The Chicago Torture Justice Center: Its History and Role in Community Healing

Introduction and Connections to the Marjorie Kovler Center

Many people draw the origins of the Chicago Torture Justice Center to the Chicago City Council passing the Reparations Ordinance in May of 2015; however, this center’s history goes beyond that. The establishment of the Chicago Torture Justice Center also has a basis in the decades long struggle on behalf of activists, lawyers, and survivors seeking justice for the years of torture perpetuated by the Chicago Police Department. However, a rarely acknowledged fact is that in addition to the struggle for justice, the Chicago Torture Justice Center’s establishment can also be partially attributed to the establishment and subsequent success of previous institutions like the Marjorie Kovler Center located within Chicago’s Rogers Park neighborhood.

The Kovler Center acted directly as a model for the Chicago Torture Justice Center and it is through examining this institution that one can see the close relationship they share and just how similar the two operate. Seeing what the Chicago Torture Justice Center was modeled after reveals that although it is a pioneer and a notable achievement, the center is not an isolated entity in offering healing from torture and violence.

The Kovler Center was established in 1987 and since then, it has acted as a resource for international survivors of state-sanctioned torture to heal, access justice, and rebuild their lives with dignity. This center was created in partnership with Heartland Alliance, a multi-faceted nonprofit organization that focuses on the human rights of individuals, especially immigrants. In
addition to heading the Kovler Center, Heartland Alliance regularly partners with the Chicago Torture Justice Center which is another indication of just how well these two organizations align and build off of one another. The Kovler Center addresses the needs of individuals whether that be “spiritual, emotional, economic, [or] physical” (About the Marjorie Kovler Center, 0:21). The Kovler Center has been holistically caring for its constituents for over 30 years and has shown that treating an individual means more than just offering counseling. It is through this example that the Chicago Torture Justice Center was modeled after to serve the survivors of Chicago Police torture.

Much like the Chicago Torture Justice Center, the Kovler Center does not limit itself strictly to Western notions of medicine but explores other methods. This exploration includes integrating therapy and healing techniques to the cultural practices of their constituents. This can be seen within the Kovler Center’s informational video when they interviewed an indigenous survivor of torture. Within this interview, the woman discusses how she utilized weaving within her own healing journey because weaving has a central role in her people’s history. In this way, the Kovler Center has proven to not rely on conventional methods of counseling and healing but instead centers the individual and attempts to conform to the desires and needs of the individual.

Working in conjunction with the individual to try to establish treatment is just one facet of how the Kovler Center believes wholeheartedly in its mission. As Dr. Mario Gonzalez discusses in his interview, what the Kovler Center does “is not charity” but is actually “solidarity” (About the Marjorie Kovler Center,1:30). This solidarity spans more than just helping the people directly affected; it also includes educating the broader community and making them aware of this issue as well. Some of these additional events and services the Kovler Center puts on include things like their Symposium on Treating Torture Survivors. Putting on an
event like the Symposium not only invites people unfamiliar with the center to participate and share space but it also teaches these individuals about torture on the global scale as well as the local. Through hosting events like this, other people are able to learn and take these teachings back to their own communities and share them with others. The solidarity and the mission of the Kovler Center does not just end with survivors of torture but also stretches to include the broader community, much like how the Chicago Torture Justice Center currently operates as well.

**Gregory Banks, Torture Survivor and Learning Fellow at the Chicago Torture Justice Center**

*I'm fulfilling my contract, man. That's my life contract.*

I grew up with both my parents and I had my siblings. I had three brothers and two sisters. It was six of us and I had a lot of fun. Growing up, my family was real closely knit. I was an athlete, too. I played basketball, baseball, baseball was actually my favorite. And that's what I wanted to be: I wanted to be a professional baseball player. I played baseball *every day* in the summertime, man. I played for years. My life was really good until I got in high school and things started to change a little bit.

My father died about 16 years ago. My mother's still alive. And my oldest brother died too. He died in 1990 after I came home off my appeal. I came home on October 31, 1990. He died November the 13th, 13 days after I came home. The fact that I had been locked up, I didn't have no… I couldn't even feel that. I didn't even know *how* to feel that. But I stayed out a little while longer and I got called up again and went back to prison. After I had gave back all that time, I got into some more messing around and went back to prison.

