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Vol. 6, Issue 2

Free Minds Connect



ARTWORK BY
FREE MINDS
MEMBER LV

THIS MONTH'S THEME: LEGACY: MAKING OUR MARK ON THE WORLD

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THE PAIN OF FOSTER
CARE ABUSE**

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CREATES HIS OWN
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SHAME: FROM PRISON
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Free minds
Connect

TALKBACK WITH TARA

Is brought to you by...

TARA

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CL, SAT, DG, LG, MK, Nick,
Will, Sean, Derrick**

FM Members

**JANET, MICHAEL,
JOHN, MIMI**

FM Friends

We are ALWAYS looking for new contributors. Write or draw something for our next issue and send it to us! (Pieces not published in the Connect will appear on our writing Blog, and at a Write Night Event!)

Free Minds Book Club
2201 P Street NW
Washington, DC 20037
(202) 758-0829

**Next Issue's Theme:
Inside/Out**

Happy Spring Free Minds Family!

How awesome is the cover art by your Free Minds brother LV? I absolutely love the image of Free Minds members tattooing the world and leaving a permanent mark of positivity. It perfectly visualizes this issue's theme of legacy. Thank you for all the letters, poems, art and certificates of achievement you send to Free Minds HQ. Keep them coming; they give us immense joy!

I recently learned the term *legacy token*; a legacy token refers to, for example, when a young person like the Columbine shooter writes down their plans for mass shooting in the hope of becoming famous. This issue is the *exact opposite* of that as the writings you will read inside are about building and spreading a legacy of *healing and peace*.

I want to give a huge shout out to our many inspiring contributors for this issue. To Nick for having the resilience to overcome abuse in the foster care system, and still have such a warm, loving heart. To Will for not letting his conviction stop him from his "conviction" to help returning citizens find purpose and employment. To our new friend Michael for reminding us to never let the toxic power of shame define us. To Hope House for fostering the love and connection between incarcerated parents and their children. To Free Minds mom Janet for her legacy of strong family bonds, and to all of our contributors for their uplifting words. Thank you!

We can all write a piece of history by writing and sharing our stories. During the era of slavery, most enslaved people were forbidden to read or write, and as a result countless stories were lost. But we do have some precious stories that were passed down through generations. There were brave people like Solomon Northup, a free man who was kidnapped and enslaved for 12 years. He knew how to read and write, and when he escaped he wrote a book about his experiences. You might have heard of it. It's called *12 Years A Slave*, and in 2013 it was made into an Oscar-winning movie. Solomon Northup's story is an important piece of our history.

At Free Minds, we want our legacy to be that we amplified the voices of those directly affected by the criminal justice system. So let us all keep reading, keep writing, and keep building our collective legacy.

As KB writes, *If I could help direct 20 young men to learn self and find that true path to manhood, and those 20 show another 20 - then my footprint is left and my legacy is born!*

Keep pressing on and pressing footprints of hope.

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

Tara

FREE MINDS HQ



By Melissa

Free Minds Invited to Largest Writing Conference in the US!

Every year, the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) offers the largest literary conference in the nation with over 12,000 participants from across the country.

In February, Free Minds was invited to lead the AWP 2017 Service Project, in addition to participating in a panel and poetry reading. Just like the monthly On the Same Page: Write Night poetry feedback gatherings, tables were lined with poetry by you all and conference attendees were invited to respond to the poems. Be on the lookout for their comments on your poetry!



Former Sudanese Child Soldier Visits



Emmanuel Jal is an author, activist, and former child soldier in the Sudanese People's Liberation Army. Six years ago, Jal visited Free Minds' members at the DC Jail to speak about his memoir *War Child*. In February, he came back to speak to formerly incarcerated members at the Reentry Book Club called "The Build-Up." Terrell, FM member, remembers Jal's first visit to the jail and now seeing him again after all those years, gives him even more inspiration.

Free Minds Goes to Boston

Staff and Poet Ambassadors travelled over 400 miles to Boston, Massachusetts to spread the word of Free Minds. Boston is one of the oldest cities in the country, and it is home to a lot of historical buildings and artifacts from the Revolutionary War. We toured Boston's historic sites, including the Old State House, where the Boston Massacre - one of the events that incited the American Revolution - took place, and the Harvard campus. We hosted an On the Same Page: Write Lunch with Harvard Law students and a Write Night with high school students learning about social justice at a local church.



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



MY LEGACY IS...

"Oh how humbled and awakened I have become by the uplifting and healing legacies left behind by our historic figures who dedicated their lives trying to find solutions to problems affecting humans as a whole, and the legacies of those whose mission is to help others become better.

