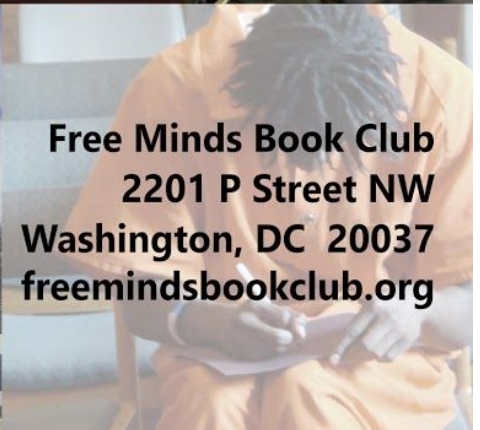
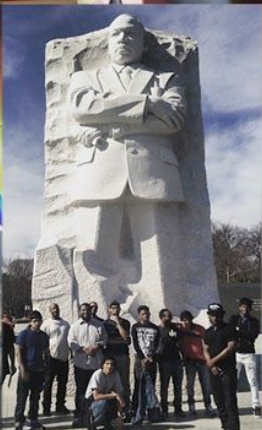
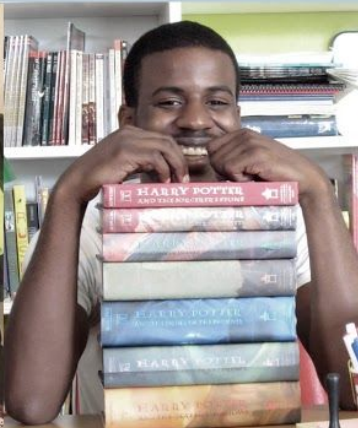


ANNUAL REPORT 2016

BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

Empowering young inmates to write new chapters in their lives.



Free Minds Book Club
2201 P Street NW
Washington, DC 20037
freemindsbookclub.org

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Free Minds Book Club &
Writing Workshop
2201 P Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037

(202) 758-0829
mail@freemindsbookclub.org
freemindsbookclub.org

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Letter From The Executive Director

“Without a pen and a page there’s no message, without a message there’s no hope, and without any hope, there’s no future.” - Terrell, Free Minds member

We like to say that whenever a Free Minds poem is read, hope is spread. With support from our community, 2016 has been a year filled with hope here at Free Minds.

Free Minds has been working hard this past year to bring the life-changing tools of books and writing to more incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youths and adults, and to continue nurturing and elevating their voices. In 2016, we have expanded our impact through several exciting new developments:



- At the request of the DC Department of Corrections, we have expanded our Jail Book Club program to serve adults as well as juveniles at the DC Jail.
- Due to increasing demand for services, we have opened our Prison Book Club and Reentry Book Club programs to referrals from other Free Minds members and friends.
- In our Reentry Book Club program, we have created a unique methodology that integrates reading and writing with job readiness and life skills training and on-the-job skill building.
- We have increased our community outreach activities and visibility, led by our Free Minds “Poet Ambassadors” who use poetry and storytelling to educate the community, advocate for those who are still incarcerated, and serve as mentors and role models to other young people in the D.C. community.

We served over 500 members in 2016 through our Jail, Prison and Reentry Book Clubs. Most importantly, many members returned from prison motivated to rebuild their lives. In 2016, 76% of our Reentry Book Club members obtained employment, enrolled in school, or participated in vocational programs that lead to employment. Only 5% of Reentry Book Club members re-offended within the calendar year. One Free Minds member, Charles, gave a speech at his Free Minds Apprenticeship graduation. Charles shared, “The Apprenticeship gave me courage and made me believe in myself.” He is now working and in school.

It has been an exciting and productive year for Free Minds. Thanks to your generosity, our members are discovering their worth through reading and writing. We look forward to working with even more people in the coming years.

In gratitude,

Tara Libert

Our Work

Free Minds uses books and creative writing to empower young inmates to transform their lives. By mentoring and connecting them to supportive services throughout their entire incarceration and reentry, Free Minds inspires these youths to see their potential and achieve new educational and career goals.

