

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Kyle Duis, and when I was 15 years old, I participated in the Restorative Justice Circle in Yellow Medicine County, Minnesota. I was asked to write a letter reflecting on the impact that Circle had on my life. I was admitted to the program after being charged with felony breaking and entering to steal liquor from a residential home.

For me, Circle was the first time I experienced members of my community not only holding me accountable for my actions but also showing a genuine interest in understanding the deeper issues that led me to abuse substances and make destructive choices. Restorative Justice goes beyond simply addressing the harm caused by a crime—it fosters accountability while providing a community of compassionate volunteers and staff who are committed to helping individuals develop the skills necessary to become productive members of society. Those weekly meetings were the first time I felt like I had a true support network.

Some people make poor choices for the sake of the choice itself, but I believe many teens and adults have never been shown a better way to live. Many lack the support and guidance needed to strive for a better life and the tools to make positive change a reality. The Restorative Justice process is not an easy path. In fact, I believe simply taking the charges and serving time would have been the easier route. However, I also believe that choosing that path increases the likelihood of reoffending.

Circle focuses on more than just the crime—it takes a holistic approach to a person's life. In my case, I had to confront difficult family issues rooted in neglect and abuse, improve my grades, address my substance use, reevaluate my friendships, and make meaningful changes in how I spent my time. Progress in all of these areas was necessary before everyone could agree on my discharge. The process took more than two years of hard work, including writing a letter of apology to the victims of my crime and testifying against a "friend."

The seeds that were planted during those years have had a lasting impact on my life. They helped me grow in ways I never could have imagined and gave me friendships that I still cherish to this day. Currently, I am set to graduate with a degree in Wildlife Biology from Bemidji State University. I am employed as a wildlife technician with the Bemidji Deer Project, and once I graduate, I have a job lined up with Delta Waterfowl in Aberdeen, South Dakota. I also have a fiancée with whom I am excited to share life's journey.

My path hasn't been a straight line to success, but the overall trend has always moved upward. Circle provided me with tools that I continue to use today and reinforced the importance of a strong support network. It showed me that a better life was within my reach and helped me develop the resilience needed to achieve it.

Thank you for taking the time to read my story.

Sincerely,
Kyle Duis