

April/May/June 2022
Vol. 11, Issue 2

Free minds Connect



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Team Free Minds,

I hope this issue finds you with uplifted spirits, strong health, and as much reading material as you'd like. If not, the magazine in your hands will change that for the better!

When I was little, maybe around 5 years old, I can recall hearing folks say, "Everyone be a **good sport** now." I remember thinking to myself, I don't even play sports and what does that mean anyway? Fast forward 6 years, and I found myself the only girl in the all-boys baseball league. My brother was on the team too, and my mom asking the league to go co-ed probably had more to do with it being easier to drop us off at the same time than any kind of feminist activism; she had to manage getting 6 kids around! 😊

Then I could clearly differentiate between the "good sports" (the boys who were kind and accepting of everyone on the field) and the other boys (who weren't exactly jumping for joy when I showed up on the field!). I was not headed for the Sports Hall of Fame by any means, but it meant a lot to me when some of the boys were welcoming to me regardless of my gender or experience.

This has stayed with me, and I think is the reason I place such a strong value on teamwork. (The Olympic sports I love to watch are not the individual events, but the relay races in track and swimming. I love the hand off to each other!) Teamwork is also one of the many reasons I love being part of Free Minds. Free Minds members exude the qualities of team players – you are always learning and sharing your wisdom and gifts with each other and accepting each other regardless of differences of opinion or experience. You will see this touchingly displayed in this issue as our Advice Man keeps us on track when life gets hard and hopelessness hits (page 10). The powerful artwork by JK on page 13 inspired deep reflection in me, and I know it will inspire this in you as well. Our wonderful intern Miesha educates us on the role athletes have played in the fight for racial justice and ties it to our own Poet Ambassadors community racial equity education work (page 15). There is such a rich

array of perspectives in this issue, like TT writing about the intersection between sports and politics (23) and heartwarming tales such as Gene's exciting underdog story (25) and AHA making it to the playoffs with the Oak Hill youth detention center team when he was a teenager (23). You'll be inspired and motivated by RB's story of how he started his own organization while inside (16). And check out the gift Kelli connected us all with from our partner PEN America (39). You will love it! Please let us know if you don't receive it, as we know mail delays are very common.

As usual, a poem really sums up the joy and meaning of this issue. ET shares his gratitude for the many benefits sports has brought to his life.

Thank You, Sports!

By ET

You helped me find myself, I thank you
You've given me best friends, family and a sense
of responsibility

You pushed me, worked me, corrected me
But, true to your being, you never neglected me, thank you
You were my friend in need, my rescuer when
I was stranded

My light when I was dark, my parachute for a safe landing
You taught me life lessons, showed me how to stand tall
No matter my age, to leave you, is a play I can't call
You are more than wins and losses, championships
and parades

Because of you I am the man that I am today, thank you.

Thank you ET and all of you for being such an amazing
TEAM FREE MINDS!

Until next time,
Tara

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

Next Issue's Theme: Wealth

The Connect is a bimonthly creative writing magazine published by the members, staff, and friends of the Free Minds Book Club. Each issue focuses on a specific theme as well as highlights the discussions of the Free Minds long distance BAM! (Books Across the Miles) book club. We publish five issues per year.



THE CONNECTTEAM

Executive Editor

Tara

Managing Editor

Julia

Contributors

FM Team

FM Friends

John, Maria, and Aiyah

FM Members

AA, AC, AHA, AL, AS, CM, DB, DLJ, DJ, DT, ET, GO,
JK, JL, JS, KN, KS, LB, LP, MC, MH, MR, MW, NW,
RB, RGB, TJT, TP, TS, TT, WS, Cliff, Antwan

THE FREE MINDS TEAM

Tara, Co-founder & Executive Director

Kelli, Co-founder & Book Club Facilitator

Julia, Deputy Director

Allen, Director of Finance & Operations

Keela, Reentry Manager

Melissa, Program Coordinator

Melody, Reentry Coordinator

Neely, Program Associate & Grant Writer

Tia, Reentry Coach

Janet, Youth Education & Outreach Manager

Craig, Peer Support Specialist

Demetria, Reentry Coach

Shannon, Advocacy and

Leadership Development Specialist

Gene, Congressman John Lewis Fellow

Justin, Jada, Nakai, Miesha, Zoe, Interns

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!)

Please write us when you are transferred so we have your up-to-date address as soon as possible!

Free Minds Book Club
1816 12th St. NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 758-0829

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FREE MINDS HQ

All the latest updates on what's going on
at the Free Minds office

By Justin, Free Minds Intern

Poet Ambassadors Travel to New Haven

Through the On the Same Page program, Free Minds Poet Ambassadors regularly bring hope and healing to DC youth. But for the first time since the outbreak of COVID-19, the OTSP team took a trip, taking their talents and stories by Amtrak train to students and teachers at Gateway Community College in New Haven, Connecticut. Alongside Janet and Tara, the PA squad of Gene, Jarrell, Craig, Shannon, and Deangelo shared poetry written by themselves and other incarcerated members and spoke to students about how reading and writing sustained them through the challenges of incarceration. "I spoke with several young men and several young women, one of the women was pregnant. I remember that student telling me that she only wants the best for her baby," Gene recalled, and that "hearing us recite the poems" was just what they needed. Your words are traveling far!

A Second Peer Support Cohort Graduates

A huge congratulations to our newest graduates as we celebrate a very important part of Free Minds – the support from fellow members to help navigate the challenging road of reentry. This spring, 13 members graduated from our Peer Support Training Program, a 12-week program where members build and develop skills around trauma-informed care, social emotional wellness, healthy boundaries, and crisis response. The graduation ceremony was filled with emotional sharing and nonstop shoutouts. Graduation speaker Sunny shared, "[Peer Support Training] was like food for the soul. It was so great for me... I'm extremely grateful for the men who facilitated and attended the group." After the graduation, Peer Supporters are partnered with Free Minds members coming home from incarceration. In addition to identifying and discussing their shared experiences, Peer Supporters check in with returning members to provide one-on-one encouragement and support. "We're not alone in this life," as graduate Zach said. "No matter how different we seem or the space between us."

Job Readiness Apprenticeship Explores National Archives

In another first since the pandemic began, the Reentry Book Club team hosted the first in-person Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship in nearly two years. In the April apprenticeship, reentry members trained in topics including computer literacy, job interview skills, dressing for success, the importance of creating action plans, practicing patience, and being open to new possibilities. What's more, this cohort of members took a field trip to the National Archives Museum, where they saw an exhibit on sports and segregation.

In Loving Memory

To honor our Free Minds members who we have lost, we dedicate every issue of the *Connect* to their memory.

Rest in Power:

Glen, James, Cortez, Derrick, Christian, JohnQuan, Nadar, Andre, Darond, Dontel, Tyree, Antwone, Amari, Kuron, Dwayne, Darnell, Marcus, Wayne, Eric, Sharod, Arthur, Isaiah, DeMario, Mshairi, Tahlil, Donta, Joshua, John, Delonte J., Eddie, Gary, Benny, Michael, David, Navaras, Dewayne, Tyrone, Darius, Aaron, Harold, Anthony, Donald, Bruce, Delonte K., Shawn, Roderick, Antoine, Davon, Jahmeze, Deonte

If you know of other Free Minds members that we've lost who are not on this list, please let us know so we can include them in our memorial.

FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Due to mail delays, we're printing feedback from the last two issues of the Connect.

Nourish:

AHA: I was nourished by all the recipes and different prison foods. I also enjoyed Justin's article on urban farming, which is the nourishment we need in our communities that isn't easy to get so having permanent access is important. Also to touch on DC favorites with food, half smokes and mumbo sauce brings back a lot of memories and something I've seen grow over the years elsewhere, but I always see mumbo sauce linked to DC like Go-Go is and originally ours, so just to hear the history behind both was good. Overall this issue was once again a lot of nourishment to feed the soul and take one's mind beyond these walls.

CM: The first story that jumped off the pages at me was about Joe being motivated to learn how to read for his daughter, big kudos to Joe, it takes a lot for a man in prison to show he needs help in any aspect of academics. It just goes to show we come into prison emotionally detached from other humans for whatever reasons, may it be drugs, bad upbringing, mistreatment, poor coping skills, feeling different (stupid), low self-esteem, low self worth, or just pure hate, because sometimes that's all we know, but the most common factor from my perspective is for those of us who came to prison as teens is, basic behavior problems which is a cry for attention sometimes, which leads us to criminal lifestyle and the justice system throws us away, but years or decades later we are not the same. For me I've gotten 10x better. I'm constantly growing. My potential has no ceiling. My communication is key to me navigating through prison and helping others! And it shows in Joe writing he is a changed man (leader).

The other story was Life After the Gunshot. I was shot when I was 14 years old so after reading his missive, I can tell you first hand the trauma is real. The scariest part is how he broke down the nervous system being stuck in fight mode. I still struggle with that almost 20 years later. It's super real, especially hypervigilance because you have to roam the streets with the person who shot you, which brings the resentment factor into play. No one in my hood was encouraging me to get help, it was the opposite, and you got picked on if you were perceived as weak when I was growing up. I just dealt with the pain, sorrow, fear, all types of f***ed up shit as a kid. My mission now is to tell the youth it's okay to get help, you don't have to snitch to talk about what you're going through, that's where I will show them what "I" statements are, responsibility has 3 legs to it. Integrity, reliability, and ownership. It's hard work but the end game will be good results.

MH: I loved the Around the World: If Lebanon Was a Woman

by Aiyah. I loved the way she put it into words. She created a scene that is of love, beauty, and heartache. I felt a strong connection to it because I am from that region, not the country though. I enjoyed it and it made me smile to read some of the prison food cooking recipes. I actually just learned to cook a type of food, which an inmate taught me how to do. There are really good cooks in prison, who can cook a good meal with the little things we are allowed to have.

Wellbeing:

JL: I really enjoyed reading the articles from the FM members concerning this issue's theme: Wellness. Being incarcerated, I know how important wellness is and how hardships and conflict can rob a person of vital energy, peace of mind, and more. Many of the articles in the Wellness issue deal with weathering personal storms and the growth that emerges from or during those storms. FM member MR's quote: "Revenge (or unforgiveness) is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die" is very powerful, and MR's willingness to forgive his brother's killer shows how powerful MR is. MR refuses to let the unfortunate death of his brother disturb his wellness of mind.

It is also encouraging to know that MR's family bond remains strong despite the years of being separated from them due to incarceration. I know firsthand how important family bonds are for those locked away. As MR says: "A supportive family (whether it's your biological family or your "found" family) makes weathering the storm of incarceration so much easier."

It is important to remember that growth comes during hardships in our lives and that those hardships are not permanent. All storms must clear to make way for the sunshine. I greatly appreciate every contribution to the Wellness issue.

AHA: Every article in this issue was on point, and the poems excellent as always. I also enjoy seeing my work again within these pages. Well I did read the Advice Man advice to MJ a couple of times; that was on point and can take any of us a long way by using this advice since many of us have identified with a setback in some way or another.

Also MR piece was on point navigating through so much that he has is a true testament how these wellbeing practices work. I always enjoy the photos of DC as well since a lot has changed in the 20 years I've been gone, so I appreciate all the sights. I always wanted to try yoga also and now have the bikram yoga poses to do so this was just on time.



FAMILY TIES: HOW ONE FM MEMBER CONNECTED WITH SOMEONE SPECIAL THROUGH THEIR MUTUAL OBSESSION WITH HOOPS!

By LB, FM member

I first fell in love with basketball when I was six years old. My mother bought basketballs for me and my brother, Tyrone. Believe me when I say, we bounced the rubber off of them balls! It's a love affair that has continued for my entire life. I just love the way people give props to you when you make a shot or a great pass or solid defensive play. I love the uniforms. I love the speed of the game. To be honest, I just love everything about basketball!

As I grew older and started to get interested in girls, I never dreamed I might find a partner who shared my obsession with basketball. Not until I met Tiffany...

It was 2015, and I was at a family reunion. Tiffany came with a friend of my cousin's. At the time, we were both in relationships with other people. Looking back, we both agreed there was a little something there from the start. We knew a lot of the same people, and they all kept telling both of us that we should pursue each other. I guess they saw that little something too! Over time, and a long game of cat-and-mouse, we exchanged phone numbers.

One day, before we really started dating, she offered me a ride home. She came by and picked me up from the gym where I'd been playing basketball. That's when she told me that she liked to play basketball too. I saw my opening. For our first date, we went to

the rec center to play ball. We were both excited and we had a great time together. I won (of course!) but I was surprised because she can really shoot. Baby Girl got great form! She got a nice follow through, which is what great shooters must have. Coaches always try to teach this form of follow through and Tiffany was a natural! I've watched the WNBA, so I've seen women play before, but the emotion she had for the sport, the love, the swag... I fell in love that day!

I think sports often connect people because they are so fun. You can interact while still competing with each other. And sometimes it gets physical which is human nature. Basketball created a special bond between the two of us. We used to watch NBA and college games together. She rooted for my team with me, which is the Los Angeles Lakers. But for us it was more about playing the game of basketball. I just really love basketball so to be playing my girlfriend it was like a dream come true. It strengthened our relationship. I look back fondly at those moments – both of us smiling, laughing, just vibing and enjoying what we love.

Tiffany and I have been through a lot together – the good, the bad and the ugly. We have a beautiful four year old son together, so we are tied for life. Unfortunately, we aren't still together as a couple. That said, I've been told that I am a great rebounder. So you never know...



JUST LAW: THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE ACT

By DJ, Free Minds Member and Paralegal

Many of the rights protected by the constitution and various statutes in favor of defendants are not just technicalities. These are basic rights that even extend to defendants in criminal cases. These protected rights include: a defendant's right to be protected from unlawful searches and seizures (Fourth Amendment); a defendant's right to due process of law (Fifth Amendment); a defendant's right to counsel (Sixth Amendment); and even a defendant's right to be treated fair and like a human being while incarcerated (Eighth Amendment).

Sometimes it is difficult to believe that your rights can be protected without money. So, this is why we have the Criminal Justice Act, DC Code § 11-2601 et seq. The Criminal Justice Act states, "A person for whom counsel is appointed shall be represented at every stage of the proceedings from such person's initial appearance before the court through appeals, including ancillary matters appropriate to the proceedings." DC Code § 11-2603 (2008). What this means is that you can ask the court to appoint you an attorney to assist you with filing documentation and gathering documentation for your case. Sometimes it is best to let the judge know the reason why you are asking for the attorney to assist. In many cases, you would have to give the judge a very strong reason.

An example of how the Criminal Justice Act works is a situation where a defendant is charged in a criminal case, but does not have finances to hire an attorney. The Court normally appoints an attorney. Another example is when you qualify for early release or early freedom by way of probation, they can appoint an attorney to assist you with presenting your case to the court effectively. The Criminal Justice Act can be a great tool to use in order to obtain relief in different criminal situations. It would be smart to discuss the plan to ask for an attorney under the Criminal Justice Act with a lawyer in order to figure out the best way to ask the court to appoint you an attorney. There are cases where defendants asked the court to appoint an attorney to represent them in pursuit of early freedom such as a set aside under the DC Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA) and were granted an attorney. The YRA is a powerful law that, among other things, provides an opportunity to get a conviction set aside after successful completion of probation. In order to obtain relief under the provisions, the criminal offense must have been committed prior to the age of 25. This means that it shares a critical relationship with the Criminal Justice Act, as both sections of the law are designed to help disadvantaged defendants. Contact us if you would like to read cases about the Criminal Justice Act and its power through the court system!

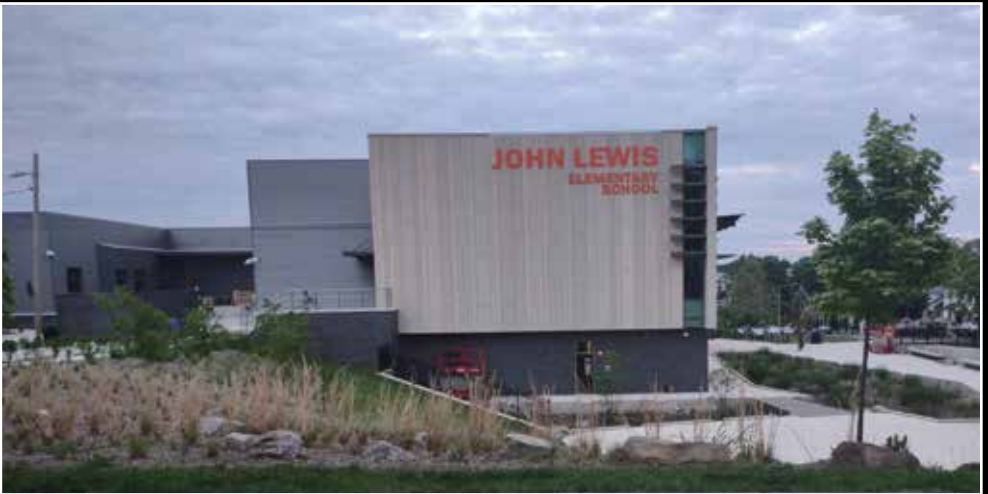
**NOTICE THIS DOES NOT CONSTITUTE LEGAL ADVICE!
YOU MUST STILL CONSULT YOUR ATTORNEY**

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DC PHOTOS



Check out Audi Field that's home to the DC soccer teams, DC United (men's soccer team) and Washington Spirit (women's soccer team). Located on Potomac Ave SW near the South Capitol Street bridge (now the Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge).

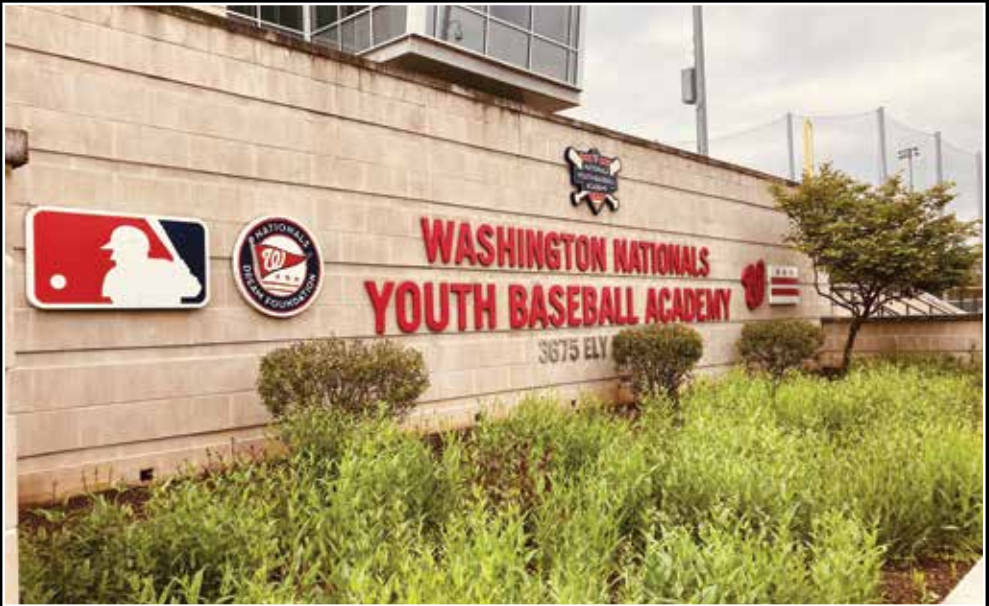


John Lewis Elementary School, formerly known as West Elementary School, changed its name to honor the legacy of the longtime congressman and champion of civil and human rights. It was previously named after Joseph Rodman West. It is located in Brightwood Park in NW DC.

DC PHOTOS



A new mural in DC featuring Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. Below her is a portrait of Constance Baker Motley, the first Black woman appointed to the federal judiciary. This mural is located a few blocks away from the Free Minds headquarters.



The Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy located in Fort Dupont Park.

Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos?
Write us at 1816 12th St NW, Washington, DC 20009 and let us know what you'd like to see!

SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

Do you have advice for the Advice Man? If so, write in and we may print your advice in the next issue. And if you have a question for the FM Fam, please send it to us. We want to hear from you!

Dear Advice Man,

People are always saying things like, "Hard times don't last forever," and "Tough times don't last; tough people do," and "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." To be honest though, I'm young and might be facing a lot of time. To me, it absolutely feels like hard times are gonna last forever. And for real, it feels like what doesn't kill me, is doing everything but kill me! What advice do you have for someone like me? I can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. How am I supposed to do this without just giving up? Because that's how I feel sometimes.

Thank you in advance.

Your friend,

AA

Salutations, A.A.! I pray these words of wisdom lift your hope and spirits as well as any young lady or gentleman dealing with similar circumstances.

Yeah, man – the truth is that: yes! Everyone feels like that, and even more so when we are in a tight spot of having to face the music for the consequences of our negative actions. Above all, the answer is that we face uncertainty one day at a time and we walk through it all one step at a time towards the light at the end.

What that looks like in these types of situations is that while you are still living and learning, you have to figuratively and literally keep your nose clean. That means stay out of trouble and don't put anything unhealthy in your mind, body, or spirit that would cause you to be weak. A.A, look at it like this. Sometimes even the highest performing machines or athletes have to get stripped down and evaluated and tweaked mechanically and mentally in order to become the best. Winners in life just don't appear out of thin air, they are forged. Sometimes it takes a hammer and fire and in other cases it takes correction, humility, hope, and education to make a winner.

As a youth, hitting rock-bottom isn't a bad thing especially when there have been so many things in our way (often one of those things is ourselves!). The best part of all our early mistakes is we still have time to fix us, and use the better part of our lives to do right. Despite your youthful present setbacks, no one can ever define you. The key is to just hang in there and make a conscious and physical effort to seek out the right advice and support. Life is much like a t.e.a.m. sport; because it takes a t.e.a.m. effort for individuals, communities, and society to be winners. "Together Everyone Achieves More!" I need you all to see that we are the solution for our communities. They need good human beings walking out of these prisons and using what we learned to redirect our community members. Who's willing and better suited to complete this task than people like you and I!

All that said, I do seriously suggest you go and seek out some professional help through psychological health services, particularly because of the traumatic environment that you're exposed to. I feel that the Black community has underestimated the power of this type of counseling. From this day forward, your community is rooting for you to not inflict no more harm upon yourself, and to grab a hold to hope, education, faith, and persistence to level up into a higher state of thinking and living.

If I can, I want to share a letter a famous coach, Pat Summitt, wrote to one of her players on the subject of sport and life. Please take heed to it, do to the mere fact I'm just one coach or mentor of many who'll be placed in your life for a moment:

[Place Your Name], This is your first game. I hope you win for your sake, not mine. Because winning's nice. It's a good feeling. Like the whole world is yours. But it passes, this feeling. And what lasts is what you've learned. And what you've learned about is – life. That's what sport is all about – life!

The whole thing is played out in an afternoon. The happiness of life, the miseries, the joys, the heartbreaks. There's no telling what will turn up. There's no telling how you'll do. You might be a hero. Or you might be absolutely nothing.

There's just no telling. Too much depends on chance, on how the ball bounces.

I'm not talking about the game. I'm talking about life. But it's life that the game is all about. Just as I said, every game is life, and life is a game. A serious one. Dead serious. But here's what you do with serious things. You do your best. You take what comes.

You take what comes and you run with it.

Winning is fun... Sure.

But winning is not the point.

Wanting to win is the point.

Not giving up is the point.

Never letting up is the point.

Never being satisfied with what you've done is the point.

The game is never over. No matter what the scoreboard reads, or what the referee says, it doesn't end when you come off the court.

The secret of the game is in doing your best. To persist and endure, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

My Favorite Sports Moment

By MC

My favorite moment was when I bowled a perfect game.
It felt awesome to see that 300 by my name.

I never thought I had it in me
not to let those gutters pin me.

It was a day I'll always remember,
that cold snowy day one December.

Of course, my kids were bowling with me that day,
and I wanted them to think bowling was fun to play.

I didn't want them to get a lot of gutter balls,
so I asked the attendant to put up the bumper walls.

The attendant got busy and didn't pay attention.
The bumper walls stayed up... oh, did I not mention?

On my turns, my ball hit those walls every time.
Without them up, I usually bowl a ninety-nine!

Boxing

By DLJ

Busy - movement

Organizing - put together

Xylophone - setting to strike

Ill-use - abuse

Nerve - strand of body

Glide - move or descend smoothly and effectively



Basketball

By DT

Belief in myself is what keeps my focused,
Ascending my character from one into three,
Strong, humble and friendly even towards those with envy.
Keeping my soul alive, and a sound mind
Even when these walls achromatize my eyes view
Towards the colors of life. Never has the thought of life
Been so bright, as it is now knowing that freedom isn't only
Accorded to physical bondage, but mental and emotional too.
Life await to live it once prison is no more
Leaving loveless behind me, believing that love always
shines through.

Football

By JS

F is for Future.

O is for Option.

O is for Oppression.

T is for Together.

B is for Brave.

A is for America.

L is for Love.

L is for Loyalty.

Football

By GO

Football is a team sport.

Other physical activities are too.

Only the committed will prosper.

Think your game plan through.

Build your strength, increase your speed.

Always help a team player who's in need.

Lessons are learned so take a heed.

Love your craft and don't be afraid to succeed.

Free Minds Book Club is a program that helps you learn.

Our safety and community building has always been
the concern.

Only the committed is likely to succeed.

Think first before you speak and do a good deed.

Be in harmony, come together as one in accord.

All we have to do is believe and trust in the good word.

Love is the key, extend a helping hand.

Learn as much as possible, because that's the game plan.

Kung Fu

By TJT

Kindled flames sway amongst the wind

United in nature's quiet song

Neutral in its burning ... It's touch

Gracious in it's fluent dance

Faculty is in the lyrics

Understand the fire



Football

By LP

Fun is what I want to have

Organized sports can be an outlet

Once you get used to the structure

Time to make a play

Bring that energy and effort every time

Attitude is more important than ability

Love for the game can take your far

Learning and honing your skills can make you a pro

The Love of Basketball!

By NW

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Anytime with beauty you feel, sense, and behold it.

Selflessness, giving, thoughtfulness if beauty.

Kindness is transcending, that's beauty.

Eternally in boundless bliss, simplistic

Therapeutic mind, heavenly and rich

Blessed is the one

Always and everlasting

Last, but not the least

Love, love yeah the love of basketball, beautiful

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Boxing

By MW

Back in my corner, a stitch over my eye, my teacher tells me *just one more round.*

Once upon a midnight, I pondered weak and weary, in hopes I can master my theory.

X-me out, never that, I live on and on, like one of your favorite songs.

I marveled at this ungainly fowl to hear for we can not help agreeing that all humans will prevail.

Nothing but jabs and hooks, bob and weave, step in step out, bring a left-hand jab, followed by a right hook.

God bless the child that can hold his own, I remember these lyrics in one of my favorite songs.

Football

By WS

Fourth and goal, truth be told even if you are NOT a fan everybody watched the Super Bowl.

Offense drive for a touchdown (commentator screams) *"McCaffrey rushes to score on 3rd down!"*

Opponents have a chance to score on possession *"Dak Prescott throws an interception!"*

Touchdown! For the Washington football team. Let's go win that 4th Super Bowl ring.

Ball is down on the 40. Mahomes takes the snap, scrambles, throws the ball and Tyreek Hill caught it... *Touchdown!*

AFC and NFC. Super Bowl Champs is what they inspire to be.

Lots of hits and spectacular plays plus field goal kicks from 40 yards away.

Love of the game is what I wrote this poem for Football the #1 American Sport.

Author's Note: *Football, One of America's Favorite Sports...*

To be brief, way before The Baltimore Ravens or The Kansas City Chiefs. On November 12, 1892, Pro football made its debut. The Pittsburgh Athletic Club was defeated by the Allegheny Athletic Association team. This was before any thoughts of Super Bowl rings. At that time an Allegheny player, William (Pudge) Heffelfinger made his fame by being the first to be openly paid (\$500) to play the game. Thus came the birth of the pro football league, before Kaepernick took a knee... Over a hundred years of pro games have been played. Today, listen as the commentators give you play by play...

Haiku

By DB

Summer sun shining,

Rainbow b-ball sets grinding,

Steph Curry long-range game blinding

Thank You, Sports!

By ET

You helped me find myself, I thank you

You've given me best friends, family and a sense of responsibility

You pushed me, worked me, corrected me

But, true to your being, you never neglected me, thank you

You were my friend in need, my rescuer when I was stranded

My light when I was dark, my parachute for a safe landing

You taught me life lessons, showed me how to stand tall

No matter my age, to leave you, is a play I can't call

You are more than wins and losses, championships and parades

Because of you I am the man that I am today, thank you.



Basketball

By ET

Basketball that's the sport for me

I enjoy watching Steph scorch from three

Lebron the court, he giving a show

It's a thrill to see Embiid live in the post

You don't have to be the best to step on the court

Just lace up your shoes and leave your fear on the porch

Did you see Kyrie crossover and score?

Or KD drop 50 points or more

I love to ball, teaches so many things

Like teamwork, respect and hard work pays

What's better than balling? You just can't find

All net time expired call it dame time

Joyful

By CM

We're in the living room

There's a lil glass table and the sofa is brown

Dad's walking in from the kitchen

He's got a bag of Utz chips

Dad's light-skinned like me

He's wearing some shorts

Army fatigue jonts with a white t-shirt

He looks happy

Probably because I was with him

I'm 12 years old, lying on the floor on my stomach

I've got no shirt on and probably some blue jeans

We had pancakes that Grandma made that morning

It's the Atlanta Falcons vs. the Carolina Panthers

Julio Jones is on the TV, just "Mossed" their cornerback

We loved watching the NFL together

This was the last game we watched together

My Dad died later that year

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Peaceful Protest

By AL

Dedicated to Colin Kaepernick

"The home of the brave, and the land of the free,"
Are notably beautiful words written by Francis Scott Key.

Yet, in 1814, those words didn't apply to individuals
with skin color like me.

So for all the injustice then and now that I see,
I proudly place my fist in the air, while taking a knee.

Sanders

By AHA

Poem dedicated to my favorite football Barry Sanders

Seeing your moves made me love this game,
Wanting to be like you.
You chased your dreams,
Inspiring in me that dreams do come true...
Until this day, many couldn't move like you
And even though you left the game in your prime
Your talent, skill and achievements remain unmatched
making you one of a kind.

Sports

By CM

Showing

People

Opportunities

Runs

Through

Sports

It starts at a young age,
If you like to fight
You can box and get paid to take out your rage
Don't waste your talent on pettiness
By ending up on the post front page
Sports is a competition sort of like running through a maze
The end of the match only one winner
Will have their hand raised



Painting by Free Minds member JK, entitled "When I Fall"

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

What's Up Guys,

Let's Play Ball! Okay, I hope that didn't sound lame but that's the first sports catchphrase that I thought of when I started writing this article. I was trying to think of something fun and engaging to write about on this theme but kept coming up short since sports isn't necessarily my forte. Then like a thunderbolt, it hit me. I decided to research some fun unknown facts about sports and tell you guys what I discovered. One of my number one goals when I write the Reentry Corner each month is to spare you guys from boredom so I hope that I am accomplishing my goal, now with that being said, here is what I found out about sports (with commentary from yours truly in bold black).

1. All-time MLB home-run leader Barry Bonds is the only member of the 500/500 home runs and steals club, not to mention the only member of the 400/400 home runs and steals club. **Cool, this means that he truly is one of a kind and got mad bragging rights!**
2. In 1935, Jesse Owens broke three world records and tied another in 45 minutes. Owens broke the world records for the 220-yard dash, the 220-yard low hurdles, and the running broad jump, and equaled the world record for the 100-yard dash. **I had mad respect for Jessie not only because of his vicious speed but also how he conducted himself in the face of blatant racism in the 1936 Olympics. After learning this, my respect level has gone up a notch!**
3. Wilt Chamberlain never fouled out of an NBA basketball game. **That is almost unheard of, dang Wilt you like that!**
4. Wrestling legend Kevin Nash was highly-recruited for basketball coming out of Michigan. He was the second most sought after, behind Magic Johnson. **Wow what a contrast I wonder if he would have been a legend at basketball as well?**
5. In 1962, former MLB catcher Harry Chiti was traded from the Cleveland Indians to the New York Mets for a player to be named later. After a poor performance, Chiti became that "player to be named later", making him the first player to ever be traded for himself. **Wait, what? That sounds painful!**
6. Deaf quarterback Paul Hubbard was the first to use the "round formation huddle" in football to ensure that his teammates could interpret his hand gestures. **Man, it's stories like these that give me so much respect for human ingenuity!**
7. In August 1971, the Pittsburgh Pirates became the first professional team to field nine players who were either black or Latino. The same season they won the world series. **This makes complete sense, very smart move Pirates!**
8. Michael Jordan makes more money from Nike annually than all of the Nike factory workers in Malaysia combined. **Hmm, I'm not one to judge but this sounds very uncool.**
9. It takes 3,000 cows to supply the NFL with enough leather for a year's supply of footballs. **The cows need to start a union so they can get paid!**
10. The household wrench was invented by boxing heavyweight champion Jack Johnson in 1922. **If you guys don't know who Jack Johnson is please send in a book request, all I can say is he was a bad man (bad meaning good) and way before his time!**

Okay guys, now onto some knockout resources (I'm trying yall LOL)

Thrive DC
1525 Newton Street NW
Washington DC 20010
202-737-9311

People are released every day from jails and prisons without food, clothing, or support. Thrive DC provides all of this without restrictions on sobriety, without time limits, and without judgment over their conviction. The New Directions Re-entry Program is designed to assist people who have been recently incarcerated and/or released from jail or prison, back on the road to success.

It consists of five components:

- Case Management
- Basic Needs Assistance (meals, toiletries, clothing, etc)
- Life Skills Education
- Access to Sobriety Maintenance Assistance and Support
- Employment Assistance



Until we *Connect* again,
Ms. Keela



College Track

DURANT
CENTER

ATHLETES, FM POETS, AND THE PURSUIT OF RACIAL JUSTICE

By Miesha, Free Minds intern

In 2018, NBA champion Kevin Durant donated 10 million dollars to help children in his hometown, Prince George's County, Maryland, afford college tuition. In partnership with the nonprofit *College Track*, Durant created a program aiming to equip students with the necessary skills to confront systemic barriers to earning a bachelor's degree. The program's ultimate goal is to aid in the pursuit of a life of opportunity, choice, and power. In reflecting on his upbringing, Durant remarks that he and his peers "didn't have the resources to get our minds thinking about the next level... When your mom's at work and you don't have a dad... your mind wanders and you want things, but we don't know how to achieve them." Durant's social and racial justice initiative provides the opportunity for marginalized children to access the tools needed for success, such as tutoring, standardized test preparation, and academic workshops. Kevin Durant is not alone in using his athleticism and subsequent resources to fight racial injustices. Many athletes, particularly Black athletes, strive to use their newfound platform to advocate for their communities and the equitable distribution of resources.

Our Free Minds members do the same in using their voices and poetry to inspire and advocate for others. They have a keen personal insight into injustices both in and outside the prison walls, so they are an important voice on these issues. Yet, both athletes and those currently and formerly incarcerated sometimes face backlash in response to their efforts and are told that their activism is inappropriate. "They should stick to what they know best," critics respond. This narrow-minded thinking works to pigeonhole these activists in their perspective roles and discredits their change-making capabilities. These unique perspectives should be seen as a multifaceted tool, not a hindrance.

Your voice matters. Your poetry matters. Your perspective matters.

Free Minds' Poet TP's piece "I Write for Freedom" says it best. He makes his poetry a place for rhythmic flows and hard-hitting truths about what it is like to be Black in the United States. He asserts, "I write this for Black people like me / That come from the struggle / Racism, the streets, and poverty." TP, like Kevin Durant and many other athletes around the world, uses his inspirational words as an instrument to fight for his beliefs and against racial injustices.

What do you write for?

I Write for Freedom By TP

I write this for my son
I write this for Black people like me
That come from the struggle
Racism, the streets, and poverty

I write this because
They mean a lot to me
I write this because
My son needs me
He needs to know how
His daddy overcame obstacles
I write this because
Black people are struggling
I want to motivate them
Through my story

I know that my words can
Build others confidence
I know my words can make people
See a lot of things different

Throughout the world
People will know
When they hear the words
They know it's the truth
And they don't want
To stop hearing them

I write so that I can provide
Black people the comfort and support
To understand how society works
I write so that I can let
Other hear my story

I write for the freedom to live free
I write for the freedom to be accepted
No matter the color of my skin
Or where I come from



PAYING IT FORWARD: MORE THAN OUR CRIMES

By RB, FM member

A little about myself: I'm a 42-year-old father of a 25-year-old child. I have an Associate's Degree in Business Management, and my hobbies are sports (both playing & watching), exercising, reading, and especially writing. I write quite often and it has become an integral part of my life's work. I use storytelling (Op-Ed, blog posts, etc) to humanize those incarcerated and to advocate for criminal justice reform, with a keen focus on second chances for serious offenders.

The inception of my organization (More Than Our Crimes) came about organically. It all started when my IRAA petition was denied and my friend encouraged me to start journaling to deal with my hardship. This led to me slamming through my journal for blog post materials. Then, COVID hit and the DC Council passed the "Good time credit for felony offenses committed before August 5, 2000," which legislated that every prisoner from DC who was arrested before 2000 receive 54 days of good-time credit for each year they'd served. This legislation immediately made me parole eligible. But, knowing the parole system, I foresaw that although the DC Council's reasoning in theory for passing this bill was to have people released from prison to lessen the burden of COVID on prisons, I knew in practice that USPC (United States Parole Commission) would still deny parole to the vast majority of the guys that the bill made eligible.

So, my friend Pam and I decided to start a petition to galvanize people to contact their representatives to pressure the USPC to change some of its vetting mechanisms. Soon, we found out that DC had no power over the USPC and thus DC citizens had no lobbying power. We decided to hold a teach-in on parole, where we highlighted all of the flaws of the USPC and why DC needed to regain control over its own parole system, especially considering the DC statehood issue. I partnered with the Justice Policy Institute and the Attorney General Karl Racine (I already had a relationship with him as he was my juvenile lawyer and huge mentor to me in my youth) and we held the teach-in on Zoom. I knew that this was the work I wanted to do once I was released so we launched More Than Our Crimes. I'm proud to say that the event was a success and I believe helped the conversation about local control of parole in DC to gain more traction.

The goal of MTOC is to humanize incarcerated people and to

advocate/help people with lengthy sentences receive second chances. We also aim to help returning citizens successfully reintegrate back into society.

MTOC service is to be the Voice of the Voiceless. So, I believe that by reporting, explaining, and illustrating through storytelling, blogs, op-eds, etc. how incarceration impacts a person, how they can change and how we can help incarcerated people successfully rehabilitate, we are helping change the narrative.

I named the organization MTOC because I wanted the world to know that each one of us is much more than the sum total of our worst mistakes! Although we may have been convicted of robbery, murder, or some other "bad" crimes, we are not murderers or robbers. I believe that once a person is convicted of a violent crime, society begins to look at them like they are inherently their crime and We are More Than Our Crimes. I represent and speak for people who are proving that they made a mistake and are more than the crime they committed.

We are the ones being directly impacted by what's going on in the criminal justice space, so it's important for us to have a voice. For instance, a few months ago they had a public hearing about local control in DC a few returning citizens testified, but we asked people in prison what they thought and reported that back to the public hearing. There are a growing number of resources for people coming home in DC, but a lot of times people don't know about them. Sometimes it can be confusing when so many different organizations are providing services. We look forward to helping clarify what is available and what works.

I have had a few op-eds published in the Washington Post, an article published in the Huffington Post and The Hill; but I think our biggest accomplishment thus far was the teach-in we hosted with Attorney General Racine and the Justice Policy Institute, as I believe it helped lead to the hearing on Parole in DC as well as played a part in the legislation A.G. Racine just introduced that would change how juveniles are charged as adults in DC. Before, a juvenile was automatically

being waived to adult court if they are charged with one of the enumerated felonies (at the prosecutor's discretion – which they never use to not waive juveniles). But now, a juvenile would be afforded a waiver hearing to ascertain whether or not the juvenile should be waived to adult court.

The broader goals for my organization are to start a voter registration drive for DC inmates. We will use our newsletter to educate this populace on how to vote, where/how to get ballots, etc. We will inform them about the candidates and their stands on the issues. Most importantly, we will allow them to participate in the discussion (through our blogs, OP-eds, etc.) by sharing their thoughts on the agenda and the issues (to sign up for this corrlinks newsletter, contact pam@morethanourcrimes.org). In 5 years, I see us successfully helping guys receive second chances through the passing of laws like IRAA for everyone and helping them successfully reintegrate into society. I see us doing documentaries, books, and most importantly being the lead liaison between the prison population and those making the laws. My main goal... to be their voice!

My advice is to just do the work and everything else will take care of itself. When you have your mind's eye on a goal and daily you take determined steps towards that goal, the world has a way of conspiring to help you along the way. Doing this work, I meet all types of people and this moves me further and further along the path towards my goal. Thank you!



Note from the editors: For more information about op-eds (opinion pieces), see The Write Way in Connect Volume 9, Issue 5.



DID YOU KNOW? Mental Health in Sports

By Shannon

Greetings everyone! As I write this, it is Mental Health (and wealth!) Awareness Month. This is a subject that many don't like to acknowledge although just as many more often than not are affected by it directly or indirectly. In today's society, some of our most revered sports figures are openly admitting how the pressures of success and sustaining that success exacerbates a problem. This problem stems from an early age. For some, being a child prodigy like a LeBron James may be difficult, as they are expected to be not just a winner but the breadwinner for their family – and to a certain degree their community. Also, athletes carry a larger-than-life persona in the public's eye so they are regarded as modern day warriors, competitors who bravely push past obstacles and adversity in pursuit of victory but these same athletes are human and not machines.

Keyon Dooling is a former NBA player who has been extremely outspoken about his post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. He said, "When we have diabetes, we go get treated. When we tear our ACL, we go get surgery. But if our heart is broken, or our soul is hurting, what do we do? We just internalize it. We become hard. We spend our whole life running from the ghost. Until one day it catches up to us... The only way to finally escape is to stop running and turn around and face the ghost." This is a sad truth that we must admit to ourselves because in denying the truth we are only hurting ourselves.

One in five adults in America live with mental health conditions, but there are many reasons why athletes

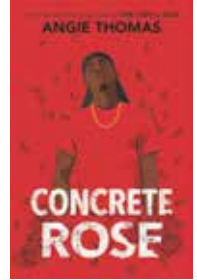
in particular fall victim to this issue. Athletes are faced with the scrutiny that comes with being in the limelight of a sport. That can become very stressful due to the misperception of how they are viewed by society. It's sad that a lot of these same athletes will hide their mental health conditions in part for the same reasoning: they don't want to look weak or give the impression of weakness. Serena Williams is arguably the best tennis player ever but has also been open about her mental health struggles and how talking to her loved ones let her know that her feelings are totally normal. Professional wrestler Ronda Rousey, a former UFC fighter, said she contemplated suicide following a loss to Holly Holm in 2015. These are human beings who society reveres and celebrates for their accomplishments, who understand not only the impact but also the importance of mental health awareness in our society.

We are taught as young kids to not cry when crying is one of the most natural things in life. Men especially are taught to toughen up and be a man even if it literally kills you. This kind of mindset is perpetuated throughout our society, and is very harmful to those that suffer in silence. It is well known that exposure to racism and discrimination are linked to various adverse mental health outcomes. Being raised in an environment that's predicated on the foundation of systemic abuse due to generational trauma cause by racism/discrimination is one of the reasons why mental health issues are relatively common in the black community and education is the only weapon we have to fight against the ignorance of this stigma that has plagued us for far too long.

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with Neely

Thank you to everyone who cast their ballot for the next BAM book! If you will please allow me the honor, I am excited to announce that the next BAM book will be *Concrete Rose* by Angie Thomas. This book follows the story of seventeen-year-old Maverick, whose life forever changes when he finds out he's going to be a father. If you've read *The Hate U Give*, you probably remember Maverick. This book is a prequel, meaning it takes place before the events of *The Hate U Give*. We will be sending out copies to you towards the end of the summer, but wanted to go ahead and share some discussion questions to start getting you hyped up for this fascinating read.



1. Maverick goes through numerous challenges over the course of the book – any one of which would be traumatic – and yet he is dealing with them simultaneously. With everything he has going on, who in his life do you think had the most positive influence on him? Why? Who has had the most positive influence in your life, and why?

2. King's relationship with Maverick is complicated, and when they disagree, Maverick feels like he doesn't even know King. How do you feel about their friendship? Did you ever feel forced to choose between what you believed in, and a friendship? How did it make you feel?

3. How does learning that he is a father change Maverick's life? Does he see his life differently? If so, in what way? What is an event in your own life that changed the way you viewed things? How did/does it make you see things differently?

4. On the drive home from visiting Markham's campus, Lisa lets Mav know she has no intention of pursuing a relationship with a "gang-banger." Mav is devastated. On p. 279, he writes, "Since I ain't shit, I ain't got shit to lose. I may as well kill the person who killed Dre." What are your thoughts on this reaction?

5. How did you feel about what happened with Maverick and Red, and the decision that Maverick made about his plan? Did his choice show weakness or strength? What motivated his decision? Have you ever made a choice that others might have seen as weak, but that in reality, took a lot of strength on your part?

Name _____ Date _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: WEALTH (VOLUME 11, ISSUE 3)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on Wealth. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 11, Issue 4 will be exploring the theme of **Belonging**.

(1)

Wealth is defined as an abundance (large quantity) of valuable possessions or money. Do you think you can live a wealthy life without having a lot of money? What other kinds of wealth or abundance do you want to create?

(2)

Generational Wealth is generally defined as property, investments, or anything with value that can be passed down from one generation to the next. Write about what you would want to pass down to the next generation. This wealth does not have to be money but it can be anything with value.

(3)

Write a poem to money, as if they were a person, telling him/her what kind of relationship you would like to have with them.

(4)

The quote "For the love of money is the root of all evil" comes from I Timothy in the Bible. Do you agree with this or do you think there are other things (like envy, rage, or hate) that are the root of all evil.

(5)

Below are the lyrics to the O'Jays famous song "For the Love of Money." Write your own song or poem about money or wealth!

*For the love of money
People will lie, Lord, they will cheat
For the love of money
People don't care who they hurt or beat
For the love of money
A woman will sell her precious body
For a small piece of paper it carries
a lot of weight
Call it lean, mean, mean green*

MEMBERS CONNECT: SPORTS

Opinion piece: How sports and politics intersect

By TT

Professional sports create a highly visible platform for exhibitions, and thus star athletes especially find themselves charged with the duty of expressing their views and sentiments on hot button issues as their unique talents propel them into a spotlight which transcends sports. So this is where social politics being a magnet for popular opinions in the 21st century comes into play and the athletic world intersects with political issues.

The LeBron Jameses, Odell Beckham, and Simone Biles of the world have many admirers who wish to emulate those people because of their success in sports. So everything from their style of dress to what they drive, drink, or think matters to their fans as well as their critics. And with millions of eyes and ears attuned to what they do and say, there is an opportunity, once they speak or act upon an issue, for them to become torchbearers for a particular cause. In some cases, whether they will it or not.

Michael Jordan, for instance, was heavily criticized in the 1990s for not weighing in on matters of social, political, and civil rights during the height of his NBA career. His position was that he wanted the focus to remain on his actions on the court and not his opinions off of it. He was strictly an athlete, and not an activist. But what was tolerable behavior for a superstar player

of the 90s does not stand in the 21st century.

In the era of social wokeness, politics and sports are intrinsically intertwined. There are a myriad of socio-political issues that resonate with any number of sports fans who prefer to hear the opinions of their favorite athletes or pundits and demagogues. Which is why star athletes are now encouraged even obligated to a certain degree, to express their stance or maybe the views of their teams or possibly an entire league when particularly sensitive societal issues arise. Police brutality being one recurring theme in recent years.

Given that sporting leagues are such large platforms, star athletes make use of the medium to amplify messages and act as voices for marginalized communities or neglected facets of society. In this vein, lionized athletes and the sports that elevate them draw attention from an engaged audience of voters and concerned citizens which make them perfect conduits for swaying public sentiment on any particular issues. Politics, if nothing else, demands attention, and sports or popular sports figures in particular can create effective referendums on socio-political causes with small effort and maximize civil participation.

My Love for Football

By AHA

My favorite sport to watch and play is football. I love this sport and grew up playing it on some of the biggest stages in DC. When I was growing up everybody loved football in my family and either was a Redskins fan or Dallas Cowboys fan. I went with the home team, never liking our arch rival Cowboys or understanding at the time why some liked Cowboys over their home team. This led me to be a fan and wanting to play myself, so this was my first passion and what I wanted to do in life.

I liked a lot of players on my team at the time – Art Monk, Darrell Green, Gary Clark and others who were playing well – but my favorite football player was Barry Sanders. I would say Barry was a beast on the field and Michael Jordan was a beast on the court so those two were my favorite athletes. Sports to me was not only a thing to enjoy but it kept a lot of us as youth active and away from certain things that led to trouble.

For me, this was when I first started to learn skills such as discipline, team building, and responsibility by doing your part. In this era there were a lot of football leagues in DC and every Boys-N-Girls club had teams with different weight classes. I played for number 10 Boys-N-Girls near Clifton St. NW and a team called Blitz that would gather at Banneker Field, so during this time it was easy to play for two or three teams if you were that good.

I started at 8 years old and then started to play for the school teams I went to such as Garrett Patterson and then Cardozo High School. Playing football got me into being physically active young, so I've always maintained this. Even today, when I exercise a lot it comes from that training throughout the years. Even as I got a little older, being in the streets more, I was trying to do both and that did not end up good. Once going to Oak Hill, I played for this team and got some of my memorable moments with them.

Playing football helped me stay focused in a lot of areas and kept me in line at times. I could have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but I was at practice, etc. A memorable moment for me was when our team from Oak Hill made it to the playoffs in which we knew if we did we would get to leave Oak Hill to play under the lights and come out at a high school.

At the time it was Cardozo and fortunately we were allowed to play all the high schools like Wilson, Ballou, Woodson, Dunbar, etc. We were incarcerated so getting this moment was a time to shine. I never forget I was on defense and got to intercept a pass going to Vernon Davis (tight end) who played for Dunbar, so it was a moment to remember since Vernon Davis was a top player that would go to the NFL and be a star for some time with the 49ers and Redskins. In this era we got to play against him and Byron Leftwich who made it to the pros. That stood out.

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: SPORTS

Playing Soccer in Iraq

By MH

I have some of the most joyous and happiest moments in my life, while playing sports. Since I was a kid I played soccer. I couldn't wait to go out and play with my friends. Even during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, I was 15 years old at the time, and the situation was bad and unstable, despite that me and my friends always tried to find a way to go out and play soccer. We had a regular curfew from sunset to sunrise, we were not allowed to leave our homes, and when anything happened there would be curfew during the day too. Playing soccer was therapy for me and it still is. When I am playing sports my mind goes away from everything bad around me. When I play sports, I forget everything happening, I feel free, and the heavy weight on my mind and my shoulders is lifted away for a little while.

When I was back home in Iraq, I played on a dirt soccer field and I played barefoot. Almost every day after a game I came back home, my feet, knees, elbows, be swollen and bleeding. I be hobbling, but I continue to play, and come the next day and play. When I was back home, we used to have tournaments, we as friends made these tournaments. In the summertime we used to go out to play when the sun started going down about 4 or 5 pm. Everybody went outside playing, shopping, gathering, or doing something. You could hear the sound of people yelling while playing sports. You heard it throughout the city. Kids, teenagers, adults, everybody played. It has been that way for a long time now for some reason. Everyday when that time comes till the sun sets and becomes dark, I feel a sharp pain that brings back a lot of memories.

Sometimes it becomes unbearable, so I try to distract myself and not look out of my window, at that time, and just do something, so my mind doesn't think about it.

There are memorable moments and stories I had while playing sports. And there is one painful as well. One I always remember, it is funny to me. One time our team wanted to buy soccer uniforms, so they sent me and my friend to buy them. When we went we found that they were all sold out. In one store we found enough uniforms for the team, but there were only two or three numbers of the same uniform (i.e. the number on the uniforms), so we bought them. Each person on the team wanted a specific number, and it took them a while to choose, because some wanted the same popular number, so with what we bought they didn't have a choice. The whole team had to choose between two or three different numbers, and on top of that they were small :). The whole team was wearing the same numbers and tight uniforms. They also paid for a good meal for me and my friend. Me and my friend used to joke with our friends, we used to say when you guys want a new uniform, let us know. My friend was killed later on. The moment he was killed, I was playing soccer. We didn't know what happened at that moment, till the next day.



My Favorite Sports

By KN

My favorite sports to play and watch are football and basketball. These are the 2 sports I first learned to play growing up and I fell in love with them. I like the bond and brotherhood it creates competing with a group of guys to win – camaraderie. I respect some of the athletes because of what they've accomplished outside of sports and the fact that they've used their platforms such as Muhammad Ali, LeBron James, Maya Moore, Magic Johnson, Chris Paul, Colin Kaepernick, Malcolm Jenkins, Eric Reid, and many others. Sports was an outlet for me to stay away from the streets. It is through sports that I've met most of the instrumental people in my life and have made a number of life-long friendships.

My Favorite Sporting Event

By KS

I don't know if tree climbing would qualify for this exercise as a sporting event, but it sure did raise my desire to compete with others. There were at least 10-12 youths, sometimes as many as 15, when word of the tree climbing event spread (all between the ages of 11-15). The event normally occurred after swimming at one or more of the neighborhood swimming centers.

Upon leaving the centers, if I or one of the others spotted a big tree, let the games begin! We would climb it to see who would/could climb the highest without falling. Not a chance, I thought. I mean the rush of our shared energetics in youthful competitiveness made it all worth it... contending like ants for little molehill realms on that tree, priceless.

I used a very special method I developed from my earlier days of maneuvering on the monkey bars at the playground, a sort of squirrel-in-the-cage kinda movements... swift as a panther in triumph through the trees that spread their forked boughs like a stag's antlers... climbing as high as heaven. The sheer fun of it up in the air. From zone to zone I flew. Some limbs of the trees were as fragile as a spider's web, moving in my youth as fluid as thought...When snap! I dropped like a bolt from the blue falling into the mellowing hands of time. Like wasted hours of youth were our rewards.

The meaning and memory of which is as dear as remembered kisses after death. I guess tree climbing as a sporting event will probably fade into the cloudy mirror of opinions.



CONVERSATION WITH GENE

Sports have always played a major role in my life. As far back as I can remember I was a Washington Commanders fan (formerly known as The Redskins and Football Team). Growing up watching and playing sports were how my friends and I passed time. We would collect and trade football cards and always tried to emulate our favorite players. In fact, most of us actually aspired to some day play professional sports, and a lot of us were good enough to do so. Though we would play all sports, football was by far my favorite! I would play football for hours! Then go in the house and play the John Madden Football video game for more hours! I couldn't get enough of football, especially my Red... Oops... Commanders. People talk smack about my team today, but when I was growing up we were one of the best teams in the league, we even won the Super Bowl back then and I remember it like it was yesterday.

Loving sports the way I do taught me a lot about life as well. One of the lessons that sports taught me was teamwork. Teamwork is so important in everyday life, especially in the workplace. Another lesson is trust. Sports teaches you to trust people even if you are not sure if you can trust them. Once you build confidence in your teammate you can trust them to do what they are supposed to. That was a profound lesson for me. There are so many lessons that can be learned from

sports, and then there's the fun in playing it. When I play sports, it's like everything else in the world ceases to exist, and the glory of victory or the agony of defeat is the only thing that's on my mind.

One of my most proudest and glorious sports moments was when I was incarcerated and playing flag football. The flag football league allowed teams to form on their own, so all of the best players got together and stacked teams, and there was a bit of favoritism going on as well. So, my team was made up of all of the "leftover" players that people just assumed weren't very good. So we formed a team (of course we were the Redskins) and entered the league. No one saw us coming, or rather no one took us seriously, well, not until we won our first three games. After that, we got some attention from who was supposed to be the best team. We beat them handily and we didn't look back! We went the entire season undefeated and won the championship by beating the "best team" again in dramatic fashion.

We were the underdog that won it all and it was so surreal. It was like something from a movie, and the pride and joy that my teammates and I had then made us forget for just a second that we were in prison. That's how powerful sports can be!



THE WRITE WAY: THREE THINGS YOU CAN START DOING NOW TO GET A BOOK DEAL LATER

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

By Maria, Free Minds friend

For starters, if you're reading this, you're already on the right track. Just by picking up your Free Minds *Connect* and reading other writers, you're getting a practice rep in on that big goal of publishing a book.

I'm a Literary Agent, and so I love helping people get their books out in the world. When I was a little girl and things would get hard, I'd hide in my room with a book and pretend I was somewhere else. Now I also like reading and representing self-help books so I can try to work on some of those hard things, but most of all, I love helping writers make their dreams become real-life.

I know getting a book deal can seem like a lucky draw, but there's actually not as much luck to it as you'd think. Authors like Wahida Clark, Chester Himes, Teri Woods, Malcolm Braly, and so many others have all become successful authors during or after their incarcerations. It's just about hard work, day after day. It's doable for anyone who keeps at it. And there really is no magic formula, special talent, important connections, or perfect timing that can get someone a book deal if they haven't put in the work. Because at the end of the day, what agents, publishers, and readers want is a **unique story, well told**. So, how do you make that happen?

1. Read the best books out there so you know the market.

How do you know if something is "a unique story" if you don't know what else is out there? If you like writing in a genre, like thrillers or fantasy or romance, read recently released books in that genre, especially any with awards, since that'll cue you into the trends in the genre. If you like writing nonfiction, like cookbooks or memoir or self-help, see what's already out there and find a way to fill the gaps in the marketplace by saying something new that only you could say. For nonfiction (other than memoir), it helps to start building knowledge in your passion area so that one day you can be an influencer, and build a public platform, sharing your ideas and advice.

Reading great, new books will also help you write a book that fits into a genre (which is important to publishers) and also to be able to say, when you're querying an agent, "My book is like X, Y, Z other books that were successful."

2. Write as much as you can so you can get practice.

We've all read a great book, thought, "I could do that," but then froze up when it came time to put pen to paper. That's because writing isn't so much about skill but about practice.

Each time you're struggling to get down on paper what you want to say, remind yourself that that's just how it is for most writers. Even authors who've written twenty books or more can freeze up or go blank when it's time to write. But they sit themselves down to write something anyway, and getting in that routine of writing even when you don't feel like it is what helps someone turn writing into a full-time career. (And, for those moments when you actually *are* hit by a bolt of inspiration, keep some paper and a pen in a pocket, so you can capture that magic before it disappears!)

3. Share, edit, repeat so you sharpen your writing.

We all know that iron sharpens iron. So surrounding yourself with people who are shooting for the same goals as you is going to make it a lot easier to get there. Find other writers with whom you can share your writing and exchange constructive criticism. This is not only going to make your writing sharper and more appealing to agents, publishers, and readers, but it's also going to get you reps with doing the scary act of sharing your writing.

This will also help you hit that "well told" part of the equation. This is where the share, edit, repeat cycle comes in. The truth is that nearly everyone writes really rough – like scary rough – first drafts. But most authors have edited their book dozens of times before it goes to an agent, and then if a publisher picks it up, it'll go through several more rounds

of edits. So the more times you can run a piece of writing through that cycle to add, delete, and rewrite based on feedback from readers or peers, the stronger it'll be.

And Two Things You Can Do Later with What You're Writing Now

1. Start sending short pieces to magazines or journals.

If you have a piece that's gone through the share, edit, repeat cycle a bunch of times and that you feel really good about, take the leap and send it to places that take submissions. Sites like Duotrope and Submittable let people search for publications by genre and payment offered.

Having shorter work already published is going to make a big difference in catching the eye of an agent or publisher. I always pay more attention to a project when I see that the writer has already been published by bigger-name places, and the best way to get into bigger places is to first get into smaller places.

2. If you have a full manuscript, you can send query letters to agents.

You don't need to have shorter work published before you send a book to agents (although it will help), so if you already have a book-length manuscript, you might be ready to

research agents. Publisher's Marketplace is the best resource for this, since you can look up which agents are making deals in your genre, which agents represent the writers you admire, and which topics or trends are coming up again and again in the deals. Before you contact an agent, you must have three things generally: 1) a completed book-length manuscript, 2) a query letter, or a brief letter that provides key information about you and your book and entices the agent to read the manuscript, and 3) for fiction, a synopsis, or detailed summary of the book from start to finish. JaneFriedman.com also has great articles on how to write a query letter and what to look for in an agent.

My favorite thing about writing is that it's mostly a meritocracy – the people who earn it, get it. Which means you don't need special *anything* to make the dream of getting published come true. You just need to get the reps in, and stay patient and stay stubborn at it!

Maria is a Literary Agent in New York City, specializing in illustrated nonfiction.

If you would like to learn more about some of the topics in this article, write back to us and let us know!

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"Sport has the power to change the world, it has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair."

– Nelson Mandela, South African anti-apartheid revolutionary and political leader who served as the first president of South Africa

"For the longest time, I thought asking for help was a sign of weakness because that's kind of what society teaches us. That's especially true from an athlete's perspective. If we ask for help, then we're not this big macho athlete that people can look up to. Well, you know what? If someone wants to call me weak for asking for help, that's their problem. Because I'm saving my own life."

– Michael Phelps, former American swimmer and the most decorated Olympian of all time

"Believe me, the reward is not so great without the struggle. The triumph can't be had without the struggle. And I know what struggle is. I have spent a lifetime trying to share what it has meant to be a woman first in the world of sports so that other young women have a chance to reach their dreams."

– Wilma Rudolph, acclaimed as the fastest woman in the world in the 1960s and the first American woman to win three gold medals in a single Olympic Games

"Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing."

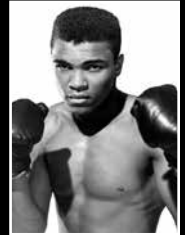
– Muhammad Ali, activist and often considered the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time

"There's not an American in this country free until every one of us is free."

– Jackie Robinson, six-time All-Star, 1949 NL MVP, six World Series appearances, and the first African American to play in Major League Baseball

"Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything."

– Colin Kaepernick, American civil rights activist and NFL quarterback



Muhammad Ali

IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

DEEP DIVE: GUN CONTROL IN AMERICA

In every issue, we will bring you an in-depth analysis of a particular topic.

The technical definition of a mass shooting is any incident in which four people are either killed or wounded. Since January, America has tallied 265 mass shootings with a total cost of 303 dead and 1,144 injured. That gruesome list includes three mass shootings in Washington, DC, nine in Maryland, and six in Virginia.

These incidents have become so frequent in America that they hardly register on the news unless the death toll is particularly high. In May, two such horrific shootings took place within two weeks of each other.

On May 14, a shooter armed with an AR-15 assault rifle marked up with racial epithets charged into a Buffalo, NY grocery store, killing 10 people and wounding three others, most of them African American. Ten days later, a teenager with the same type of powerful weapon was able to break into an elementary school and murder 21 people, mostly small schoolchildren.

Will these tragedies lead to any changes in the way America controls the supply of guns inside its borders, and who can have them? There are strong feelings for and against that, and that is in large part to our nation's unique history when it comes to guns.

On December 15, 1791, the Bill of Rights was ratified by Congress, including the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The second of those amendments says the following: *A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.*

There are perhaps no more obsessed-over words that have ever been written. There are currently about 200 constitutions that serve as the backbone of law in various countries around the world. Only three currently include a right to bear arms, the other two being Guatemala and Mexico. But the United States is the only of those three without explicitly restrictive conditions on the purchase of firearms.

Centuries of this constitutional guarantee has facilitated a deep

culture of gun ownership in America. Forty percent of U.S. adults report the presence of a gun in their household, and 30% of Americans report personally owning a firearm. The vast majority of those guns are used for sport shooting, hunting, or are owned to defend people's homes and property.

But it has also made the United States an undeniable outlier when it comes to gun violence. In 2020, there were nearly 25,000 murders recorded in America, and 80% involved a firearm in some way. And murder isn't even the number one source of gun deaths; more than half of people who die from guns in America are those who commit suicide.

Over the years, legislation has sought to create precedent and clarity on what guns are available for sale and what the process is to acquire them. The nation's first gun control was actually born of a famous mass shooting, the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, a Chicago gangland shooting in 1929. Five years later, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the National Firearms Act of 1934.

That law marked the first time America nationally restricted the sales, ownership, use, and transport of short-barreled rifles and shotguns, machine guns, silencers and suppressors destructed devices used by the military. But even these weapons, in many states, can be purchased with a higher level of scrutiny and licensure than a handgun, for example. And while several federal laws have been passed since the 1930s, restrictions on guns have largely been left to the states to handle.

Today, there are really two different discussions around if or how to regulate the sale of guns on a national level. The first is specific to incidents such as the recent mass murders in Buffalo and Uvalde, Texas, and that is whether or not to ban or limit the sale of high-powered assault rifles such as the AR-15. These weapons are not used in the majority of mass shootings if you follow the definition of four people being shot, but in incidents with a higher death toll, they are omnipresent.

That is a conversation around what types of guns anyone should have. The other discussion, which is more relevant to the vast majority of gun deaths and gun violence in America, is around



On June 11, approximately 40,000 gathered in DC near the Washington Monument for the March for Our Lives calling for gun control. This display of flowers represents lives lost to gun violence.

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

what type of people should not be able to purchase a firearm. Ideas around this include so-called red flag laws, which enable a process for preventing gun purchases by people experiencing a mental health crisis; stronger permitting requirements or licenses for gun owners; and banning the sale of guns to those who are convicted of domestic abuse or other violent crimes.

As we put the news together for this issue, there is talk on Capitol Hill of a bipartisan agreement that would add some new federal gun restrictions while also funding better youth mental health services and school security, a deal forged in the wake of the deadly school shooting in Texas. It is unclear what the prospects are, as this would require 60 of the 100 senators to approve it.

Meanwhile, polls show a majority of Americans support mental health restrictions, universal background checks, red flag laws and bans on high-powered weapons and ammunition. This general support for change, however, continues to run up against a large and politically focused contingency in America who oppose gun rights restrictions, who are backed by the world's only unfettered constitutional guarantee to own guns.

WORLD

The Russian invasion of the Ukraine continues, with devastating consequences that are rippling out into the rest of the world. When the war began, nobody imagined that it would last this long; the conventional belief was that Russia's surge of weaponry and troops would enable the country to establish air supremacy and control Ukraine from above.

That has not been the case, because Ukraine continues to stun the world with its relentless fight to prevent a Russian takeover. But the cost has been massive: nearly 50,000 lives have been lost in the war thus far, millions of people displaced, and more than \$600 billion in damage done within Ukraine's borders. And despite a massive military aid package for Ukraine that was recently approved by Congress, Russia has begun to take a decided upper hand in the eastern part of the country, the side closest to the Russian border.

Because Ukraine and Russia are both major producers of wheat and the materials necessary for fertilizer, the war has already begun to put the world's food supply in a perilous state. There are an estimated 30 million tons of grain stored in Ukraine that the country is struggling to export out around the globe right now.

The country feeling the effects of this the most right now is Somalia, an East African nation of about 16 million that is experiencing its worst drought in nearly four decades. With the supply of food aid tight, hundreds of children have already died of starvation and millions have been displaced, forced to flee their land to cram into refugee shelters inside and outside of the Somalian borders.

SPORTS

As Free Minds goes to print, the two winter pro sport seasons are heading for an exciting finish.

In the NBA, the Golden State Warriors took a major hit with injury

luck last year, with their two legendary shooters – Steph Curry and Klay Thompson – missing major time. This season, they came all the way back, easily advancing to the finals with series wins against the Denver Nuggets, Memphis Grizzlies, and Dallas Mavericks.

The Boston Celtics, led by its gritty defense and young core of Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown, had a much harder path to the finals. After making quick work of the Brooklyn Nets in four games, the Celts toughed out a 7-game slugfest with Giannis Antetokounmpo and the defending champs, the Milwaukee Bucks. They followed that with another seven game series against the Miami Heat.

As we print this, the series between the Warriors and Celtics stands even at 2-2. Either the more recent dynasty in Golden State will be resurrected, or the league's most decorated team will notch its 18th championship trophy.

On the ice, the Stanley Cup Finals are set to begin as we write this. From the Western Conference, Nathan Mackinnon and the Colorado Avalanche finally made their way to the championship game after several years of flaming out as a frontrunner.

They will face the juggernaut from the Eastern Conference Tampa Bay Lightning, led by Steven Stamkos and Nikita Kucherov. The Lightning have won the past two Stanley Cups and if they prevail again this year, they will become the first team to pull a threepeat since the Shaq- and Kobe-led Los Angeles Lakers of the early 2000s.





MEDITATION: PEAK ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE MEDITATION

By Kelli

We've all heard about how athletes who suffered "the yips," "slumps," or "got in their heads." As just one recent example, we can look at Steph Curry's shocking shooting slump earlier this season. He hit rock bottom in a game against the Heat in early January, making only 3-of-17 from the field and just 1-of-10 3-point attempts. One of the NBA's leading scorers, finished the game with only 9 points that night! It was weeks before he returned to his expected stats.

Sportscasters and athletes often use the all-purpose term "headcase," for an athlete whose emotions get in the way of their performance. While it sounds derogatory (nobody wants to be called a "headcase!") it literally refers to a state of mind that is unfocused and uncontrolled. It is the opposite of mindfulness. Some of the best-known past and present athletes practice meditation – LeBron James, Derek Jeter, Russell Wilson and the late Kobe Bryant among them.

NBA coaching great Phil Jackson has been one of the most visible proponents of meditation and mindfulness as an avenue to achieve peak athletic performance. Before every important game, he had his players (first the Chicago Bulls and later the LA Lakers) sit in the dark and focus upon nothing but their breathing for 10 minutes. That may not sound like a long time, but when you try it, you will see it takes discipline and practice to achieve mindfulness for that long. Jackson has 11 NBA Championship rings, so clearly, he was doing something right!

What is mindfulness? "Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens." – Center for Greater Good, Berkeley

You've all read in previous issues about the benefits of breathing and meditation. With sports though, these practices have been proven to boost athletic performance by: helping you focus; helping you cope with pain, calm your fear; strengthening your immune system; reducing negative self-talk; increasing your resiliency; helping stabilize your emotions (better control your moods); reducing your stress; improving your sleep so you get the rest you need; and helping you see "blind spots" that may be holding you back.

So whether you're getting ready for a pick-up game of basketball, or training to run your personal best on the track, feel free to try the following simple meditation. This will work best if you can find a buddy to read it aloud while you meditate (and then switch roles) but if no one is available, try reading through the script a few times before closing your eyes and practicing the meditation.

Start by sitting in a comfortable position, with good posture. Make sure your feet are planted on the ground, shoulder-width apart. Keep your back straight, but relaxed. Allow your chin to fall gently toward your chest, lengthening your neck.

Now, focus upon your breath as it enters through your nose and fills your body. Your chest rises and falls. Your belly inflates, and releases. In... and out...

Your body and instinct take over... you are simply observing.

As thoughts arise in your mind, just acknowledge them, but let them float away, always coming back to your breath.

Try to observe your breath in this way for at least a minute...

Now visualize yourself engaging in your chosen sport...

See yourself performing at your absolute peak...

Your body is strong and athletic...

Your muscles are powerful...

Your focus is absolute...

All of your movements are perfectly coordinated and controlled...

You see your body moving in exactly the way that you want it to move...

You may experience negative thoughts, such as "I'm not feeling 100%," or "I can't do this as well as I once did." If these thoughts enter your mind, just observe them and let them go. Return to your positive visualization. See yourself performing to the height of your ability...

When you are ready, you can return your focus to your breath. Follow each breath in through your nose... and release it through your mouth. You are strong. You are competent. You are coordinated. You have control of your mind and your body!

Return your attention to the room. And now go crush it on the court, the track, the field, wherever! Remember, the more that you practice mindfulness meditation, the more skilled you will become, and the more you will see the benefits manifesting in your performance and your overall health!

REENTRY PROFILE

Interview with Cliff

Free Minds member Cliff returned home in 2019 after serving more than 34 years behind bars. A gifted athlete, Cliff decided to share his love of basketball with children and became a coach. Free Minds Advocacy & Leadership Development Specialist, Shannon, sat down with Cliff recently to learn more about his experience.

Shannon: What role have sports played in your life?

Cliff: Sports played a big role in my life. Growing up I liked basketball, so I got involved playing in clubs after school. I was a shorter guy than some of the others so I wanted to see how far I could go.

Shannon: How did you get into coaching basketball?

Cliff: I had a few surgeries on my leg so I'd given up on playing sports myself. My nephew was involved with this rec center and had heard that I was a good coach, so he talked to the lady and she said, "Bring him down!" I came down a few times, started talking to some of the young guys. The lady said she would like for me to come help and that's how I got into coaching the youth.

Shannon: What's the hardest part of being a coach?

Cliff: I was a good player and I played hard, but they say you can't coach people the way you play, you have to coach them the way that they play. It's about being patient with the young kids. Coaching is just staying on top of them, trying to make sure they understand the game. I figured since they were tall and young that they would know a little bit of the game, but you just gotta teach it to them.

Shannon: What's the best or most rewarding part of being a coach?

Cliff: When you can get the kids to be better players. When you can teach them, and get them disciplined in the fundamentals of the game, that's a good thing. I'm enjoying coaching the kids to have fun. And that's the most important thing I always specify: have fun first. Because if you take it personally, you're going to start pointing fingers and probably disrespecting one another. So have fun first, but in the process of having fun, always think about winning.

Shannon: What are some of the values and principles one can learn from playing sports?

Cliff: Respect, and being respectful to one another – that's the most important thing when you're playing the game. Accepting criticism when you're doing wrong, and accepting when the coach is getting on you and letting you know you're doing wrong. If they respect me as a coach, then they'll respect the things that I say to them.

Shannon: What are some of the differences you see in the kids now versus when you played sports as a kid?

Cliff: I think they don't have that work ethic! When we were growing up, we always wanted to win every game. We were competitive. We hated to lose. We'd get mad, upset, or hurt

when we lost. Sometimes we didn't shake the opponent's hand because we were mad they beat us. It was much more competitive than it is now. I think we played more team ball than they do now. I think we played better defense than they do now! Kids now are so athletic, when they get the ball they wanna throw it up, alley-oop, dunk – just touch the ball and put it in the air to the rim. But when I force them to play a half court game, you see they don't know how to set back picks, set picks for their shooters. It's a lot different from when we played.

Shannon: How do you get the kids to get to a mindset of "team first" instead of "me first"?

Cliff: I noticed when we had practice, I had two guys run up and trap the guy with the ball. That's why I tell [them] to pass the ball to the open man. You have to swing the ball. I specify that this is a five-on-five, not a one-on-one. When the opposite team is playing together, and you all are playing one-on-one basketball, you're not going to beat that team. There's no one person in the world that'll beat five people. So the only way you have a chance to win is by playing team ball, playing together. Have confidence! Have faith in your team. When you don't pass the ball when they're open, you're saying you don't have confidence in your teammate.

Shannon: How do you channel those lessons into success for the team?

Cliff: I say, "Listen. If you don't put in hard work at practice, you're not going to put it into the game." They came to practice one day and I let them do them. We had the game the next day, but they lost. I said, "You know where that comes from? Y'all didn't want to practice." So then when they came in to practice the next day, I asked them, "Are y'all trying to win? Or are y'all just trying to go out there and get swept? If you want to win, you have to do things to win. You can't just go out there and ask for a win. You have to play for a win, and you have to play together to get that win." So they said, "Coach, what do you want us to do?" So, I got them together, we started swinging the ball, got some guys to help with passing the ball, and I helped them with their picks. I don't try to move too fast because I know they're young – they're 11 and 12. I focus on the fundamentals of passing the ball to the open guy and getting back on defense. I force them to shoot the hardest shots in basketball, not just layups.

It makes a big impact on me to be able to teach kids to be competitive in a sport that I grew up loving. I also know it's important to keep the kids off the streets and keep them active, involved in things. Whether it's football, basketball, music – something that lets them show their talents. It's impacted my life. All I've wanted to do is work with kids because I got into bad situations as a kid and I don't want [the kids I work with] to follow in my footsteps.



REAL WORLD OF WORK WITH COACH ANTWAN *Interview with Zoe, Free Minds intern*

Zoe: Can you tell us about your incarceration and your history with Free Minds?

Antwan: I was incarcerated at sixteen in 2006 and charged as an adult. I was in the juvenile block when I heard about Free Minds. I was never a big reader back then, but I was a very outspoken person. I had an influence on the block. It was a new program on the block so everyone was rebellious to it. I sat down and saw their outlook and their vision to cope with incarceration. I relayed the message to the other inmates and was a positive advocate on the block for the book club.

When I came home after six and a half years as a juvenile, I did the Free Minds reentry program and served as an outreach coach. I went into various junior high schools and high schools to talk to youth, sharing my experience, and listening to their stories too, giving them an outlet. It opened my mind to work with youth and I learned a lot about myself. I can't change the world, but I can spot somebody who can. Free Minds has the vision and the motivation to help me see another outlet in life. I found out this was my calling in life, giving back and uplifting the youth. Helping people on and off the field. Some of the youth I work with don't have a father figure. They don't have anyone else.

Zoe: Was there a transformative moment in your life that led you to Free Minds and to coaching?

Antwan: I am the last child out of five. Over the years before and during my incarceration I lost everyone but my mom

to gun violence. I lost my father, my three brothers, and my sister. They were all murdered one after the other. There was a repeated cycle of death that traumatized me. That trauma had an impact on me. It caused me to lose hope in life. Working with the youth and seeing the impact I can have on an individual child's life, and having an impact on a team's life, it gave me back my hope. I really mean something now.

Zoe: When you were released from prison did you know that you wanted to be a football coach?

Antwan: I always played football and had a passion for football. Always. Even throughout my incarceration, I played football. So, when I came home I had a son who was seven at the time when I came home. We tried basketball, but he wasn't too big at basketball. We gave football a try. We went to the field and saw a lot of other little kids playing with the school. When I picked him up from school I saw them there. So my son joined the team. My son would have bad moments at practice, but whenever I was there he had an excellent practice. So I started to stay on the field more and more. A lot of the other kids would adapt to how I was coaching my son. So I started to coach them too. After one season, all of the parents wanted me to be the head coach. So, I became the head coach.

Zoe: And you now coach through the school your son goes to?

Antwan: Yes! I have been doing it for three years. I have been the head coach for two.

Zoe: How has the team grown or improved over the years?

Antwan: The process has been phenomenal. The build up process is what it is all about. I have had these kids since they were five years old, and they are seven now. So the growth and the experience and everything we have accomplished, the traveling, it has been beautiful. They have been getting better and wiser. The level has been getting tougher and tougher. I love them like they are mine. I have twenty-six players, they are all my sons and daughter. I have twenty-five boys and one girl.

Zoe: What are your goals for the Hornets and your own career goals for the future?

Antwan: Last year we got to the DC state championship. We came up short, 12-6. So this year we are going to win the championship and bring it back home to DC. That's what I want to do for the Hornets. It's going to be a group process and a lot of fun. Over the years we will continue to grow. We got new helmets coming in, thanks to help with fundraising from Free Minds. So it is going to get better and better each year.

Zoe: Do you have any other career goals or are you just focusing on football?

Antwan: I want to use this as one of my paths. As I said, the kids are seven years old now and I have them until they are thirteen years old. I want them to be my way into the high school field. To be a high school head coach and so forth. So if they blossom I can go to college coaching and from there NFL coaching. It starts here though.

Zoe: So you can go up with the team you know and help to mold them.

Antwan: Exactly.

Zoe: What do you love the most about coaching?

Antwan: The love back man, the interaction. Me and my voice having an impact on them. Me being so important to them. That feeling right there is unbelievable!

Photo below credit: the Watkins Hornets Youth Association (<https://www.watkinshornets.org/>)



CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

We would like to congratulate the following Free Minds members on their accomplishments:

- ★ NH received his GED
- ★ TH received his diploma
- ★ SW started a writing workshop on his unit in the feds
- ★ DJ got married!
- ★ DK received his GED

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

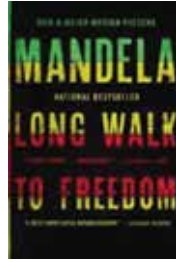
WHAT WE'RE READING

with Neely

Have you recently read a book that left an impression on you, good or bad? We want to hear about it! Send us your thoughts (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next "What We're Reading."

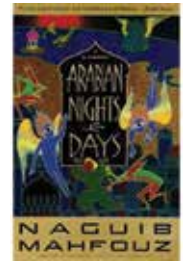
- **AHA: *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela**

Nelson Mandela is a man like no other in the world – in the likes of Malcolm X, MLK Jr., Gandhi, and some others. But to do all that he did for his people against all odds, go to prison for it, and then become president later down the line puts him at the top of the list. After watching the movie, "Long Walk to Freedom," the book filled in the rest of the story.



- **Julia: *Long Division* by Kiese Laymon**

This is a novel that tells two interconnected stories, one set in the current time period and one in the 1980s. I haven't finished the book yet so I'm not totally sure how the two stories will come together, but the story starts with a teenager named City who lives in Mississippi and goes to stay with his grandma after getting in some trouble on a nationally televised competition. In his grandma's town in Mississippi, he gets drawn into a story about a missing girl, a white man who might be in the KKK, and some mysterious woods that might just have a portal to the past.



- **Tara: *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig**

I just started *The Midnight Library*. It's a novel about a woman named Nora Seed, who is going through an intense period of depression and regret about the choices she has made in life. She finds herself in the Midnight Library, and when she reads the books in the library she can see herself living out all the different lives in the books. She finds renewed hope through reading--something we can definitely relate to!

- **AC: *Arabian Nights and Days* by Naguib Mahfouz**

This book is such a dive into the pool of the human condition; full of reality mirrors within frames of the fantastic things that we believe and yet don't see. Truly fascinating. The one thing that jumped out to me was a list of six obstacles you have to face to attain the rank of "devout." I thought about this and decided that it is also true that only after passing through these six obstacles can we say we have truly lived and we can say that we know what it feels like to be a human.

ANNOUNCEMENT: BOOKS HALL OF FAME!

In our last issue, we asked you, our readers, to nominate your all-time favorite books to the Free Minds Books Hall of Fame. Please continue to send us your book nominations along with your reasons why you think it belongs in the FMBHoF (see what we did there?)!

Our nominees for the FMBHoF:

- *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein
- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as Told to Alex Haley
- *David Walker's Appeal* by David Walker
- *Blood In My Eye* by George Jackson
- *The Throne of Glass* series by Sarah J. Maas



What books would you recommend for the Hall of Fame?

SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHED AUTHOR

Many of our Free Minds members have published books and we'd like to celebrate their accomplishments! If you have published a book, please send us the title and a short description that we can print in an upcoming issue of the Connect. All books must be available in paperback on Amazon.com. Free Minds will not list books that include explicit sexual material, gratuitous violence, or discrimination against any group of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or disability.

Lyrical Kites by Brian Gilliam

Description from the author: *Lyrical Kites* is about letters in a form of poetry written from prison in a creative way, that allows me to express the thoughts of my mind and the feelings in my heart. Words put together from a solid foundation. Black is the color that has a lasting imprint on my life. God has made me Black, So I guess it's only right. I am a young Black male from the inner-city. What does it mean to be Black? Is it just the color of my skin? Or the way I talk? Plus the way I walk? The way my hair grows? Or laid out in the street? Surrounded by yellow tape and white chalk?





RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

**An update to our February/March 2022 issue*

re-stor-a-tive jus-tice

noun

1. A system of criminal justice which focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large.

For those of you who read the *Connect* on the theme of Well-Being, you will remember FM Member, MR's story about forgiving the young man convicted of killing his younger brother. He wrote:

(In 2020,) our little brother "E," a talented and successful local DC rapper, was shot and killed in the streets of DC. When I learned of his death, I felt like I'd stepped on a landmine with nowhere to take cover. Initially, I won't lie, I wanted revenge! By the grace of Allah though, I realized that we couldn't let traumatic grief consume us. We had to seek higher ground. Personally, I knew I had once been in the shoes of the young man who pulled the trigger. But now I realized, my siblings and I had been thrust into a unique position of breaking the cycle of gun violence...

...I can sincerely say that I have forgiven my brother's killer. I hope that this in turn will allow him to forgive himself and foster within him a greater appreciation for human life. I will be writing a letter to his judge advocating for him. I have urged my family to go to his court date and sit with his family. We've all lost something. But we can choose to use my brother's death as a legacy to promote life.

Recently, MR wrote to update the FM family:

*Just as an update, the young man who was charged with my lil' brother's death was sentenced yesterday. During the court proceeding, my sister told me that he read a very heartfelt victim impact statement. She said he made full eye contact with members of my family as he spoke. It was so moving that apparently, even the judge teared up. Afterward, his mother came over to my family to apologize for what her son had done. This led to both families exchanging hugs. What's crazy is that that's just how I envisioned it taking place when I wrote my essay for the *Connect*.*

My lil' brother's case ties into the bigger picture of rising violence in America. This includes daily bombardment with violent imagery in the news (mass shootings), TikTok, video games, movies, and now even the Oscars ("the slap!") Unfortunately, we often just move on after the bullets hit their target. In essence, we simply "absorb" the violence. Seldom do we get to see LOVE after the fact. RECONCILIATION after the fact. And in this case, the HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS of two grieving families who took the hard but necessary steps to heal together.

Big shout outs to MR and his family. This is absolutely restorative justice in action!

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

The Body Keeps the Score

with Neely



The current BAM book is *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel Van der Kolk, M.D. An expert in trauma-informed therapy, Van der Kolk discusses how trauma literally reshapes both body and brain. *The Body Keeps the Score* exposes the tremendous power of our relationships both to hurt and to heal – and offers new hope for reclaiming lives. Both a profound and vulnerable read, we are eager to hear your thoughts.

1. Van der Kolk talks about imagination as critical to wellbeing, allowing us the opportunity to envision new possibilities (p.17). Is imagination important in your life? What role does it play?

AHA: Imagination is important in my life. Being incarcerated a long time, you imagine that you are somewhere else you want to be. When you're reading, you may imagine you're in the story vividly taking many journeys, just like when you write. The role it plays is important, since it can get you through rough days, or just free your mind from these walls. So yes, for many it gets you by.

AS: Imagination, or for me, "concentrated visuals or reveries" (lol) plays a big part in my life when I balance it with goal-oriented thoughts and will power. I like to keep reminding myself that imagination sometimes beautifies what you want to achieve rather than the minute details and hard work. My imagination is indelibly attached to my everyday actions.

JL: Imagination has been an important tool in my life from childhood until this day. During childhood, I was under the watch of an abusive step-father who made me sit in my bedroom for many hours a day. I was cool with being in the bedroom because it kept me and the step-father out of each other's sight, and I'd let my imagination soar when playing with the few toys I had or with my baby sister. During my school and college years my imagination served me by visualizing what I read in books and writing rap music. Or I'd imitate certain people to make students and teachers laugh. These were the ways my imagination proved critical to my wellbeing, because it helped me mentally escape some of the harsh realities in my life and broke me from some of the shyness when around my peers.

RGB: Imagination is more important than intellectual skills, but without an education, imagination can be toxic and poison us. Imagination is like oil, but it needs formal education to become gasoline. Imagination is like gold that needs the refining process of formal education to become wealth.

2. On p.240, Van der Kolk discusses the practice of "free writing," where you look at an object and start writing whatever comes to your mind. Have you tried this before? If not, try it out. What object did you use, and how did you feel after completing the exercise?

AS: I always free write. When I first joined Free Minds, you all asked me what my favorite genre of poetry was and I said, "Musings" (my own genre) because I just write what I feel and what's on my mind. I never do spell checks or rough drafts because I want to see, when I look back on it, my growth and development.

JL: When trying "free writing," I used a square piece of pink sticky-note paper. The pink paper reminds me of occasional stomach troubles I had once in a while. Momma would sometimes give me some Pepto-Bismol to try and settle my stomach.

AHA: I have tried this practice a couple of times. One time I did it after seeing a colorful bird I've never seen before outside my window. After I did it, I felt good. Like I created a small story as to how this bird would travel and reactions people would have upon seeing it.

3. How common do you think trauma is in our society? Do you think the main audience for this book should only be therapists, or is it important for everyone to know? How might society benefit if more people were trauma-informed?

RGB: The source of human society is the mind. Trauma in all its forms destabilizes the mind. In the same way, we are hyper-focused on the health of the "physical" body. The smart people are beginning to realize that we have to produce mental health. Coming to prison has given me the opportunity to gain control of my mental health. I've been in prison 25 years plus. It was worth it. No mental health = no health.

AHA: Trauma is in our society more often in this day and time, so when you see the things that affect our communities and then a pandemic comes and it becomes more devastating as we have seen in the aftermath. This book is important for everyone to understand what affects us and know the signs to seek more help when needed. This I believe will help society and benefit us as a whole to know how to deal with trauma.

JL: I believe that trauma is more common in our society than what most figure. Particular daily events can leave a person traumatized. There is simply no way that African Americans are not still shaking off the collective trauma caused by their past enslavement in this country, especially when considering the fact that the torturous, subjugating methods of those times (hangings, beatings, shootings, and other forms of harsh punishment) continue to be used today. Just hearing of the harsh sentencing by the courts or witnessing police brutality is enough to traumatize people in many ways, no matter the skin color. I strongly believe that gun violence is due to trauma and causes more trauma. I really do not know if society might benefit if more people are trauma informed.

AS: Trauma is so ubiquitous throughout our society, that sometimes we do not realize we are traumatized. This Roe V. Wade stuff can traumatize people, the Jan. 6 insurrection, or even something as common as an argument. It's all relevant to people's tolerance level, so it's vital that everyone reads this book so we can not just overstand ourselves, but also those around us. Then we would know how to address it and move forward.

4. Which of the techniques mentioned on trauma healing (in Chapters 13-20) stood out to you the most? If you are comfortable sharing, are there any techniques mentioned that you would like to try or have already tried? How did it affect you?

AHA: I would say restructuring inner maps in Chapter 18, "Filling in the Wholes: Creating Structures." One technique I have engaged in was CBT – Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, since it's a class that can be taken in the BOP. I have tried it and benefited from it. It affected me in many ways that changed my behavior, and dealt with things in the past in many ways using the methods from this class when approached with a situation.

AS: I always wanted to try the Rorschach Test, just to see my diagnosis. When I would see it in movies, I thought it was a bogus test.

RGB: Mindfulness training or sitting meditation for at least 30 minutes per day, at least twice per day. For the first, say, 12 months, you don't notice. After about 18 months of consistent practice, your brain chemistry actually changes. This will improve everything your brain does. Think about the brain as the eyeglasses of your mind. Your mind sees through your brain. Consistent meditation practice gets your brain out of the way of your mind.

JL: The healing that stands out to me is found in chapter 14 – Language: Miracle and Tyranny. In chapter 14, Mr. Van Der Kolk states: "While trauma keeps us dumbfounded, the path out of it is paved with words, carefully assembled, piece by piece, until the whole story can be revealed." (p. 234) I find this statement correct because as I wrote a manuscript of my life's journey, certain traumatic experiences that lay dormant began to surface piece by piece. These memories would cause me to stop writing for a while, but then I realized that the more traumatic memories resurfaced in my mind, the more my internal enemies were revealing themselves. Without a foe, a soldier never knows his strength, thus, internal enemies are to be conquered by exercising an inner strength. And as I finished writing the manuscript, I finally got to see those enemies that plagued me for decades. Words matter.

5. Were you surprised to hear about the lower crime and incarceration rates in countries that prioritized affordable health care (p. 169-170)? How do you think crime and incarceration would change in the United States if we started prioritizing health and wellness?

JL: I am not surprised to hear about the lower crime and incarceration rates in countries that prioritize affordable health care. Hopefully, if the U.S. began prioritizing health and wellness, crime rates would drop.

RGB: Crime in the US is an intentionally manufactured object. Mass incarceration, flooding the streets with guns, and poverty-generating schools create the crime problem. Then the political ruling groups make a lot of noise about being tough on crime and the cycle starts again. Prisons are where criminals are manufactured. Watch your children, focus on their education. Keep them focused and engaged in self-development.

AHA: I was surprised to hear about the lower crime and incarceration in these other countries who focus on more important factors. If the US did right, some of the wrongs this system has created, since they will prioritize more on helping others who need it before it becomes a problem.

6. If you are comfortable sharing, did reading *The Body Keeps the Score* provide any clarity or insight into your own life? Did your understanding of the connection between trauma, the mind, and the body change?

AS: This book did further my overstanding on the mind and body because it informed me of the latest science and studies, which I like to always know about. I think this is the best book we've read thus far.

RGB: I'm Buddhist and have been going to Buddhist "college" mind training. So we get a more in-depth form of what's in this book. What's in this book is actually what religions have been attempting to teach our ancestors. Psychology/Psychiatry is now using scientific methods to improve the effectiveness of mind training.

AHA: Yes, this book provided a lot of clarity and insight into a lot I wouldn't have thought of in my life, which opened my eyes. It changed a lot by understanding how it affects people so I now understand the connection between trauma, the mind, and body which changed a lot for me knowing how it may have affected my mind and body, but now knowing how to process it and use what I've learned.

JL: *The Body Keeps the Score* did provide some clarity and insight into my life, especially why I am so defensive at times. However, I was already somewhat aware that trauma affects the mind and body.



AROUND THE WORLD: HOW TO TRAVEL WHEN YOU CAN'T

By Aiyah, Free Minds Friend

For various reasons, there'll be times in our lives when the choice to leave is not ours to make. Against our will and every far calling of the road, against every promise we'd made to be elsewhere, we are here, and there's very little we can do about it.

Some of us will manage to release our fight, erase the memory of our plans, accept what's become familiar. But for the others, that's hardly the end of our story. We can't go; neither can we mute the voice telling us to. We imagine not only where we'd rather be, but who we could be *there*.

I have two confessions. First, after so many years of running on the road, I am unable to leave. For the first year in 5 years, I am not planning another escape. And for a variety of reasons, some my own, some imposed on me, I will have to stay someplace I'd rather not be in, for now.

My second confession is that in nearly every instance I've traveled, it's been in the pursuit of a desperate hope for change. But the important truth is that I am standing in the same emotional territory I was in years ago. I've never left. It's been easier and a lot more alluring to change my physical environment than to do the painful work of altering the emotional one I've lived in.

Because traveling is so much about wanting change, a shift in perspective, something unfamiliar to observe, to walk within, I believe these are experiences we can replicate internally.

And it seems too cliché, too easy to suggest that we begin by traveling inside our bodies. But in us all is enough unknown and untouched territory to keep us traveling for the rest of our lives. You know who you are now, the person your circumstances have shaped you into, but who are you without that story, those memories, that family, that neighborhood? To stay in one corner of our bodies is like visiting one city in a country and thinking we've seen it all. It's like reading about one country's government and thinking we know its people. And just the way we'd sit with a variety of characters to understand a country, we'll have to sit with the crowd within us to understand the diversity of the world in us that appears deceptively simple and singular. And all it takes is a few stolen moments of solitude throughout the day to step into the body, and begin the long walk through the country of our lives, our stories, who we've become, who we could have been had our circumstances been different, and who we could be if we defy those circumstances. And as we discover and walk through more unfamiliar parts of ourselves, the world before us begins to look different. We could be waking up

to the same scene we've always hated, but something has shifted in our world. We notice details around us we hadn't noticed before. We walk through the same place with a stunned feeling of foreignness. Because our environments reflect our internal worlds so strongly, a change within us sets in motion a change around us. It can be the same hallway you passed through a week ago, the same view you've always woken up to, but nothing feels the same. And that is exactly the sensation we get when we travel, minus the comparison of the familiar with the unfamiliar.



Still, there is something special about traveling, and the way we experience freedom and life in places unfamiliar to us. Not every part of travel has its substitute within us, but after years of traveling I can say honestly that its substitute is always *near* us, and it begins by allowing ourselves small liberties every day. We could disrupt the numbing routine of our lives with a sense of adventure through little changes in our lives. And it's these changes, carried out each day, that pour into our lives a sense of unfamiliarity, a feeling of departure from the rhythm of our lives. It could be that instead of reading you pick up a pencil and start sketching, or writing yourself. Or that you change your music for a day, or what you do before going to bed for a night. We are leaving behind not our disheartening settings, but how we navigate through and experience that setting. However dull, however colorless and repetitive, we can leave the familiar and experiment with all the ways we can live the life of a traveler, having never left.

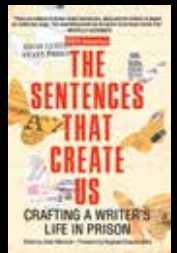


A GIFT FOR YOU *by Kelli*

Do you love presents as much as I do? If so, read on...

Have you ever heard of PEN America? Founded in 1922, PEN America works to ensure that people everywhere have the freedom to create literature, to convey information and ideas, to express their views, and to access the views, ideas, and literatures of others. Their Prison and Justice Writing program has amplified the work of thousands of writers who are creating while incarcerated in the United States.

In addition to sponsoring a highly-regarded national annual prison writing contest, and offering writing mentors to people who are incarcerated, the organization has just published *The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting A Writer's Life in Prison* (Haymarket Books). The book provides a road map for incarcerated people and their allies to have a thriving writing life behind bars – and shared beyond the walls – that draws on the unique insights of more than fifty contributors, most themselves justice-involved, to offer advice, inspiration and resources.



And guess what? We were contacted by the wonderful people at PEN America with an amazingly generous offer. They will be sending each one of you Free Minds members currently serving time in the Federal Bureau of Prisons a copy of *The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison*. This book is chock-a-block full of wisdom, advice, exercises and resources for aspiring writers. Just like us, the folks at PEN America believe in your talent and want to read your stories. Be on the look-out at mail call and let us know your thoughts on the book after you've had a chance to dig into it!

FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

1816 12th Street NW
Washington, DC 20009

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: WEALTH

Our next issue will focus upon the idea of WEALTH. How do you define wealth? Is it always measured by dollars? Or are there ways to be wealthy beyond money? What impact does your own history have upon your wealth? What is "generational wealth?" If none of our ancestors have ever been wealthy, what additional challenges might we face in acquiring wealth? How integral is wealth to your vision of "success?" Has your approach to creating wealth changed since you were younger? If so, what motivated this change? Do you believe in pursuing wealth in community with others? Or is it a singular pursuit? Do you believe all can achieve wealth? Or is it more like a finite "pie," where if someone else has more, you will invariably get less? We look forward to reading your poems and essays on the topic of WEALTH!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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