

AFSC Michigan Social Justice Spring Break

March 2014

Comments from Student Participants

While many students chose to party or sleep over spring break, a group from Earlham College travelled to Ann Arbor, Michigan to learn about the criminal justice system and AFSC's ongoing work to promote restorative and healing alternatives. AFSC staff Natalie Holbrook, Pete Martel and Ron Simpson-Bey led the break.

The students had a packed week, touring and learning, talking and debating, challenging and growing. In their comments below, they talk about the value of relationships over punishment.



Students meet with staff from the Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending.

I REALLY LIKED ALL the people we talked with; they all had really important things to say. This whole thing was fantastic – I'm super impressed!

I've been thinking a lot about how so many issues are wrapped up in the prison system and how it's such a very complicated issue to take on in any meaningful way.

I'd like to talk and write with prisoners and be a support to them both in prison and upon release....I think it'd be great to start a group like Students Organizing Against Prisons (SOAP) at Earlham.

I THINK THIS WAS ONE of the most informative and transformative programs/educational experiences I've ever had. It was great how people presented so many nuanced views....I really learned a lot about Ann Arbor from my homestay family.

This week has really made me think a lot about working with prisoners.... So many people in this system have so much potential and just need a second chance, people to believe in them, support/guide them – that kind of relationship building is really the alternative to mass incarceration.

I'LL BE VERY INTERESTED to continue learning about the criminal justice system and how advocacy has a major role in prison de-population.

I really want to thank Natalie, Pete, Ron and all the AFSC volunteers and staff for sharing their hard work and their hospitality.

I LOVED THE TALK WITH Sharon Goens-Bradley [the director of AFSC's Twin Cities Healing Justice Program].... I learned so much. Prior to this week, I had a superficial understanding of what it means to be a prison activist and/or abolitionist. My views on all the people – prisoners, guards, legislators, activists – have been complicated.

Most of all, I'm leaving with the understanding that I have a lot more to learn. I'm also leaving with the desire to stay involved with this work in some way.... How can community-based justice come about when whole communities can be racist? I'm going to keep asking myself these questions, and more!



Ron Simpson-Bey of AFSC speaks at an event organized by Students Organizing Against Prisons.

GOING TO SEE THE BRAILLE TRANSLATION at the prison was fantastic because it was unexpected and great to be able to talk to prisoners about what they liked about it, to hear their names and to hear how one person described it as helping to rehabilitate himself.

I THINK THIS PROGRAM WAS THE IDEAL BALANCE between formal and informal. It's important to remember that the notions of "formal" and "professional" oftentimes are created as part of the capitalist, patriarchal structure. Thank you for showing us who you really are and how you really function as a team.

Doing this program forms part of the closing part of my college career. For most of my four years, I spent my time studying theories without critically thinking how they operate in society.

I am grateful that I was given the chance to work with you for a week.... I already knew that I wanted to do similar work for the rest of my life, but this was the first time that I had a substantial insight into the overall work of AFSC.

COMING HERE WITHOUT AN EXTENSIVE BACKGROUND IN PRISONS and prisoner advocacy was intimidating at first. Nonetheless, your patience and willingness to teach and share opened up my potential to learn vast amounts, and for that I am truly grateful.

AFSC's office space in the garage has just the right energy to provide both levity and seriousness when necessary, and as I learned about the way that this work is carried out, I felt more and more that the informality of the garage worked as a release valve from time to time, especially after intense talks, prison visits, Google Hangouts or information sessions.

I think a crucial piece of the conversation is considering what/how much we don't know. That will be one of the biggest takeaways I continue to ponder and contemplate. What can we do? Where are the avenues for transformation?

PETE AND RON BOTH ADDED A LOT about understanding prisoners' daily life/schedule by their personal experience.

Questions I'm pondering: How can mutual respect and understanding be established between COs [guards] and prisoners when such a powerful hierarchy remains and is a direct part of their daily life? How do you restore human dignity in an inherently inhumane system and place?

What is the balance between building deep relationships with people and working towards wide-scale policy reform? How do you get people to truly understand the cruelty of treating people like animals if they never go into a prison and don't see how it affects them and their community?

THE FOOD WAS EXCELLENT! I haven't eaten this well since Christmas.

In some circles, when it's that white, straight, middle-class white man who's talking all the time, I feel fine being like, "You need to sit your ass down!" But in a group like this one, with a queer majority and a mix of race and classes, when I notice a dynamic forming like that, I don't know what to do about it, or whether anything should be done about it, by me or anyone.



Earlham students with AFSC staff at Wayne State University

Natalie, Pete and Ron, you have been absolutely brilliant to us. You have definitely changed and "complexified" my viewpoint on how to tackle/address problems in the criminal justice system, and I feel much more capable to argue for prisoner-centered advocacy and relationship-based social change.

THIS WHOLE BREAK WAS AN AMAZING EXPERIENCE. I only wish that spring break was more than just one week!

This week has allowed me to ask myself the most difficult questions I've ever had to think about answering. I am grateful to have been guided in asking myself these questions (because if I had not been guided in this direction, I wouldn't even know that these questions exist, and that they are important to ask myself).

I have realized that everything I have learned about Restorative Justice is that it aims to provide a system of dealing with crime that focuses on what actually needs to be done by everyone affected by the crime (including the offenders themselves): healing.

I am beyond-words to describe how grateful I am to have had this experience.



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