

May/June 2018
Vol. 7, Issue 3

Free minds Connect



THIS MONTH'S THEME: CHOOSING YOUR FAMILY

FINDING SOURCES OF HEALTHY LOVE AND SUPPORT

**MY MOM ISN'T THE
ONE WHO GAVE BIRTH
TO ME**

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**WHY BETH BROKE UP WITH
HER FAMILY AND HOW SHE
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ENGINEER, FM MEMBER
IS NOTICED & PROMOTED**

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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* may appear on our Writing Blog and at a Write Night Event!)

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Next Issue's Theme:
Communication

TALK BACK WITH TARA

Hello Free Minds Fam!

I hope this *Connect* finds you surrounded by those who uplift and support you, and if not, know you always have your Free Minds family! We only want the best for you. As you know, that is not always the case with biological families for a host of reasons that could include mental health issues, addiction, religious beliefs, or simply no exposure to positive parenting role models. This issue explores the powerful choice we all have: to create our own chosen family. This week I was talking to one of your FM brothers who recently came home and realized his family wasn't able to be there for him in his new journey of change. They were still deep into the street life and knew no other way to guide him. He told me he didn't get to choose the family members he was born with, but he can choose the ones he wants now. All those potential new family members out there are keeping him strong as he goes through the painful breakup with his biological family.

In this issue, you'll read about my neighbor Beth, who had to cut ties with her family after her sister's murder. She shares with us her checklist for a good support network. FM member Eddie describes how his foster mom's healing love transformed him. Decario details the secrets of his success on the job. Hint: It includes doing the opposite of what is usually

done in prison. Follow Decario's example and you too can work your way to the top!

FM friends Callie, Karina, Achim, and Danielle share how they survived and triumphed over the trauma of being rejected by their families and ostracized by the community solely because of their gender or sexuality. Forty percent of the homeless population in the US are gay and transgender youth, many abandoned by their own families. If we can all recognize our shared humanity, then we can work together to end this cruelty.

Finally, if you're still thinking, "*What's the use? New people will just let me down too,*" keep this issue handy and re-read it over and over for strength and hope. I learned a new word from an article I recently read: "Possibilist." Remind yourself that anything is always possible and become a possibilist. No one is forced to join Free Minds, so it makes it even sweeter to be intentionally chosen. Thank you for choosing us. One of the best things in life for me is to know I always have a choice – and I choose you all! Until we gather "on the same page" again.

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

FREE MINDS HQ

By Melissa

Free Minds in Florida

In March, Julia and James traveled to Tampa, Florida, to participate in the Association of Writers & Writing Programs national conference, which hosts over 12,000 participants from across the country. James spoke on a panel called "Redemption in the Pen: Insights from the Journeys of Formerly Incarcerated Writers," discussing the importance of expressing yourself through writing.

Free Minds Visits Universities

Free Minds also travelled to New York and New Jersey! Poet Ambassadors shared your stories with students at Columbia University in New York. In April, Poet Ambassadors visited Princeton University

in New Jersey to share your stories with Princeton students as well.

Featured in WAMU

Ten Poet Ambassadors were featured in a multi-media project by WAMU, a public radio station in DC and Virginia. This project gave our Poet Ambassadors the opportunity to bring their poetry to life by using their own voices to record readings of their own work. We are so proud of their courage!



JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

FM Member JG shares his take on the Connect theme "chosen family" in his "Words of Wisdom" column

By JG, Free Minds Member

Chosen family, in my humble opinion, is the only family that matters. All others are just relatives. Chosen family is determined by love and connection. Love is an action verb – it requires action, and so does the act of connecting. Both require a conscious, deliberate intent. I consider the people that you connect with and that show you love and vice versa to be family.

Free Minds is definitely a prime example. I mean, I've never met most of you, but I still feel a bond, a connection, and a degree of love from you all when I receive the *Connects* and read all of the articles and experience, vicariously through you all, all of the struggles and joys and everything in-between that you care to

share. On my journey through these prisons or universities, as I like to look at them sometimes, I've met good men who I now consider my brothers and family because we connected, we share similar values and goals, we looked out for each other when in a time of need, and we share in the same struggle.

Like I mentioned earlier, blood only makes one your relative, it takes more than that to be family. It's very important that we choose wisely the type of people we surround ourselves with and the people we call family, because "birds of a feather flock together."

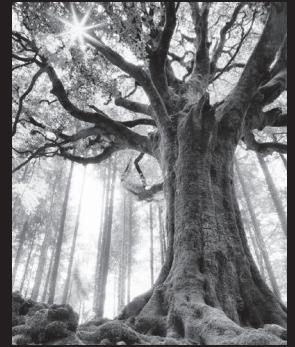
QUOTE-I-VATOR

"That's what people do who love you. They put their arms around you and love you when you're not so lovable." – Deb Caletti (National Book Award finalist)

"I don't care about whose DNA has recombined with whose. When everything goes to hell, the people who stand by you without flinching – they are your family."

– Jim Butcher, Proven Guilty (Author of fantasy book series *The Dresden Files*)

"You can kiss your family and friends good-bye and put miles between you, but at the same time you carry them with you in your heart, your mind, your stomach, because you do not just live in a world but a world lives in you." – Frederick Buechner (American writer and theologian)



FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the Mar/Apr 2018 Connect on Education.

SJ: I truly loved everybody's input about what education means to them and how it affected their life. The "Education from Behind Bars" is a very awesome section because he has accomplished a lot while incarcerated in the federal system. That brother has been moving as well.

I truly loved Kelli's "My Best Teacher" as well, because mines was a school teacher throughout the Washington DC public school system. She has taught me a lot of life things which I've taken heed towards as well. She passed away back in 2014 at 82 years old. I'll never forget the keys of knowledge that she raised me upon as well. That article touched my heart.

I loved the poem from LM about Knowledge of Self and I've read that book *Knowledge of Self* by Supreme Understanding three times. I liked Lorenzo's poem "The Things I'd Like to Understand." It's a lot of things I don't understand about life and I still have to learn as well.

GM: Typically, prison is the place dreams come to die, yet through the Free Minds Fam and *Connect* my dreams have been resurrected!





WHAT IS CHOSEN FAMILY?

Have you heard the saying that *blood makes you related, but loyalty makes you family*? We can't choose who we're related to, but we can choose who to be around and whose presence in our lives makes us want to improve ourselves, feel supported, and feel loved. Your chosen family is just that – people who are there for you in ways in addition to the family you were born into or who are there for you in ways the family you were born into can't be, for one reason or another.

For example, individuals in the LGBTQ (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer) community whose gender identity or sexual orientation was not accepted by their parents or other immediate family have long had to rely on chosen families for bonds of community and support. Here are some stories by people who identify as being part of the LGBTQ community, and why, in their own words, they have chosen families.

Callie: Most LGBTQ folks know what it is to fear for your family relationships. Many of us, when coming out, are literally forced to choose ourselves over our blood relations. Coming out is the act of embracing a truer version of yourself, and it can be costly – namely in the loss of family relationships.

When I came out, I was ready to lose my relationship with my grandma. I expected my relationship with my mom to be strained, but not broken. I'm thankful to say I was wrong about my mom. My mom and I are closer now than we've ever been. My grandma is a different story.

My grandma never outright rejected me. She never accepted me either. Our relationship existed in this weird space where her love came with **asterisks (*)**. "I love you, but you know what the Bible has to say about that sort of thing" was the way she worded it. There was always a subtext of disapproval and disappointment. I eventually decided that our relationship was too toxic to sustain. I removed myself from her life.

Often when we speak of chosen family, we speak about people we've chosen to fulfill those familial roles in our lives traditionally filled by our genetic mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and so on. But on some level, all family is chosen family. Some of us are utterly dependent on our families for food, money, and shelter. There's no choice involved in that. But many of us who are otherwise independent still feel tied to our families because of societal obligations, past history, and the social stigma that comes with the expectation of families "just sticking together."

Realizing that I didn't have to stick beside my family who didn't accept me was a journey all its own. Sometimes in constructing (or reconstructing) our own family units, we not only look outward for new people to bring into our lives, we allow ourselves to rethink existing family relationships and recognize we're not obligated to maintain them if they bring us too much pain.

Callie is a trans woman, atheist/LGBT activist, and host of *The Gaytheist Manifesto* podcast.

