



Richmond City Sheriff's Office
Sheriff C. T. Woody, Jr.



PRESS RELEASE

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BRYAN STEVENSON VISITS RICHMOND CITY JUSTICE CENTER

Richmond, VA— Bryan Stevenson, Founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative based in Montgomery, Alabama, visited the Richmond City Justice Center today, and met with residents enrolled in the Recovering from Everyday Addictive Lifestyles (REAL) Program to discuss his New York Times Best Selling book entitled *Just Mercy*. Mr. Stevenson's book focuses on a young lawyer and those he has defended, while making the argument for compassion in the pursuit of justice.

Virginia Commonwealth University, who coordinated Stevenson's visit, also donated 200 copies of *Just Mercy* for residents at the Richmond City Justice Center to read. Over the course of four weeks, residents read and completed assignments on the book, the end goal being for them to be aware of social justice issues, the issues of incarceration, and how they can contribute to breaking the cycle.

"We're honored and grateful to have Mr. Stevenson with us today," said Sheriff Woody. "His experiences with the law, mass incarceration, and with those who are poverty stricken, as well as his message of hope is one that our residents will be able to empathize with and receive. I know the residents thoroughly enjoyed reading his book, *Just Mercy*, and to have the author of a book they read come to speak to them is an experience many of us do not get in our life time. This is a special occasion, and I thank Mr. Stevenson for taking the time to visit with them today, as well as VCU for donating copies of his work."

"When I come to jails, I always want to make sure to impart one piece of wisdom on those who are incarcerated, and that is, it's up to them to change the narrative of what it is to be an incarcerated person," said Mr. Stevenson. "That means implementing treatment and rehabilitation for those who are addicted to drugs, rather than introducing them to the criminal justice system. That means committing to our children who are abused and traumatized - to come from a place of treatment for and protection of them, rather than a place of stigmatization and criminalization. Grace, redemption, and rehabilitation can change our world as long as we

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are willing to do the uncomfortable thing. It is uncomfortable to talk about these issues. Doing the comfortable thing is often times easier than doing the uncomfortable and right thing, but if we do not do the right thing, we will never change the narrative. If we don't change the narrative, we will never change the system.”

After the event, residents presented Stevenson with an original drawing of him, drawn by a REAL Program resident, to show their appreciation for his coming to visit and speak with them. [A picture of the letter and drawing are attached]

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A letter of gratitude

I am compelled on behalf of the R.E.A.L (recovery from everyday addictive lifestyles) program and its members to express the huge amount of appreciation we have gained for you, thanks to your book "Just Mercy." We are extremely grateful for the opportunity we have been given and taken advantage of to not just read but discover the treasures which lie shrouded amongst the pages. This book was insightfully concise and truthfully written and has opened the eyes of many people to the disturbing revelations concerning the inequalities, corruption, and racial injustice that was and still is within our criminal justice system. Which many of us have experienced in some way, shape, or form.

Due to many of our unpleasant experiences with legal representation we have developed a stigma that all legal representatives are crooked, just want money, and don't truly care about their clients lives at all. Your creation "Just Mercy" has altered this stigmatic way of thinking, with the one on one accounts with you and your clients. The incredible amount of care and concern you displayed for them gives us hope that one day our legal system can truly be for the people.

Just Mercy sent a rally of emotions to the depths of our souls, from feelings of utter abhorrence, to despair, to relief, and finally hope. As we continued to read your creation, "Just Mercy" I realized this is a story of resilience and no matter how many times people tried to deter you from your motive, no matter how many times people told you to give up on the clients you were representing, no matter how many times people said "These people aren't worth your time", you persevered. I can see a relation from this story to what many of us are battling now. From people giving up on us, to us fighting against stereotypes and labels such as "Felon," to us being incarcerated and at times feeling like all hope is gone. Of all things learned one of the most valued is Perseverance and we now see that if we apply this value to our lives we too can make a lasting change and impact the world.

We want to say thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to share a few memorable moments with us and we hope you know that you are appreciated.

Sincerely,

The REAL Program at the Richmond City Justice Center

April 12th, 2017

