

“Radical Healing is Possible”: A Conference on Restorative Justice

October 27, 29, and 31, 2020

One of UD graduate student Ashley Klesken’s future plans is to open a trauma healing center that is open for anyone. “So much violence comes from people just not having the resources to survive and feeling desperate, and I hope to create an environment with those resources,” Klesken says. She would want the trauma healing center to be a Catholic organization “based on restorative principles, the message of God’s love for all people, and top-notch counseling.”

Klesken along with Jessica Hoelting, Maureen Anderson and Drs. Martha Hurley and Kelly Johnson attended the **Harm, Healing, and Human Dignity Conference** which brought together scholars and practitioners of restorative justice.

Restorative justice emphasizes repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior. Restorative practices seek to address those consequences through encounter that repairs the harm to the greatest extent possible. These practices align with Pope Francis’ call to create a culture of encounter, where we go to the margins of society, share our presence, and enter into dialogue with those we meet. The conference brought together Catholics using this approach to address injustice while honoring human dignity.

Faculty, staff, and students from UD who attended the conference shared their reflections, the importance of restorative justice, and the impact the conference had on their personal lives. Jessica Hoelting, Assistant Director of Community Standards & Civility and Coordinator of Restorative Practices was reassured of the long-lasting impact restorative justice can have on communities. The stories that participants shared demonstrate “demonstrate not only the positive impact a Restorative Justice infused experience can have itself, but also the longevity and reach the impact has,” Jessica said. The stories solidified her belief that Restorative Justice “fits into our Catholic Marianist mission and the work we’ve been doing with students does positively impact their lives for the long term.”

While restorative justice is often associated with alternative practices in criminal justice, conference sessions showed it can address other kinds of injustice. For Dr. Johnson, the most moving session was on historical harm in which Maka Akan Najin Black Elk, Sr. from Pine Ridge Reservation and Cheryllyn Branche, a member of the group of descendants of slaves sold by the Jesuits of Georgetown University, spoke alongside two representatives of religious order that owned slaves. In this session, “the religious who like to think they are advocates of justice are recognizing themselves as perpetrators,” Johnson said. “They have to face people they have hurt and hear directly and specifically what they are accountable for, and then to take responsibility for what they need to do now.” The process toward healing is difficult and intense. As one speaker near the end of the conference said, “Restorative justice requires we walk through fire. But there is no life on this side of fire.”

For Ashley Klesken, the number one takeaway was that “radical healing is possible. Hearing the stories of those who had committed murder or other felonies - how through restorative circles they learned about the trauma they had experienced that contributed to their violence, how they

learned to see the impact of their crime and feel truly contrite for their actions, and how some found the bravery of literally apologizing to the families they harmed - was the most impactful.”

Speaking of the impact the conference might have on their personal lives, Ashley noted her increased awareness especially around the death penalty. Most importantly, however, she felt that she “grew in confidence in my faith and in the power of restorative justice, and that growth has manifested in my speaking up for myself more in everyday life.” For Jessica, the conference was a reminder of the importance of being fully present for one another. “Oftentimes one can get caught up in the details of a situation and lose sight of the bigger picture,” Jessica mentioned, so “it was a good reminder to slow down, evaluate, and actively listen to parties needs and work to articulate those needs to everyone involved in a situation.”

The Catholic Mobilizing Network is a national organization that mobilizes people to value life over death, to abolish the death penalty, and to transform the U.S. criminal justice system. Through education, advocacy, and prayer the Network believes in the inherent value and dignity of the human person.

For more information, we encourage you to visit:

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