

The Art of Justice

Vicki Chartrand and Emily Lampron¹

Conceptualized in 2012, the *Centre for Justice Exchange* is in its sixth year running at the Bishop's University Sociology Department. Originally conceived as *Prison Letters* at the University of Ottawa, the group was created to address the dearth of information available to people in prison. As the group evolved, it eventually became the *Centre for Justice Exchange* in our realization that we are not simply providing information, but also learning and growing from these exchanges. Today, the group is made up of academic, student, and other volunteers who respond to information requests from people in prisons across Canada.

The *Centre for Justice Exchange* receives over 100 letters annually with information requests that range from research on criminal justice issues such as solitary confinement, prisoner wages, and dangerous offender designations to information on community resources including transition houses, legal support, and print-based education programs. Operating from within a university setting with student volunteers, we have access to information and resources that are clearly lacking in the prison system.

Prison systems are not only designed to keep people in, but also to keep the community out. Without access and resources, people in prison are isolated from the available supports and information needed to increase their quality of life, as well as reduce the potential for further social harms and conflicts to arise. Not only do we address a clear need for those who have been cut off from much-needed resources in carceral settings, we also gain valuable insight into the prison and criminal justice system through our correspondence.

In this way, our work generally consists of the sharing and co-creation of ideas about justice, as well as how to advance more consultative and inclusive forms of justice and accountability. Justice is not only about being accountable to each other and ourselves, but includes opportunities to live, grow, and create. With this in mind, the purpose of the *Centre for Justice Exchange* is to: 1) share information on justice issues and resources of support to those in and out of prison; 2) raise awareness of the current barriers to justice and struggles of people in prison; and 3) learn and advocate for more inclusive understandings and practices of justice and accountability.

This year we held our first Prison Art Exhibit entitled *Representations of Justice* on 19 September 2018 from 5:00pm to 7:00pm in the Centennial Theatre Lobby at Bishop's University.² The art exhibit consisted of the

theme of representations of justice in its diversity and ranged from tattoo designs, to photographs, drawings, and poetry. For example, some of the exhibits included a photograph of racoons looking into a prison yard through the barbed wire fence; a colourful drawing of an Indigenous man performing the sacred pipe ceremony in prison; and a Jenga game with blocks representing the necessities of life such as family, shelter, and love, showing how each is a foundational part of the whole. Each piece of artwork was accompanied by a deeply personal description of the meaning behind it.

Walking through the labyrinth of artwork provided the onlookers with a sense of prison life expressed through a creative medium, a wide variety of justice themes were addressed, including hope, strength, resilience, struggle, spirituality and loss. The exhibit offered a means of exploring and reflecting on ideas and possibilities of justice that may never have come to light otherwise. The artwork collectively brought an awareness of the struggles that are routinely faced by people in prison, but largely unknown to the public.

To further this reflection, Reuben Robertson, a Mi'gmaq/Acadian, gave an insightful and inspiring talk of his personal experiences of being incarcerated. His intimate stories highlighted the inherent power dynamics at play in the Canadian criminal justice system and showed how privileges, opportunities, and rights can be taken away from people by a prison system that often seems to see people that are incarcerated as less than human. Reuben conveyed the reality that this unjust framework has existed for a long time and warns those who decide to work in the system that this is what they will walk into. For this group, he recommends they seek change slowly by seeking out like-minded people with whom to work with, rather than expressly trying to change the system's long-held and thoroughly institutionalized beliefs. This will not only help them find the humanity in others, but also to not lose sight of their own sense of justice. The theme of humanity was central to Reuben's talk as his personal experiences taught him that no matter how terrible a crime, the people in prison remain human. Reuben concluded with a wishful warning: "no matter where you work and what you do in life, do not internalize or get lost in the toxic attitude and reasoning of the institution you find yourself in". The audience was clearly appreciative of Reuben's candid talk. Many enjoyed conversing with him and having his responses to their many questions about his time in prison.

Overall, the event was an overwhelming success, with only positive comments coming from the almost 80 attendees, the *Centre for Justice Exchange* surpassed its goal of not only raising funds to continue its work, but to also raise awareness on campus about alternative forms of justice and the prison experience as expressed by those behind the walls. Most attendees felt that they had learned something new about a system that is largely hidden from the public view and about which they had known very little. All in all, the Prison Art Exhibition was an emotional, inspiring, and informative event that pushed people to reconsider their preconceptions about justice and crime, all the while enjoying some stunning artwork.

SUPPORT AND LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR JUSTICE EXCHANGE

The Centre for Justice Exchange is a non-profit collective that relies on fundraising and donations for our continued work. To donate, please visit <https://justiceexchange.ca/donate/>. A charitable tax receipt will be provided.

For more information about the Centre for Justice Exchange or if you are interested in joining, please email vicki.chartrand@ubishops.ca or mail her at the following address:

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Thank you for helping us learn, create, and grow. Keep on keep'n on...

ENDNOTES

- ¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in Issue 33(5) of the *Justice Report*. It is being reprinted with permission from the Canadian Criminal Justice Association.
- ² See www.ubishops.ca/event/the-centre-for-justice-exchange-presents-prison-art-exhibition/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Vicki Chartrand, PhD is Associate Professor in the Sociology Department at Bishop's University, Québec and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Her general research interests include penal and carceral politics, modern day colonialism, grassroots justice and collaborative methodologies.

Emily Lampron is a recent Bishop's graduate in Sociology with a concentration in Criminology, Law and Social Policy. She was a volunteer at the Centre for Justice Exchange for three years and collaborated on this piece as an intern. For her master's degree in Criminology with a concentration in Women and Gender Studies at the University of Ottawa, she is researching alternative forms of justice.