



Illinois Humanities | September 2020

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Three Questions: Q&A with Jobi Cates, executive director, and Wendell Robinson, program manager, Restore Justice



The Illinois Humanities Spotlight

Bi-monthly Illinois Humanities highlights the work of our Community Grants program partners through our "Grantee Spotlight." It shines the light on our grantee partner's work, offering details about the organization and the funded project, as well as a Q&A with a team member of the organization.

More: ILHumanities.org/Spotlight

Project

"Beyond County: Community Dialogues and Partnerships"

Location

Chicago, IL



Organization

Founded in 2015 by criminal justice reform advocates, those formerly incarcerated, and others, Restore Justice believes every human being deserves dignity, including those who have committed serious crimes. Restore Justice works toward a day when the criminal legal system in Illinois treats every case as an opportunity to heal individuals and communities. We advocate for fairness, humanity, and compassion throughout the system, with a primary focus on those affected by extreme sentences imposed in their youth.

Project Funded by Illinois Humanities

The "Beyond County: Community Dialogues and Partnerships" project builds upon Restore Justice's experience visiting 17 communities across the state. It seeks to deepen relationships and create networks between partners in Chicago as well as Belleville, Peoria, Decatur, Rockford and Naperville.

About Jobi

Jobi Cates is Executive Director and Founder of Restore Justice. From 2008 through 2014, Jobi was the Senior Director of the Chicago and Midwest Regional Office of Human Rights Watch (HRW). In her role there, she led the legislative and communications efforts of a broad-based coalition to end the practice of sentencing children who commit serious crimes to "life without parole."

About Wendell

Wendell Robinson is the Program Manager at Restore Justice. He initially joined the organization as the first Future Leaders Apprentice and now oversees that program. His current role also involves community outreach, data management, and fundraising. Wendell served 25 years in the Illinois Department of Corrections for a conviction at the age of 17.



Q1

How do you see the arts/culture/humanities as being essential?

Wendell Robinson: "One of the beauties in life is being exposed to arts, culture, and humanities. When you've been in a space for so long that's oversaturated with some of the world's most undesirables, you need something to soothe you. You need something that can broaden your horizon. Taking to arts and observing different cultures aided in molding a different perspective on how I now see life. So arts and humanities was more than instrumental in fashioning the man that I am today!"

Q2

What is the most important thing people should know about your work?

Wendell Robinson: "I've been so fortunate to be placed in a situation working around people that genuinely care. All the full-time staff at Restore Justice possess a certain level of passion for the causes we champion. I'm a firm believer that when people care about the work, it shows in the work product. I work with an extremely unique team. We all have areas of expertise, and the benefit of working with passionate experts is a unit that wants to get things done. It doesn't bother me when I have to drive 400 miles to pick someone up after a lengthy prison sentence and it's really nothing when I have to take someone to the DMV on consecutive days for hours on end. One thing I can ALWAYS count on is my TEAM to have my back."

Q3

Who makes your work possible?

Jobi Cates: "Our work was originally catalyzed by a constellation of people I could not have planned for if I had tried. I sometimes pinch myself recalling that Abner Mikva was there at our first board meetings, excited to chat with Julie Anderson, whose son was serving life without parole; they were eating the same chicken salad as four attorneys with almost 100 years of experience in public defense here in Illinois. And the person who made the chicken salad was one of a small group who decided funding something like Restore Justice was a good risk to take with their personal wealth. This combination of political, experiential, and financial power was something to behold. In this, our fifth full year of operations, the same people are the backbone of the organization, but we have slowly and deliberately rounded out our family to include some of the incredible people coming home from prison, and we had to say goodbye to Abner when he passed in the summer of 2016."

For more

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