

January/February 2017
Vol. 6, Issue 1

Free minds Connect

THIS MONTH'S THEME

KEEP IT MOVIN'

Dealing with Difficult Experiences & Emotions



**FREE MINDS
BROTHERS &
BUSINESS PARTNERS**
PAGE 13

**THINKING LIKE
THIS KEEPS ME
SANE**
PAGE 6

**TEENAGE LOVE
SURVIVES A SEVEN
YEAR BID**
PAGE 5



Is brought to you by...

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SEANA, IMEESHA, NOEL,
CAMPAIGN FOR THE FAIR
SENTENCING OF YOUTH**

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
2201 P Street NW
Washington, DC 20037
(202) 758-0829

**Next Issue's Theme:
Legacy**

Happy New Year, Free Minds members!

Whoa, is this issue's theme of "Keep it Moving" appropriate timing or what? Things are already moving pretty fast in this world and just seem to keep speeding up. New Year, new president, new congress, new technology, new ideas. With all the new excitement in our fast-paced, ever changing world, there also come the inevitable downsides too. New heartache, new loss, and new struggles. We wanted this issue to 1) remind you that you're not alone in the tough experiences life can throw, and 2) show some ways others get through difficult times. I'm so grateful to our many contributors who opened up and shared the hurts they've been through in the hopes of easing the pain of their brothers and sisters in our Free Minds family.

In this issue you'll meet Kelli's nephew who writes about his journey of understanding and overcoming his own depression. I am inspired by how he was able to relate to a famous hero in literature to make meaning out of his despair. Julia shares how writing helped her through the confusion and pain of losing her close friend to suicide. We are rerunning an article JG wrote about his fear of his heart "turning to stone" in prison. As you know from reading his column, JG is the exact opposite of stone – serving as a leader in his Inside Out program with local college students and being a mentor to so many youths. CM urges Free Minds members to take advantage of the Challenge program if it's available in your facility. It isn't easy to look deep inside, but as CM writes, he now knows how to deal with the pressure to conform and he holds his head up high.

My sister Noel shares a technique that activates one's healing processes that she used when her son (my nephew) was in agony from cancer surgery. She decided to learn the technique herself and is now helping others find comfort during times of distress.

This issue is so chock full of positive articles, from how a country is healing after genocide, to an app that helps isolated high school students find a lunch partner. It's called Sit With Us and how awesome would it be one day if it could be used in prisons. That would really be moving things forward!

Our Building Engineer, Larry, takes care of us here at Free Minds headquarters and was the inspiration for this issue. We dedicate this issue to him. Thank you Larry for all the wonderful things you do for us every day.

As Larry says, keep it movin' can either be running from difficult feelings or feeling them, which allows you to move on to a better place. We hope this issue helps you move through difficult times to peace and joy. Now get moving on through and start reading!

Until next time, you are always in our thoughts and our heart.
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 Melissa

Free Minds on TV (AGAIN!)

Free Minds member Robert was on Channel 8 NewsTalk and spoke about challenges faced by returning citizens, and his personal experience of overcoming obstacles after being incarcerated for almost two decades. Read more about Robert in this month's Real World of Work! A week later, Terrell and Reentry Apprenticeship Trainer Tony were interviewed live on Channel 9. They talked about reentry and how literacy had a major impact on their lives.

Amazon Holiday Box

In December, Free Minds was one of the lucky recipients to be selected for Amazon's Holiday Box Promotion. We created a wishlist of items from their website, and they



brought the items in a holiday box (pictured above). The donated items include a microphone, video projector, and laptops that will help us spread the word about Free Minds at community events.

Ms. Keela's DC Council Award

What a better way to start off the year with one of our Free Minds staff being recognized for an award by the DC Council. On January 2nd, Ms. Keela was awarded the Community Cornerstones Award. This award recognized all her hard work in helping Free Minds members obtain employment, go back to school, find housing, and more. Way to go, Ms. Keela! We're so lucky to have you on our team!



KEEP IT MOVIN'... IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION!

By Larry, Free Minds Friend

Larry is the Building Engineer in the church where we rent office space. You all are close to his heart, as he sees himself in you. Larry is the inspiration for this month's theme, Keep It Moving. When we lost a Free Minds member to street violence, he offered his compassionate sympathy and said, "You know what they say in the hood, Tara, when rough things happen? Keep it movin'. You have to keep doing the good work you are doing and not let this stop you." We had a great conversation about that, and here's some of Larry's story.

I grew up in SE DC and a lot of bad things happened there when I was a kid, but all I heard was "keep it movin, Larry. Keep it movin." And that's exactly what I did, sometimes to my detriment as I never expressed my grief but took it out in unhealthy ways.

I started selling drugs at 13, and by 16 I had my own spot. I was selling PCP. I moved up and got my own supply. Every drug dealer is paranoid – you got to be – but I was so conditioned to it, I thought it was normal. You always had to be on alert. I was hanging out with my friend when we were both 16 and I just got this feeling all of a sudden that I needed to leave. I did, and later found out he was beaten to death with a baseball bat.

I stopped going to school. I was a smart kid, but I lost hope. Of course I got locked up. It always gets you either killed or incarcerated. I served 2 years in Georgia and 5 years supervised release. What made me change wasn't getting locked up though – it was my daughter. I knew I wanted a better life for her.

Now that I'm wiser, "keep it movin" means something different to me. "Keep it movin" means absorb the blow, focus on a new direction and keep it moving in a positive direction. By absorb the blow I mean grieve, allow yourself to grieve. Most people don't. If a loved one dies, breathe and really feel that loss. Then you can remember all the good times, but if you try to block it out of your mind it stays in your spirit.

We don't want to feel the pain and we think we will just go numb because we shut it off, but guaranteed it will only resurface and sometimes even stronger. If you don't air it out, the pain festers like a bad cut. It needs to be treated. Like diabetes – my mom had diabetes and the infection got so bad she got gangrene and first had to have her hand cut off and then her foot.

We have to treat our emotional wounds by confronting what we are feeling, airing them out. Now, how do we do that when the pain is so deep?

For me, I examine myself and then I make a plan of action to move through those feelings. I go fishing, I read, I pray. I go for a long walk. I put myself in a place where I can do something positive. I help someone in need out. There is always someone who's having a worse time than me, and I try to ease their burdens.

continued on page 7

WORDS OF WISDOM

By JG, FM Member

This is a reprint from an old issue. It's so good we wanted our new readers to see it too!

So the day before yesterday was kinda crazy. This dude I've gotten cool with here in prison, his baby's mother got shot up the other night. Apparently she was sitting in a car in front of her apartment building. She was shot twice in the head and once in the stomach.

My man was crushed. There's about five of us that kick it together, and all of us stayed outside with him until recall, keeping him company and trying to comfort him. She's still alive, which is something, but that didn't keep my man from breaking down. Most of us were crying. I think it triggered some emotions in the others that they've been holding in.

Later that night while I was locked in my cell I did a lot of thinking about my man Debo. I was with him when he got killed back in 2002. I can remember a few days after he was killed, I was drunk, and out of the blue, I cried like a baby. Debo was too deep in a situation he couldn't get out of. Me and my cousin did a coupla' crazy things trying to help him, including breaking into this guy's house and taking every gun we could find, to try and slow him down a bit. But apparently that didn't help.

continued on page 6



THE WRITE WAY

By Julia

Today I'm going to rewind...to the very first article I wrote for the Connect, back in 2012. Here's what I wrote then:

Sometimes you're having a hard time and you might not feel like writing anything. Everyone deals with their emotions in different ways, and that's okay. But here's my suggestion: when you don't want to write is actually the best time to do it!