"I dream of one day impacting the world with my vision of inspiring young men through literature, music, and film. The beautiful reward of recognizing that we were entrusted with Duties and Responsibilities to uphold, in order that we maintain a more peaceful world, safer communities, stronger families and healthier lifestyles.

"If I could help direct 20 young men to learn self and find that true path to manhood, and those 20 show another 20 – then my footprint is left and my legacy is born!" – KB, Free Minds Member

"The legacy I hope to leave to this world, I pray will one day read this short missive. You see I want to leave a legacy that embodies the best of my DNA. When you look into her big brown beautiful eyes that sparkle like a pool of diamonds in the midnight sky or experience that smile that has the intensity to warm the coldest heart, you'll think to yourself, "What a treasure to behold." A priceless piece of my existence. A tangible connection of enduring strength that had to overcome heartaches, setbacks, and failures.

"The physical proof that love conquers all and that forgiveness is God's redeeming power to resurrect a broken soul from the ashes of self-destruction. The depository of all my hard lessons in life processed, shaped and formed into a brilliant, loving, spiritual, compassionate and socially conscious leader that will reflect the best of an indomitable spirit, and have the knowledge that she is cut from the cloth of survivors. She will know when she gives the world her best, she honors the legacy of the roots she comes from and personifies her name, but most important of all she will know that she was a dream come true.

"My Precious Gift. My Legacy." – QS, Free Minds Member

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WORDS OF WISDOM

By JG, FM Member

After much studying, researching and digging, I finally found my legacy, which had been buried and willfully omitted from the history books and popular culture by a white supremacist society. I would often look at TV and wonder why people that looked like me were so under represented; I still do actually. We learn so much about the Greeks and Romans and English by way of all the movies and television shows depicting their culture and mindset. I'd bet that you could probably ask any random American regardless of race, religion, age or gender, to give you just a random fact about the Greeks or Romans and they'll be able to do it easily. But, can they do the same for the Phoenicians? Or the Moors? Probably not.

Europeans and the descendants of Europeans find it necessary to celebrate and remember their ancestors; after all, we are today what our foremothers and forefathers were yesterday without doubt or contradiction. I, too, feel this need to celebrate and remember my ancestors, who were and are the original people of the earth, who are the Light Bearers, the Great Civilizers of the world, the authors of the origins of life itself. Their blood runs through my veins. This is my legacy. However, as mentioned above, this knowledge has been hidden from us, therefore in the past few centuries all my people have been able to do is mimic the mindset and behavior of others. Given this fact, my responsibility and duty to share this knowledge and pass this legacy on becomes that much greater. As the Prophet Muhammad said, "The ink of the scholars is holier than the blood of the martyr," so I will write. I'll do my best to share what I've learned through my writing, and sometime in the near future I will be sharing these stories on the big screen as well because images, like words, are very powerful, and can cause paradigm shifts, and we are really in need of a paradigm shift. I will also strive daily to direct my thoughts, feelings and deeds in accordance with the natural order of life, Nature's Law, in the spirit of resurrecting the mentally dead and lighting the torch once again for all to see.



THE WRITE WAY

By Julia

Today's "Write Way" is inspired by FM member TTB who has been writing a kind of poem called a haiku. In a bit of serendipity (serendipity: the occurrence of events by chance in a happy way), this morning while I was browsing Twitter on my way to work I stumbled across an article in Washingtonian about haikus and learned that I had been approaching them the wrong way!

What is a haiku? A haiku (pronounced hi-ku) is a traditional form of Japanese poetry that is very short. Haikus are meant to be said in one breath. They are only three lines long. Most people in the U.S. (myself included) have long thought that haikus had to follow a rule about the number of syllables in each line: 5 syllables in the first line, 7 syllables in the second line, and 5 syllables in the third line (5-7-5). Well, today on my morning commute I learned that this is not strictly true, but is actually due to a mistranslation from Japanese. In Japanese, it's meant to be 5 (then 7, then 5 again) sounds in each line, which is not always the same as syllables (the example in the article is that *strength* and *cat* are both one syllable, but *strength* takes longer to say, so it is a longer sound).

The main thing then about a haiku is that it is a very brief poem in three lines that typically uses images to say something about life or the natural world. A traditional haiku often includes contrast between two images. "What makes a haiku work is not the syllabic structure, it is the sense of transformation and suggestion contained in the imagery of the poem" (Washingtonian).

A sample haiku:
The warmth on my skin.
Fire falls beneath the trees.
I see the sun set.

Here, the image of fire is contrasted with the idea of the sunset, which is usually a peaceful image. The use of contrast in this poem changes the way the reader considers the setting sun.