When I was incarcerated, boxing saved my life and it gave me an outlet. I was angry. I didn't know. For a little while, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Finally, I said, “Man, you got
to bounce out of this” because I was going through a nervous breakdown and didn't know it at the time. Once I recognized that, I began to work out again. I got in that gym, I got on the boxing team. I went to school, I boxed, I played baseball, and I stayed in that law library. I said that I was not going to stop doing what I needed to do to get my freedom back. And I did everything that I said that I was gonna do, man. I did everything I said I'm gonna do and with the help of the Creator and the help of the people, I got out of that situation. I'm fulfilling my contract, man. That's my life contract.

*I look at myself as being blessed, man.*

I always tell people that I went on my cultural revolution while I was incarcerated. I found out stuff about my people--my ancestors--that I never knew. I started reading and then I found a whole plethora of information about evidence. I mean, everyone was calling me the Professor! That’s what they was calling me because I'd be reading, going to school, I was doing well, I was boxing, and I was in the law library. I was doing well in prison and I said, “Look at how you respond when you in these dismal crypts man. You got to respond like that when you out there. You got to respond like that, and I loved how I was thinking. My spirituality, my mind, my soul, all that stuff was complete. And on top of that, I was working out. Everything was working, man, and I was younger. *A lot* younger.

I boxed; I went to school. I got my associates degree first from Lincoln College and MacMurray. Then I got my bachelor's from Roosevelt to become a substance abuse counselor, I did that at Harold Washington College. I took the substance abuse courses and I took my exam at Moraine Valley College. I took my exam and got certified to become a drug abuse counselor. I did that on December the 14th, 2012. It was a remarkable day I’ll never forget. But anyway, so far so good man. My life has been good since I've been home these last 13 years. I've stumbled a
little bit but other than that, my life has been fairly well, man. I'm married, all my children are
grown. I look at myself as being blessed, man.

_We done normalized it_

Torture leaves so much trauma that we hold in our body. It's so much trauma that we
don't even recognize the trauma that we hold inside of us because we think that it's normal, or it's
gonna become normal. We done normalized it. So I don't know. I don't think that I’ll ever heal
from that. I often think about PTSD and trauma. Are they the same thing? Because they sound
like the same thing on paper. I just want to get a clear understanding of politicized trauma and
politicized healing. Cuz when you think about politics, it covers everything. Everything is
political. Everything man.

There’s a couple of brothers that's been a fighting for a while and it just seems like they
keep taking them around in a circle like Gerald Reed. I'm saying he should have _been_ home. But
they keep wanting to take a spin on him. Come on! Leave him alone. Let him go, man. They
afraid. They are afraid because he got them, man. He got them, and they hoping that somehow he
could never get out.

I look at these brothers fighting for their liberation and freedom… I look for that and I
see Stanley and them still fighting in there, but we’re out here. We fight but they’re still
incarcerated. It's hard. Because Stanley and Gerald should have been at home. Stanley should
have been home because he got hit when George Ryan came up with the moratorium on the
death penalty. Ryan cut him loose, but he's still locked up because he has another case. He
should have been home long time ago too. But they keep holding him. He been gone for 38 years
now. They keep holding the man. These guys are tired! They ain’t no young guys no more.
They’re in their 50s and 60s, they ready to go. They don't know how much life they got left in
them. Let them people out, man. Let them go, man. Like they don't wanna let me just let them

I'm gonna continue to fight this fight as long as there's breath in my body, man.

One of the things that I said is that I want the Chicago Torture Justice Center to be
different from all these other places. We first said that we weren't gonna have no criteria where if
you don't fit this, you can't enter and we just said that if you was tortured, or hurt in any way by
the Chicago police or any law enforcement, that if you needed some help, and we had the
opportunity to help you, we will. We will do everything we can to help you and if we didn't have
what you needed, we will send you somewhere else that could help you. The main thing that I
talked about was that I really didn't want nobody coming there and getting turned away. We was
not going to do that; we was going to help you no matter what. I feel that so far, so good. The
Chicago Torture Justice Center is doing exactly what they said they was gonna do. It's getting
better, and better and better.

I've been working at the center for about two years now, but I've been there before I even
got the job. I was doing what I needed to do to make the center grow, man. It's been fabulous.
Working there and being able to travel, especially with University of Chicago! I'm so grateful.
The fact that I had a chance to go to Alabama with the University; that was a remarkable trip. I
felt kinship in that community. The people that I went down there with, and most of them were
students from the University of Chicago. I made a lot of new friends too and Alice is a
wonderful, wonderful woman. She is a wonderful professor. She's a wonderful human being man
cuz she put her life on the line to fight for us. I appreciate everything y'all do, man. Everything.