I'm not just saying this because I want you to write more. I'm saying it because it's true. I believe writing can help because it has helped me! When I was 16, my friend E. committed suicide. I didn't know how to deal with that, and for a while I didn't want to talk to anybody about it. I felt pretty isolated. But you know what helped? A pen and paper. I'm serious! That first night after I heard what happened I went to my room and took out my notebook and a pen and I wrote some poems. I wrote everything that I was thinking and feeling. I didn't share those poems with anybody else, but they helped me. And by writing them, I kind of shared them with the world. What I mean is, maybe nobody else read those poems – but I still got them out and put them out into the universe. And when they weren't crowding up my head anymore, I felt better. It wasn't a magical cure and it didn't make my friend's death any less horrible, but it helped me to work through it. So wherever you are, whatever you're dealing with right now, know this – writing about it can help. You don't have to share what you write, but remember that your Free Minds Family is always hear to listen/read if you do.

Writing Prompt:

This writing prompt is inspired by Free Minds member DC's poem "The Vault." Imagine a locked box deep inside your mind. What do you put in the vault?

"The Vault" by DC

Locked away deep down inside
Is where my treasure lies
And my secrets hide
So dear and sacred to me it needs two locks
Not even the most sneaky could pick pock
My feelings collect dust, way down there
Just so I won't let 'em show out here
The code to the vault is truth

But I'm scared to unlock it
I wish my feelings, pain, and thoughts inside it
Could take off in a rocket
But they can't, so my secret storage will have to do
That's how I deal with things, how 'bout you?
When I have bad things happen or bad thoughts
It all goes in the vault



FREE MINDS MAILBAG

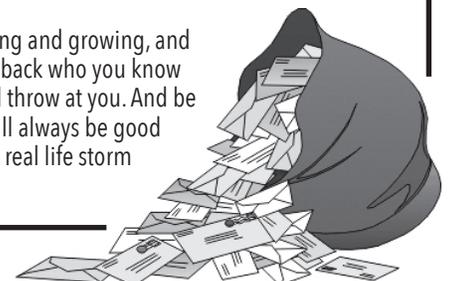
We love getting mail from our Free Minds Family. Write us, and let us know what you thought of this issue!

"Two words for all that participated in the Empathy *Connect*: Strong & Beautiful! Also reading about how some of the Supreme Court Justices was touched by words from incarcerated men, wow I never knew people so high up recognized us as humans! Knowing we are reaching so many people who have never took a step in the direction some of us were headed to b4 prison and reading how we can make them smile through poems is a great deal to me. I feel like we're making history!" – CM

"To feel empathy for someone takes great courage and understanding, while also speaking volumes of the empathizer's personality; e.g. having an open mind. People who are open-minded have a greater tendency of being more receptive to their surroundings and other people's feelings. Seana's story should be the epitome to all those who lack the understanding of empathy." – TTB

"I didn't mean to hurt so many lives and I didn't mean to make so many people cry. Man this s*** hurts and you know what? I'm tired of acting like it don't. I'm tired of walking around like I'm fine when in actuality I'm hurting." – AH

"Life is not easy for any of us. So you just keep right on living and learning. Long as you can keep on learning and growing, and long as you have the mind power from deep within to love yourself, and you're wise enough to love those back who you know that love you, that will give you the empowerment and strength to handle just about anything that life will throw at you. And be smart enough to count your blessings along your long journey through your life. Long as you live, there will always be good times, sometimes rough times, and sometimes you might experience a life storm. We all will experience a real life storm sooner or later. The good thing is no storm lasts forever." – AM



FAMILY TIES

The column where FM family and loved ones weigh in.

By Kelli

Can true love survive a prison bid? Obviously, it's not easy. Far from it! Even couples who love each other deeply sometimes still can't prevail over the daunting challenges of distance, time and the pain of incarceration. But hey everyone, Valentine's Day is coming. This month, we want to share a love story about a couple who did make it! Meet Terrell and Imeesha.

Terrell: We met when we were so young! I was 14 and she was 13. I was with my Dad on South Capitol Street and saw Imeesha walking toward the library. I'm not gonna lie. I was drawn to her because of her beauty. She has chocolate skin and she was so pretty! She didn't answer when I first called out to her, but I ran over to stop her and ask for her number.

Imeesha: Well, first of all, I was attracted to him by his smile! It's amazing. But beyond that, there's just something about him. Right away, I could see his potential.

Terrell and Imeesha exchanged numbers and right away, they became very close. Because they were so young though, life and growing up intervened. When Terrell was arrested at the age of 16 and charged as an adult, he reached out to Imeesha right away. They talked on the phone regularly and wrote letters to each other. For Imeesha though, it was hard.

Imeesha: I was only 16! I remember thinking, Seven years...Wow! That's a very long time. And to be honest, I felt like I can't do this! I'm young and this is too much. I went AWOL. I stopped taking his calls and stopped writing to him. I felt bad, but I didn't feel like I could do 7 years with him. People were telling me that I should be open to meeting someone else.

Terrell: It was about a year and a half after I got locked up. I knew that people were telling her that I wasn't worth the wait. I'm not gonna lie. I was mad at them! I was beefin'!

About 8 months later, Terrell's sister invited Imeesha to come with her to visit him in federal prison. She told herself she would go just to make sure he was doing okay. What Imeesha didn't realize was what would happen when she saw him.

Imeesha: When I saw him, everything came back! All of the emotions and feelings I had for him.

Terrell: Words can't even explain how I felt when she came to see me. It was such a blessing. She came back to me!

The two made a promise that day to stay together. And when Terrell was released and came home this past summer, Imeesha was waiting for him.

Imeesha: The whole time, Terrell has been working to become a better person. He's determined and knows what he wants out of life. I love that and it made me willing to wait for him.

Terrell: When I came home, we had to get a feel for each other again.

ASK HF ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

Dear HF,

A lot of hard things have happened to me and my family recently and I'm trying to figure out how to handle them from here. I have a lot of feelings of sadness and loneliness, but don't want to show anyone or tell anyone. What can I do to deal with them without anyone knowing I'm down?

Sincerely,
WJ

Dear WJ,

Whether we're in "here," or out "there," life will always find a way to gift us all some hard things to experience. Wherever you may find yourself, you have to develop healthy habits on how to deal with the hard issues. For me, I pray, drink tea while eating chocolate, and talk to those in my circle that I trust and know that have overcome hard problems in their own lives. It is critical that you learn how to develop your own method with dealing with stressful situations, and build a strong circle of people that are battle tested and trustworthy.

Always remember you will be figuring out how to handle situations successfully for the rest of your life. Your comfort zone in the midst of the storm will find you. It is your responsibility to embrace your own unique way of successfully handling the hard times and not feel compelled to copy how other people deal with their difficulties. Don't be afraid to express how you feel to those that have earned your trust. You should never feel insecure about feeling pain to the point where you feel that you need to secure your sadness in. Be free wherever you are!

Sincerely,
HF

People grow and change. But we worked hard to stay close throughout my bid and it paid off. When I was locked up, she was the person I wanted to talk to every day. We refused to allow ourselves to grow apart. It's not perfect, I mean we still fuss sometimes, but we roll with the punches. What I love most about Imeesha is her personality. She's a lot like me. She works toward whatever it is that she wants. She puts hard work and time into what she wants. I mean, she sure proved that!

