

... The Conference!

In my role as Building Bridges (BB) project coordinator, it's my privilege to speak about our expectations of this conference.

This is directly related to my personal motivation to accept the role as project coordinator. I-am not a Restorative Justice 'specialist', not a trainer in prisons. But I have seen and heard the effect of existing Sycamore Tree Programmes (STP) in our organization. A few times our programme coordinator used my nasty victim experiences in a training to offenders. I remember these occasions very well, as those were the times I had to cry myself afterwards.

The new project challenge was: could it be possible to work with 9 project partners for 2 years and develop and pilot new ways to bring healing and justice to victims of crime and offenders throughout Europe and beyond, to build bridges between these 2 groups of injured individuals?

Through a grant from the European Commission, the project partners acquired the opportunity to start or widen the scope of a new initiative in this area: working with groups of victims of crime and offenders to go jointly through a process of healing and evaluate scientifically what happened.

These objectives resulted in 14 pilot restorative Building Bridges dialogues with unrelated victims and offenders in prisons and communities in 7 countries. Each country has trained facilitators to select and prepare victim- and offender-participants and to facilitate the actual programmes. In these programmes the restorative subjects has been discussed in several ways. You will hear more about the effects of these dialogues during this conference.

The project was submitted to the EU in May 2013 and approved mid-November that same year. The project preparation was particularly done by PF Germany in collaboration with Makam from Austria. Before that period, PF the Netherlands had discussed a number of times possibilities for financial contributions from the EU within the context of the Prison Fellowship International organization. This emphasizes that nothing happens by chance.



You need entrepreneurs with a broader perspective than just an eye for your own little organization and the small world around it.

From the first project meeting in February 2014 we had ‘Rome’ in our minds. We have looked forward to: meeting people from across Europe who have an interest in restorative justice – whether as victims, prisoners, volunteers, or professionals - seeking healing and recovery in situations where lives and relationships have been damaged by crime.

As the emphasis in BB is on victims and offenders in a process of going through a joint programme, we learned a lot about the healing impact for victims and the effects on offenders when victims are present all the time during 8 (or less) programme sessions.

During a Building Bridges symposium in the Netherlands a few weeks ago, I listened with a lump in my throat to stories of murder victims (the bereaved), stories of offenders and what can happen during training sessions.

One project challenge has been to find ways whereby organizations - people from different countries and cultures - could jointly develop and learn together. These last two years really have been full of challenges! We went through a lot of learning curves. What did this lead to?

Yes: we now can and wish to share what we have learned from the different pilot sessions, from the scientific evaluation and from the personal skills of all the project participants.

We now can show and prove that other organizations in all European countries can succeed in establishing activities which bring healing to victims and offenders. Local situations differ, but it can be done.

This requires passion, time, a structured project planning, good (new) network partners, financial support. But: it can be done!

So our goal for this conference is: you don’t leave the conference without a growing passion, background information and network contacts that will enable you to materialize this as soon as you are back in your town!



That has been my personal and our project group motivation. We have had to comply with a lot of EU regulations, procedures, and reporting activities. But it's worth it when you start a project in your own country.

I grew up in a Christian family. When my father read something from the Bible after dinner we, as small children, had to repeat the last sentence he read.

My last sentence today is: I look forward to new STP/BB activities in at least 15 European countries during the next 2 years!

I wish you a fruitful and practically conference!

Joost de Jager, project coordinator