Writing Prompts:

THE NATURAL WORLD: Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to write a haiku—a poem in just three short lines—that uses imagery (for example, the sunset that looks like fire) about the world or a moment in your life.

OR

INSIDE/OUT: Write a haiku that compares/contrasts your inner self and your outer self. How do people perceive you from the outside? Who are you really on the inside?

FREE MINDS MAILBAG

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

"I loved reading about Terrell & Imeesha, all their ups and downs through his bid had me (lol) because I'm going through that right now, but it's a constant struggle so that was real. Charlie's story was the epitome of a strong and determined black man who would not give up, now look at him. But as usual Robert's story was the best in my eyes, because he really has weathered one of the worst storms for 17 long calendar years. Now he is home working 2 jobs that seem hard as hell but I guess the patience and respect he learned in prison is still with him. I salute him and wish him the best success!!!" - CM

"I'm feeling Larry's definition of "keep it movin" on page 3—"absorbing the blow, focus on a new direction and keep it moving in a positive direction." He demonstrates very wise insight when suggesting one takes a negative situation and experience and make it have a positive outcome. We as humans have the power to do that. I appreciate his remedy of how to treat our emotional wounds by confronting and airing them out." - JL

"I believe that with every taste of failure creates and plants a seed for success, so what I'm faced with I must remain cool and keep it moving." - MH

"The legacy I'm building now is to be the best linguist I can be. I'm learning several different languages (Spanish and Arabic). I have the time in prison now to study and learn, and I'm taking advantage of it. I also want to be known as a person who helps my people and gives encouraging words, not putting them down." - MAH

"I like the poems, the words shared, the pictures, and most definitely the insight into the lives of those in Africa (Rwanda) and how the trip there went." - JW



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

FAMILY TIES

The column where FM family and loved ones weigh in.

By Kelli

One Free Minds mother believes in a legacy of positivity and holding family close

Free Minds mother Janet was born and raised in Washington, DC. Because she understood the dangers that lurked in the city's streets, she worried when her son Sean turned 14 and began to cut school and miss curfew. Sean's father died when he was a baby. As a single mother raising three children, Janet couldn't compete with the lure of the streets and the peer pressure from Sean's so-called "friends". He was arrested on adult charges at the age of 17 and is now serving a 7-year sentence. I spoke by telephone with Janet, who has since moved to Alabama to raise her youngest daughter in a safer environment.

KELLI: Can you tell me about Sean's teenage years?

JANET: I worried about Sean all the time. It caused me to lose a lot of weight. He was in the streets and hanging with the wrong friends. He was being a follower and not a leader. Whatever they asked him to do, he did. At the time, Sean said his friends was more like his family to him than I was. He would listen to them before he would listen to me. Many times I had to go out at in the middle of the night and look for him. Anything could happen that time of night.

KELLI: How does Sean's incarceration affect you and your family?

JANET: I miss him being here. I miss him acting crazy and I miss his laughter. I feel sad that he's missing out seeing his little sister's teenage years. She's about to be 13 and it's real hard on her. All the other kids in the neighborhood have older brothers and sister to do things with them. And she has to look up to their big brothers, because Sean isn't here. Still, he works hard to be a positive influence in her life. I think he feels bad because he promised her he wouldn't get in any more trouble, and he broke his promise. Now he always wants to talk with her on the phone and he asks her about everything, especially how she's doing in school! (Laughs) He's almost like a father figure to her.

KELLI: What lesson do you think is most important for Sean and other young men behind bars to understand?

JANET: First they need to know that their actions affect not just them, but their families too. What young men do in the

ASK HF ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

Dear H.F.,
I am locked up for six more years. I have a daughter and a son that have different mothers. They will be teenagers by the time I come home. I hate that I'm not there for them during this important stage of their lives. I'm afraid all the time about them making the same mistakes that I made (being in the streets and everything that comes with that!) Before long, they will have temptations. I worry that their mothers may be putting things in their heads about me that cause them not to listen to me. What can I do from prison to help them? More than anything I want to be a good father to my children. I want to help them so that they can be better than I am! Can you pass along some advice?

Sincerely,
K.J.

Dear K.J.,
The best thing that you can do to help your children is to help yourself. Don't focus on what you can't do from prison, but focus on what you can do. You want your children to stay out of trouble, then you stay out of trouble in prison. You want your children to go to school, then you go to school in prison.

Send your children copies of your progress reports that demonstrate that you have been free of disciplinary infractions. Send your children copies of your diplomas, certificates, and degrees. Send your children copies of your education and psychology data transcripts to show them that you are taking classes to improve your education and to address your criminal thinking.