Free Minds serves more than 500 youths each year across three successive phases: Jail Book Club, Prison Book Club, and Reentry Book Club.

Jail Book Club



Free Minds recognizes that books and creative writing have the incredible power to teach, build community, inspire individuals and change lives.

Our Book Club & Writing Workshop meets every week at the DC Jail where juvenile inmates (16- and 17-year-olds charged as adults) come together to discuss a work of contemporary literature —an exciting experience for youths who have often had little meaningful exposure to books. The Jail Book Club operates democratically with books chosen by majority vote.

Members have chosen books like Makes

Me Wanna Holler, Nathan McCall's raw account of his troubled youth and his time behind bars, which allow them to feel a personal connection with a book and its author, often for the first time.

Free Minds brings in guest authors to speak to the Jail Book Club members. Past visitors have included Congressman John Lewis and co-author Andrew Aydin (March: Book One), Coe Booth (Bronxwood), Patricia McCormick (Sold), Emmanuel Jal (War Child), Dwayne Betts (A Question of Freedom), Jonathan Franzen (The Corrections, Freedom), George Pelecanos (The Way Home, HBO's The Wire), James McBride (The Color Of Water), Walter Dean Myers (Dopesick, Lockdown), and more.

Each Book Club member receives a new dictionary and journal to encourage daily reading and writing. Free Minds staff and the larger community provide feedback for the young poets through our writing blog.

Prison Book Club

The love for reading and writing that develops among so many members must

continue to be cultivated.

As DC has no long-term prison, at age 18, members are transferred to federal prisons across the country. Many receive no letters or moral support from home and the isolation can be crippling. Each month, through the long-distance Prison Book Club, Free Minds sends discussion questions, one new book, and creative writing and book review assignments to members who have turned 18 and been transferred to federal prison. Free Minds also hosts monthly Write Night events at which volunteers write feedback for the incarcerated poets.



Through regular written correspondence and a monthly newsletter (*The Free Minds Connect*), Free Minds strengthens relationships first built at the DC Jail and continues to monitor and assist members' progress toward achieving their goals. The newsletter features our "Books Across the Miles (BAM!)" long-distance book club. Since 2002, Free Minds has been sending individually tailored book selections to members in federal prison. Now, through BAM!, these members also receive the

same book every three months. In addition, they receive a set of discussion questions and writing prompts about the book. Their responses are featured in the monthly newsletter, *The Free Minds Connect*, which is sent to over 350 young men in more than 30 prisons across the country.

Reentry Book Club

While some Free Minds members receive lengthy sentences, the majority of Free Minds members serve between three and seven years before they are released into the community. Building upon a sustained connection made in the Jail Book Club and Prison Book Club, Free Minds connects its recently released members to the resources and programs in the community that will help them achieve their educational and career goals.

Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building

Apprenticeship: Free Minds provides a month-long paid Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship for recently-released members. During this month-long Apprenticeship, participants practice essential skills including computer literacy, communication, teamwork, and office protocol. Each apprentice also has the opportunity to gain valuable on-the-job experience by working for DC-area remodeling, cleaning and landscaping companies.



Our Apprenticeship Program is led by Reentry Apprenticeship Trainers Marcus Bullock, Derrick Bey, and Anthony Belton, themselves business owners, returning citizens, and

valuable role models. The Free Minds Apprenticeship also includes workshops led by experts from the community who give their time and energy to instruct the apprentices on topics such as resume writing, job interviews, college preparation, nutrition, physical fitness, family planning, entrepreneurship, and workplace problem solving. Because giving back to the program is an important aspect of the Reentry Book Club phase, apprentices also have the opportunity to speak at community outreach events as Poet Ambassadors.

Reentry Book Club members form the core of Free Minds' "On the Same Page" initiative, where they practice their leadership skills and share from their own experiences to prevent youth violence and to educate and inspire others.