Imeesha: My advice to other couples trying to stay together through prison is this: if it's something you really want, then stay loyal, stay honest, and stay true.

Terrell: This is what I dreamt about every night in my cell. And now, here I am – living my dream!

Just before New Year's, Terrell and Imeesha moved into their own apartment together. They are both working and plan to get married!



WORDS OF WISDOM

continued from page 3

I can count on one hand how many times I've cried since then. Sometimes I question whether I've become emotionally detached. I can't remember the last time I had an actual argument with someone. Sometimes I feel so indifferent, like it's whatever. I don't like it, but it's safe. It helps me stay sane. I recently came across a quote from the author Oscar Wilde. He said, "The most terrible thing about [prison life] is not that it breaks one's heart – hearts are made to be broken – but that it turns one's heart to stone." It was kinda scary to realize how close to home that struck.

IT'S ALL ABOUT PROGRESS

By CM, FM Member

I have never been the type of man who cries over things I can't change. For example, I can't change my past no matter how hard I try. And growing up with a chip on my shoulder with so much to prove to those around me, I have a very checkered past that affects my everyday life, but as a man I roll with the punches. As the saying goes, I "take the bitter with the sweet". And yes I visualize and sometimes make mental movies about the perfect life.

I am a devoted father, loving husband, hardworking man, provider for my household with legal money and strong faith. But due to one mistake the system has shattered all dreams of me becoming any of that without a blessing from Allah. I'm serving a sentence of all day and forever on my 1st adult charge. There is no more order in the court. Even though my future is set to be in prison for a very long time, I still hold my head very high. When I was a youngin' I was afraid of change; I wanted to take charge of every situation because I was afraid of what my so called buddies would say.

Now 112 months (9 1/2) years later still sitting in the penitentiary I realize I have no one to impress but myself, and my family. I'm tired of being a monster, gangster or most feared. Now I'm a father 1st. I will always remain a man amongst men. Thinking like that keeps me sane and with a healthy mind and when you surround yourself around men who don't want to change you will never reach your full potential. Life is about sacrifice, sacrifice the streets for a book, which can be a learning tool for success.

For those of you who are familiar with the Challenge program in the feds it's a very instrumental program for change and growth. Yes it's a whole lot to deal with but if you're not afraid to change it's perfect for a new lifestyle. Forget what the homies think it's about making yourself feel better for a chance, and that's what I call "Keep It Moving." It's all about progress!

THE LEGAL PAD

*By our friends at the
Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth*

The District of Columbia Council unanimously passed the "Comprehensive Youth Justice Amendment Act of 2016" (B21-0683) on November 1, 2016, and it was signed by Mayor Muriel Bowser on December 8, 2016. **This bill is not yet law. It will not become law until the United States Congress has had 60 legislative days to review the legislation.**

One important provision of this bill permits a person to petition the court to modify his or her sentence **ONLY IF**:

1. the person was convicted of a violation of the D.C. Code in the District of Columbia Superior Court (not federal court), **and**
2. the person was convicted in adult court for an offense that occurred before the person's 18th birthday, **and**
3. the person has served at least 20 years in prison, **and**
4. if the person has a parole-eligible sentence and the person is not yet eligible for a parole hearing.

The petition for sentencing review allows the judge to consider a variety of factors that include the person's age and life circumstances at the time of the offense, what the person has done while incarcerated, and the factors that make youth different than adults. It's important to keep in mind that this new law only provides an opportunity for a hearing before a judge and does not guarantee a sentence reduction or release.

Again, this bill is not yet final law. If you have an attorney, we strongly encourage you to contact your attorney to discuss how this bill may affect you.

If you have questions about the bill, please write to:

D.C. Bill Communication,
The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth
1319 F St. NW, Suite 303
Washington, DC 20004



KEEP IT MOVIN'... IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION!

continued from page 3

I remember all the good times I had with my loved one and remember that my loved one wouldn't want me to be down, so I lift my spirits in their honor.

I know it's hard sometimes to treat our emotional wounds, but trust me, bottling up the pain will only make it worse. You can recover and find even more joy. You deserve that.

CONVERSATION WITH KELLI

Hey Free Minds,

As I write this, I'm actually sipping a hot cup of coffee and looking out my window at the snow and ice that fell over the weekend. Sending a special shout out to FM member TK who wrote in to share a virtual cup of 100% Colombian with me!

Picture this...we're sitting at a big wooden table, warming up with a cup of Joe and sharing what's on our minds. Because the truth is, this is exactly how I often deal with the trials and tribulations that life sometimes throws in my way. I talk it out with friends (often over Starbucks if I'm being honest!). I know that everyone has their own coping skills and what works for one person doesn't always work for another. For me, talking with a trusted friend can almost always make me feel better. Sometimes that other person has been through something similar and can offer advice on it.

At the very least, sharing with another reminds us that we're not alone. So often when we're facing a challenge, we feel like we are the only one in the world with this problem. Other times, voicing our worries or frustrations makes them seem less formidable. It can help put the whole situation in perspective.

Of course, trust is key. You don't want to share with someone who might betray your trust. You are the best judge of who you can share things with. But I guarantee you, it is worth a try. Human beings were made to connect! And remember, you can always write to us.

I hope that this year is getting off to a positive start for each of you. Recently, instead of typical "resolutions" in the New Year I've been focusing on a new word or words to describe what I want in the new year. Last year's words were kindness and courage. This year, one of my words is productive. This year, I really want to do the things I say I want to do! Less talk, more action! What words are you focusing upon in 2017?

Your friend, Kelli



DEALING WITH LOSS

By RD, Free Minds Member home from prison

Dealing with loss in prison is really hard. I cried a few times when my father died. I cried with my cellie. I was lucky to have someone I trusted. Find someone you can talk to – anyone you can share what's going on with. Could be a supervisor on your detail. Anyone you know who will be a good listener, and be safe. I used to keep it bottled up, and then you start to get angry and the littlest things can set you off. We all know where that leads. It's never good. Working out is always good, or writing about it. Just get it out. Get it out or it will get to you bad.



POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Keep It Moving

By BG

Keep that pen moving as your mind release thoughts and feelings that may affect you now from yesterday, today or tomorrow.

My ink or lead are my tools to engrave my tearful pain on each page cut of love letting you know what I go through so you can get through things you don't have to hopefully because my experience can be learned from not the hard way but wisely taking these lines as a path of light that can be looked upon, examined and rightfully discerned

My sole purpose

My mind is at ease knowing yours is at ease

These lines are spat upon your ears to load your mind freely of charge as I reap joy that no check can cover sewing a seed of love in the form of hoping you get it understood exactly how I had spit it without getting it twisted fulfilling my mission hitting the mark as a marksman shooting ideas never missing

Unlocking the spirit deep within rooted out of love chasing no feeling but strongly feeling you feel me blessed with happy feelings.

Mission complete I pray to keep it moving

This pencil I'm pushing keeping it once again moving

Trusting you to be moved in a special direction is strictly why I do this.

Untitled

By DJ

Some stuff in the world mean a lot to me

Some stuff in the world just a little too much for me

Like cops killing us, but we killing each other

People leaving kids out there without a father figure

Now I'm locked in a cell staring at my son's baby pictures

Catching headache 'cause I'm thinking too hard anxiety building up

I'm having throbbing pain in my heart

Been through the struggle before never broke apart

It seem like everybody dying of cancer life just ain't fun anymore

Living life in a crazy world gotta pray for something

Hope the Lord still mess with me

'Cause I only call him when I need something

Pain

By HW

Pain keeps me up in the middle of the night,

One of those thing I just can't fight.