Don't worry about anything, just focus on what you can DO. Oftentimes, parents invest too much time on what they TELL their children and not enough time into what they SHOW their children. Just BE the human being that you want your children to be wherever you are and always share your personal progress with them through documentation and pictures. If you do good, you'll attract good, and that's all that is ever in any of our control!

Sincerely,
HF

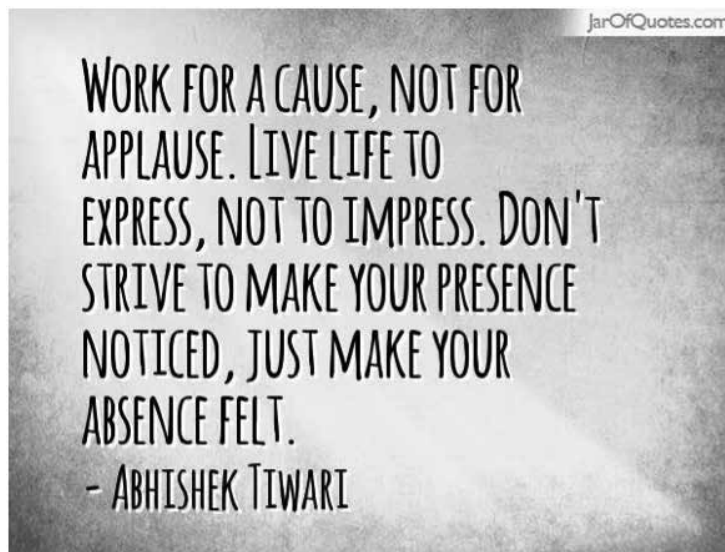
streets causes a lot of mamas to cry! I want them to keep their heads up and stay positive. They need to put as much positive stuff in their lives as possible. And that includes positive family members! Family is constant and is always there for you. I think Sean's learning this lesson. I see growth in the way he talks and what he writes in his letters. He's always talking about positive things now instead of the negative. He always tells everyone he will be home soon to help them out. He wants to be a mentor so he can help young kids so he can teach them to go in a positive direction. He has also learned to express himself to us through poetry. He sends me poems and they make me cry because I see he's maturing and getting his life together. I hope that Sean and others in his situation will reach for their goals and let the world know they are somebody and they can do good. You don't have to do bad things to be noticed.



MY LEGACY IS...

continued from page 3

"I've always been a thinker, but when I was 16, I was just constantly trying to prove myself. That means that I went with the crowd. Whatever they were doing, I was doing it too. I was trying to prove myself, and that's what got me in trouble...To be honest, I never had a concept of the future. I was busy planning my legacy. I didn't expect to survive and so I just wanted to be remembered as someone who was bad. I wanted my tough reputation to be glorified. I wanted kids in the neighborhood to be saying, 'Yeah, I knew him!' Now when I look back, I see that it was all just ignorance and stupidity." – TB, a Free Minds Member who has been home and working for almost 5 years



"When my time is done on this Earth my legacy will be my four seeds: Timothy II, T-Heyler, Tianna O'li, and TJ, the best parts of me; what brave children they are to face the world every day without their father...I would also like to add an additional perk to my already existing legacy, and that is, at least, the completion of Book 1 (to a series that I am hoping I have the drive to finish), called Hyperlings. I want the world to vicariously live through the amazing characters that I am having so much fun, and at the same time, so much trouble with bringing to life. I want everyone to know that even though I was in federal prison and have a record that these two terrible things against me didn't hinder me or define who I am as a person, or take away from my intellect. My four seeds and Hyperlings will be my legacy." – TTB, Free Minds Member

DC PHOTOS OF THE MONTH



We all know and love the Ben's Chili Bowl on U Street...but did you know that they have a second location on H Street?



The neighborhood around the Rhode Island Avenue station is now home to a lot of brand new apartment buildings, restaurants, and stores.

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



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

CONVERSATION WITH KELLI

Hey Free Minds Little Brothers,

Today's coffee drink is a peppermint mocha--a shot of espresso with steamed milk and chocolate and peppermint syrup. Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and let your imagination take you away. Grab your cup and join me.

You all know how much I love to write. You may remember sitting next to me in book club while I put a pen in your hand and physically wrapped your fingers around it when you just didn't feel like writing. As obnoxious as that may have been (my bad), I hope you understand I did it because I wanted and *still* want to share with you the joy of writing. Since our theme is **legacy**, I've decided to tell you about my history of writing in journals. Yep, I'm talking about all the way back to the 4th grade when I wrote every single day into a red "pleather" (plastic/leather) "diary." It even had a lock and a key which I hid very carefully so my big sister wouldn't read my carefully penned rankings of my three favorite boys in the class. What I didn't count on was my sister's treachery. She didn't even bother to look for the key. She just took a scissors, sliced open the little strap of "pleather," and read the whole thing!