Did You Know? "Trans" is short for "transgender." A transgender person is someone who identifies as a gender that is different from what they were assigned at birth, so for example, a trans woman is someone who was falsely labeled as male even though they are a woman. A trans man is someone who was falsely labeled as female even though they are a man.

Karina: As a rape survivor, I had to distance myself from toxic influences if I wanted to move forward in my healing process. While difficult, distancing myself from people who were unhealthy for me created space in my life for the recovery, joy, and love that I desperately craved, needed, and deserved.

Being raped had affected me in profound ways: I developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD, which is when someone has difficulty recovering from a traumatic experience) and started shooting dope as a way to cope. My chosen family, a network of loved friends I created, helped guide me back towards a life worth living. With their help, I was able to get clean and learn to start trusting people again.

Today, I am in graduate school, working in a field I love, and getting ready to graduate from a top university with a master's degree. Although I still suffer from PTSD, I have my chosen family who I can rely on to show up for me. Some of the ways they show up for me are by calling or texting to check in on me; affirming and validating my experiences; spending time with me, whether it's going to a show together or simply hanging out; sharing hugs; helping me with chores when I'm too depressed to get out of bed; and just being there. I try my best to do the same for them because we're all in this together. Our struggles, our successes, our very survival, are an intimately woven web of interdependency.





WHAT IS CHOSEN FAMILY? (CONTINUED)

Karina is a queer femme graduate student working on their master's degree in Library and Information Sciences.

***Did You Know?* Some people identify as non-binary, meaning they are neither a man nor a woman, but somewhere in between, or a combination of the two identities, or don't ascribe to having a gender. Many people who are non-binary use the pronouns they/them/their (instead of she/her/hers or he/him/his).**

Achim: I know all too well and learned early that family is not necessarily blood. I was raised by an abusive, single parent who always told me that she wished I was never born. When I was officially thrown away and disowned by my blood, it hurt, but didn't bother me as much as it could've because I had someone who grabbed ahold of me and let me know that I was loved and worthy of being loved.

My trust was built outside of my home rather than in. What I have found is that my extended family has been there and has always shown me loyalty better than the family I was born into. Family to me were the ones who reached out to me and pulled me out of the valley of depression and gave me the inspiration and courage to live for tomorrow. To me, family consists of those who keep you grounded and who help inspire and give you the tools to be you. Family is those who can accept you unconditionally regardless of your race, sexuality, or gender identification.

In my family, I have a mother figure who calls me her son and tells me that it feels as though she has given birth to me. I have sisters and brothers from another mother. I have uncles and aunties as well as cousins who each serve different purposes. And I also have an array of sons, nephews and nieces who I mentor and give the love and guidance that they need (my way of paying it forward).

Life is too short to waste time and energy dwelling on those that don't give a damn about me. We can't choose the beginning of our stories, but we can decide on how it will end. The choice is yours to create your own family by accepting those who don't have a problem with loving you, embracing you with nothing but dignity and respect, and reminding you that you are not a mistake but a treasure and gift to this world and universe.

Achim is the founder of DC TransMen Rising, a community and mentorship group for trans men, and an advocate for Black transgender men living with HIV.

Danielle: What is family? I'll tell you that it's not just necessarily blood, and that's not because of marriage, either.

I'm a trans woman. It's not something I chose or would have chosen, if I'd been asked first. When I came out, most of my family wasn't terribly supportive. Some tried to understand, some said they wanted to but didn't try, and others, my parents in particular, stopped talking to me. I became homeless for a while, until two incredibly kind, compassionate, and generous women helped me find a shelter and a doctor and gave me money to get back on my feet. Later, they adopted me into their family, and now I have two sweet, beautiful sisters. I live with their mama in New York City, where I do work I'm proud of as a civil rights activist. I would be homeless and dead if it weren't for my chosen family.

I asked my oldest sister once, "Why? Why did you do this for me?"

She just said, "Because I love you." And I told her, I love you too.

THAT'S what family is.

Danielle is a professional civil rights activist, transgender woman, writer, and musician based in NYC.

Do you want to learn more about individuals identifying as being part of the LGBTQ community? Write us and we'll send you some book recommendations!





FAMILY TIES

The Woman Who Stepped in When I Needed a Mom

By Eddie, FM Member

I never knew my father. In fact, I don't even know who he was. My biological mother was addicted to drugs. When she would get high, which was almost all of the time, she would beat me, my older brother, and our little sister. When I was just two and a half, our babysitter – who at that time was a friend of my mother – saw what was happening and she took us into her home.

I have always called her "Mom." In my eyes, she became my mom the day that she rescued me from a dangerous and harmful situation. Soon after, she legally adopted us. She would take us to visit our biological mother in whichever halfway house, shelter, or drug program that she might live in at any given time. But the drugs had taken over. It was just not possible to have a meaningful relationship with her.

My foster mother, Mom, was a very special woman. She was not educated in the traditional sense of the word. She couldn't read or write. Where she grew up, as soon as children were old enough to work, they had to get jobs. But she had so much wisdom. She got her wisdom from church and from the Bible. She taught me the value of hard work. When I was growing up, she worked in the laundromat at a rehabilitation hospital. On days that I didn't have school, she would take me with her. I'd sit on the floor while she taught me how to sort, wash, dry, and fold laundry. She made sure to teach me all of the basic skills I'd need in life.

When I was incarcerated at the age of 16, my mom didn't give up on me. She was getting older at that point, but she always came to visit me and put money on my books. She loved to joke and laugh, and people were always happy around her. She showed me ten times the love that other people's actual blood relatives showed them. I realized that if my mom wouldn't give up on me, then I certainly couldn't give up on myself. She taught me not to let my incarceration define me or my life.

Without my mom, I doubt I would have made it to the age of 21. She made me the man that I am today, by sharing the importance

continued on page 8

ASK HF ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

This issue, HF is on break. James filled in to answer your questions!

Dear James,

I don't have any family out there that really care about me. I've been on my own since I was 14. When I got my sentence, it was hard for me to even care how much time I got. Because it wasn't like there was anyone or anything out there waiting for me to come home. I feel sad when other people hear from their family, or get mail or call home. I feel like giving up. I feel like it just doesn't matter. What can I do so I don't feel like this?

Sincerely,
JH

Dear JH,

I know the feeling of going long periods of time without receiving mail. It used to hurt me quite a bit, and I would play it off.

I tried to reach out to family and friends multiple times to no avail. As most of you know, in the struggle, it only takes a certain amount of time before people fall off the map while you're doing your time. The world continues to move on the outside whether or not you're around.

Once I got it in my head that I got myself into that situation, it was easier for me to put my focus elsewhere. I decided to focus on what mattered at the time, and that was the time I had to deal with. I focused on me, because if I didn't, I could lose myself mentally. I worked out, read up on things that interested me, and worked on my craft, which is writing music.

I decided not to spend time wondering about people who may or may not be wondering about me. It was very hard, but it helped me. I left the outside world on the outside, and grabbed the bull by the horns and dealt with my bid the best way I could. "Hope for the best, expect the worst" was my motto. I created bonds with people who I connected with while incarcerated, and they became somewhat family because you see, "Blood makes you related, but loyalty and a bond makes you family." A little cliché... but it's the hard truth.

But Free Minds aims to be just that! As of now, a lot of people consider Free Minds as a form or family and/or support. Free Minds, along with the outside community, has been an effective tool in supporting the incarcerated people of DC. A family built off of Loyalty that will create a lifetime bond with those who decide to be a dedicated member. Even if life takes hold of you and you get to a point where we start to lack communication, at any point in time you can reconnect with us and we'll be there.

Any time you feel like you're down on your luck or feel the need to receive some outside love, just send us some of your writing and we'll be sure to send it back with lots of encouraging words. You can always send a letter to the office and someone will reply. All in all, this is a time to work on you, so do just that. You'll spare your feelings and better yourself.

Take care and keep your mind free,
James



MEMBERS CONNECT: REFLECTIONS ON CHOSEN FAMILY

Family

By MS

Truth be told, I was going to forego writing anything about the topic of "family" since that term, that sentiment, and I are on shaky footing. Then I received a birthday card from the Free Minds family. It was unexpected, welcome, and gave me a moment of pause. I am new to your family and yet I am treated in a way my real family hasn't acted in a few decades.

So what does family mean? I know that it means different things to different people. It could be that you define "family" as two parents, one sibling, and a house with a white picket fence.