I try hard, with all my might,

But the pain, still keeps me up at night.

I lay in bed and close my eyes,

I feel it in my heart,

Then my whole body will rise.

Sometimes it's mental,

And other times it's a feeling that words can't respect.

I can't mask the pain, am I alone?

Have I been given this pain for my unfair share of deeds?

Only the creator can answer me.

Pills can only

Take away the feeling,

But can't numb the mental strain or the mental pain.

Makes Me Stronger

By LB, Free Minds sister

The cuts and scars each tell a story

Sometimes the stories are too hard to listen to

Sometimes the stories make us stronger in all types of ways

What doesn't kill me will only make me stronger

The scars that run deep is called my lifeline

Does it make me weak to be able to not remember?

The fights, rape, the knife fights...and so on?

In the end it all made me stronger

Keep It Moving

By SAT

Today will never be the same again.

I keep being angry today for what happened yesterday

It's over, but it's really not, cause I keep letting yesterday control the way I feel today

Why, I don't know...

Yeah, I know it should be a day of reflection

and I should've already digested those feelings from yesterday but,

I'm still having a hard time swallowing it, because it's rooted in my chest

Now making it hard for me to think about anything else but the pain I feel

Although this pain is mental, I feel like hurting somebody for it, but what point would that prove?

cause they wouldn't even know why I'm hurting them

I gotta find a way to rid myself of this mess in my head

it's giving me a headache, Man!

I done let this mess get the best of me.

I gotta keep thinking to myself, don't let what I don't have control of me...

But it's hard, cause my mind will capture the thought like a fly in a cup

And like the fly, when I get trapped in my head,

I tend to lose control until I get exhausted.

So unless I settle down and humble myself

I'm gonna feel the same way tomorrow

How I Keep It Moving

By JH

(This is an excerpt from a longer poem)

People that meet me don't think I have the time that I do

They want to know how I do it

They want to know how I'm coping

I'll tell you one thing I ain't sitting here doping

I ain't sitting here smoking

I haven't became a blood or crip

You'll never see me lacing

I ain't with none of that gang mess

What I do is go to church

And when I'm thirsty in here

Only 'The blood of Jesus' quenches my thirst

I pray and try to keep up with my kids

Through pictures, letters or the phone

By these channels I read with them, do homework, laugh

And make sure they came straight from school

And have made it safely to their home

Knowing they're good keeps my mind at ease

Then I focus on myself

I do calisthenics for body, reading for my mind

Church, prayer and meditation

For my spiritual health

I believe that if I keep this up

God will take care of everything else

continued on page 11



PAYING IT FORWARD

Giving Everyone a Seat at the Table

By Kelli

You shuffle along in line. A lady in a hairnet scoops beef-a-roni and adds it to your plate, next to the four dry iceberg lettuce leaves with a carrot curlette. She adds a dry brownie and a milk carton and hands you the whole lot. All the while, the anxiety in your gut is growing. Not because of the unappealing school lunch, but because you are approaching that moment. When you stand at the entrance to the school cafeteria and look around. Everyone else has already established "their table" with their friends and nobody is about to make room for you.

This agonizing moment plays out for hundreds of thousands of students across the country every single day. Whether it happens because they are new at school, because they don't have a lot of friends, or because they are being bullied or shunned, the loneliness of the moment is universally painful.

16-year-old Natalie Hampton from California spent her entire 7th grade year eating lunch by herself. Sitting alone made her an "outcast," and she became a target for verbal and physical bullying. Now in the 11th grade and thriving socially at a new school, Natalie decided to do something so that other kids wouldn't have to suffer as she had. She created a cellphone app called **Sit With Us**. The app allows kids to designate themselves as "ambassadors" to create tables in the lunchroom that are welcome to everyone. Kids who have no place to sit can access the app, and see which tables at their school have an open invitation.

Hampton's idea uses technology to promote kindness. In many schools, students known as "the cool kids" who want to take a stand against bullying are embracing her idea and signing up to be ambassadors. Students say **Sit With Us** is creating new friendships across lines that might not previously have been crossed.

High school is a notoriously tough environment for anyone seen as different by others. **Sit With Us** is an example of how one person, harnessing the power of kindness, is changing countless lives for the better.

What will you do with the power of kindness in 2017? Let us know!



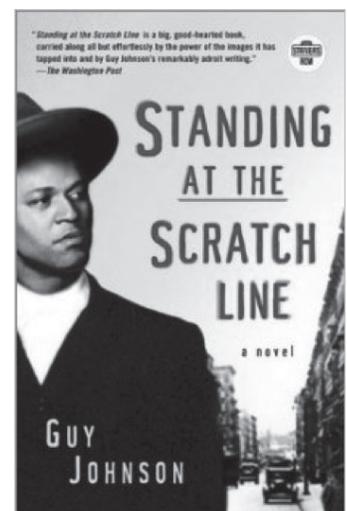
KEEP IT MOVING

By SL, FM Member

How do I deal with difficult experiences in my life? I used to self-destruct when I was home. I would get chased by the police on purpose around my way in SE. In prison, I would eat. I went from 175 lbs to 226 in a matter of three months after I lost my trial and got 28 years. Now I try to slow down a bit, breathe, and sort out what I can do to improve the situation and if I can't, I've learned to accept what I can't change and change what I can to better me for the future.

In what invisible or visible ways do my past experiences affect me in the present? I can see that my past experiences have made me a stronger person to myself, my kids, family, and the community. It has also taught me to not waste the lessons I've learned in life because time waits for no one. So cherish and love life, be the best me I can be.

What can I do to stay healthy in mind as well as body? The things I can do are stay positive,



continued on page 10



KEEP IT MOVING

continued from page 9

keep busy, and accomplish the goals I've set for myself. When I get excited, slow down and take my time with whatever I'm trying to accomplish—don't look at it as the end of the world but as a motivation to get it that much more. Now as far as body, I understand how important my health is so exercising and staying spiritual to keep you grounded. It allows you to further your future and live a fulfilling life. That goal everybody in the world wants, ultimately.

Have I written a poem or read a book that made me feel better when I was struggling with something? A book that I've read? There are so many so I'll just pick one: Standing at the Scratch Line by Guy Johnson.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving." – Albert Einstein

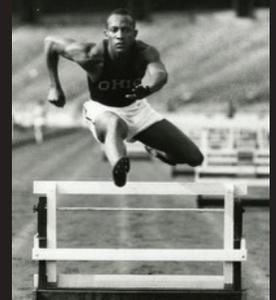
"Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed." – Booker T. Washington

"The battles that count aren't the ones for gold medals. The struggles within yourself – the invisible, inevitable battles inside all of us – that's where it's at." – Jesse Owens

"It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it." – Lena Horne

"In every crisis there is a message. Crises are nature's way of forcing change – breaking down old structures, shaking loose negative habits so that something new and better can take their place."