On the Same Page

Free Minds members who are now home read and discuss their own work and those of members still incarcerated through “**On the Same Page: Free Minds Poetry in the Community and the Classroom.**” These events, led by Free Minds members known as Poet Ambassadors, offer a new way to engage with issues of youth violence and incarceration and to find healing through the powerful medium of creative writing. “On the Same Page” events, such as **Write Night**, are held with diverse audiences across the city. We frequently meet with middle school, high school, and college students, as well as community groups (offices, civic organizations, book clubs, and more).



Write Night

Free Minds reaches upwards to a hundred volunteers each month at Write Night, alternating between two sites: Western Presbyterian Church in downtown DC, and Seekers Church in Takoma. In responding to poetry written by youth who are still incarcerated, volunteers have an opportunity to be literally “on the same page” with the young prison poets. Poet Ambassadors also engage with volunteers by sharing their personal stories and reading poetry.

In 2016, we also brought this program to workplaces and community spaces. Poet Ambassadors were enthusiastically welcomed by workers who took their lunch hour to learn more about Free Minds, and respond to poetry by incarcerated youth.

School Outreach

Free Minds partners with PEN/Faulkner Writers in Schools to bring the *On the Same Page* program to local middle and high schools. They encourage high-risk youth to turn away from street life, and share personal stories to show them the value of education. Using our two poetry collections (*They Call Me 299-359* and *The Untold Story of the Real Me: Young Voices from Prison*) to start a dialogue, Free Minds Poet Ambassadors bring about healing and serve as invaluable mentors.



Poet Ambassadors facilitate monthly book club and poetry workshops with a group of 7th grade boys at the M.V. Leckie Education Campus. Poet Ambassadors mentor the students and coach them in literacy and creative writing.

2016 Accomplishments, New Initiatives and Related Press

Jail Book Club

44 new participants, for a total of 61 16- and 17-year-old members served. 39 participants in the GED Book Club expansion (adults 18+ at the DC Jail).

Prison Book Club

105 new participants, for a total of 365 members served. 91% opted in to continue receiving services.

Prison Book Club members wrote 497 letters to the office (our staff responded to 100%). 56% of letters requested specific books or expressed appreciation for books received.

We sent over 2,000 books to members in prisons across the country.

Reentry Book Club

115 members served, 47 in the Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship.

76% of RBC members obtained employment, enrolled in school, or participated in vocational programs that will lead to employment. (67% employed, 6% in school, and 3% in vocational programs).

68% of RBC members participated in our On the Same Page violence prevention community outreach program.

Only 5% of RBC members re-offended within the calendar year, as compared to a national recidivism rate for young offenders of 75.9% within three years (Bureau of Justice Statistics).

Notable Accomplishments



Congressman John Lewis visited the Jail Book Club along with his co-author Andrew Aydin to discuss their graphic novel trilogy March, which tells the story of Congressman Lewis's experiences as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. The teenagers in the Jail Book Club described the

event as “life-changing.”

[Washington Post: Civil rights leader Rep. John Lewis encourages teens at D.C. jail](#)

[ABC7: Atlanta Congressman, Civil Rights icon John Lewis visits D.C. Jail inmates](#)

Free Minds members home from prison visited the Supreme Court of the United States, and gave a copy of our poetry collection, *The Untold Story of the Real Me: Young Voices from Prison*, to each of the Justices. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said of the book, “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.”

The Library of Congress invited Free Minds to participate in the 2016 National Book Festival, where we shared Free Minds poetry with visitors from all over the United States. The National Book Festival led to a spot on the Fox5 Morning Show, as one of the producers was introduced to our program at the festival.

Free Minds was featured in a “Harris’s Heroes” segment on ABC spotlighting local charities.

[Harris’s Heroes: ‘Free Minds Book Club’ Empowers Young Inmates in D.C. Jail](#)

Two Free Minds members, DA and DJ, were honored at the DC Regional Scholastic Writing Awards. DJ won the Gold Key (the highest award), as well as an Honorable Mention for “Moment of Truth.” DA won an Honorable Mention for his poem “Gunfire.” Neither of the poets had written a poem before joining Free Minds.

Eight Free Minds members were published in Tacenda Literary Magazine (from American University’s BleakHouse Publishing).