This is a place where you can come, and you could talk about your life and you ain't gotta
be worried about people criticizing you. It was a safe place for me and for anybody that wants to
be in that space and you ain't gotta worry about people whispering behind your back. You could talk about things that are affecting you, America, and even the world. That is what I said I wanted the Center to be and that is what it is becoming. It's doing exactly what we asked it to do. All that you can is help your fellow man and woman. Do everything that you possibly can. I said that I was gonna fight this fight, no matter what. I don't care what's going on. I'm gonna continue to fight this fight as long as there's breath in my body, man.

**Dorothy Holmes, Mother of Ronnieman and head of the Ronnieman Foundation**

*When I say justice, I say justice for 'em all!*

My name is Dorothy Holmes, the mother of Ronald Johnson. Born and raised on the Southside of Chicago. I lost my only son on October the 12th, 2014 to Chicago Police Detective George Hernandez. I have two living daughters and 12 grandkids. I'm still *still* fighting for justice for my son and other people's kids who were lost to the hands of Chicago police. I have met mothers in Colombia, Cali, Brazil, Ohio, California, Minnesota. So it's like, I'm not alone in this battle, fighting for justice. When I say justice, I say justice for 'em all!

I can't say if I can ever fully heal. I tell anybody that lost a child when they asked me "Where do you get your strength from? How do you deal with it all?" You know, you have your good days and your bad days. But most of all, you know, you still gotta go forward. You still got other kids and grandkids and people that love you, then you got to try your best to keep going forward. I know a couple of people that passed from stress, because they can't handle it.

*Ever since then, we just been keeping it going. It grows every year*

When Ronnieman passed, I would always go down to the area where he got killed because I could not believe it. There was some little kids out there and I was like why are all these little kids, you know, always coming out here when I come over here? So, one of the guys,
he walked up to me and said, "Why are you always over here?" and I was like "My son was killed over here." And then he's like, “Oh, wow,” so then I'm like "Where y'all live at?" And he pointed to the building where the party was at the night my son got killed.

He pointed to that building and I'm like, “Wow. How can I help these kids in this area?” So that's when I came up with the Ronnieman Foundation. I had help from Fred Hampton Jr. and a bunch of other people. You know, it wasn't no real big event at the time. Ronnieman was just killed in October and I met them in November. Then I told them what I want to do in December because December the 14th is his birthday. My own son, he would have been about 26 in December, so I wanted to give away toys in the area. So everybody came out and they supported me. Then some of my family members, they came out also and then in 2015, it got bigger. I had made an Amazon Wishlist for the Ronnieman holiday toy drive. Ever since then, we just been keeping it going. It grows every year.

*It's just like another place that you can call home*

The Chicago Torture Justice Center, you can go there for support, you can go there for counseling, aroma therapy. It's just like another place that you can call home when you're not at home, where you can get this support and talk to counseling. Because some of us that lost kids, we didn't get the proper counseling that we needed. And for myself, when I went to get counseling, it was like I was there, but I wasn't there because they was making it seem like it was something else going on instead of them, giving me the proper medical attention that I needed when I lost my son. I didn't get that from there. So when I go to the Chicago Torture Justice Center, I get all the support that I need. There's people there for me to talk to even if it's not a counselor, or somebody there. It's always somebody there that I can talk to on a particular day or over the phone or I could just walk into the office and like hey, this is what's going on. This is
how I'm feeling and they don't judge you. If it's someone in the office they’ll say “Okay, well give us a minute we're gonna let you talk to this person.” Once you get a chance to actually talk to somebody that's in a that field then you start feeling okay.

Before I started going to the Center, I did work with, like, Black Lives Matter of Chicago. CPAC. We have the group Justice for Families. So they was there to talk to but once they came up with the Chicago Torture Justice Center, it made it more powerful and there were more people to talk with. I'm in a lot of stuff with Chicago Torture Justice Center. They had like, after school stuff, like they had the kids come in. They had the little boxing classes and stuff for the kids, but when the COVID came about, a lot of stuff we couldn't do anymore. So hopefully, we will be back in the office soon.