– Susan L. Taylor



Jesse Owens

DC PHOTOS OF THE MONTH

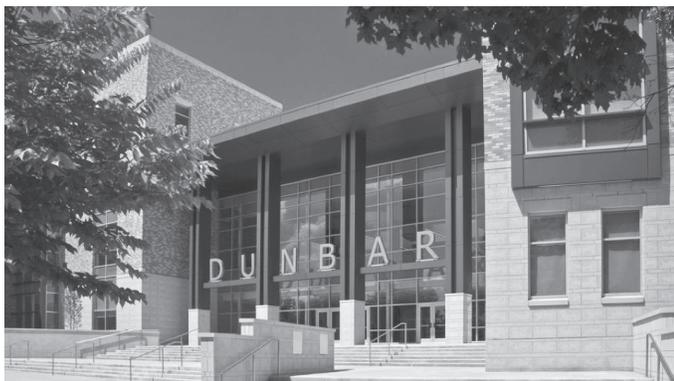


Photo by Gerry Suchy

This is the new Dunbar High School that was remodeled a couple years ago. In addition to a new look, the school is now LEED certified – meaning it is a leader in energy and environmental design.



This is the new streetcar that runs up and down H Street. It's kind of a cross between a bus and a metro car. What do you think – would you ride it??

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!



Give us a call when you get out: (202) 758-0829

REAL WORLD OF WORK: CUSTOMER SERVICE/RETAIL

Robert was incarcerated at 17 years old and spent 20 years behind bars. He came home less than a year ago and hasn't let any time go to waste. He's always on the go, working at a men's clothing and tuxedo rental store by day and for an upscale bowling and entertainment center in DC at night. He's a busy man but he always has time for his Free Minds family!

Can you tell us what your position is and what you do at the men's clothing store?

I am a Sales Assistant and Tuxedo Specialist. I am responsible for making both the customers and management happy by selling men's suits and renting tuxedos. I do everything from online ordering, unloading the merchandise truck, keeping track of inventory (the product that is sold in a store), shipping, putting out the clothing in the customer area, interacting with the customer to help them find what they need, and finally selling them the clothing.

What would you say are the top qualities someone must possess to be successful in retail and customer service?

You must be personable for any customer service job, but to be a salesperson you have to have charisma and be able to "meet, greet and sway." You need confidence in your ability to interact with customers and show off the new products. Customers are more likely to buy from someone they like, so you got to turn on that charm! You must be friendly, calm and cool and always remain professional no matter how much the customer might upset you. There is a saying that "the customer is always right" and you really have to live that. Sometimes it's hard because they might be rude but you can never be nasty back. I look at it like you have to be an actor. Pull out your best Denzel! :-)
For example I have never worn a cummerbund (the part of the tuxedo

that covers the waist) in my life, but I act like it's the most important part of the tux when I'm selling it!

Can you describe some of the types of customers someone in retail might encounter and how to best deal with them?

You will definitely get all kinds. The most frustrating customer for me is someone who can't make up their mind. I had someone there once for 4 hours who went to the register 4 times and then did 3 exchanges! Of course you will always deal with the "Mr. or Ms. Know It All" who is really demanding and keeps trying to trip you up, but you just keep that cool and calm demeanor and never let them see you sweat and it always works out. I take it as a challenge that I won't let anyone take me off my friendly demeanor. I'm good at it now.

Did you always want to work in retail? How did you get into this field?

Marcus! (Free Minds Apprenticeship Trainer and business owner) I saw something in him that I wanted. He told us in the Apprenticeship that we have to work hard for our goals. I was lucky that he connected me with this opportunity. After being in prison for so long (20 years) I didn't think I had it in me but he made me take the leap and I've never looked back. I'm so grateful to him. The opportunity presented itself and I took the chance. I'm glad I did.



POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

continued from page 8

You Define Me

By JM

(This is an excerpt from a longer poem)

You are the vision when it's hard to see
You see past the rest, optimistically
Do your best to hold things together
You hold it down
No matter
Whatever
You define me
You don't care what people say
As years went by
You made me stay
You made me spend all those nights alone trying
You kept me alive

When everything else was dying
Essential
Necessary
The way you made me feel
Felt you in the past
Sometimes stronger
Always real
Never felt so much of you in the heart
And what is gained
Can never be taken apart
You define me...
HOPE!!



IN THE NEWS

By John, Free Minds Friend



Eight years ago, America witnessed an inauguration that was a long time coming: the first person of color to become president of the United States.

In January, America witnessed perhaps the most unexpected presidential inauguration in its history: a man with no political experience and no tolerance for political correctness. A

billionaire celebrity who won with a pledge to help America's working class.

On January 20, 2017, the presidency was transferred from Barack Obama to Donald Trump. The transfer of power itself was peaceful, as were the massive, women-led demonstrations against Trump around the country and the world the next day.

Trump's presidency has begun, and now the world watches to see if he will bring about the reforms to America's position in the world that he campaigned on.

Here are a few important ways in which Trump and the Republican-controlled Congress might make major changes:

- **Economy:** Trump has vowed to punish American companies that do not rely on the country's workers to produce their goods, and vowed to renegotiate several of our major trade deals without countries such as China, Mexico and Canada.
- **Immigration:** Trump campaigned on a pledge to build a wall along our border with Mexico, and ratchet up the rate that America deports people living in the country illegally.
- **Abortion:** Trump promised to nominate a conservative judge to the Supreme Court. With a court that has one more conservative judge, there is a real chance that states will soon have the option to make abortion illegal.
- **Healthcare:** Trump and the Republican-led Congress will soon preside over the repeal of the healthcare reforms championed by Obama. The only question left is what they'll do to replace it?

SPORTS

On Sunday, Feb. 5, the Atlanta Falcons will square off against the New England Patriots in Super Bowl LI (51). Atlanta has perhaps the two best offensive players in football right now: Julio Jones,

the league's top receiver and quarterback Matt Ryan, the likely MVP this season. They also have the most fun celebrity fan base in the league: Ludacris, Future, and Big Boi are among the regulars on the sidelines and in the primo seats for Falcons games.

It is the Falcons' first super bowl since 1999, nearly 20 years. This is the seventh time since 1999 that the Patriots have made the big game, led as always by coach Bill Belichick and quarterback Tom Brady.

If the Patriots win, Brady will hold the record among quarterbacks with five wins. Belichick has already set the record for head coaches by making his seventh Super Bowl appearance.



D.C. SPORTS

The Redskins missed the playoffs by choking in the final week of the season, losing at home to a New York Giants squad that had already clinched a spot and were playing not to get injured.

After a horrendous start, the Wizards have been fire at home and ice on the road, but look poised to make the playoffs.



The Capitals are the best team in hockey, as they were last season at this time. The question is: can they do it in the playoffs? The Caps haven't made it past the second round since 1998.





REENTRY PROFILE

Charlie

By Kelli

Free Minds member Charlie served six years in prison after being charged as an adult with armed robbery at the age of 16. As his release date was approaching, he was excited and focused on finding a job and a place to live. But it wasn't as easy as he had hoped.

"I filled out more than 30 applications, and got only two calls back," he says now. He grew frustrated, especially because everyone seemed to see him only as someone with a criminal record.

"I started to think that's all I was, and wondered if the streets were the only place I could succeed," he says. The one bright spot in his life was reconnecting with a special young woman he'd known growing up. Charlie eventually found a part-time job detailing cars. Then he visited the Free Minds office and started going into the community as a Poet Ambassador to share his story with young people. They loved him.

"That had an amazing impact on me. It gave me hope. It boosted me up and made me see that there are people who want me and appreciate me in the community. I stopped feeling like nobody wanted me to succeed. Now, not only did I have my own family, I had my Free Minds family, and the larger community rooting for me."

