

US Prisoners write poems, in order not to break in jail We talked to them

If you take away the Rap and the Beat, a poem remains. Terrell Branham finds it not at all contradictory when young, male prisoners put pen to paper and express their emotions, despite the prejudice of hard guys; that they consider themselves too cool for poetry. The 23-year-old does not seem like a good poet at first sight: he has dreads in his hair and a small tattoo under his eye. But written on his blue T-shirt is "Poet Ambassador".

On this flaming, hot summer evening in Washington, DC, Branham meets with ten other "Free Minds" members in a church to read the poems. For young men who are currently in prison, they have the opportunity to express their feelings, fears and worries through poems – just as Terrell once did. "Free Minds" motivates young men in jail to read books, write poems and discuss as a group through regular meetings; thus, escaping the devil that is the American Judicial System.

In the Western Presbyterian Church, located on Virginia Avenue in Northwest Washington, is the Free Minds office where, along with the regular book club members, there was a rough number of 30 volunteers. On the round tables in the Community hall sits a pile of scattered poems which those who have attended should read and write down their thoughts. No German critic; only notes on the content, what you thought and felt about the poem. The poems that are commented on are then sent back to the poets in prison.

The poems can be about pain or about them feeling alone; they are a way of processing the inmates' experiences. "To me, the poems were an opportunity to communicate," says James, who was released six months ago and now visits Free Minds meetings outside of prison. "They became a kind of diary for my feelings." James's poems were also sent back to him when he was in prison with many comments on, "Many of my poems have given my readers a new look at experiences they haven't had in life." Says James as he sits around a table with five volunteers and opens up about his experience in jail.

There are a lot of problems in the American Judicial System; there are already severe punishments for minor drug-related injuries and the reentry system is almost never successful. This evening, you can see that each Poet Ambassador present is an African American and comes from a difficult circumstance. Each one of them had experienced violence from early on in their life and some were illiterate. If their prerequisites had been different, they might have won football tournaments and gone to college with scholarships instead of being held in jail for drugs, robbery and other crimes.

But we also see many volunteers who tirelessly work to fix this issue. By doing what the state can't, by helping returning citizens back into society and showing them education as an alternative in a country that makes up a good quarter of the world's prison population. For the members of "Free Minds", the concept has developed.

Terrell Branham works at Free Minds and is in touch with the inmates who write poems, send them out and eagerly wait to receive them back with comments, a feeling that the 23-year-old can understand. Terrell was 16 the first time he went to jail, and also the first time

he got in touch with Free Minds as the club held regular meetings at the Washington DC Youth Detention Center. At the age of 18, Branham was transferred to the Adult Detention Center and was sure that he was left on his own until he suddenly got mail: "They sent me cards for my birthday, books to read. Nothing came of my own family – but Free Minds did not forget me," Branham says. At the age of 21 he was released: "At last I was able to get to know all the people at Free Minds personally and I was excited to be outside the prison."

Among the 600 members to whom the book club is helping in DC, Virginia and Maryland, only three of them are women. Why? "Free Minds" specializes in juvenile delinquents who are condemned as adults – a circumstance, which, according to the outreach coordinator Mbachur Mbenga, is very rare in women. The women in prison participate in separate events and are housed in another part of the prison.

That Evening, Terrell Jackson, whose life was also changed by Free Minds, visited the Church: He had been arrested in 2007 for three years. To Terrell, Free Minds was an excuse to kill time and get out of his cell because at the time, Jackson could neither read nor write. But over time he warmed to the idea of expressing himself through poetry. "They encouraged me, gave me new words each time, taught me poems and at some point, I was finally able to express my feelings; all the pain and the grudges." He is especially proud of his poem 'Reflection', for which Terrell received a lot of positive feedback. It begins with the lines:

*'Looking in the mirror and what do I see...
A reflection of myself staring at me
Unearthing imperfections that change with time
Was enraged in a cage now I'm free sunshine
Redemption for today seeking forgiveness on tomorrow
Wondering what I'm to do with the time that I've borrowed.'*

Self-awareness, but also the development in his life is currently an important topic for Terrell.

For the past ten years, Terrell Jackson has been a Free Minds member, regularly attending schools for talks on behalf of Free Minds and to open up on his experiences in prison, of his childhood and his youth. "I'm trying to get them off the road, to show them alternatives. The cell is not the end of their lives, there are ways out of there, other possibilities in the world. Sure, there are those who do not listen, but a good 75% of the group gets involved."

In addition to the weekly "Write Nights" where comments are written on poems and discussed, Free Minds helps the young men get back into society. How do I write a job application? How do I dress for a job interview? They provide internships with other companies so that returning citizens can gather the relevant experience they need for their CV.

At the beginning of the Evening there were several announcements: Tara Libert, the co-founder, introduces new members and encourages the young men to talk about positive developments and successful internships. For example, Terrell Branham will fly to California

and attend a workshop – it's his first trip in an airplane, he's very excited. As one of the Poet Ambassadors says he is just about to aid a kitchen fixation, the audience doesn't hold back, they cheer and whistle. Libert, an energetic woman with short hair, applauded loudest and always proud. Also, Terrell Jackson has an announcement: He has become engaged with his girlfriend and will soon marry.