

Gwendolyn Hooker Highlights Barriers Facing Justice-Impacted People

Gwendolyn Hooker, founder of Hope Thru Navigation, told students during our in-class press conference that her nonprofit is built on helping justice-impacted people set and achieve their own goals.

“Success is defined differently for every person,” she said. “Our program is self-identified... they identify what their goals are, what they want to do, and they prioritize them.”

Hooker spoke about the Tiny Houses of Hope initiative, which provides affordable housing for people with criminal backgrounds who are routinely denied rentals. She said the project began after she noticed clients with stable jobs were still rejected solely because of their records.

“People would not rent to them simply because of their criminal background,” she said. The project became possible after Kalamazoo passed the Housing Equity Ordinance in 2021, which Hooker called “critical” to ensuring people with convictions could legally access housing.

“It wasn’t about if I was going to make it happen,” she said. “It was about how I was going to make it happen.”

Hooker said the first three homes, completed in 2024, are fully occupied, but demand far exceeds supply. When units open, “the first three people that qualify are the first three people we take,” she said.

She noted that fundraising has been one of the biggest challenges. “People don’t really care about people that have criminal backgrounds,” Hooker said. “So we had to be very creative in the funders that we got.”

Hooker also discussed JABS – Justice and Bullying Support – an initiative she launched after her granddaughter was violently assaulted in elementary school.

“There was nowhere for someone that's been impacted by bullying to go,” she said. The program teaches self-defense, conflict resolution and restorative practices, and supports both children who are bullied and those who bully.

“Bullying is a learned behavior,” she said. “If you’ve been bullied, you’re most likely going to go to school and bully other people.”

She addressed broader systemic barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals, pointing to employment and licensing restrictions as major obstacles. Many qualified people, she said, “can build a house on their own,” but cannot get certification because of a felony. She added that while policy improvements have been made, “there’s a lot more work to do.”

Hooker also detailed her group’s involvement in the Kalamazoo Alliance to Prevent Gun Violence, started in 2020 in response to a record number of shootings. The initiative focuses on victim support, relocation assistance, life-insurance coverage and community safety training.

“We are really concentrating more on the preventative side now because we’re trying to prevent gun violence,” she said.

Throughout the conversation, Hooker encouraged future journalists to be thoughtful about language and accuracy. Terms like “felon” or “ex-convict” carry heavy stigma, she said, adding that journalists should instead use “justice-impacted” or “formerly incarcerated.” Her advice to reporters was straightforward: “Make sure you get it right the first time.”