The Justice Storytelling Quilt

Bonnie Weppler

There is a most unique quilt hidden away in two large suitcases in office L353 at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

The Justice Storytelling Quilt hosts 27 English quilt blocks and 13 French; each block was created by a victim, an offender or a family member and the blocks represents their stories.

With the aid of a computer, a click on any of the blocks allows participants to listen to the person tell his/her story, while looking at the block on the actual quilt. The stories are heartbreaking and sometimes extremely difficult to listen to: a wife whose husband unsuccessfully attempted to kill her; a man who intended to commit a robbery but instead ended up murdering someone; a woman who expresses empathy for the teen who killed her husband; a man who shares his pain after a drunk driver kills his father; a step-daughter whose step-father sexually abused her from the time she was four-years old.

With funding from the Women’s Inter-Church Council of Canada, the quilt is now more accessible than ever because that funding allowed The Church Council on Justice and Corrections to create an online version of the quilt. Use <https://ccjc.ca/current-projects/> to access the online quilt and listen to the 40 stories.

The idea for the creation of the original Justice Storytelling Quilt came from Lorraine Berzins, former Executive Director of The Church Council on Justice and Corrections. Berzins was inspired by another interactive story quilt, *First Kissed*, by artist Meaghan O’Shea.

The purpose of The Justice Storytelling Quilt is ultimately an attempt to humanize justice: by hearing people speak from their hearts about what they have been through and what they need to help them recover.

Creating the quilt, and their individual blocks, helped these victims, offenders and family members to find understanding and meaning and that life can still be good and worth living, despite the suffering and horror they have been through. Ultimately, the quilt was designed to bring people together to empathize with the suffering, hope and courage of victims, offenders and family members.

Some of the victims and family members met offenders through a restorative justice program which allowed them to get answers to questions they had, and which is not usually possible in a criminal justice process. It also helped them to realize that a person who commits a crime is not only a criminal or a monster: he/she is a human being. Some offenders who met their victims were able to understand the impact of their behaviour on someone’s life. One of the offenders said he never realized his actions actually hurt someone until he met them.

A diverse range of materials was used in the blocks including pieces of baby quilts; photographs; a triathlon ribbon; a feather; beads. A number of the blocks contain similar images including the sun, flowers, hearts, and people.

The Justice Storytelling Quilt debuted during Restorative Justice Week 2005. During that week, the quilt was exhibited at the Ottawa Court House, Ottawa City Hall, Justice Canada and Saint Paul University. It was hoped that during Restorative Justice Week 2020 (November 16-22), the quilt could be displayed again at these four locations as a part of its 15th anniversary. However, COVID changed our world and that is no longer a possibility.

But all is not lost! The Justice Storytelling Quilt was presented at the Restorative Justice World eConference, from August 22 to 31, 2020. You can watch the 32 minute video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgWWLvepexY>

RJ World is a coalition of 14 restorative justice organizations including Canada’s Peace of the Circle. The eConference hosted over 700 delegates from 40 countries including Canada, Belgium, India, Nepal, Australia, South Africa, Switzerland, the US, Ireland, Nigeria, Estonia and other and presentations were made in English, Spanish and French. Topics ran the gamut:

* The history of the restorative justice movement and the meaning of restorative justice in serious crime
* And Restoration for All ... Reimagining the In School Suspension Model while Building a Culture of Reflective Students
* International Legal Instruments and Guidelines Relating to Restorative Justice
* Restorative Justice/Transformative Justice in Gender Violence and Serious Crimes
* A Vision for Restorative Justice: From Ego to Ecosystem
* The Restorative Lab
* Restorative Justice Otautahi Christchurch: An Evaluation of outcomes and ‘what works’ to achieve results

The Church Council on Justice and Corrections is a national faith-based coalition of eleven founding churches, created in 1974, to promote a restorative approach to justice with an emphasis on addressing the needs of victims and offenders.

CCJC’s mandate is, through research, projects, workshops and presentations, CCJC promotes education on restorative justice and sponsors initiatives to build healthier and safer communities.

To book the actual physical quilt for an event in Canada, please contact Bonnie Weppler at bweppler@ccjc.ca or 613-563-1688.