Meanwhile, a fellow Free Minds member named Will had launched his own business called Clean Decisions, with a mission to employ recently released individuals and train them for employment. Will had been urging Charlie to come work for him, but Charlie was hesitant because the work was hard manual labor.

After completing the Free Minds Apprenticeship though, Charlie learned that he and his girlfriend were expecting a child. And that changed everything.

"When I found out I was going to be a father, I knew that I could never, ever go back to the streets. I was determined to make sure my child had a better childhood than I did," Charlie says. In 2015, he took Will up on his offer and he hasn't looked back. He started out working the night shift, cleaning and sanitizing restaurant kitchens across D.C. Soon he moved on to work landscaping and working on cleanup crews at citywide community events. Even though the work is hard, Charlie says it never feels that way.

"I'm working with other people who have been through what I've been through. So I'm with these guys all day long working really hard, but it's almost like we're just hanging out. We're not just coworkers, we've become a family!"

Will was so impressed with Charlie's work ethic, he promoted him. Charlie is now the head of operations and owns half of the company, which has 15 employees.

"Will inspires me. His drive for success makes him a role model to me. He just never gives up. I've got that too. Anything I do, I just put my heart into it. But Will is amazing. He keeps me on my toes!"

Charlie's dream is to grow and expand the company and continue helping formerly incarcerated people to get job skills they need to secure employment or start their own business.

Charlie says his Free Minds brothers can do what he's done. "Just don't give up on yourself. Even though that sounds cliché, it's true. Stick to whatever it is you've got your mind on. Life has ups and downs for sure, but just stay on that right path. It will make you feel good about yourself and when you feel good about yourself, that's when you can reach out and help others!"



MY EXPERIENCE

By Ian, Free Minds Friend

At the age of 18, Kelli's nephew Ian (now 22) went away to school. While there, he began to experience strong bouts of loneliness and symptoms of depression. He is not alone. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, at least 16 million young adults in this country suffer from one or more symptoms of depression every year. The good news is that depression and anxiety (which often show up together) are highly treatable with counseling and/or medication. Mental illness is like physical illness, and can be treated with medication, therapy, or other remedies. Here, Ian shares his experience, as well as one thing that helped him to cope.

To be clear, I don't know for sure if it is depression. I've never gotten a proper diagnosis. I call it depression because it's similar to what other people have described.

I might have felt something during high school, but I only started taking it seriously after I graduated. It was my first time living away from home. Even with a roommate and neighbors, I felt alone.

When you're depressed, you're walled off. You realize, or think you realize, that you're never going to change. You become painfully aware of all your mistakes. They grow larger than life, until you can't remember a time when you did anything right. You end up as nothing but a collection of mistakes that all add up to one big mistake.

Every new problem feels impossible to overcome. Every misstep is cause for panic. Speaking about it is almost impossible. If you do, people will know there's something wrong with you. Even old friends feel alien.

You try to think of solutions to this mindset, but solutions require rationality, and you're not in your right mind. You're

stuck inside your own head, and it's an echo chamber for the negative thoughts.

I thought of killing myself. It didn't feel like an attractive option, but I still thought of how I might do it. Hanging, drowning, cutting. But I knew what it would do to my family. And to be truthful, I was still scared of dying.

My lack of conviction saved my life. Or maybe I wasn't as depressed as I believed. If I had been truly suicidal, I might have just jumped. Off a building. Into the river. In front of a bus. Whatever worked.

My depression may be different from yours, or the next person's. Not everyone with depression is suicidal. Not everyone who's sad is depressed. There are different types, different symptoms for everyone, some better or worse than others. The only thing universal is that it's never a good position to be in.

If I have any advice, it's this: don't feel ashamed. I know I did. I felt bad about feeling bad. I knew I should be grateful. That there were plenty of people who had it worse. Realizing other people have experienced greater adversity can be both a hopeful and disheartening thought to have. Hopeful, because it means that it can be endured, disheartening because you wonder why you haven't recovered too.

Find positive examples to be inspired by, but don't feel that you need to copy them. Some people find a strategy to manage depression instead of searching for a cure. For example, a friend of mine found jiu jitsu (a Japanese martial art), and it made a huge difference in her life. Try exercise. Find a hobby. Talk to someone. Seek medication. Even smaller things may help. Find what works for you.

REENTRY CORNER

By Keela

Unyaka Omusha Omhule!

Which of course means Happy New Year but in what language? Stay tuned to find out. While that little mystery is hanging in the air, I want to express my thoughts and prayers for you in this upcoming year; no matter what your current circumstances, YOU are SIGNIFICANT and this is also your NEW YEAR so grab hold, take 2017 by the wings and soar!

As always, I want to update you on some opportunities that you can jump on when you return home. First up is the Welcome Home Reentry Program sponsored by Catholic Charities. Welcome Home helps returning citizens find and follow a path to a new career. Volunteer mentors work closely with returning citizens to reach each of their established goals. The program has three goals to help returning citizens find employment, community support and housing.

Catholic Charities has a whole network of career training and housing options too vast to list here, but in order to receive services from them, as soon as you return home, you can either contact them via phone at 202-772-4300 or visit them in person at 924 G Street NW, Washington DC.

The next option you guys will find way more exciting and I can't blame you! The MGM casino has finally opened at National Harbor and they are woefully understaffed and are hiring like crazy and guess what? They welcome returning citizens! Currently, four of your Free Minds brothers are employed there and I am referring guys by the boat load. They are hiring for every position under the sun, and from the looks of things, this will be a consistent ongoing option for employment. If you are interested in working there, you could either submit a resume or application online or physically go there (I highly suggest this). The MGM employment center is located at 7100 Oxon Hill Run, Oxon Hill, MD 20745 or can be reached via phone at 301-971-5700.



I'm going to leave you hanging just a bit about the New Year's greeting. Of course it's a different language but which one?? Below is a list of choices, write in to let me know which one you think it is, and I will reveal the real one in the next edition of the Connect. So is it: Tibetan, Danish, Zulu, Finnish or Hungarian? You tell me!

HOW TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

By TK, FM Member

In my life everything is based on levels. The more serious the situation the higher the levels. A difficult experience is when my mom passed (a high level). I'm still dealing with this difficult experience. I think about the times we've had, and I replay some of those moments and talk to her every time I think about her because I truly believe there's a God so I know she's with me mentally at all times. With this being said, "I LOVE YOU DEARLY MOTHER!!"

Another difficult experience is being away from my family: siblings, kids, nieces and nephews (high level). I deal with this difficult experience by either calling, writing, or I go outside and run and jump rope for two hours. By the time I finish that and take a shower I'm cool, all I can do is sit back and wait on the next obstacle to overcome!!

For my lower level I eat me some chocolate and I'm good. :)



Artwork by AW

COMMITMENT AND DEDICATION

By LG, FM Member

When I think of the phrase "Keep It Moving" I think of a person who is focused. I think of a person who is striving to complete a goal. I think of a person with a purpose. Commitment and dedication is needed to be the epitome of this phrase. In life, everyone will be faced with a decision. The decision you choose will determine the path you take. Along the road of your chosen path, you will be faced with difficulties. Will you allow hardship to turn you away from trying to achieve what you are so passionate about? Or, will you stand firm, push through, and "keep it moving"? The path I speak about is the path of surviving prison long enough to obtain your freedom.

