was behind bars. I began to take any program offered to me. I read an untold amount of books to better myself. Where once I never thought about the consequences of my actions I began to consider the consequences of my actions on all levels. Whether this was in my daily interactions with other inmates or staff. I encouraged others to strive to better themselves in any way that they could. In short, I did whatever I could to become a person that others could hold in high esteem.

My participation in RJP didn't just affect me. Many of the men in prison with me would hear that I was meeting with the person that I shot and the questions would begin. This created introspection for many of the men and after some soul searching more than a few would ask for the address to the University so they, too, could participate if accepted. Staff members would also ask questions about the program and over the course of the meetings I had a couple sit in and were blown away by the process. My family noticed the change in me. They noticed the peace I had found. As I grew as a man I would also encourage them to love more, hate less, forgive those that had wronged them and grow themselves. At one point I met with another one of my victims: my direct victim's sister. I say "victim" because, even though I had one direct victim in my crime, in reality my choices as a 16 year old kid I victimized a great many people. Sadly. My victim's sister said that she hated me and wanted to die before we had met. After our meeting she apologized to me and said that she didn't know. She didn't know how I was sorry for what I did. She didn't know my story leading up to my crime. My victim's sons never wanted to meet with me, but seeing the change that the program had in their Mother they, too, forgave me.

RJP had a great impact on my formative time in prison, but it also has had an impact on my life since being released in June of 2020. I served nearly 25 years of incarceration before being released. Since being out I have not even come close to being in trouble. I have spent much time with my family and continued to develop the love and mercy with them that was shown to me in that meeting all those years ago. I have maintained steady employment since being released and have continually been in positions of trust. I feel it is important to say that I have been in positions of trust while my superiors fully know my life story. My character, which was formed in large part due to the Restorative Justice Program, shines through with everyone I meet out here.

I feel that had I not been a part of the RJP I most certainly would not be the person that I am today. My life would be quite different. Sure I may have found other reasons to develop integrity, honesty, compassion, loyalty, human decency, hope, love, faith or any of the other attributes I have worked hard to develop, but that is pure conjecture. What IS known is that I developed these characteristics, and more, directly due to my participation in the Restorative Justice Project. It may be an oversimplification to say that I have only become the man that I am today solely because of having met my victim via RJP, but had I not had this experience in my life I would not have had the motivation, the reasons, to change myself for the better as much as I have attempted to do so over the past 25 years. I feel that I would have existed; not existed WELL.

I am fully in support of this Bill as I feel that it has the ability to impact others in much the same way that the RJP has impacted me so powerfully. When used properly it is my humble opinion that lives can be genuinely changed for the best. True healing can take place where typically there is only suffering and pain. My only complaint with the RJP as it is presented in Wisconsin is that the offender is unable to reach out to the victim(s) via proper channels. Over the course of over 20 years there were many men that expressed the desire to participate in

such a program if for no other reason than to "merely" say that they were sorry for their actions. As a result many victims have missed out on the chance to find peace as they were unaware that the person that victimized them wanted to reach some sort of reconciliation. I think it is wonderful that the Maryland Bill has the potential to allow both victim and offender the opportunity to start the healing process.

In conclusion, I am offering my story, briefly, in the hopes that you will take it into consideration for passing this Bill. Restorative Justice, for me, started out as a way to create healing for my victim and maybe for me as well. After having participated in the program for about 23 years I have seen the impact it has on the victim(s), offender, family, friends, the community and people in general first hand. Being forgiven saved my life and I would never have known that forgiveness had I not been a part of this program. I thank you very much for your time and help in this matter. If you have any further questions I have included my contact information below. God Bless.

Sincerely,

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