Maybe you see "family" as a single-parent home, or just your grandparent(s) raising you. It could be foster care, or two fathers, or two mothers.

Your "family" could be just you and your siblings because your parents passed away, or your close circle of friends. Your family could be the set you claim or the community you belong to (Sunni, Free Minds, Christians, etc.).

Following conventional thinking, "family" is supposed to nurture you and your sense of self. It is supposed to introduce you and teach you methods to help you make it in the world at large. It is supposed to offer a place to feel safe to be your truest self. "Family" is supposed to give you

protection, guidance, success. Family is all these things and more... to some (sometimes I feel like I've been lied to). But to some, "family" is broken, and as a result, we become mirror images of that brokenness. Sometimes it's a waking nightmare, abandonment issues, blackened eyes, and broken bones. In some instances, "family" is severed by long prison terms. Sometimes "family" is drunken, incestuous, intolerant, and bullies; sometimes it is betrayal-prone, treacherous, and apathetic.

So how do you (we) reconcile these two ideals of "family" that are polar opposites? How do we meet in the middle?

"Family" is the place and people we choose to accept, for there are good, bad, and in between. "Family" is hard sometimes; they make you want to pull your hair out one moment, yet in the next they can do something that makes your whole soul glow. "Family" just is... each with its own intentions and different outcomes.

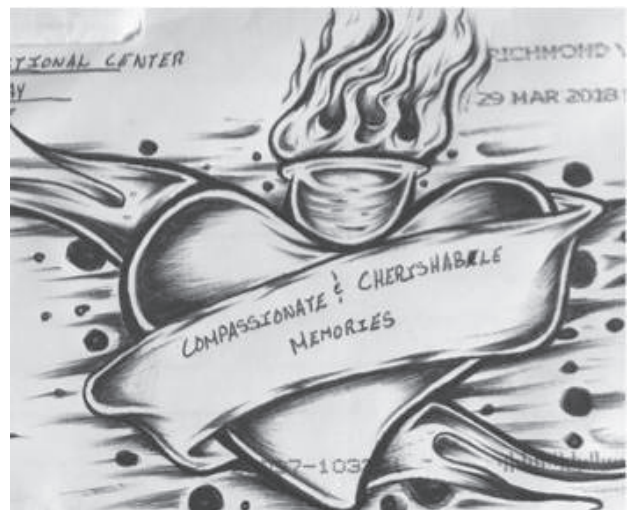
For those that subscribe to the notion that you don't have any "family," pause, think of those around you that care for you in the best way that they know. The people may just be the family that you believe you don't have.

Thank you for the birthday card, Free Minds Family.

Uplifting

By MH

The bond that me and my attorney, Ms. R, have is more like a brother and sister bond. When we first met in 2012, I was her client and she was my lawyer. We built a good friendship that turned into a sister and brother relationship. She also encouraged me to follow my dreams and goals. And she always helps me when I need her the most, and she accepted me for me. She didn't judge me for my mistakes I made in my life. I encourage her to follow her dream too. We are like night and day. We uplift each other and others always too.



Envelope Art by MH



THE WRITE WAY

Bring to Life with Personification

The column where writers share writing tips and prompts to inspire your creativity

By Chelsea

This issue, we are all about making things come alive. How do you make something that you see every day come alive in writing? How do you make those inhuman objects feel and appear human in a poem? This is called **personification**. Personification is when you take a non-human or non-living object or thing and give it human features, characteristics, or qualities.

Let's look at a poem and see how this device can be used. We are going to look at Tupac Shakur's poem "The Rose That Grew from Concrete" to explore this poetic device. As you read this poem, ask yourself the following questions: What is this poem about? Who is Tupac talking about? What image do you see in your mind as you read this poem?

The Rose That Grew from Concrete

By Tupac Shakur

Did you hear about the rose that grew
from a crack in the concrete?
Proving nature's law is wrong it
learned to walk without having feet.
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,
it learned to breathe fresh air.
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else ever cared.

After reading this poem and thinking about the questions above, what do you have in mind? What does the rose represent? How did this rose grow out of the concrete? Is it easy or difficult for something to grow out of concrete? Is this usual? What does this even mean? Think about this for a moment. Tupac is trying to paint an image of a person by using a rose and giving that rose human-like qualities. The rose is growing, walking, and dreaming. The rose is making a life out of unbearable and unlikely circumstances. The rose is striving and thriving against all odds. The rose is a person and perhaps the rose represents him!

Now, it's your turn! Take an object that is not a human being. Think about an object or a thing you see every day. What does that object or thing represent? Next, think of some human-like qualities that can be given to this object to make it "come alive." Then, write it all down into a poem! You can follow Tupac's lead by writing a poem about yourself or someone else through a symbol, or you can simply write a poem about an object and personify it.

As you write, think about the image you want your readers to see and the story you want people to think about. Sometimes it's by making things come alive that we create the challenge our minds to really think, which in turn creates those really powerful poems.

FAMILY TIES (CONTINUED)

of patience, perseverance, and faith. Even though she couldn't read the Bible on her own, she would ask me to read to her and teach her. And she really did make progress. The lessons she shared continue to teach me and help me grow. She told me to always go to the Bible if I felt angry, and that it would calm me down. And it does! She also taught me to keep my focus upon what is important. Because of her, I couldn't even consider ever going back to the streets. I have two kids of my own now and they mean too much to me to ever risk my freedom. I'm a hard worker. I've designed my own clothing line and my dream is to successfully launch it into the world. I go to church, I read the Bible, and I am a good father.

Both my biological mother and my foster mother passed away recently. I have both of their names on my arm. I have forgiven my biological mother for the things that she did to us because of her addiction. But I believe that my mom, even though we were not tied by blood, was meant to find me. She was a gift to me when I needed her. I miss her and it hurts that she's not here. But I believe that she would be proud of me. She would see how I've mastered the skills she taught me and it would make her happy.

Without my mom, I doubt I would have made it to the age of 21. She made me the man that I am today.



CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL

Unlikely Brothers

By Jess

Dear Free Minds Family, We've decided to try something new! Instead of a "Conversation with Kelli" column every issue, we're going to rotate the column so that you get to hear from different members of the Free Minds family – staff, volunteers, interns, students, members, and more! Let us know what you think of this new idea going forward.

For this issue, FM Intern Jess interviewed FM Reentry Facilitator Michael Mattocks about the book *Unlikely Brothers: Our Story of Adventure, Loss, and Redemption* that he co-authored with peace activist and cofounder of the Enough Project, John Prendergast.

John and Michael have a unique relationship that goes all the way back to their younger days in DC. What is now an incredible brotherhood between two people who've lived completely different lives started off unexpectedly over thirty years ago in a shelter downtown. While John was traveling back and forth between war zones in Africa, Michael was living on the streets of DC, until they were reunited. I had the opportunity to catch up with Michael about this incredible story and hear a little bit more about what this unlikely brotherhood has meant to him.

Jess: Could you take me back to the beginning of the story and explain how your relationship with John started?

Michael: I met John in a homeless shelter when I was probably about five years old, and I'm 41 now. I remember him coming in because his friend was running the shelter, and then one day, John started a conversation with us. We kinda thought he was crazy, like, *who is this white man coming in here talking to us?* We were looking at him kinda funny, and he asked us if we knew how to read. Eventually he asked if we wanted him to take us to the library, and we kinda looked at him like, "whatever." But the next day, he actually came, and my mother actually let him take us to the library!

I get asked a lot why my mother allowed this white man to take these black kids to the library when we didn't know him. My mom just had this feeling about him. And he actually took us and showed us a lot of things. He ended up coming around almost every day getting us something small.

Jess: I understand that you lost contact for a while, and then reconnected. What was that like?

Michael: When we lost contact for a while, we were so sad because when we were younger and he didn't come back, we really didn't know what he was into or where he had gone. We knew he was doing stuff with Africa in a foreign country, but we didn't know he was deep into it like that. By the time he did come back around, we were gone from the shelter. But guess what? He found us.

Jess: How did he find you?

Michael: I still, right now to this day, do not know how he managed to find us. He found us, and when we saw him coming, oh my god, we were all excited, because we knew we were about to have fun. As soon as he found us, it was so unbelievable. He took us, and he would take us fishing, take us driving – and you know we were little kids! He was teaching us how to drive – we were

probably eight years old and he was letting us drive! 'Cause he was a kid himself, too, though. He wasn't that old himself.