Through experience, I've learned that prison can be one of the hardest roads traveled. Forced to live with a stranger. How does one cope? It takes strength to endure. Some things are out of your hands. The victim becomes the aggressor and the aggressor becomes the victim. If you live to see another day, "keep it moving"! The only change is to be placed with another stranger, which is no change at all. After being traumatized, will you lose your sanity and be moved to strike first or will you remain calm and keep the peace?

It's time for us to live out the saying "Each one, teach one". It's time to live out with a purpose and aim to make a difference, instead of living aimless and selfishly for ourselves. You are only obligated to plant the seed, after that "KEEP IT MOVING"!

EPIC

By Ian, Free Minds Friend

Epic *ep.ik* /'epik/ **noun**

1: of, relating to, or having the characteristics of an epic <an epic poem>

Adjective

2 a : extending beyond the usual or ordinary especially in size or scope

b : heroic

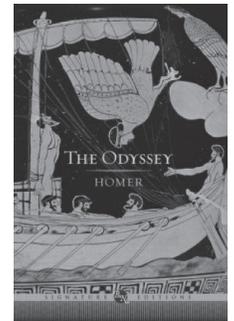
I was fortunate enough to have a teacher named Barbara. She taught me how to recognize what was epic in my life.

I don't know what would've happened to me without her lesson. I was going through an extremely low point; I honestly thought I could disappear without anyone noticing.

On the first day of class she arrived with a red suitcase full of different copies of *The Odyssey*, the classic poem written by Greek author Homer. It's been translated many times, by many authors, but the basic story remains the same.

A hero named Odysseus has won a ten-year long war and is returning home, but early in his trip, he's shipwrecked, hunted by monsters, and at the mercy of angry gods. It takes him another ten years to finally reach home.

It's exciting stuff, but that isn't what makes *The Odyssey* special. Underneath the big adventure it's a simple story about a homesick man fighting through the many challenges standing in his way. Reading his story, I felt a little less alone. I was only a day's drive from home compared to Odysseus's decade long journey. True epics never lose sight of the hero's basic humanity. They take universal and relatable experiences and make them heroic. They remain familiar, even as the stories are exaggerated for our enjoyment.



My problems were minor and temporary, but they were similar in a sense. Odysseus and I were both far from our homes and battling unfamiliar surroundings. It was easy to miss our absent friends, curse misfortune, and rejoice when we finally saw our homes.

Our own personal challenges may not be so hugely intimidating, but there is always adversity to overcome. I think that's what got me over the guilt. Finding common ground with a hero. Knowing that I could persevere as he did. Recognizing your own struggle in another is empowering, and one way to do it is to open up a book and find the stories that reflect your own life.

It doesn't matter if it's epic or every day. The ability to endure is heroic.

THIS HAPPENED TO ME

By MM, FM Member

A series of bad decisions led me to a point in which I was guilty of possession with intent to distribute methamphetamines, and sentenced to 262 months. Who can say at which point it was something I chose and the point where it was something that happened to me? Addiction is a very distorted lens to look at life through.

However, there is one thing more important than determining our "paradigm's locus of control" (did I choose this or did it happen to me??) and that is what and how we choose to react to it.

On that day in which I was sentenced, I decided to do whatever was necessary to fix my predicament. I knew I had to fix my life in many ways; from a legal standpoint, all the way to dealing with my addiction and life's goals.

For the next four years, I worked every day on those things. I only worked half-days on Christmas and Thanksgiving. Every other day, I spent all day on myself. For two of those years I worked on my appeal. The second two years I worked on my graduate degree in Positive Psychology.

To make a long story short, there is a happy ending. My appeal was successful. I was resentenced to 65 months and my achievements were instrumental in that sentence reduction. Additionally, I have a job waiting for me upon release.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

By Aubry, Free Minds Intern

For many years, depression and other mental illnesses were considered taboo, and were highly stigmatized (regarded with strong disapproval). Thanks to many courageous individuals who have spoken out about their experiences, more people are aware of the truth about mental health, and more people are able to get help when they need it. There are many different kinds of mental illnesses (bipolar disorder, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, to name a few). One of the most common illnesses is depression.

While everyone experiences feelings of sadness during difficult experiences, sometimes these feelings persist and interfere with daily life. These persistent and painful feelings are symptoms of Depression. Depression is beyond sadness and often a person cannot simply "cheer up" or "snap out" of this state. Instead, it needs to be diagnosed and treated just like a physical illness. Some symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sad or anxious mood
- Irritability
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or hopelessness
- Loss of interest in hobbies or lack of energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Aches or pains, headaches

Doctors will often treat depression with antidepressants that are designed to improve the way the brain uses chemicals to that control mood. Often these medications are used in conjunction with therapy.

In addition to treatments prescribed by a doctor here are some ways you can combat depression:

- Exercise (Did you know that physical exercise is good for your mind, not just your body? Exercise increases brain chemicals that increase happiness and relaxation.)
- Set goals
- Spend time with people you trust
- Write or journal
- Meditate

(Source: National Institute of Mental Health)





MY SON'S SURPRISING PAIN RELIEF

By Noel, Tara's sister and Free Minds Friend

I knew the minute the four nurses in the x-ray room were looking at me with those sad and pitying eyes it wasn't good news. Sick dread crept up my stomach and I felt lightheaded. My son had been having leg pain for a while but my husband and I thought it was just his usual oversensitivity. He was 10 years old. After the pain kept getting more intense, we went to an orthopedic doctor (someone who specializes in bones) and that's how I found myself in that x-ray room.

He was diagnosed with Ewings Sarcoma, a bone cancer that had caused the painful tumor in his thigh bone. I immediately knew a long and hard journey of treatment lay ahead. Trying to ignore the bleak statistic that only 25% of kids survive Ewings Sarcoma, my family "kept it moving" and dove into care mode.

First there was the chemotherapy to shrink the tumor before it could even be taken out by surgery. Then more chemotherapy followed by radiation. The surgery was a grueling 6 hours. They had to remove not only the tumor, but enough tissue around the area to make sure no cancer cells were still hiding in them. It went so far up his leg he needed a hip replacement. They replaced his femur (thigh bone) with a titanium rod. They put in a port in his chest right near his heart that stayed there for a year so they could pump the chemicals in directly.

Needless to say, the surgery was extremely painful for my son. They wheeled him back into the hospital room afterwards and I'll never forget his piercing cries of agony. There were so many nurses trying everything, but he was inconsolable. Nothing worked.

A couple of weeks earlier, after he had been diagnosed, my sister's yoga teacher had recommended a "healing circle" called a Reiki share. We had no idea what it was, but went anyway. We were scared and ready to try anything. Reiki is a healing technique based on the principle that the therapist can channel energy into the patient by means of touch to activate the natural healing processes of the patient's body and restore physical and emotional well-being. Reiki is now being used in many hospitals with a number of nurses



learning the technique to improve patient care. The "Reiki Master" was a woman named Mary who had come by the house a few times to sit with my son, but he didn't seem to be strongly connected to the method.

As my son's cries of excruciating pain were getting stronger and I was thinking I'd go out of my mind wanting so badly to stop his suffering, who walks through the door at that exact moment? Mary. She didn't even know he was having surgery that day. She immediately went to him and began her relaxing talking and moving her hands gently above his leg, not even touching him. What happened next will forever amaze me and is why I've gone on to become a Reiki master myself.

My son totally relaxed and became quiet and still. It was incredible. From writhing in agony to calm sleeping. Whatever this healing modality was I wanted to learn more.