*I'm giving back to the community... it's helping keep my son's name alive*

I think this would be like, I think, the third year that I’m doing the Ronnieman Back-to-School book bag drive. We started that one year and village we took over a vacant lot. Everybody met up over there and we held events over there. And I'm like, "Hey, I want to do a back-to-school book bag giveaway!" So I reached out to Aislinn and she said that sounds great. Most of the time, I come up with an idea. I run it by Aislinn and she's like, "Oh, that's a great idea! Go ahead and do it, Dorothy. We got it. We got your back." So once she told me that I just take off with it. We started with an Amazon Wishlist and we started getting book bags and donations of book bags, school supplies, and all of that. So we took the vacant lot and each booth had something different for the kids to do. It might be face painting, arts and crafts, making little beady chains, we had the bounce house and the tent where all the food and stuff was. There was snow cones, snacks and all of that up under there. So we just keep it going every year but keep it going because it's Ronnieman day.
I be out there communicating with, I don't like calling them "homeless", I say the less fortunate. When I be out communicating with them, and actually talking to them, and then being able to get them some of the items that they ask us for. I know how my son was about certain stuff. And you know, when it comes to animals he was an animal lover, and he hated seeing people struggle. In a way, it makes me feel good when I host these events because one I'm giving back to the community. And two, it's helping keep my son's name alive.

**What is the Chicago Torture Justice Center?**

Since 2017, the Chicago Torture Justice Center has opened its doors to individuals that have been tortured by the Chicago Police Department as well as individuals directly affected by police violence within the city of Chicago. Located on 63rd Street, the center has been a haven for torture survivors and a place for people to call home. Rather than being located in the Loop or another flashy location, the center made it a point to be located on the city’s southside not only for the convenience of those they serve but also to fully integrate itself with its constituents and to truly become a part of the community. In the direct testimonies from Gregory Banks and Dorothy Holmes, it is clear that these efforts have paid off and the Center has established itself as a resource for the people and has gone beyond the call of just being a place that offers counseling.

The Chicago Torture Justice Center has gone above and beyond what was originally outlined within the Reparations Ordinance and that has been to its benefit. Originally, the ordinance stated that the center would just offer “specialized psychological, family, substance abuse and other counseling services at a convenient South Side location that will be based on the model of services provided by the Marjorie Kovler Center of the Heartland Alliance” *(Reparations Ordinance)*. The resolution simply states that the center will offer counseling
services but did not elaborate how. For that reason, the Center has truly taken after its predecessor in using this outline as a foundation and building a support network that offers more than what was originally proposed.

As an institution, the Center wears many hats and addresses a multitude of issues. These can all be seen in the values of the center which include things such as holistic support, politicized healing, community relationships, radical justice and so many more. Just by examining the pillars that make up the values of the Center reveal how it does more than simply offer counseling. The Center understands that healing from the torture that survivors endured is inherently political and the Center understands that this trauma exhibits itself indirectly throughout the rest of the community. For that reason, the Center offers a multitude of events, both in person and online to try to welcome as many people as possible while also educating outsiders about what occurred within the City.

The Chicago Torture Justice Center understands that it is an inherently political institution and even its creation was political and calculated. For that reason it capitalizes on its political nature and attempts to show solidarity towards the people it serves much like the Kovler Center. The Center works closely with many activist and civil rights organizations. Representatives of the Center like Mark Clements and Gregory Banks can not only be found at roundtable discussions and meetings with organizations like Chicago Torture Justice Memorials and the Campaign to Free Incarcerated Torture Survivors (CFIST) but they will also be out marching and protesting along with these groups as well. In fact, one of the co-directors of the Center, Aislinn Pulley, is one of the founders of Black Lives Matter Chicago. The staff of the Chicago Torture Justice Center goes beyond just showing charity or solidarity but are actually co-strugglers in the effort for prison abolition and justice for torture survivors.
A lot of the healing services the Chicago Torture Justice Center offers are particularly unconventional in the western medical field. The Center tends to offer a multitude of events that not only address the physical and mental health of its constituents but also their spiritual health as well. An example of the Center addressing a person’s spiritual wellbeing is when it let people plant seeds in a garden with the intention of coming back to observe the growth at a later date. This type of event was intended to symbolize an individual’s healing journey and resemble how a person grows and gets stronger as time passes. In addition to this, when the Center had in person events, they held a boxing series that Gregory Banks spearheaded and this was intended to sync an individual’s body and mind and allow the person to become cognizant of how their body felt performing certain motions. Lastly, the Center also has an entire page dedicated to zines and mental health toolkits for people to examine and practice on their own. The efforts of the Center do not fall into a single category and are constantly growing.

There is no one set criteria for how the Center operates. It will take on a political identity, address a person’s spiritual health, and also stand with people as they struggle for justice. In this way the Chicago Torture Justice Center has taken the formula of the Kovler Center, and has made it its own. The personal testimonies of Gregory Banks, Learning Fellow and torture survivor, and Dorothy Holmes, community organizer and mother of Ronnieman, show just how much the Center’s work means to people. The Chicago Torture Justice Center is doing amazing work and offers so much to address those that have been most harmed by the carceral system.
Bibliography:


