

# Free minds Connect



**THIS MONTH'S  
THEME:**  
EMPATHY

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# Free Minds Connect

## TALKBACK WITH TARA

Is brought to you by...

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FM Friends

We are ALWAYS looking for new contributors. Write or draw something for our next issue and send it to us! (Pieces not published in the Connect will appear on our writing Blog, and at a Write Night Event!)

Free Minds Book Club  
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**Next Issue's Theme:  
Keep It Moving**

Happy Happy Thanksgiving Empathetic Free Minds Members, I am so thankful for all of you and grateful for the wisdom and inspiration you provide.

This issue's theme of Empathy could not have come at a better time as I needed to read the incredible stories of walking in another person's shoes that you'll find in this issue.

The presidential election has been bruising, and seems to have widened a chasm that's split our country in two. Strong emotions are surging because of candidates' and their supporters' words, and they have stirred up feelings of fear and panic. Sounds like we need now more than ever to do what the character Atticus Finch recommends in the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

This is not to say we should ever condone harmful behavior, but only to say all of us need to try to understand each other so we can build bridges instead of shutting each other out. I was so proud of our Free Minds family as our November Write Night hit record attendance. So many new volunteers came who truly want to understand and see the world through the eyes of incarcerated Free Minds members by reading and commenting on your poetry. There was such a positive energy in the room that I know it has transferred to this Connect newsletter and I hope you will feel it as you read. Keep that writing coming so we can give the people what they want: your experiences and poetry!



As columnist JG writes, we are all connected; he shares the African proverb, "I am me because of you." Empathy is not easy, as both MH and AJ describe in their articles. They try to understand the viewpoints of correctional officers and the actions of some family members. Antoinette, whose son's father is an incarcerated FM member, writes about how she tries to imagine her child's father's life even when her own is stressful so she can be the best co-parent possible. You'll read our good friend Shaka Senghor's letter to his victim. We are all better people by reading each of these honest and authentic strivings for higher consciousness. Our own Seana and Free Minds friend KK share their experiences of being the victims of robberies and looking beyond their own fear and hurt to think about what forces were driving the young boys who robbed them. They both possess an exceptional gift of empathy that is making the world a better place.

Neurologists (scientists whose job it is to study the brain) say some babies are naturally born with more empathy than others but that it can be learned and taught. There is an amazing traveling museum started in London call the Empathy Museum which is designed to look like a shoe store. There are boxes of shoes that people pick out and then literally walk around the city in the shoes while hearing a tape recording of the shoe owner's life story. I love this idea but we don't even have to go to London and wear someone else's shoes, we can just open up this wonderful issue. Step inside!

Until next time, be compassionate with yourself and others.

Tara

May the long time sun shine upon you  
All love surround you  
and the pure light within guide your way on

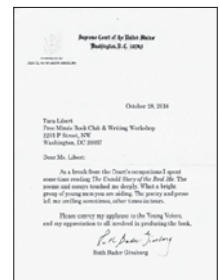
## FREE MINDS HQ



By Seana

**October Apprenticeship:** On October 27th, 9 of your Free Minds brothers graduated from our last apprenticeship of the year and we celebrated in downtown DC with a fun party! Since we began this month-long program in January 2015, over 80 Free Minds members have successfully completed this program and gone on to pursue exciting new adventures. We are so proud of these men for their hard work and can't wait to see all that they will accomplish in the future.

**Supreme Court Tour:** It was a historic day for Free Minds last month when we visited the Supreme Court of the United States, the highest court in the country! Thanks to James, a Free Minds friend, our staff and some of your Free Minds brothers got a behind-the-scenes tour of this incredible building and even got to sit in the courtroom while arguments were happening! After the tour, we gave each of the Supreme Court Justices a copy of *The Untold Story of the Real Me*, and guess what? They're reading it! Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan sent us a letter saying she was looking forward to reading your poetry, and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said this: "As a break from the Court's occupations I spent some time reading *The Untold Story of the Real Me*. The poems and essays touched me deeply. What a bright group of young men you are aiding. The poetry and prose left me smiling sometimes, other times in tears. Please convey my applause to the Young Voices, and my appreciation to all involved in producing the book." The people on the highest court in the United States are reading your words. Congratulations!



**Free Minds on TV:** On November 5th, thanks to a connection we made at the National Book Festival in September, Free Minds was featured on Fox 5 News' Saturday morning show—and it was live! Your Free Minds brother TB overcame his nerves and did a great job talking about the literary journal (your poetry!) on the show. We are excited that your work is reaching new audiences every day and look forward to our next on-camera interview! Maybe a feature film one day???



# DEFENSE INVESTIGATOR AND ROBBERY VICTIM IN THE SAME DAY

*By: Seana*

A lot of you know that I used to be an investigator at the Public Defender Service here in DC (which is how I first heard about Free Minds and met some of you) but most of you don't know that I was the victim of a robbery back in 2007. I remember it clearly, even though it was so long ago.

I was walking home from a friend's place one night near the Convention Center in DC (after a long day of investigating for the defense if you can believe it), and was only a few blocks from my apartment when it happened. Four young men walked up to me and one of them grabbed me by the neck and pushed me against a car that was parked along the street. The other three then circled me and went through my pockets, taking my cell phone and money, before telling me to walk away and taking off in the other direction.

I remember feeling shocked that this had happened to me. I also remember how everyone later commented on how calm I seemed about the whole thing and how I was reacting differently than most of the robbery victims we were used to interviewing at work. I have come to realize that this is because I had empathy for the young men who robbed me. I have sat across the table in the visiting hall countless times with young men charged with doing the exact same thing so I felt like on some level I knew these kids. That might sound weird, but it's true. I have so often heard stories of regret and embarrassment from clients charged in similar incidents- kids who had made one mistake or bad decision but aren't bad or scary people and who would have done things differently if they could go back and do it all over again.

Most robbery victims are not able to experience the level of empathy and forgiveness that I felt almost immediately, which is understandable. Being a victim of any crime can be an incredibly traumatic experience that often stays with people for years to come. I have heard stories from robbery victims who say they now live in fear, afraid to leave their homes after dark and unable to forget what happened to them. This is why I believe that restorative justice is such a powerful and important tool. It teaches empathy and shows both parties that there is so much more to a crime than the few seconds that go by while it's happening. It helps the victim as much as the offender, in my opinion. I think that empathy has been incredibly beneficial

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## WORDS OF WISDOM

*By JG, FM Member*

Culturally, we could definitely use some lessons on empathy. A lot of the time we're so quick to judge and/or dismiss other people's struggle without even making an honest attempt to see things from their perspective. Prime example: The Black Lives Matter movement. Black people have taken a stand, proclaiming that we're human beings, deserving of any and all human rights, and despite all of the overwhelming and undeniable evidence of systemic oppression of black people, we still have people (way too many), who dismiss and disregard this national problem. These people refuse, for whatever reason, to be empathetic to their fellow men and women, and that's the reason we'll continue to see problems in this country.

When I think of empathy, I think of a South African proverb that says something to the effect of "I am because you are." To me, this one phrase embodies the understanding of the fact that everything and everyone in the universe are connected, so when someone does something, good or bad, it's a reflection of the community that person come from. Which is a reflection of the

*continued on page 6*



# THE WRITE WAY

## Writing the Second Person

By Julia

A few years ago, researchers did a study and concluded that reading literary fiction can increase our capacity for empathy. It makes sense, right, since when you read someone else's words you are putting yourself in their shoes. That's what we're going to do today, with an exercise in **writing the second person**.

In English, "**I**" is the **first person**, "**you**" is the **second person**, and "**he/she/they**" is the **third person**. When you write something from the "you" point of view (just like this sentence!) that's called writing the second person.

Here's an example from [The Untold Story of the Real Me](#). Antwon uses the second person in his poem "Tyree (Before the Sword)" on page 106.

*Imagine that you are a working 25-year-old young man  
You have a seven-year-old son  
Who is the spitting image of you  
And loves his Daddy dearly  
For once in your life  
Smile at the fact that you are trying to better yourself*

Antwon is using the second person to put himself and the reader in someone else's shoes. That's the powerful thing about the second person—it calls upon the writer and the reader to imagine themselves as someone else and understand what that person is going through.

### WRITING PROMPT

Think of someone close to you (a friend, a family member, or someone else you know). Write a poem from their point of view using the **second person "you."**

### A Book That Changed My Life

"The book that changed my life would have to be [The Mis-Education of the Negro](#) by Carter G. Woodson. This book made me take a hard look at how I perceive life through the window of perspective and the outside dynamics that have played a conscious and subconscious role in the shaping of it."  
- QS, FM member

"A book that had a hand in my journey towards liberation is [A Long Walk to Freedom](#) by South Africa's former president Nelson Mandela." - GL, FM member

# FREE MINDS MAILBAG

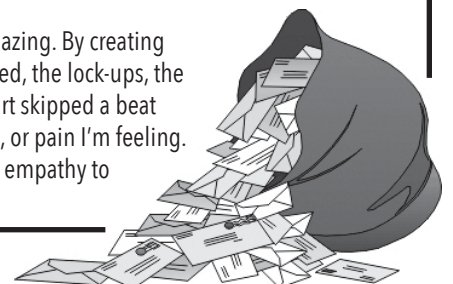
*We love getting mail from our Free Minds Family. Write us, and let us know what you thought of this issue!*

"Always good to get a newsletter from you guys because it seems like it's always something new going on in the city! Like the new museum on the Mall—I didn't even know it was being built so for me to see a picture of it shocked me to the core. This last Connect was like DAT to me and it held some strong messages inside. Like how TB came in with his big brother and how he is home 6 years later and seems to have grown and learned from his mistakes—that's major!" - FM member CM

"I sat in on a victim's impact group when I was in Texas. One of the guests played a 911 call from a time when someone broke into a woman's home when she was alone with her baby. It was awful. After hearing the stories in the group, it made me feel for people I have victimized and I didn't ever want to take advantage of anyone again." - FM member BG on the empathy he felt after participating in a victim's impact group

"I just received [March Volume 2](#). Thanks a lot! I truly enjoyed the first one and even though I am not usually into graphic novels, this story is amazing!" - FM member AT

"My empathy goes out to Congressman John Lewis. My first time reading [March: Book One](#) was vividly amazing. By creating this comic book, I was able to lock into each page at my own pace. I felt the adversity John Lewis experienced, the lock-ups, the beatings, pain, and oppression. When reading [March](#) I felt like I was right beside Lewis, every sit-in my heart skipped a beat hoping that it would all be over soon. Empathy is important to have if I want others to understand an issue, or pain I'm feeling. I would expect them to at least show empathy. Likewise if I plan on being a motivational speaker I must have empathy to reach out to my listeners." - FM member BH



# FAMILY TIES

The column where FM family and loved ones weigh in.

## My Son's Father is in Prison

By Antoinette

I first met DJ (a FM member) when we were both just 13 years old and in the 8th grade together. Now, 16 years later, DJ and I are the proud parents of a beautiful 5-year-old son, Andrew. Unfortunately, DJ has been incarcerated throughout most of Andrew's life. Never did I think that I, a 4.0 student with a master's degree I earned at the age of 23, would be a single parent. But hey, life happens. And here I am.

While we are no longer together, DJ and I have made a conscious decision to co-parent our son. This is important to me. DJ is still Andrew's father. No matter where he is, where we live, or what my marital status is, if DJ is living and breathing on this earth, he is still Andrew's father. It would be too selfish of me to take away his right to be in his child's life—society has already done that.

Being mother to a child whose father is incarcerated is very fatiguing and toilsome. I'm doing it all on my own but I thank God that I can provide for my child without suffering financial struggle or strain. Of course, things get tight with unexpected expenses and celebratory occasions, but we make it work. Honestly, the hardest part is that Andrew consistently asks about his dad's whereabouts or "when he'll be coming home from work."

I feel lucky though that DJ is extremely active in Andrew's life. He sends books along with a CD of his voice reading the stories. He sends letters, drawings, pictures and "just-because" gifts throughout the year. DJ has not missed one birthday, Christmas, graduation or celebratory occasion.

Empathy is extremely important to me in getting through this. It's the key element of emotional intelligence. I practice it daily. As a Bible-believing Christian, I believe we must understand one another. I must have empathy for both Andrew and for his father, DJ. There's an American Indian Proverb that says "Never criticize a man until you've walked a mile in his moccasins." I incorporate this in both relationships. With Andrew, understanding how he feels is vital to letting him know I care about his worries and concerns. Andrew is too young now to be worrying about what I'm going through, though. If I'm having a hard day I try not to take it out on him. If I'm feeling overwhelmed, I wait until he's sound asleep and go into the bathroom and have my "mommy moment". When he is older, he will understand and he will have empathy. DJ and I agree that it is not my responsibility to tell our son about this time of his dad's life, but his. I see it as a bonding moment for the father and son. DJ can most credibly convey the importance of staying out of trouble, remaining focused in school and taking advantage of all positive opportunities, because of what DJ, himself, has endured in the judicial system.

I feel for DJ. I hope that he and Andrew can build a relationship that DJ and his own father did not have. I hope they can bond and share

# ASK HF ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

HF will be back for our next issue in January. This month, guest columnist and FM member TB sits in at the advice desk.

Dear HF,

*I need help! I know empathy is about walking in another person's shoes, right? All my life I've been loyal. Loyal to my friends, to my family, and to my block. Loyalty is more important than anything where I come from. But since I've been locked up, my friends aren't there for me anymore. I know they could put a little money on my commissary, write me a letter every now and then, or even just accept my call! But none of them even do that. It's like they've forgotten all about me. If they don't have empathy for me, how am I supposed to have empathy for them?*

Sincerely,  
KQ

Dear KQ,

I understand how you might be feeling right now due to your family and friends not being supportive to you in your current situation. Loyalty is a commendable factor to us all, however just because a person isn't as supportive as you need or want them to be, doesn't mean they don't care or think about you. I was in your same situation, and felt the same way you did when my family and friends was not there for me like I needed them to be. I understand the small things you're looking for seems like nothing to do at all. You have to understand that life is fast, REAL FAST in the outside world. And it is so easy for things to skip and slip a person's mind. Life itself is too short to hold any grudge towards anyone, especially family. Now your friends are different, you have to have a better judgement of character from now on.

Sincerely,  
TB

experiences, secrets and talk about life's hardships. I want our son to have the option to go to his father if needed because there are some aspects of his life that I as his mother and a woman, will not be able to relate to or help him with.

Our son is a very happy, smiling little boy. He studies sign language, judo, and tennis, as well as prospering in school. I cherish every second of his life.

My advice for those parenting alone because of incarceration, as well as those who are incarcerated and separated from their children, would be to ensure that you have a strong faith-based foundation. It doesn't matter if it's Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Sikhism, whatever! Just find a higher power and BELIEVE! It's critical that we demonstrate empathy, sympathy and compassion with each other. Especially with our loved ones that are incarcerated. Trouble does not last always. But joy comes in the morning.



## WORDS OF WISDOM

*continued from page 3*

larger society, which is a reflection of that state, and so forth and so on. So, from a more universal viewpoint, we all bear some responsibility for not only ourselves, but each other as well. Developing our ability and willingness to empathize with each other will allow peace to gradually come in and reign supreme. I believe that's all people really want at the end of the day.

On a more personal note, there's one time in particular that I can recall when someone empathized with me. I had just turned 17 and I'd just left DC Jail about 2-and-a-half weeks earlier. Now I was leaving one of those jails in Montgomery County, MD, absolutely clueless as to where I was going or what lay ahead. Needless to say, I was lonely and afraid. When we arrived at the airport we were turned over the US Marshalls. There was one woman who was very nice to me. This was unusual considering all my prior experience with the US Marshalls, going back and forth to court. She put my hand cuffs and shackles on loosely and then asked, "They aren't too tight are they sweetie? Because I can loosen them." I told her they were okay.

The Marshalls got all of us on to the plane and seated and before we took off she came by and asked, "You okay honey?" I told her I was. She checked on me one more time during the flight. And then, periodically, as she was doing her rounds or taking someone to the bathroom, she would smile at me. I was on that plane for a few hours before I transferred to another one. But I never forgot that Marshall and her kindness towards me. I've played this back in my mind numerous times and at some point I realized that she wasn't being this nice to any of the other prisoners. As a matter of fact, she was barely speaking to anyone else unless it was necessary. This is when I also realized that she was empathizing with me. I was the only juvenile on the plane, and I probably looked as scared and lost as I felt. But her kind words and gestures meant more to me than she may ever know. Peace be upon her wherever she may be, and till next time, peace be upon all of you as well.

## THE LEGAL PAD

### The DC Comprehensive Youth Justice Amendment Act

*By Rachel, FM intern*

On November 1, the D.C. Council unanimously passed the "Comprehensive Youth Justice Amendment Act of 2016," (CYJA). The Comprehensive Youth Justice Amendment Act was introduced by Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie and addresses many concerns about the way our juvenile justice system operates. It will work to keep children out of the adult criminal justice system, reduce over-incarceration, and ensure age-appropriate sentencing and confinement. The bill has made its way to the office of DC's mayor, Muriel Brown. It won't become law until she signs it.

#### So what exactly does the CYJA do?

The bill contains a ton of information and changes but here are some of the specifics:

- Ensuring that juveniles are not detained unnecessarily before a court hearing
- Expanding voluntary victim-offender mediation services as an alternative to prosecution
- Protecting children under 10 from being committed to the custody of DYRS with older children
- Ending the commitment of status offenders (juveniles who commit minor offenses such as running away from home) at age 18
- Banning the use of juvenile life without parole sentences (following Supreme Court precedent)
- Transferring all detained juveniles from adult facilities to DYRS
- Banning the use of solitary confinement in juvenile detention
- Providing juveniles charged as adults who have long sentences with an opportunity for judicial review after serving 20 years

#### Who supported the CYJA? Who helped bring it to the DC Council?

Free Minds Poet Ambassadors testified about their experiences and how the bill could improve the lives and conditions of DC youth. In addition, 28 organizations and advocates all signed a letter in support of the bill. Some of these signers included: DC

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# DEFENSE INVESTIGATOR AND ROBBERY VICTIM IN THE SAME DAY

*continued from page 3*

to me in this situation because it meant that I was quickly able to move on from the robbery and did not become fearful of my neighborhood, always looking over my shoulder and worrying if it would happen again (it hasn't). For that, I am grateful. I'm not sure what happened to those kids that robbed me that night (no one was ever arrested for it, that I am aware of) but I hope that was their first and only big mistake and that they have gone on to do positive things with their lives.

## CONVERSATION WITH KELLI

Hey Free Minds Brothers & Sisters,

What do you think of the new name for the column? Something I love is talking with friends over coffee. Since we can't all gather at Starbucks just now though, I'm thinking we'll meet for conversation over every new issue of The Connect instead (imagine that we each have a steaming cup of coffee)!

We just finished reading Dime by E.R. Frank with the young'uns in the Jail Book Club. The book tells the story of a young 14-year-old girl named Dime who has grown up with a mean and alcoholic foster mom who doesn't really care about Dime now that she's not a cute toddler any more. After being put out of the house, Dime is befriended by a young woman who takes her home to meet a man called "Daddy." Daddy tells Dime she is beautiful—something no one has ever told her. He buys her clothes and gives her food and shelter. Eventually, once she has fallen in love with and become completely dependent upon him, convincing her nobody else wants her, he "turns her out" as one of his prostitutes. The story is heartbreaking. The author, E.R. Frank, did years of research into sex trafficking in our country before she wrote the novel.

I think we all felt enormous empathy for Dime. I know the book gave me new insight into how so many young women from backgrounds of poverty and neglect end up selling their own bodies. Dime didn't choose prostitution. She was trapped by it. One of the young men in the book club named D. told me the book really opened his eyes. He said, "Daddy took advantage of Dime. She was vulnerable and he tricked her and stole her innocence." D. said the book made him think an entirely different way about prostitution.

How cool is it that a book with fictional characters can teach us empathy? Books allow us to get inside the experience of another person and that's how empathy works. What other books have you read that let you walk in another person's shoes? When did you last practice empathy? Write and tell me about it.

Until then, I want to acknowledge that my all-time favorite holiday, Thanksgiving is coming. I am thankful for each one of you. I'm especially thankful that you demonstrate a desire to keep your mind free, just by reading this newsletter! Keep reading, writing, learning and growing. I'll do the same ☺

Your friend, Kelli



# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## **Empathizing With Darkness** *By LG*

Someone once shared with me  
The darkness behind these walls  
Like being surrounded by piranhas  
And bone crushing shark jaws

Every time he re-entered society  
A new story was told with a smile  
It was hard to receive a lesson  
When expressions seem to guide

No one wants to die in prison  
And certainly doesn't want to waste their time  
No one wants to come out an old man  
After entering darkness in their prime

The day that darkness surrounded me  
Understanding became so clear  
It's hard to control your emotions  
When your freedom is near and dear

I finally share his feelings  
Cause I know from which he speak  
I appreciate his strength  
Cause it didn't make him weak

## **Empathy** *By BG*

I hate to be in the vicinity where someone is being bullied  
Whether it's against a stranger, friend, or even an enemy  
See life has dealt a hand in which it hurts me to say  
"I'm all in."

I'm not void of a past  
Whether good or bad  
So I know how it feels to be happy and glad.  
Or angry or sad

I try to get you to sense where I stand  
Without revealing my hand  
I have the power to reach  
So I reach to teach

So as I teach  
I reach to all I've done wrong  
Especially those I've done harm  
I hate losing

But as I've loss  
I feel lost

To find I've loss mine  
Accept my all  
To God, I'm not surprised  
You've opened my eyes  
I see clearly

I want for me family  
To reap the passing of a loved one's demise  
I aim to stop the violence  
At least with my own hands  
Even if it means...

...the loss of me  
Eternally I live 4 you all  
Giving you my all

In return  
That one shall fall

## **Empathy** *By LC*

I've been called a super-predator  
With no conscience and no empathy  
Must be brought to heel  
Mass incarceration was the remedy  
Harsh sentences for light crimes  
Twenty years for selling a nickel rock  
Life for carrying  
So now where's your conscience at  
Where's the empathy in that?

## **My Little Flower** *By AH*

Sometimes silence is the loudest of noise  
And her silence speaks volumes  
Everybody is entitled to make mistakes and in  
Life we all stumble  
But of all the mistakes I could have made  
With this one I scarred her for life  
To leave her alone to raise our child  
Was like condemning her to a rough life  
We may not have been the best of lovers  
But for 9 months she carried our daughter  
So strong she appears on the surface  
On the inside she feels dirty, used,  
And worthless  
And no matter where she turns she is  
Overwhelmed with pain  
So she runs back to the game  
Like a moth to a flame  
Run child run  
You're still my little flower

I can only imagine how much resentment  
my daughter holds for me  
And believe me it's there if she's anything  
Like me  
I once hated even the thought of my father  
There were so many bottled up  
Emotions towards him I harbored  
Now as a man I see how he felt  
To have to wonder as a father if his  
Child's being raised by someone else  
To be stripped of a chance to love  
His only child  
To be separated by so many miles  
Man, I may not have been what they  
Call a 'model citizen'  
But I'm still a man that loves and  
Misses his children  
And the last thing I will ever be is a  
Coward  
"Kool" I pray God helps you bloom into  
The most beautiful little flower

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# PAYING IT FORWARD

## A Young Woman from Oregon Joins Peace Corps

By Kelli

*You've probably heard of the Peace Corps. But do you know much about it? The Peace Corps began under President Kennedy in 1961. Since then, more than 220,000 Americans have volunteered to travel to 140 different countries to help people and improve cross-cultural relationships between the United States and the rest of the world. This month, we talked to Abie, now 29, who just returned home after volunteering in a small village in Peru for two years.*

### **Why did you decide to apply to the Peace Corps?**

I wanted to be a part of something bigger than myself.

Peru was everything that I did not expect! When you Google "Peru," the things that pop up are Machu Picchu (ancient Incan ruins on top of a mountain) and llamas. That's not what I saw! When I arrived in the village that would be my home for the next two years, I saw desert, trash, stray dogs and poverty. It was terrifying. I remember thinking, "I can't do this!" During my first month, almost every day I wanted to leave. Sometimes I still find it shocking that I stayed! It was very difficult to be away from my family in Oregon. Luckily, I lived with a wonderful Peruvian family and they helped me so much.

### **What was your job?**

I was a youth development volunteer. Every day was full of surprises. I worked with local schools, parent and youth groups and local government to create programs to help support and promote higher education, sexual education and leadership. I held after-school clubs, taught parents the importance of talking with their children about safe sex, and helped teachers organize college and career fairs in the community.

### **Do you feel you succeeded in your mission there?**

In Peru, women are told that after high school they should get married and have kids. They believe husbands should provide for their families and women should just work in the house. I believe my biggest success was being an example of an independent, single and goal oriented woman who moved to another country by herself to pursue her dreams of helping other people. Many girls and women would never think that was even possible. Showing them that they can do anything they work hard for, even as a woman, was my biggest success.

### **Can you describe briefly how race issues play out in Peru?**

Peru was colonized by the Spanish way back in 1572. Because of this, in Peru the lighter your skin, the more "beautiful" or "wealthy" people think you are. As a dark-skinned woman, I faced a lot of racism. Some people didn't believe I was worth their time. Many refused to believe I was American, because I didn't have blonde hair and blue eyes.

### **What was the most gratifying part of the experience?**

Just knowing my purpose was helping others.

I remember the first time I worked on a project promoting gender equality. Most of the fathers I worked with believed their sons deserved to go to university while their daughters should just become housewives. One young woman in my class came to me and said she wanted to go to University. She wanted her father to understand how important it was for her. The following week in my parenting group, I showed the father her school work, to prove how smart she was. He told me he had no idea she was so smart. She had never shown her father her school work because she didn't think he would listen. I was so grateful I had the opportunity to prove her father wrong about girls, and that girls too are incredibly smart and can do anything boys can do.

### **What was your craziest experience?**

Every day during my first 6 months! I showed up to Peru with very limited Spanish skills. Working with the Mayor of the village, professors, and health care professionals in a language you don't speak led to the weirdest situations. Like when I thought a nurse was inviting me to a nutrition class for new mothers and infants, but really it was a breastfeeding contest. As in, what mother can breastfeed their child the longest!

### **What would you say to someone considering the Peace Corps?**

DO IT!

### **Did your experience in the Peace Corps require empathy?**

To have the ability to understand and share the feelings of another helps us to connect. To be able to be successful in the Peace Corps it is incredibly important to have empathy for others. I had empathy before I left for the Peace Corps, but when you are thrown into another person's life and walk in their shoes for a day (or two years), the ability to understand others and share their feelings becomes so natural.

The most important thing I learned in the Peace Corps was that as human beings, we are more alike than we are different.

I truly believe that to achieve a more understanding, loving, healthy and safe world, we need to embrace empathy and take the time to understand one another.





# THE LEGAL PAD

*continued from page 6*

Lawyers for Youth, Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, and Public Defender Service of the District of Columbia.

## How does this affect Free Minds members?

If this bill is signed into law, it will affect any DC youth who are awaiting sentencing, and Free Minds members who are currently under 18. Free Minds members who have long sentences will have an opportunity for a case review after they have served 20 years of their sentence. Note that those already eligible for parole are not affected by these changes.

# QUOTE-I-VATOR

*"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive."* - James Baldwin, author ([The Fire Next Time](#), [Go Tell It On the Mountain](#))

*"Reading fiction not only develops our imagination and creativity.... It gives us the ability to feel empathy for people we've never met, living lives we couldn't possibly experience for ourselves, because the book puts us inside the character's skin."* - Ann Patchett, author ([Bel Canto](#))

*"Throughout the world, teachers, sociologists, policymakers and parents are discovering that empathy may be the single most important quality that must be nurtured to give peace a fighting chance."* - Arundhati Roy, author ([The God of Small Things](#))

*"If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."* - Atticus Finch in [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) by Harper Lee

# DC PHOTOS OF THE MONTH



**King-Greenleaf Rec Center:** located in the center of the James Creek neighborhood in Southwest DC, one block from South Capitol Street and the new Nationals baseball stadium, this rec center is home to a brand-new Spray Park for kids. A hangout for local youth, this rec center is also where several of our members have spent the summers working.



**Barry Farms:** This neighborhood in Southeast DC, adjacent to the Anacostia metro station, is where Junk Yard Band (a popular go-go band in DC) was founded in the early 1980's. It is not named after DC's late former mayor, Marion Barry, although they share the same spelling.

Have a request for next issue's DC Photo of the Month? Write us at 2201 P St NW, Washington, DC 20037 and let us know what you'd like to see!





# I KNEW HE WAS SCARED: MY EXPERIENCE BEING ROBBED

*By KK, a photojournalist and volunteer for Free Minds*

One beautiful, sunny Sunday afternoon, my husband and I were walking home from a trip to Eastern Market. We'd been married about a year, and it was a magical day, not only because it was one of those glorious fall days DC does so well, but because we had just learned the night before that I was pregnant with our first child. We were thrilled, and the world seemed full of potential.

We must have been on C or D Street, SE, and I remember turning right onto 13th, just a few blocks from home. About halfway down the block, a teenage boy stepped out from behind a hedged entryway to one of the row houses. Without thinking much of it, we greeted him with a friendly, "Hello." But instead of greeting us back, he pointed a gun at us and asked for our money and phones. My husband has been a teacher in DC public schools for years and, seeing every young person as a potential student (as teachers do), he answered with a playful challenge, "C'mon, we say hello to you and you pull a gun on us?" But this seemed to make the boy more agitated and he pressed the barrel of the gun into my husband's jaw. I was terrified by that, by the potential that moment had to ruin all our lives, and started to cry. I'd lost my brother a couple years earlier and life had finally begun to feel stable and hopeful again.

You know when you're in an emergency situation and time seems to slow down and your thinking becomes very clear and rational as you weigh your options? That's how it was. I remember wanting to tell that boy not to make this decision, that there was so much more waiting for him in life than this, and that he was risking it all. But I knew he was scared, just as we were, and I sensed that ending the situation as quickly as possible was in our best interest at that point.

I told him we'd give him whatever we had, and we quickly emptied our wallets of the few dollars in them and gave him the phone that one of us had. But doing so felt like we'd all conformed to the worst stereotypes about us, and had widened the chasm between us. He told us to walk away, which was scary as our backs were to him, and we ducked into the street as soon as we could to make sure there was a car at least between us and the gun. When we looked back from the end of the block, he was gone.

Afterward, we filed a report. There was no happiness looking at all those photos of teenage boys. On the one hand, I hoped the boy who held us up was caught so that he wouldn't do that to anyone else. But I also wondered what his story was, what had led him to that moment, and how he felt about it afterwards - and I found myself half hoping he wouldn't be caught, that he had hated the experience as much as we had, wouldn't do it again, and would go on to a life far more worthy of his potential. There is no question that some kids have much tougher paths than others - that lack of fundamental fairness is what drove my husband to teach in the first place. And it grounds my writing and interviews with people from all walks of life, with a belief that when people understand each other - feel real empathy for each other - we are so much more apt to do right by each other.

I've tried hard not to let that experience color the way I see other teenage boys on the streets. I don't know why that boy chose to do what he did that day or what his options were. I never did find out, but I continue to hope that it was a one-time mistake, and that he has since had the opportunities he needed, and made the decisions necessary, to go on to better things.

## POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

*continued from page 8*

**Sometimes I Cry**  
*By DJ*

I told a million lies now it's time to tell a single truth  
Sometimes I cry  
It's hard dealing with my pride not knowing whether to fight or flee  
Sometimes I cry  
Hard to maintain this image of a tough guy  
When deep down inside I am terrified!  
If I ever told you I wasn't scared I lied  
Struggling to make it back to society and my family, I cry

I cry for my son who I barely see  
Due to these mountains  
And me and his mom's beef  
I cry for my siblings who never knew their older brother  
Because he stayed in the streets  
I cry for my grandma who is now deceased  
I cry for my life, half of which they took for me  
I cry for the lack of unity we have, most of all!  
When will it end I want to know  
Till then all I can do is let these tears flow...



# IN THE NEWS

By John, Free Minds friend

For months, the world's eyes have been trained on the United States' presidential campaign, a contest between Republican candidate Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton. The person who holds the office has a tremendous ability to influence not only what happens in America's cities and towns, but also what happens to the world's economy.

It has been a campaign marked by negative arguments. Trump has attempted to paint Clinton, a former Senator and Secretary of State, as a Washington insider that broke the law by using a private server for emails that may have contained classified information. Clinton has sought to portray Trump as a person who is unfit and unprepared to lead the country.

Earlier this month, the campaign ended in a stunner: Donald Trump was elected to become the 45th President of the United States. Virtually every poll and projection leading up to the election suggested otherwise, and he will ultimately lose the popular vote by at least a million votes, possibly two (they're still counting). But Trump won six states that the Republican candidate in 2012, Mitt Romney, did not win.

Trump is a billionaire whose finances emanated from his real estate business, has no government experience, and has in the past donated to candidates from both parties. Along the campaign, the media published stories that he may not have paid income taxes for decades, ran a fraudulent charity, and made incredibly offensive remarks about women.

So how did he pull this off? There are lots of folks trying to figure that out now. At least part of the story is that in some key states, the voter turnout was lower than in 2012 in patterns that did not favor Clinton.

But that isn't the whole story. Trump also managed to piece together a large group of voters with different priorities:

- **Immigration:** Trump campaigned on stemming the flow of immigrants from Mexico, Central America and from unstable areas where terrorists could attempt to enter the country under the guise of refugee asylum.
- **Jobs:** Trump vowed to renegotiate America's trade deals, make it harder for American companies to move jobs overseas, and at the same time lower corporate tax rates to make doing business in America cheaper. Clearly, he tapped into a fear in many parts of the country that the world economy was passing them by or phasing them out.



- **Abortion:** Since the passing of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, there has been a vacancy on the Supreme Court. Trump has promised to fill that with a conservative jurist that would, in all likelihood, help the court overturn *Roe v Wade*. That is a 1972 case where the court ruled women had the constitutional right to have an abortion.

Since that time, many conservative-led states have sought to make access to abortions as limited as possible under the law. Overturning *Roe v. Wade* would not ban abortion in America, but it would permit all 50 states to decide for themselves whether to permit the procedure.

Along with Trump's election, the Republicans have won control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This gives them, and Trump, the ability to make policy quickly.

Trump's election has left many minority groups in the country fearful that this administration will be antagonistic to their communities. Trump said during the campaign that registering Muslim Americans was something he'd consider, even though the idea is unconstitutional. Latino families are fearful that the president-elect will follow through on plans to amass a large deportation force and send home up to 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country.

Trump repeatedly said during the campaign that the African-American community had been let down by Clinton and past Democrats, and urged black voters to give him a chance. And he did garner a larger share of the black vote than Romney did in 2012. However, he also said during his campaign that he would restore "stop and frisk," a policy ruled unconstitutional.

But Trump's personal attitude toward the black community aside, it has become increasingly evident that white supremacists and

# IN THE NEWS

white nationalists support him and are seeking to capitalize on his victory. There will surely be consistent pressure on Trump to separate his administration from this faction.

## SPORTS

It has been a bizarre season so far in Redskin-land. It does not seem like there has been a single week where both the offense and defense dominated a game, and yet the Skins sit at 5-3-1 with victories over division rivals the New York Giants and Philadelphia Eagles.

We will have a chance to see whether Washington is for real on Turkey Day, when they head on the road to take on hated rival and top NFL team the Dallas Cowboys. The Redskins nearly beat the Cowboys in Week 2, letting the game slip away with an interception in the end zone.

For any Cowboys fans reading this: the future and the present are looking pretty bright. The squad started the year with a rookie QB, Dak Prescott, taking over for an injured Tony Romo. But Prescott and fellow rookie Ezekiel Elliott have thrived behind the league's best offensive line, and the defense has been good enough to win.

Any list of serious Super Bowl contenders at the moment includes the following: the Cowboys, the Seattle Seahawks, and the New England Patriots. Teams on the next tier are the Oakland Raiders, Kansas City Chiefs, Denver Broncos, and probably the New York Giants.

Major League Baseball wrapped up its 2016 season with perhaps the greatest game in league history deciding a World Series between two cities that haven't won in a very long time. The Cleveland Indians and Chicago Cubs faced off in this year's Fall Classic. Cleveland had not won the World Series since 1948; the Cubs hadn't won since 1908! The Indians quickly took a 3-1 lead in the series. The Cubs battled back, forcing a Game 7 in Cleveland on a cold, rainy, November night. The Cubs took an early lead in the game, only to have its long-suffering fans watch the lead disappear in the 8th inning. As the game approached extra innings in a tie, the skies opened and the game was paused for a rain delay.

After the rain delay, the Cubs broke through with two runs in the 10th inning. The Indians got one back in the bottom of the 10th, but couldn't tie it up. And so, the Cubs broke the longest championship drought for any team in American sports.

In basketball: the Washington Wizards stink, that's the early season news. Through nine games, they are 2-7. The early season suggests a handful of dominant teams in the Western Conference - Golden State, the Clippers, and the Spurs - along with the defending champion Cleveland Cavaliers in the East.



## ENTERTAINMENT

On the November 12 edition of Saturday Night Live, the world sort of welcomed back a comedic giant and one of the greatest groups in rap history. The show was hosted by Dave Chappelle, the stand-up comedian who soared to fame in the 2000s with his hysterical sketch comedy show on Comedy Central. Chappelle abruptly left the show, leaving millions on the table.



The musical guest for the show was A Tribe Called Quest, which this month released an album for the first time since 1998. The group recently lost one of its two emcees, Phife Dawg, who passed away due to complications with diabetes. Tribe's new album, "We Got It From Here... Thank U For Your Service," will make any old-school rap fan happy. The music recalls the formula that made groups like them great in the 1990s, and features guests including Andre 3000, Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar.





# REENTRY PROFILE

## Success Story: VD

VD was just shy of his 18th birthday when he was arrested, charged and convicted as an adult. He spent the next 11 ½ years in federal prisons across the country. Upon his release, VD, now 29, was determined to prove to himself and his loved ones that he had changed and was now a hard-working, and responsible man. "I grew up a lot in prison," he says. "I changed and I put away childish things."

Hi number one goal was to work. "I knew if I wanted money or a car, then I needed to work for it. Money wasn't going to fall from trees and nobody was going to give it to me," he says. He got a job immediately, and then just as quickly he was let go because of his criminal record but he refused to give up. It was his job counselor at the halfway house who first told him about the Free Minds Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship. Then his good friend told him how he had just completed the Free Minds Apprenticeship and that VD should definitely check it out. "Free Minds, Free Minds. I keep hearing about Free Minds!" he remembers thinking. The name rang a bell, but he couldn't put his finger on just why it sounded so familiar.

"As soon as I got to the office, I figured it out! Back in 2004, when I first got to the DC Jail, I went to exactly one Free Minds Book Club session before I had my turned 18 and got shipped out to federal prison!" he says. And it had an impact. VD used books and writing poetry to help him throughout his sentence. His favorites were deep thought-provoking books that caused him to examine his own life. "My favorite book ever is As a Man Thinketh by James Allen," he says now.

The apprenticeship experience was powerful for VD. "They gave me the training and skills I needed to pursue my goals. Now, I had already learned some of these things while I was in prison. I even got my Associate's Degree in Business while

I was incarcerated. The difference though was the people. Everybody in prison had me prepared to be rejected by society. The older guys taught me that nobody would give me a chance. But Free Minds was different. They showed me there are people out here who are really trying to help. That gave me the motivation I really needed," he says.

VD was especially inspired by Free Minds' Apprenticeship Trainer, Marcus and Job Site Supervisor, Tony. "Marcus and Tony really showed me that I could do this. If they were locked up and came home to become hugely successful business owners, then I just knew there was hope for me."

VD had not even completed the month-long apprenticeship before he landed an interview and then a fulltime job with the government agency in Washington, DC. Now he spends his days helping keep our streets clean, safe and friendly. "I do everything from helping tourists who are lost to power-washing graffiti off of walls to picking up and disposing of dead animals," he laughs. "I like to learn things and I'm open minded and I just appreciate having this job now. I feel pretty great about what I've done since I came home. Some days are tough, but I don't complain. I just keep pushing myself to do the best that I can."

During his off-hours, VD is a dedicated and loyal Free Minds volunteer, speaking at community events promoting nonviolence and mentoring younger Free Minds members. One day he hopes to work full-time as a counselor guiding and supporting young people. "I just want to give back to the community. I want to teach these young guys that you don't have to go to jail to prove yourself or earn your stripes."

The Free Minds Family is so proud of him!





# TWO SIDES TO EVERY STORY

By AJ, FM member

*We checked in with AJ who has been home for a couple of years. AJ works 3 jobs, has an apartment, is in a long term committed relationship and they just had a baby. We asked him if he could share his personal experiences with empathy.*

It's crazy you asked me now about empathy because my truck just got stolen right outside my apartment on my street and it was like déjà vu as it brought me right back to all the things I was doing as a kid on the come up. Doing anything to get money, robbing, stealing cars. At first I was mad and got right back in the mindset of doing something in return; then I thought about the kids who probably did this and put my feet in their shoes. The police officer said this type of van was the number one that's stolen in the area. I knew they were probably using it for some other reason, to carry out other robberies or get another car. I could imagine it was a group of kids all trying to fit in who don't see another way to do things. Just like I was as a kid. All that pain and trouble came back to me and I wasn't mad anymore. I feel bad for the things I did to my victims as a kid. As a kid, you're not thinking about the consequences, how someone worked hard for what they have. I work hard for everything I get now and it feels good. I wish kids knew there is another way. They can get jobs and get things they need and want. When it's all you see around you, you think it's the only way to do things. They aren't thinking about who they are doing bad things to. They are just thinking about their own needs. You have to get personal for people to understand. One of the main reasons I think kids do bad things is because nobody treated them good so they get hard. It's how they were raised. I think nobody tried to figure out how they were feeling so they don't even try to think about what others are going through.

There are some situations in which it's much easier for me to imagine what another person is going through, and others where I'm just not there yet. My girl going through labor—I know I'll never know what that feels like but I see her in a lot of pain and I try to do whatever I can to ease it a bit. My mom being addicted to drugs when we were all young. At first I couldn't see why she would even start using but now that I'm

older I see drugs as a way to escape reality. If you need drugs to take your mind off something, if you are trying to better yourself, I'm not going to judge. I guess I'm a live and let live person.

When I was locked up there were so many times when you just don't know the whole story. People come to you with one side of the story but once you talk to the other person the person might have left something out to make it look good on their end to make you want to side with them. I learned quickly you should talk to everyone and leave your opinion open. If you side with someone right away, you are just doing something without thinking and that's a plan to fail. I feel like 9 out of 10 people act like that and it leads to a lot of problems. People need to have consideration for everyone involved in a situation. I want to understand all sides of the story. My opinion is not the only opinion.

My dad is easy for me to empathize with. He wasn't there for me as a kid because he put himself in a predicament and he got 15 years. Now that I'm a father I see that when you got a family and responsibility you do things to get ahead for them. You might do wrong things because you want to do things for your family. Your family is first and there are measures a parent takes. I can feel what my dad is going through. One thing I struggle with is dads not being there for their kids. That's where my empathy hits a wall. Your kid shouldn't have to take that repercussion for you doing that. I can't relate to that.

One thing I want to tell the Free Minds members is that I feel for what they are going through but know that there are lots of jobs out here. You just have to apply yourself. You can get your CDL for free. You can work so many places. The thing is you have to not get used to doing what you were doing before and know you're not going to make much money at first but it gets better. My bosses love how hard I work and are always promoting me. You gotta start imagining yourself in a working person's shoes and how good that feels. Can you feel me?



# REENTRY CORNER

*By Keela*

What's up Guys!

As always, it's Ms. Keela coming to drop some knowledge about some awesome opportunities that await you once you arrive back in D.C. It's always great to keep you guys informed and prepared so that when you come home, you can blaze a trail right to your destiny! We're so passionate about your success and we want to be a part of that process so let's see what's new!

Central Union Mission has a program called Ready2Succeed (that's what I'm talking about!). Ready2Succeed provides valuable training, job experience, and references, as well as the opportunity to earn and save wages for permanent housing.

There are three program models, Ready2Work, Ready2Recycle and Ready2Cook. All three of these programs are designed to teach you skills and services that will lead to full time employment.

Ready2Succeed is located @ 65 Massachusetts Avenue NW, and can be contacted by calling 202-745-4181.

Up next, we have.....

The Howard University Center for Urban Progress Workforce Training Program! This program provides training in high and medium skilled occupations to unemployed and underemployed residents of the District of Columbia. The program currently offers a free 16-week training course in Microsoft Office applications which leads to the Microsoft Office User Specialist (MOUS) certification. Since the program's inception in 2000, they have trained over 150 DC residents in heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC), plumbing, and refrigeration! DC residents who are interested in applying to the program may be eligible for educational assistance from the District of Columbia Department of Employment Services (DOES). Qualifying applicants through the DOES can take the course free of charge. Those seeking admission into the program must:

Call the WDTP office at (202) 481-3503 to request an application, schedule an appointment to visit the training facility at 2000 14th Street, NW Suite 330, or visit any of the DC DOES One-Stop Centers for registration, orientation and assignment of a case manager.

Well guys, I hope this information is helpful and I highly urge you to check it out; you have nothing to lose and so much to gain.

Until next time – Keep your head up, read, and stay focused!  
-Ms. Keela

# A MONUMENTAL TASK

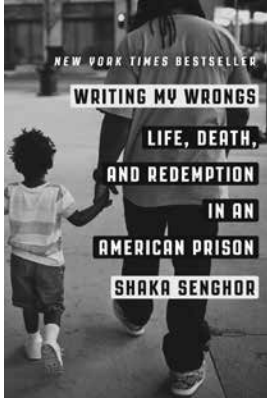
*By MH, FM member*

I feel that this month's theme was very complex to expound upon. First, for us in the struggle, our world is filled with tense masculinity, deep oppression, and physical violence. The word empathy is like the polar opposite of our surrounding. Behind these walls you can find some of the most unempathetic people. I highly promote the emotion empathy and at the same time to exercise empathy in this culture is a monumental task. At first, I felt like empathy is an emotion I can leave behind. It gets very tiring to feel someone else's pain while dealing with your own. However, I need to work on empathy to become the well-rounded man I strive to be, on top of studying and working out. I've come to realize that the whole spectrum of emotions should be used. To do this is to understand the essence of being a human. For all my fellow brothers in this struggle, we have all encountered someone who completely lost themselves to this system. It's as if their humanity was taken away. While some may view empathy as being sort of or even feminine, I see empathy as an unselfish emotion that embraces being human. Not too long ago, Hillary Clinton apologized for saying my era would grow up to be "super predators." Even though this is a cold world we live in, I make it my business to prove people wrong by working on intimate emotions they feel I'm not capable of doing. I applaud all the FM family for their use of empathy towards us incarcerated. I know firsthand how empathy can lead to positivity. In closing, I mention one powerful moment of empathy. I met this fellow brother from DC, not too long ago. Basically, all his family is dead and he has life. When he shared his story, I pictured me walking in his shoes. To see his strength through all he's been through is sad but inspiring. At the same time, he put himself in my shoes and reminded me of my blessing of going home. We both encouraged each other through that one emotion of empathy.



# A LETTER TO MY VICTIM: EXCERPT FROM WRITING MY WRONGS

By Shaka Senghor



*Shaka Senghor spent 19 years in prison for shooting and killing a man. Some of you may have read his memoir, Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death, and Redemption in an American Prison. This is an excerpt in which he writes a letter to his murder victim:*

Dear Mr. Clarke,

I am writing this letter to share with you what has been on my mind and heart for several years now. For the last few nights, I have stayed awake writing this letter in my head, and each time, I

found myself mentally balling up the pages because I couldn't find the right words to convey how deeply sorry I am for causing your death. Somehow, no matter what words I use, saying I am sorry for robbing you and your family of your life seems too small of a gesture.

Every time I think back to that night, I find myself asking the question, "Why didn't I just walk away?" When I finally found the answer, I understood for the first time the true meaning of the words "weakness" and "strength." See, all my life, I had confused their meaning. I thought walking away from an argument would make me appear weak and make me a loser. But in reality, it takes strength to walk away from conflict. Back then, I didn't have that strength. I was afraid, and I allowed my fears to dictate my actions. Sixteen months prior to the night I shot you, I too was shot in a similar incident. I survived, but I became consumed by fear and paranoia. I thought it could happen again at any given moment. I became desperately angry, because anger was the only emotion that could conceal my fear.

When you and I encountered each other, I was already programmed to kill. I had convinced myself that it was better to shoot than to be shot; that the handgun in my pocket was the only thing that could protect me. In my mind, it was easier to shoot than to walk away, and I have spent the last 17 years learning just how wrong I was.

For years, I blamed you for making me mad enough to shoot you. Now I realize that no one can make me feel anything I don't want to feel. I blamed your death on the fact that we were both intoxicated, but now I recognize that the instinct to shoot anyone I perceived as a threat had been planted long before we met. Even though I pled guilty in court, I blamed everything and everyone but myself. Pleading guilty was easy because I knew I had violated the law, but it didn't mean I was taking full responsibility for having caused your death.

It wasn't until I was ten years into serving my sentence that I began seeing things differently. My healing started when I learned to begin forgiving myself for the wrongs I had committed. However the real

change started a year later, when my eleven-year-old son sent me a letter that said he had found out the real reason I was in prison. Knowing my son would see me as a murderer made me face up to the fact that my thinking and my choices had caused your death and led to me losing my freedom. Today, when I look back, I wish I could change the past. I wish I could restore your life so that your children could have known the safety and security of having their father in the house. I wish I could bring you back to life so that your wife could enjoy the presence of her husband and your parents could see you reaching for your dreams.

I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

I know that saying I'm sorry can never restore your life. But I believe in the power of atonement, and I have taken responsibility for my actions by dedicating my life and talents to making amends for the pain I have brought into this world. For the last five years, I have been actively involved with anti-violence organizations that work with at-risk youth. I have used my talent as a writer to share my story – our story – so that others may learn from it and make better choices with their own lives. It doesn't change what I did, but I want you to know that your life was not, and will not be, in vain.

I first learned about the power of forgiveness from your godmother, Mrs. Weaver, who started writing me five years into my sentence. She wanted to know what had happened that night – why I had shot and killed you. It's one of the hardest questions I've ever had to answer, but I knew that I owed your family closure. I told Mrs. Weaver about our dispute, leaving out the fact that it was started by a drug transaction because I didn't feel that it was necessary for them to be exposed to that part of your life. I told her that you didn't deserve it; that I wished more than anything else in the world that I could change what happened on that night.

She wrote back two weeks later. She said that she forgave me and encouraged me to seek God's forgiveness, and I took her words to heart. It would be five long years before I reached the point when I could truly forgive myself. But I did, and today, I can't help but wonder if your godmother's care was the first real step in my transformation.

I know that even though I have evolved and taken the necessary steps to right my wrongs, I still have a lot of work to do. But each day I am blessed with life, I know that I now have the will to live with meaning and purpose.

Sincerely,  
Shaka

Senghor, S. (2016). Prologue. In Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death, and Redemption in an American Prison (pp. 3-6). New York, NY: Convergent Books.



# AROUND THE WORLD

*The column where we explore places near and far on our miraculous planet.  
The writer is the guide and the readers are on "vacation via imagination."*

## Gambia: The Smiling Coast

*By Mbachur, FM Outreach & Evaluation Specialist*

Hello friends, my name is Mbachur. I used to intern at Free Minds during the summer of 2013, then I went away to school in New York City, and just moved back to D.C in September.

My family is originally from The Gambia, which is in West Africa, but I was born and raised in DC. Gambia has a population of less than 2 million people, and has been ruled by President Yahya Jammeh since 1994 when he seized power at 29 years old in something called a coup d'état (pronounced coo-de-ta). A coup happens when people in a country, usually the military or other elites, illegally overthrow the government.

Since President Jammeh's 22-year presidential term, he has been responsible for killings of innocent townspeople, recruitment of child soldiers, and falsifying information like claiming to have the cure for HIV/AIDS and "treating" local village people of their sickness (including instructing them to stop taking their medication).



Gambia holds presidential elections every five years, and the country is preparing for elections this December 2016. For the first time, Gambia also has a female presidential candidate. Did you know that Shirley Chisholm was the first black woman (and the first woman, period) to run for president in the US? She ran in 1972 as a Democrat.

Gambia is such a beautiful country. It has beautiful beaches, guaranteed sunshine, amazing food, all the tropical fruit you can imagine, and some of the nicest people you will ever meet; they don't call it the smiling coast of Africa for no reason.

In this month's Connect issue, we talked a lot about empathy. My personal definition of empathy is putting yourself in another person's shoes to understand what they feel. How do you think we can see the world as other people do 6 thousand miles away? My family and I have visited Gambia at least twice a year every year since I was 6 years old. Being a first-generation African American, it has always been great having a direct connection to my roots. On the other hand, since my parents were born and raised in Gambia, they have a completely different perception of priorities and values than my siblings and I do being born in America. On the weekends, we can wake up to watch cartoons and stay in our pajamas all day, while in Gambia, you wake up and go to the Mosque to pray in the mornings.

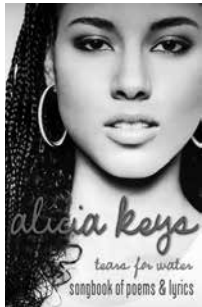
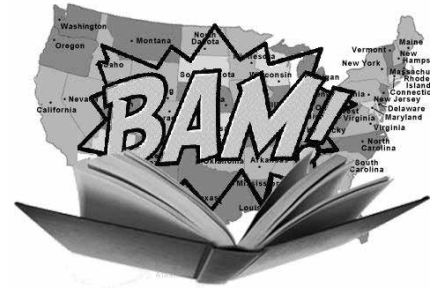
My friends and their families always show me a great deal of empathy for being a part of two worlds, because they wish they could take a walk in my shoes in the foreign land where their ancestors came from. Sometimes, they say they don't think they would have the patience to deal with the hot sun all day, but I always say, "you never know until you try."

The people of Gambia are very conflicted about who to vote for during their elections just like many people in the United States were. Gambians face the same issues that we do in the US, such as poverty, community violence, and unemployment rates. The vast majority of Gambian voters are ready for Jammeh to be out; in hopes that there will be a new president elected in Gambia, I hope that there will be a great deal of change to come!

# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

Free Minds long-distance book club  
By Julia

Hey Free Minds! The next BAM! book is Tears for Water by Alicia Keys. Tears for Water is a collection of her poetry and lyrics, as well as some reflection about what she was thinking about when she wrote the poems. As I write this, we are currently in the process of ordering the books so if you haven't received your copy already, it should be on its way to you. For this month, I enlisted your Free Minds brother TB to help me come up with some discussion questions.



Discussion Questions for Tears for Water by Alicia Keys:

- Do her poems sound like her music?
- Do you have a favorite poem or song from this book? What do you like about it?
- If you have a girlfriend/wife, which one of the poems in this section would you want to write to her?
- Reading that Alicia put some of the verses of her songs as poems, do you read them differently?
- If Alicia asked you to respond to one of her poems, what would you say? (Respond in a poem)
- The poem "Diary" (page 149) is such a deep and affectionate one. Have you ever had someone that you feel you can tell all your secrets to?

## THIS IS NOT A GOODBYE, IT'S A SEE YOU SOON!

Hi Guys! I wanted to let you all know that after two incredible years as the Program Director at Free Minds I am leaving to pursue a new job opportunity. I cannot tell you how much I have enjoyed my time here at Free Minds, especially getting to know all of you. I have loved reading your letters and poems and hope you know that I am leaving you in good hands. The staff at Free Minds is the best in the world and I am lucky to have worked with them and call them friends and you are too. As you know, we are all Free Minds 4 Ever so this is a 'see you soon' and not a 'goodbye.' I can't wait to hear all about the amazing things you guys are doing in the coming months because I'll be keeping in touch with the rest of the staff, attending special events and reading the latest issues of the Connect newsletter, of course! I hope you know that I care about each and every one of you and wish you all the best. You guys are amazing.

See you soon,  
Seana #FreeMindsFamily

## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: KEEP IT MOVING

*How do you deal with difficult experiences in your life? In what invisible or visible ways do those past experiences affect you in the present? What can you do to stay healthy in mind as well as body? Have you ever written a poem or read a book that made you feel better when you were struggling with something?*

Until then, stay strong and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!