It has been 6 years since that day and I am very happy to tell you that my son is cancer free. He still has a rod in his leg that prevents him from doing many physical activities, but that is not stopping him. He's doing great and has a very sunny outlook on life. Today I activate the same healing energy that was given to my son so other families can experience comfort and relief that I experienced firsthand.

My son is 16 now and has a very skeptical scientific mind. He hasn't been able to explain the scientific process that is Reiki yet but he doesn't need to – he's experienced its healing power firsthand.

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."*

Rwanda

By Seana

Hi Guys! I'm excited to contribute to this issue of the *Connect* and to check in with everyone. I miss you all but have been so touched by the beautiful letters and poems that have been passed along to me in response to my article about being robbed in the last issue. Thank you for your kind words, it means a lot to me. For this month's issue, I wanted to share a little bit about a trip I took to Rwanda, a country I visited on my first trip to Africa.

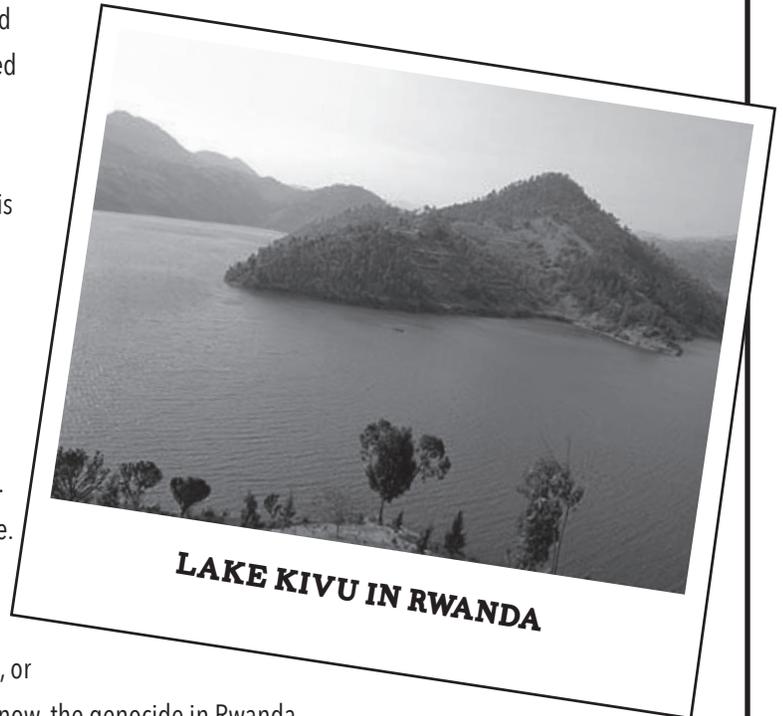
Some basic facts about Rwanda are that it is a small, landlocked nation in central Africa that is about the size of the state of Maryland and has a population of a little over 11 million people. The capital city is Kigali and the current president is Paul Kagame.

Sadly, the first thing you might think about when you hear Rwanda is genocide, which is defined as an intentional action to destroy a people (usually defined as an ethnic, national, racial, or

religious group) in whole or in part. For those of you that don't know, the genocide in Rwanda

took place in 1994, with almost one million men, women and children murdered over the span of about three months. Today you can find memorials throughout the country to honor those that died and the genocide has been the subject of a number of books and films which you should definitely check out (let us know if you want a book about Rwanda!). While the genocide and its history are a very sad and somber piece of that nation's history, there are also a lot of wonderful things going on there today to learn about too.

The tourism industry is booming, with incredibly unique opportunities that include everything from visits to the volcanoes in the North to trekking up close and personal on foot with Mountain Gorillas! Rwanda, the Land of a Thousand Hills, is just that – a beautiful country with green rolling hills that create the most spectacular views everywhere you look. There were always the brightest full moons while I was there which seemed to glow in the night sky. Taxis, for the most part, are motorcycles that take their customers anywhere they wish to go which is great, except when it's raining! There are restaurants serving cuisine from all over the world and quite a big nightlife scene. The new Convention Center in Kigali is a giant, dome shaped building that hosts conferences and events and lights up all different colors at night which is really cool to see. Everyone I met during my trip was incredibly warm, friendly and proud of their beautiful country and all that they have accomplished in such a short time. Rwanda has overcome incredible tragedy to build a strong, beautiful nation 22 years later which is inspiring and a lesson we can all learn from.





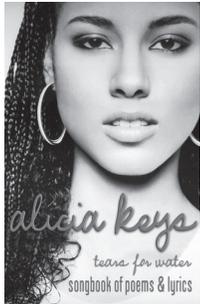
BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

Free Minds long-distance book club

By Julia



Hey BAM! readers, as you know the "Books Across the Miles" book is Tears for Water by Alicia Keys. If you did not receive the book and you would like to, please write to us and let us know! Tears for Water is a collection of poetry and lyrics by singer/songwriter Alicia Keys. Here's what Free Minds members had to say about this book:



"As a poet, I can relate to her work. She's one of my favorite artists anyway. Not just because of the physical beauty, but because she's extremely talented. Her music is true art. Mainly because I feel it deep within the confines of my heart and soul." - GL

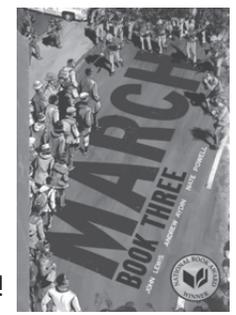
"She is so raw and real with her words. Her poems are beautiful. She paints on the canvas of her heart. I try to do the same." - LC

"I've always been a fan of Alicia Keys, but reading Tears for Water made it seem like she was right here talking to me. It's hard for me to pinpoint one as my favorite because I have so many pages folded over, and those are all the ones that I like." - DP

"My favorite is the song "When Gone Is the Glory." I feel like this expresses how I felt about having a name/rep in the streets. Now I'm gone and my name/rep means nothing. All the so-called friends left with it." - SL

"I've begun to read the book and it's very agreeable, genuine, cheerful, fantastic, enjoyable, dignified, and conscious. This actual book has really showed me a strong woman's real thoughts, emotions and challenges of life against her...friends, family, enemies, herself, boyfriend, husband and...career as a whole. Wow! I would honestly recommend everybody to actually read her beautiful sincere words of life. These are my favorite poems: P.O.W., Lilly of the Valley, Damn You!, Mind Sex, Cosmopolitan Woman, Is It Insane?, No Room for Religion, Girlfriend, Fallin', Troubles, A Woman's Worth, and Goodbye!" - SJ

"Tears for Water really gave me a big push in the right direction in a positive aspect. I enjoyed every single page that was written. Some of the stuff that was written grabbed my attention 'cause I can identify with a few of her art, and some of them I just place myself where she was at that time." - DM



Next BAM! Book: March: Book Three

March: Book Three is the conclusion to the graphic novel trilogy by Congressman John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. March tells the story of Congressman Lewis's experiences as one of the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Congressman Lewis is the only surviving speaker from the 1963 March on Washington (where Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech). Fittingly, you can expect to receive this book in March!

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: LEGACY

What is a legacy? Legacy means something handed down from one person or generation to the next. In other words, it's the footprint you leave in the world. A lot of people have been discussing President Obama's legacy. What impact do you want to have on the world? Maybe you want to publish a book, be a mentor to young people, start a nonprofit, or be a loving parent to your children. You can build your legacy wherever you are. Maybe you're the best listener on the unit, the best cook, or hey – the best poet. What will be your legacy?

Until then, stay strong and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!