Free Minds was honored with the Outstanding Collaboration Award from DC’s Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC). Free Minds Reentry Manager Keela Hailes won the 2016 Community Cornerstone Award from DC Councilmember Anita Bonds, recognizing her outstanding service to returning citizens.

Free Minds staff traveled to Federal Correctional Institution Petersburg Medium, a federal prison in Petersburg, Virginia, where they participated in a workshop with inmates who are transitioning home in the next 18-24 months. They also met with a group of poets who have been participating in the On the Same Page UNITED program in Virginia. Since 2015, Free Minds has partnered with program staff at FCI Petersburg; inmates at the prison write poetry as part of the On the Same Page UNITED project, and Free Minds staff provides reentry workshops to help inmates prepare for release.

Executive Director Tara Libert was selected to co-chair the DC Mayor’s Office of Victim Services



and Justice Grants (OVSJG) newly formed coalition to improve reentry outcomes for District residents. The DC Reentry Action Network (DC RAN) includes nonprofit service providers, government agencies, and citizen groups. The mission of DC RAN is to bring together a network of client-centered reentry service providers to exchange information, strengthen services, discuss and address issues of mutual concern and be a collective voice in order to best meet the complex and varied needs of DC inmates and returning citizens.

Other Press

- March 2016, The Examiner:
[Free Minds Engages Poetry and Dialogue to Mitigate Violence](#)
- April 2016, NBC4 Viewpoint:
[Viewpoint: Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop](#)
- November 2016, Social Justice Solutions:
[Imprisoned as Teens, Speaking Out as Free Men for Change in Juvenile System](#)
- December 2016, WJLA NewsTalk:
[Challenges Faced by Returning Citizens](#)
- December 2016, GOOD:
[When a Book Club Lends More Than Just Books](#)
- December 2016, WUSA9:
[Poetry & writing helps former inmates transform their lives](#)



NATIONAL PROJECT: On the Same Page UNITED

Using poetry to connect inmates with their communities

A project of Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop with the generous support of the Booz Allen Aspen Ideas Award

In July 2015, Free Minds won the first annual Aspen Ideas Award, a prize of \$25,000, for On the Same Page UNITED, which replicates on a national level an extremely low-cost/high impact model that has proven hugely successful since 2011 in Washington, DC.

On the Same Page UNITED teams have launched the project in seven communities: Brooklyn, NY; Arlington, VA; Takoma Park, MD; Denver, CO; Louisville, KY; San Francisco, CA; and Portland, OR.



Since 2011, Free Minds has been hosting community gatherings where poems written by local inmates are read by a diverse group of volunteers who then write comments and encouragement in colorful ink, literally “on the same page.” Those pages are then sent back to the poets. The impact is powerful and transformative. Inmates feel like a part of their community—often for the first time in their lives.

**“I was shocked to learn I had love and support from people who didn’t even know me. I felt needed and useful. It let me know that I’m a part of something bigger!”
– Robert, 22, in a letter from prison after receiving written feedback on his poems.**

People on the outside experience the writers as human beings who are so much more than the crime they committed.

“The poem I read was written by an inmate named Marcus who is struggling with addiction. My brother is an addict. For decades, his addiction has turned our family upside down and has caused a lot of bitterness. Reading Marcus’s words was like this enormous light bulb going off for me! While I thought I’d put myself in my brother’s shoes before, Marcus’s poem suddenly made me feel sincere empathy and understanding. I am so grateful to him and I told him so in my written comments. This was one of the most powerful and healing events that I have ever been a part of!” – Ann, volunteer at On the Same Page UNITED.

Creating these critical connections between people in prison and their communities before they are released can help us stop the cycles of violence and incarceration and begin to promote healing. Press:

- [Aspen Times: Aspen Ideas: Helping prison inmates turn the page through poetry](#)
- [Colorado Public Radio: Through Poetry, Colorado Inmates, Communities Work To Build Bridges](#)

Donors

We are so grateful for the generosity of both the individuals and institutions who make our work possible. Free Minds receives and has received financial support from the following businesses, civic groups, government agencies and foundations:

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Tara Libert, Co-founder and Executive Director

Before co-founding Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop in 2002, Tara worked in radio and television producing news and documentaries for twelve years. After producing many features on the US criminal justice system, she was drawn to direct service. Tara began tutoring incarcerated parents at the District of Columbia jail. She also trained as a tutor with the Literacy Volunteers of America and as a mediator with The Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County MD. In addition, Tara trained at the Freedom Writer's Institute; her writing has been included in Teaching Hope: Stories from the Freedom Writer Teachers. She has won the Linowes Award for "unsung community heroes" and the DC Department of Corrections George Strawn Volunteer Award. Tara oversees all aspects of Free Minds and works with the Board of Directors to fulfill the organization's mission.

Kelli Taylor, Co-Founder and Book Club Facilitator

Before co-founding and serving as Executive Director of Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop (2002-2010), Kelli worked as a television news and documentary producer. She served as a trained volunteer for Offender Aid and Restoration with young inmates at the Arlington County Jail. Kelli uses her expertise to develop curriculum, research and locate books that will engage and excite new readers, and lead the weekly book club sessions at the DC Jail. Kelli also played a lead role in Free Minds' winning the prestigious "Aspen Ideas Award" and has been part of the team responsible for seeding "On the Same Page" projects in cities from Brooklyn, New York to Portland, Oregon (see National Project: On the Same Page UNITED).

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*2016 only

**2017 only

Poet Ambassadors

The Poet Ambassadors are a group of 25 Free Minds members home in the community who lead the On the Same Page sessions on a rotating basis. Most have been members of

Free Minds since the age of 16 or 17 at the DC Jail, where many wrote their first poems and read their first books. They have gone on to become avid readers and writers throughout their incarceration, and have pursued education via GED programs. These young men are highly motivated to give back to their community by sharing the strength and wisdom that writing has given them in order to prevent future violence.

Office Interns

Free Minds' work is assisted by a dynamic team of interns from area universities. These interns provide valuable office support by typing poems, providing writing feedback, coordinating our writing blog, and helping with Community Outreach events.

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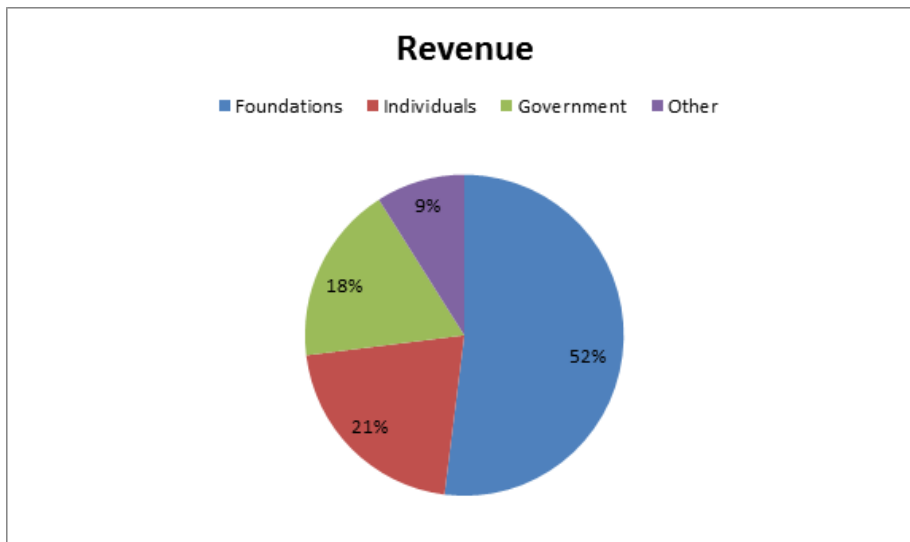
Foundations: \$351,990

Individuals: \$140,343

Government: \$124,194

Other: \$59,801

Total: \$676,328



Expenses

Program services: \$520,151

Management & general: \$46,752

Fundraising: \$40,752

Total: \$607,655