Jess: You and John both have had completely different life experiences. What has this taught you about making connections with people you thought you might never have a connection with?

Michael: It really does make me think about people differently. Because now I know that you never know where that friendship will go. There's definitely always a chance. When we met each other, we had no idea that one day we would be talking to each other the way we are now. There's just a lot of famous stars that he's affiliated with—and I get asked this question a lot because they see John as like an inhuman star, but I don't see him like that. I look at him just as John. A lot of people are scared to say certain things to him, but I'm real with him and I say what I think to him. They put him up on a pedestal, but I never do. John is John to me. I would never treat him differently, and I think that's what he loves about me.

Jess: With these experiences in mind, what does family mean to you?

Michael: Family means everything to me. My wife and I have custody of my nephew, and he's like a son to me. There came a time in my life where it was hard for me to trust people – being young, getting hurt so many times – but I'm trying to learn how to trust people. Family is who you choose to love and take care of, and I'm learning that every day.

Jess: What do you hope that our Free Minds members can learn from your story of unlikely brothers?

Michael: What I want them to learn from this story of unlikely brothers is anything is possible. I am the poster child for the fact that you can be anything you wanna be in life – because I never dreamed that my life would be the way it is now. Me and my wife have six biological kids together and then we have two added on, that's her nephew and my nephew, and we got two dogs! And I own a house, I got two cars, and I work for the government. So I went from this big time drug dealer to doing these good things. It's unbelievable to me how my life turned out, but I never gave up. I kept moving forward because I knew I had to be successful in life. I have all these kids, I gotta change my surroundings from all these people to make myself better.

And I just want them to know that anything is possible. You can't always say, "I can't, I can't" cause you could. And you never know what is going to happen in your life, like I could have never predicted what would happen with John in my life, at all. Never ever forget that.

Jess: Is there any advice that you have for the Free Minds members who are thinking about building their own chosen families?

Michael: When you have kids, dedicate yourself to your kids. You are always going to have people that try to drag you back, but now you keep going forward. And raising a family, don't get me wrong, it's not easy. But it's not hard either. It's what you make it. It doesn't take money to have fun with your kids. Teach your kids basketball, baseball, take them fishing. The simple stuff that they really enjoy.



POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

This One's for You

By DM

Grandma, you nourish and protect me
 From day one, I remember people thinking,
 I was your child, and not your grandson.
 As I got older, you were always the shoulder I needed to lean on.
 Grandma, I get so fed up with this life,
 And I miss you.
 Tears are falling – someone pass me a tissue.
 Yes Grandma, I cry because I love you,
 And I promise I will not put no one above you.
 Grandma, I still have that hole in my heart.
 Now that you're gone, it's really torn apart.
 I remember when you said that my biggest threat is me,
 And since you left, I got caught up with some beef,
 Looking for that love you gave me in the streets.
 Now I know it's not there,
 So where do I get it from?
 Now you caught up in the air.
 I have to get this off my chest,
 Because it has me stress,
 Thinking I'm the reason behind your death.
 You would probably be here
 If I didn't get caught up with that attempted murder mess—
 You would not have been stressed.
 My mom said that I am selfish,
 Because I want you here with me.
 I agree, but I am empty.
 And you make me complete.
 Grandma, I know you would be proud,
 Because I don't hang around with the same crowd.
 Grandma, in your eyes,
 I did no wrong, even when I was wrong.
 Grandma, I know you in a heavenly place,
 With good health, body in shape –
 With that Holy Spirit glow on your face.
 Grandma, when I think of you,
 It's all smiles.
 I'm not your grandson, but forever your child.
 God bless you Grandma, I love you.

The Pack

By James

A lone wolf, with a pack nearby just to be cautious... waiting
 Only one hat to be worn at a time with many on the shelf
 I can mingle with different crowds
 I am a man with options, relatable to many

Family Always Means I Love You

Whether or not blood related, loyalty and goodwill can make you equal to
 Or greater than, depending on your life's standards
 because blood may be thicker than water, but your body still needs both

New or old, family is your foundation,
 those who, without hesitation, equipped with dedication,
 help with your elevation.
 Support and honor, love and care, just to name a few
 With that certain group of people, too much shouldn't matter, acceptance is key
 Unconditional love, hand after hand extended, on the journey up the ladder

Family Always Means I Love You
 The Pack, that got your back.

Friends Challenge

By TG

Your words are always cordial,
 warm, heartfelt, sincere.
 Your kindness monumental,
 so precious and so dear.
 Surely you were a princess
 or a queen way back when,
 and I a knight of your court
 with the title of your friend.
 So patiently wait for the morrow
 to defend my maidens fair
 with an oath of undying loyalty
 and a binding pinkie swear,
 and I'll know I received an honor
 If the only thing I'd win,
 is the smile you'll always give me
 and the title of your friend.

We all search for happiness
 we all search for joy.
 Every woman and every man
 every girl and every boy.
 We may find it in the beginning
 and may lose it in the end
 So I hope that I will never lose
 the title of your friend.
 I'd rather fight wild creatures
 lions, tigers, bears, oh my!
 Or cross my heart and hope for death
 or stick a needle in my eye
 and empty the oceans with a tea spoon,
 Then fill them up again,
 there isn't a challenge I'd not take
 for the title of your friend.

Dear DJ

by JM

Dear DJ,
 I feel so left alone down here, but I know that ain't the case
 Memories throughout the years
 The laughter and the tears, the love from all our peers
 We set off on many journeys together to conquer all our fears
 Now I cry so many tears
 And though you feel so far away
 I know you're very near, I feel your presence everyday
 Man, it devastated my heart to hear you passed away
 But God has the final command – I hope mercy finds you in every way
 I pray to be half the man you were, to earn God's mercy in my own way
 But for now I gonna keep on living hard
 You wouldn't have it any other way
 Plus I gotta look at it this way, I gotta help your kids to gain
 Then I smile at your smiling faces to cope with all the pain
 Sometimes it seems like time is stuck in place, still hear echoes of your name
 Could've swore I heard you call me the other day
 Don't take it wrong I can explain
 My first cousin, but more close to me like a brother
 Got love for you like a mother
 There is peace believe it or not
 I am struggling just to keep my face clean, I love you straight from my heart.



POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Family Redefined

By LG

I grew up with the notion
That blood made you kin
A bond that's thicker than water
And blood that's far from thin

We shared some very good times
Fervent love without a doubt
When times got very hard
Together we roughed it out

After a few bad decisions
I was hauled off to jail
The pain of reality sunk in
When I stopped receiving mail

As long as I was present
Their eyes were never blind
But once I was out of sight
I quickly was out of mind

I've met others along the way
Some that I called my friend
Who is left to turn to
When convenient friendship ends

I was quick to name a friend
Blind to the worth of loyalty
Conditional relationships
I settled for less than royalty

I set out to determine
To reach a limit's end
The dimensions of a single word
That should mean more than friend

I've searched and I've found
Now I'm looking to expand
The connection of a family bond
That's highly in demand

A family is a group of people
That care for one another
With common morals and goals
Who willingly support each other

Experience taught me the truth
Wisdom is one of a kind
This is my definition
Of family redefined

How to Bring About Peace in 10 Steps

By AL

Inspired by *The Write Way*, Volume 7, Issue 2

1. Add in 1 lb of **Dignity**
2. Pour in 2 tbsp of **Integrity**
3. Simmer over 5 cups of **Sympathy**
4. Stir in 1 clove of **Compassion**
5. Next add 1 heaping of **Independence**
6. Mix 4 ½ cups of fresh **Perseverance**
7. Chop up 3 bushels of **Love**
8. With a dash of **Imagination**
9. Grind 2 tsp of **Nobility**
10. Sprinkled lightly over 7 lbs of **Empathy**

Wandering Off

By DC

When I sit and let my thoughts run wild
I call it thinking.

Staring off into space until my eyes go dry
From not blinking.

We never pick who changes our lives
But we do pick who stays in them.

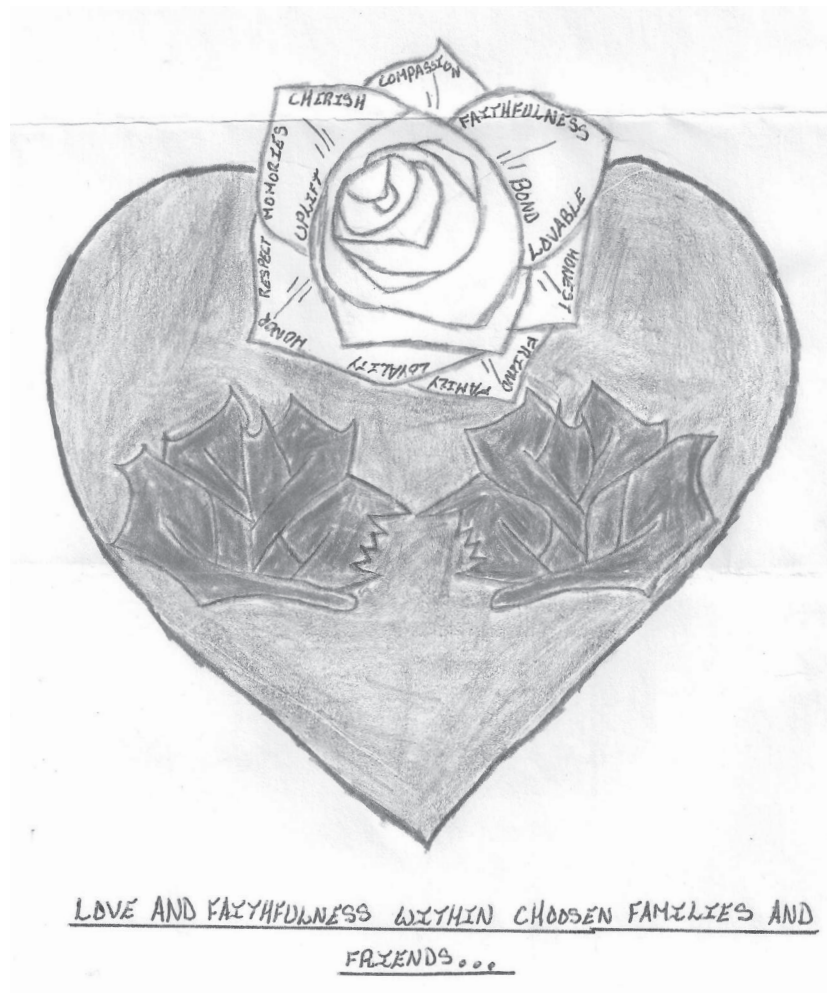
Whether it's a brief encounter
Or something that lasts for a minute.

Stories have been told
And advice given on how to decipher the two.

There's no definite answer
So it begins and ends with you.

Love gets tested in so many ways
But if it's real it lasts forever.

Through hurricanes, earthquakes and tidal waves
You two will stand together.



Art by MH



DC REENTRY CORNER

By Ms. Keela

Hey Free Minders!

It's such a wonderful thing to know that we have been CHOSEN by you guys; we do not take it for granted! It's so awesome every day to wait expectantly for a letter, a poem, an essay drawing, email or phone call. Then, to top it off, to be able to reciprocate by sending you letters, books, poems with Write Night comments, newsletters, and birthday cards is such an honor. So in acknowledgment of this month's theme, we just want to thank you for CHOOSING us and allowing us to get to know you and celebrate who you really are with all of your talents, attributes and individual character and uniqueness!

Now, with that being said, I can't think of a better time to introduce you to your newest Free Minds family member, Tia. Tia, our new Job Coach, joined the team last month and we are so lucky to have her as she has a heart for the mission and, in the words of most Free Minds members, is "down for the struggle!" As we have been able to see firsthand, Tia has an immense passion for helping to improve the lives of returning citizens and is directly impacted as her children's fathers are currently incarcerated.

Before joining the Free Minds family, Tia was a Career Development Consultant with the Pre-Apprenticeship Training program Building Futures where she managed the Job Development department. While at Building Futures, Tia helped to develop specified employment plans for clients based on their individual skills, interests, and personal characteristics. Also, I am so happy to report that although Tia has only been with us for a little over a month, she has already successfully connected four Free Minds members to full-time employment! Hopefully this is exciting news to you guys because I for one am so excited to have her onboard!

Guess what! I have an awesome new resource CHOSEN especially for you guys, and I couldn't wait to let you know about it so here goes!

The new **District of Columbia Infrastructure Academy (DCIA)** is the latest new opportunity led by the Department of Employment Services (DOES). As we have recently been witnessing, Infrastructure is one of the fastest growing industries in the country and especially here in DC. DOES has opened the DC Infrastructure Academy to meet the need for skilled infrastructure professionals in Washington, DC, and soon, that will include you! DCIA coordinates, trains, screens and recruits residents to fulfill the needs of the infrastructure industry and infrastructure jobs with leading companies in this high-demand field. Programs and Services associated with DCIA include:

- Commercial Driver's License (CDL)
- Energy & Utilities
- Auto Mechanic Training
- OSHA 10
- Solar Panel Installation
- Interview Skills
- Job Fairs
- Job Referrals

If you are interested in these services, you have to be a DC resident 21 years or older. DCIA can be reached at (202) 899-6040, or you can visit their office located at 2330 Pomeroy Road SE, Washington, DC.

In closing, I would like to say again that we are so glad that we were CHOSEN!

- Ms. Keela

DC PHOTOS OF THE MONTH

DC is changing. What do you think of the improvements to the quadrants of DC and the statue of Marion Barry?



In the heart of Southeast lies Anacostia Library. This is just one of the many things built to try to improve the quadrants of DC. This one is located on Good Hope Road SE.



The man with the plan, former mayor Marion Barry! He left behind many memories and an impression on DC folks. This statue of Barry is right outside the Wilson Building on Pennsylvania Avenue, where the DC government offices are located.

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

THE DISAPPEARED POET: VERSES FROM TURKMEN PRISON

by Elena, Free Minds Friend

Elena works for an environmental and human rights nonprofit. One of their campaigns is Prove They Are Alive! which aims to uncover the truth about the fate of hundreds of people who have disappeared in prisons in the Central Asian country of Turkmenistan since the 2000s.

Being able to talk to your friends and family while incarcerated is a protected human right. However, this right is abused in many countries, where people are subjected to "enforced disappearances" in prisons. One victim of such a brutal practice made his voice heard through poetry.

*There is still so much I haven't told you,
And so much we haven't talked about.
Alas, that life resembles a train station –
The muffled din, the whirl of strangers and dust.*

Batyr Berdyev, who wrote to his son these verses from behind bars, is a victim of "enforced disappearance" in Turkmenistan. Ever since Berdyev was sentenced in 2003, his family have been unable to contact him and the government continues to withhold information about him.

Enforced disappearance is exactly what it sounds like – prisoners of corrupt or authoritarian regimes sometimes simply vanish behind bars. It often occurs to silence anyone who threatens the dictatorship: political opposition, activists, and journalists. It is an abusive, cowardly, and inhuman practice, and although it is against international law, it still happens in some parts of the world.

Our "Prove They Are Alive!" campaign aims to protect prisoners and their families in Turkmenistan, one of the world's most oppressive countries, notorious for its brutal prisons, poverty, and disregard for human rights. We have registered 112 cases of enforced disappearance in Turkmenistan.

Behind each name on that list is a human tragedy and a family that does not know if their loved ones are even alive. We demand that the Turkmen government allows these people to talk to their families.

Most people on our list have been sentenced with politically

motivated charges, such as Berdyev, once a high-profile diplomat and state official. Berdyev was arrested along with 60 other government officials and sentenced for his alleged role in an assassination attempt against the then-Turkmen president. According to witnesses, the defendants were severely beaten and tortured and had not received any food for days before their trial.

Since his conviction, Berdyev's relatives have received no information about his fate or whereabouts. He was kept in complete isolation, without access to lawyers or medical care. Berdyev's voice was last heard by a fellow inmate in 2005.

Thanks to Berdyev's poetry, we can hear his voice through these years of silence. Early in his prison term, he turned to poetry to address his young son, wife, and friends to, as he put it, "preserve his soul." Tortured and mistreated, he refused to be silenced. Luckily, dozens of his poems were smuggled from prison and given to acquaintances abroad, who gave them to our organization. We published these to make sure his voice is heard.

Attending Free Minds events and reading the The Untold Story of the Real Me (Free Minds anthology), I learned that the desire to express one's feelings through poetry in such difficult circumstances is universal. Verses about family, love, and friends touch our souls regardless of the writer's circumstances.





BETH'S STORY: LEAVING MY TOXIC FAMILY FOR A HAPPIER, HEALTHIER LIFE

By Tara

Beth is a friend of Free Minds and Tara's neighbor.

I knew definitively that I had to make a clean break from my family after my sister was killed.

She was strangled by a boyfriend.

I had tried for years to help pull her out of depression, addiction to drugs, and bad relationships. Because of her depression and low self-esteem, she had a pattern of falling into toxic relationships with men who both physically and emotionally abused her. I tried to save her, but it was hard for her to leave the cycle of abuse.

While planning her memorial service, I realized I had to stay away from my family to keep myself from spiraling into negativity and a life of hopelessness.

My brother had been drinking heavily – this is how he copes with life – and he threatened to have me removed from the memorial by the police because I wanted to bring my best friend to support me. He called me a “stuck-up snob” and said that no outside friends were allowed to come. The hardest part was that my mom sided with him. And my dad was out of the picture – he died right before my sister was murdered, which brought up all kinds of emotional pain because he had been very secretive and emotionally distant. I was worried that my older brother might do something, too, as it seemed my family was taking all their pain and inflicting it on me. I did the right thing and went to her memorial anyway.

I knew that my younger brother had serious depression issues, but he kept making me the bad guy. He would call me only when he had been drinking and would only say negative things about me – but I could recognize the red flags of his behavior and the harmful effect it was having on me because I'd already been seeing a therapist at this point.

It wasn't an easy decision to break off contact from my family to save myself. It can be really hard, but I knew I had to be around supportive and uplifting people or I would have a life of despair and suffering.

After my sister was gone, I shut down emotionally and I knew it. I felt nothing. I can remember just being in my bed staring at the ceiling. **Feeling nothing is a terrible feeling.** I remember when it was Valentine's Day and I asked my boyfriend at the time, *instead of a romantic dinner, could we go to the gym together?*

We started eating better together and cooking healthy meals. I instinctively knew these things would make me feel better so I forced myself to do them. It wasn't easy.

I was lucky to have a really good therapist and I don't think I would have survived without her. I did what's called **cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)** which helped me recognize my family's behavior and form new ways of responding. Their negative patterns of interaction were all I'd ever known and I needed to learn new ways to interact.

After lots of counseling sessions and practice, I mustered the courage to tell my brother that he could contact me only when he had something positive to say. He hasn't been in touch since and that was six years ago. But still, I experienced a feeling of relief. My family had always been pulling me down, saying how bad a person I was for wanting a better life, and I couldn't sacrifice my fulfillment and happiness to fit in and be down on their level.

I deserved positivity and structure. I had worked hard to become a homeowner, go to school, and have a good job.

At first, because I hadn't been exposed to healthy interactions and relationships, I gravitated to people who were similar to my family. My therapist helped me see this pattern and we worked hard to seek out positive people. One friend had become such a negative influence that I knew I needed to cut it off as well, after I tried really hard to make it work. She was jealous of me and competitive. It was a one-sided friendship all about her needs. We ended up having a phone call where I told her we were not a good mix. It was so hard, but so liberating!

Now, I have a checklist that I want to share with you that helps me see if someone is truly worthy of being in my circle of friends and chosen family.

Ask yourself:

- When good things happen to you, do they celebrate or do they make negative comments and show their jealousy? (No one is perfect every day, of course, and we can all get negative, but do the negative interactions happen more often than not?)
- Do they bring out the best in you?
- Do they inspire and motivate you to reach higher or do they bring you down emotionally and ask you to do things that are harmful to you like being dishonest, taking drugs, or abusing alcohol?

But even though I was healthier, there are moments of intense loneliness and longing for a supportive family. One way I cope is to exercise. Running makes me feel the best so I make sure to do that every day. I also intentionally surround myself with positive, supportive people.

Finally, during the hardest times when you most want a family, make a new tradition for yourself. My hardest time is the period from Thanksgiving to Christmas. It's the time when I get saddest about not having a supportive and loving original family I deserve. But I've taken charge of that and now I invite friends over. I'm the host. I love to cook, so that helps.

The last couple of years, I've been on my own so I have a “thing” that I do on those days: I hike with my dog. I love my dog. I don't get jealous of other loving families or wish it was different. I remind myself of the positive, joyful, adventurous life I have that I know I wouldn't have if I stayed connected to my family. I feel proud of myself for retraining my brain to think in healthy ways.

PAYING IT FORWARD

By Zahiyah, Free Minds Friend

Zahiyah is a volunteer for CASA DC.

CASAs, **Court Appointed Special Advocates**, are appointed by a judge to advocate on the child's behalf and best interest. CASAs represent the voice of the foster child or youth. I've volunteered in the past tutoring elementary students and delivering meals to the elderly. Although I enjoyed those experiences and felt my contributions were meaningful, I still felt I had more to give, so I decided to become a CASA volunteer.

Foster youth often must manage numerous changes simultaneously as they transition into foster care—some changes that most adults would struggle with. Foster children must manage difficult situations so early in their development and childhood, and my goal is to help them navigate the sea of obstacles they may encounter and thrive under uncertain conditions while attempting to achieve some normalcy.

During my training, I learned that CASAs are expected to work with the entire support team for the youth, which includes their foster parent(s), social worker, and guardian ad litem (person who is appointed by the court to investigate what is in the "best interest" of the child). CASAs also engage with the youth's biological family. One of the most important lessons I learned during my CASA training was the ability to look at complex situations involving family dynamics from different perspectives, which helps to better assess and understand a foster youth's plight, and the plight of their biological parents.

I recently started working with my first CASA assignment. As I work with my foster youth, my first priority is to really get to know her, understand her wants and needs, and ensure she is safe and provided for. My focus is to build trust with my youth, which understandably has been a little bit of a challenge given the circumstances leading to her foster placement. Foster youth interact with many new faces that suddenly have significant roles in their lives, so establishing trust with yet another new face can come with caution. However, I'm learning that these reactions are normal, and that it's important to be consistent, patient, and compassionate. I'm committed to demonstrating that I can be a source of dependable support. I hope I can guide my foster youth in making good decisions, prepare her for life ahead, and most of all, help her carve out a path of stability, healing, and self-love.



CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

DOES POETRY NEED TO RHYME?

By James

You know I work at Free Minds full-time in the office. But you might not know that I'm also an aspiring DC rapper. I love the art of writing, especially the rapping part. A huge part of Free Minds is poetry. I read a lot of poetry from a lot of members and I see a common format: it seems that a lot of people try to rhyme.

I'm here to tell you, as a writer, a rhyme scheme isn't the only way to write a poem. If you are new to writing poetry or just not sure how to do it, just write. Write what's on your mind with a little creativity. There are endless things to touch on when writing. It can be food, clothes, a pet, etc. Just go all in, and express yourself.

For example:

Thankful for family, the real MVPs

My father is Aaron Rodgers calling plays

Making things happen

My cousins are my O line

Making sure I'm protected from the dangerous hits of Ray Lewis and Troy Polamalu

My mom is the coach, training me, giving me life skills

Aunts, Uncles and all others are Seattle's 12th Man rooting me on

I remember when I first started writing, I was just rhyming and not making any type of sense in the world. I thought just because I was rhyming my words, I was doing a great job until a dude asked me to explain my rap and I couldn't. I was stuck and realized what I thought was art was just a bunch of words that sound alike. Your work is a reflection of you, so put an effort into it.



If you just so happen to begin to rhyme, then that's great, but try not to force it because it can take away from the poem itself. A reader can tell when you are genuine through your words.

What do you think? Do you think you can tell the difference when someone is just writing just 'cause and when they have a purpose?



THE REAL WORLD OF WORK

Noticed and Promoted, FM Member Decario Worked His Way Up

By Kelli

FM Member Decario, Chief Engineer at a large hotel, credits patience and a strong work ethic for his success

When he was 16, Decario was charged and incarcerated as an adult at the DC Jail. He served a total of two and a half years. When he came home, he moved to another state in hopes of a fresh start. Within a year, he was back in prison where he served almost five years for a crime he didn't commit. He was eventually exonerated and released. Decario knew that employment would be his first big hurdle. Kelli sat down to talk with him about his journey.

Decario: My first job was washing dishes at Chili's Restaurant. It wasn't easy. But I have a really strong work ethic. I worked hard! Sometimes, waiters would come into the kitchen and throw the silverware, splashing nasty, dirty water up on me. I would get heated and want to react. But, the truth was, they weren't doing it intentionally. They just wanted to speed back to their tables so they could earn that tip. I didn't complain. I held it together even though it made me mad. Instead, I just made a point to separate everything so they'd see that, *Hey, here's where the utensils go! I don't need to throw them.* In prison, a person would handle that much differently—loudly and aggressively. There's so much pressure in prison. But you have to realize it's different out here.

Kelli: You didn't stay in the restaurant business. What are you doing now?

Decario: I work in hospitality. I've got more than six years of experience as a hotel engineer. Right now, I'm the Chief Engineer at a Holiday Inn. I had to work my way up though! When I was at Chili's, there was this woman who was the silverware roller (that's the person who rolls the fork, knife, and spoon into a napkin for the table). She saw how hard I worked in the dishwashing pit. One day, she told me her other job was managing a hotel and asked me to apply there. I did, and I got the job! I was a "house man," responsible for keeping all of the grounds at the hotel maintained. At the hotel, I was always looking for work that needed to be done. I'd see a lightbulb that was out, or anything else that needed attention, and I'd take care of it. One of the engineers took notice. When a maintenance position came up, he took me on. Every day in that job, I learned so much.

Kelli: Are you still at the same hotel?

Decario: No. I worked my way up, but I had my resume on the website called Indeed. I got a call and I'm now a Chief Engineer at a Holiday Inn. I'm in charge of ensuring everything is in shape on the exterior, including all of the landscaping. I perform preventive maintenance rounds all day, going into the rooms to make sure that everything is functioning right. So, for example, a housekeeper might

let me know about a scratch on a dresser from a guest's luggage, or a loose toilet seat. I'll go check it out and fix it.

Kelli: Are there any aspects of the job that are challenging?

Decario: Most of the housekeeping staff doesn't speak English as their first language and that can be challenging. I work hard to have good communication with my staff though. I let them know if there is a problem and show it to them in person. Most times, it's just a language issue. I just show them how to go about it the next time. I also downloaded Google Translate so I can speak to them in their language!

Kelli: What is your dream job?

Decario: My dream job is to be a youth advocate. When you all first met me at the jail, I was completely closed down. I was afraid to open up to anyone. Through reading and writing and my relationship with Free Minds, you all stayed around and that built trust. I started expressing myself and learned a different view of life. I learned you can be determined and successful if you really apply yourself. It starts off with guidance and support. Now that I've been through this, I feel like I understand what the average inner-city youth feels like, and what they're going through. I really want to help young people, by reaching them with a language they understand and trust. I'm taking steps toward my dream. I volunteer at a church where my former boss is a deacon. I talk with a few little guys there who need some guidance. I've also been there for younger Free Minds members who need a listening ear.

Kelli: What advice do you have for your Free Minds brothers and sisters who are still behind bars about the world of work?

Decario: A lot of the jobs or things that you may have in mind to do when you come home, just be ready and understand that it may not work. But that's okay. The important thing is getting your foot in the door. Come home, get a job, *any* job, and then take it slow, don't speed. Once you're earning an income, then you can start looking for that next step up. That is the most important advice. Don't complain. Some people coming home from prison have unrealistic expectations. They think it doesn't take hard work. But it is hard! When you come home to society and get a job, you're going to encounter people, situations, and things that you would deal with differently if you were in an institution. Your tone may be more aggressive, and you don't realize it, because you're used to talking to other grown men who were aggressive towards you. That's not how you deal with people in the world out here. Come home and take it slowly, one step at a time. Be patient and give yourself the time and space to adjust. If you do all of this, you will make it!



AROUND THE WORLD

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

The Resilient and Vibrant Spirit of Cuba

By Tara

Ever since I was a kid, I've always wanted to go to Cuba. I was curious how a place only 70 miles off the coast of Florida could be such a world away. So when my yoga studio planned a trip there this past February, I jumped at the chance to go.

Cuba is a fascinating study in complete contrasts. I found the most open, friendly people, despite the fact that they live with a communist government that controls every part of their lives.

Cuba has one of the highest literacy and school graduation rates in the world, yet there are very few jobs available.

It has a stellar health system and high life expectancy, yet its medical equipment is outdated, sometimes donated.

They were beyond generous and yet desperately poor due to US trade sanctions. (see FM newsman John's explanation of trade wars on page 18).

The majority of the country has to rely on remittances of money and goods from outside its borders just to survive.

The history is remarkable. Like most places in the world, it includes colonizers brutally wiping out the indigenous peoples and pillaging their natural resources and goods for their own greedy benefit. In Cuba, first it was the Spanish **conquistadors** (conquerors) in 1511. They quickly realized they could get rich from the sugar and coffee that flourished in the sub-tropical climate and began to import slaves in 1526, an endeavor that didn't end until 1898. More than a million people were brought to Cuba as slaves.

I'm still haunted by what I witnessed when we toured a former coffee slave plantation. The Spanish were brutal and some would chain the slaves in their sleeping quarters – stone huts with no ventilation called *barracoons* – at night so they wouldn't run away. Our group stayed inside a *barracoon* for a long time and many people broke down crying, imagining the suffering the slaves had endured. Because of the slave trade, the majority of the island has African ancestry mixed with Spanish ancestry. I really loved getting to witness how proud Cubans today are of their Afro-Cuban heritage – everywhere I went, there was always mention of Africa and how having African roots was the source of their most positive qualities.

At the Museum of the Revolution, I learned that in the 1940s and '50s, Cuba was the playground of the rich and famous and a central headquarters for the US mafia. The Cuban government at the time was led by Fulgencio Batista, a dictator backed by the United States. Many politicians were in bed with US corporations treating workers badly.

The government corruption and inequality spawned a political movement led by rural farmers, the working class, and by revolutionaries Fidel Castro and Che Guevara (write to us and we can give you lots of book recommendations about the Cuban Revolution) who overthrew the Batista government.

Castro and Guevara were widely revered as heroes and their images are all over the country.

It's sad that the Castro government while giving incredible freedoms and rights to his people tolerated no dissent and jailed people who spoke out against him as well.

Another story of contrasts is the role of women in the country.

We heard an enriching lecture by one of the country's leading experts on women and equality. She has been a professor at University of Havana and was part of the inner circle of Castro and Guevara during the revolution. She told us that though the most progressive laws empowering women's equality are on the books, the culture is still male-dominated, burdening women with the double duty of working and taking care of the home and children. We had so many questions that we went over our allotted time and to our shock, she said she had to go home to make her husband lunch! Laws may change, but cultural views still persist.

Although it's a place of many contrasts, one thing is clear: Cuba is a beautiful, culturally rich country with very strong-spirited and warm-hearted people. I was sad to part, but glad I got a chance to explore it and share my experiences with you!



The hardship of the Cubans has not dampened their creative spirit. Everywhere you go, you hear guitar-strumming, beautiful voices singing, and you see couples dancing salsa (most popular dance of Cuba) and artists painting. I don't think we ate one meal without live musical accompaniment!



Plaza de la Revolución, "Revolution Square" in Cuba, photo by Marcel601



Beautiful architecture, cigars, and the Cuba Libre drink (rum, coke and lime) are all associated with Cuba, but I'll leave you with one of my favorites—classic cars still running perfectly! To me, they sum up the spirit of the Cuban people to me. They bring beauty and style no matter the obstacle!





IN THE NEWS

By John, Free Minds Friend

In this issue, we're trying something new with the news! In addition to a short summary of what's been going on, we're going to provide "deep dives" to take a more in-depth look at particularly dense topics in the news of late. Let us know what you think of this new format!

DEEP DIVE: GLOBAL TRADE

In the United States, the federal government is in charge of ensuring that American businesses are able to trade freely within the country. If a company based in Oregon wishes to sell pencils in Florida, they are free to do so.

This is possibly because, though all of the states in America are different in how they treat businesses, there are basic standards and laws on trade and labor that are enforced on all businesses. So, for example, you know that the pencil company in Oregon isn't able to sell at a lower price than a company based in Florida because it uses 13-year-olds working 15 hours a day to make the pencils (this is illegal nationwide). Although if the pencil company in Oregon has better pencil-making technology or more productive staff members than the company in Florida, they could sell pencils at a lower price because they pay a lower cost for the production of each pencil.

Can you think of ways trade, rules of business, and geography affect your lives? Is this reminiscent of being in the streets?



But in the decades since World War II, the United States has become a central figure in the development of the global economy. And the regulation of products sold to a country

(exports) and of products sold here by another country (imports) is a much trickier matter. There is no doubt that global trade has made America a country with incredible wealth overall. But it has also made it very difficult for American businesses in some industries to compete with similar businesses in other countries, which can mean the loss of jobs.

In many cases, businesses in other countries are able to make products and sell them in the United States for a lower price than an American business can. There are a lot of reasons for that: in some cases it's because people get paid less, or that there are just thousands of workers available to do certain jobs. In other cases, some countries have superior technology or efficiency in making certain things.

Is that a bad thing? Not for U.S. consumers as a whole. There are hundreds of millions of people in America, and as buyers of products, they all benefit from business competition the drives prices down.

But if American industries cannot sell their products at a profit, those industries within the United States will suffer, and that will ultimately cause businesses to lay off workers.

This predicament is true for countries all over the world, and many, including the United States, regulate the flow of trade through trade agreements and tariffs.

Trade agreements involve two or more countries, and often lay out a very broad and complicated list of rules regulating trade among them. These are negotiated carefully to avoid frequent arguments and legal battles over what is allowed to be exported and imported, and at what cost.

Tariffs are basically international taxes on certain items. If a business from Country X wants to sell Product Y in America, and we have a 10 percent tariff on the product, it makes the cost of doing business here more expensive within our borders. That helps level the price for an American business that is also selling Product Y, because it will not have to pay that tariff.

President Trump hopes to change America's trade

IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED)

agreements and tariffs to make them more favorable to America. His view is that the status quo is costing America jobs and profits.

The Trump Administration has already begun the process of seeking renegotiating trade agreements with some of our biggest trade partners, including China, Mexico, and Canada. He has also introduced tariffs on companies that want to import steel or aluminum into the United States (most of our imported steel comes from Canada).

Trying to rewrite the rules of global trade is not without risk. A tariff on steel and aluminum might boost American manufacturers in that area. But if China responds to that by imposing its own tariffs on something America exports to China, businesses and workers in that area of the American economy could get hurt by it.

WORLD

The death toll associated with the civil war in Syria continues to climb. In April, the United States bombed several military installations after the country's president, Bashar Al-Assad, used chemical weapons yet again against his own citizens. The war pits the Syrian government against rebel factions, along with a whole bunch of major military powers involved, including Russia, Iran, Israel, and the United States.



Bashar Al-Assad, President of Syria

President Trump is still set to meet North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un in May to discuss removing the country's nuclear arsenal and normalizing relations with the United States. In April, the North Korean leader met with Chinese President Xi Jinping – his first trip outside of North Korea since he succeeded his father, Kim Jong-il – and secretly met with Mike Pompeo, who was head of the CIA and is now running the State Department.

NATIONAL

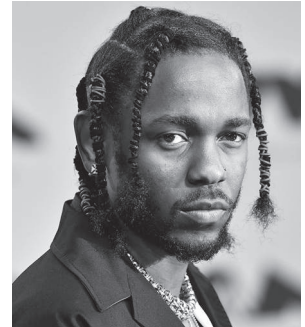
At home, the economy has continued to steadily grow and add jobs. There have been 90 consecutive months of job growth in America, a pattern that began during the

administration of Barack Obama.

There is cause for concern on the horizon. A recent survey of investors with high net worth found that seven in 10 believe there will be a recession by the year 2020.

MUSIC

The Pulitzer Prize is awarded for achievement in journalism, fiction, and music each year. Historically, the music award goes to individuals and groups in the genres of jazz, classical, and opera.



Kendrick Lamar

This year, the jurors made history by awarding the Pulitzer Prize for Music to rapper Kendrick Lamar for his most recent album, *DAMN*. Lamar is the first hip-hop artist to win the award.

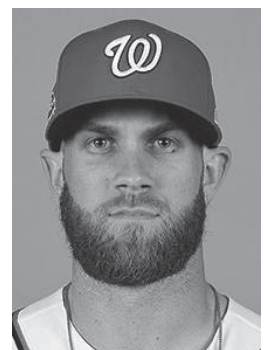
SPORTS

By the time you read this, it is more likely than not that both of DC's winter teams – the Wizards and the Capitals – will have been eliminated. Both went down 2-0 in their respective first round series against the Toronto Raptors and the Columbus Blue Jackets.



Alex Ovechkin of the Washington Capitals

Despite strong starts from Bryce Harper and most of the starting pitching rotation, the Washington Nationals are off to a sluggish start under their new manager. The Nats stood at 9-10 on April 19, with a week of West Coast games coming up against the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants.



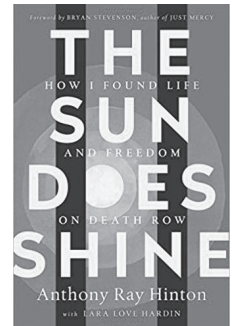
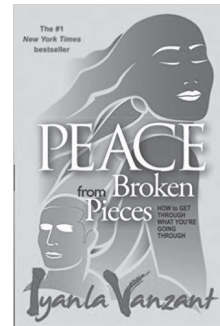
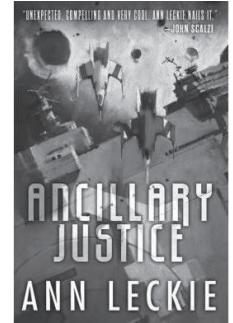
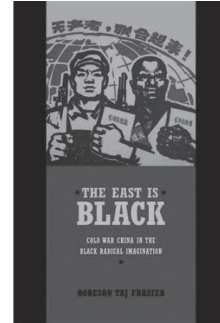
Bryce Harper, Outfielder for the Washington Nationals



WHAT WE'RE READING

Are you reading something you have really strong feelings about and want to share your thoughts with other Free Minds members? Send us your impressions (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next "What We're Reading."

- **Brian, FM Friend:** *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* by Robeson Taj Frazier. This book plays on the famous Chinese song/phrase "The East is Red" (*Dōngfāng hóng*). It is a fascinating investigation of the connections between Africans and African Americans with the Chinese Communist Party during the Cold War. It highlights how both African Americans and Chinese people were victims of racialized capitalism, imperialism, and violence at the hands of Europeans and Americans. I am enjoying this book because it shows that oppression does not happen in isolation.
- **Julia:** *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie. This is a fun and inventive science fiction (sci-fi) novel, set in a distance future with space travel, artificial intelligence, and aliens. The main character is pretty unique – she used to be an AI (artificial intelligence – like a super computer) who controlled a spaceship and hundreds of soldiers. Something went horribly wrong, and she is now trapped in the body of a single soldier, looking for revenge. I would recommend this book to anyone who likes sci-fi or fantasy.
- **Tia:** *Peace from Broken Pieces* by Iyanla Vanzant. Iyanla is a spiritual coach who passionately shares her life story filled with many twists and turns. This book made me laugh, cry, and shout for joy! There were many parallels to my own life. Her courage to move closer to peace after going through a few devastating circumstances in her professional and personal life was inspiring to witness through her own words. She shares her story on finding and losing love, death of her daughter on Christmas Day, and starting over after many struggles within her career. She makes you feel comfortable in your imperfections.
- **Tara:** *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row* by Anthony Ray Hinton. I just heard him speak at an event and I was literally speechless. He spent 30 years on death row for a crime he didn't commit and was exonerated and released in 2015 after Bryan Stevenson (whom many of you know from the book *Just Mercy*) became his lawyer. It took 15 years and a US Supreme Court ruling to show the racist, corrupt Alabama criminal justice system knew he was innocent but still kept him. What happened to him was unspeakable yet he never let it snuff out his incredible personal integrity, humor, and faith.



NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: COMMUNICATION

Have you ever felt misunderstood? Have you ever misunderstood what someone else was trying to communicate to you? For this issue, we're looking at **healthy communication** – how do we express our thoughts, feelings, and ideas to the people in our lives? How do we communicate our ideas to the world? How do we listen to others? Communication is the key to success in our relationships with family and friends; it's also essential for a strong work environment (we know a thing or two about that in the Free Minds office!). Communication is how we share the things that matter to us – our values, our goals, our vision – to the world around us. How can we use our words (or music, or art) to make people understand us? How can we understand others?

And a preview of Volume 7, Issue 4: We want to make sure people have time to write in with their submissions, so here's a heads up for the Fall 2018 issue! We'll be writing about **Parenthood**, our relationships, hopes, and dreams for our children (or future children).

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!