The vandalized diary!

(Big Sis' was mean when she was 12!) Despite this humiliation, I have never stopped keeping a journal (let's use the word "journal" because "diary" sounds a little teenage-girl-ish). I have filled journals all the way through my teens, my early 20's, the early years of my marriage, the childhoods of our two kids, and my ummm, "current" years. I don't journal every day. I write when I feel the familiar tug to put pen to paper and record what's happening in my life, and, more importantly, how I feel about it. Writing is like therapy for me. It helps me to make sense of my world and myself. There's a famous 20th Century American novelist named Flannery O'Connor who said: "*I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say.*" I totally identify with this!

What's cool about writing a journal is it preserves a particular time in our lives. When I go back and read what I wrote years ago, I can not only recall otherwise forgotten details of my life, but I can see how I reacted to the world around me. I can remember how I felt. And, maybe best of all, I can see how I've grown.

If you're not sure how to start, try writing your journal entries as if you are writing a letter. To yourself, to your child, even to your not-yet-born child! You can even write to an imaginary friend. Have you ever read The Diary of Anne Frank? Anne was a young victim of the Holocaust who kept diary as a young teen while her Jewish family hid in an attic from the Nazis. That diary was published internationally after her death and informed the world on the horrors of the holocaust. Anne Frank was so lonely, every day, she wrote in her diary to her imaginary friend "Kitty."

Keeping a journal while you're incarcerated provides an invaluable lens through which your loved ones might better understand what you've gone through. For example, imagine sharing entries from your journal with your children when they are young adults. They would be able to see not only what you experienced, but what you thought about while you were behind bars. How much you missed them and what you wanted to teach them!

The point of a journal is to just put down on paper what's going on in your head--your thoughts, emotions, experiences, revelations, and your big ideas. You may decide to hide or destroy some journal entries, never showing them to anyone. That doesn't mean it was a waste! Half of the value is in the writing itself. Then again, who knows? Maybe one day, your journals will be published as a best-selling memoir available through Amazon.com! No matter what though, when you keep a journal you create a legacy.

Til' we share our next cuppa'... Stay strong, keep reading and writing, and keep your minds free!

Your friend,
Kelli

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

By Sean

I think that it's wrong
That brothers killing each
other these days
For no reason
Most of it come from reppin'
another neighborhood
Or over something dumb
It make me feel

Like we don't have no respect
for each other
Or respect for our community
I hope that it can come to a stop
So that the crime rate can drop
And people can live their lives
And move on in the world



POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Legacy By CL

Changing the world is not as easy as it seems
Stepping stones help like ideas and dreams
My input, your input, his and hers over there
The world would be different if we knew how to share
Share the resources and wealth
Share everything and become one
Teach the youth to be shooting stars
Instead of teaching them to shoot guns
My legacy, your legacy
It's all the same
One step at a time
Making the world a better place

Unspoken Legacy By SAT

The ambulance passed by and sirens
The sounds of death
The streets are silenced by it as a sign of respect,
But no respect for the police cause they lost that privilege,
The same village it takes to raise a child is neglecting them
By letting the courts correct them
And that's incorrect cause they're corrupt and will end up corrupt-
ing them,
They're men that are cut from the same cloth that was cut from
the hem
On the end of the robe worn by the most high in the courtroom
A fraternity of entitled and privileged, even they live by a code of
silence
The only difference is, sign language means rep in the hood
When you know how to stack your alphabets
Or when the alphabets are coming, that's when it's cool to be
selfish,
Don't pass the rock off for someone else to end the game,
Cats is hungry till crunch time, then they want somebody else
to take the blame
A statement documented separated the real from the fake
Always recognize the fur on a mouse and shredded skin from a
snake
Avoid all traps and learn your way out of the maze
Cause once you're on your own, it's up to you to know your these
things,
Information is power,
Opinions make for good conversation, but facts are the only
things
that make a difference,
The gift of gab will only get you so far until you have to be quiet
And your eyes have to tell who you really are
Cause it's hard to lie with your mouth closed and only be
able to rely

on your facial expressions
When your whole intent is to leave a false impression.

Legacy By DG

Growing up a legacy is all I ever wanted,
Thought if I had a lot of girls, cars, clothes & money it will mean
sumthing,
Wanted everybody outside of S.W. to know who I was,
When they sit back & reminisce they'll remember lil cuz,
Probably would've did life or died young,
But I wouldn't have cared, long as I died totin' that gun,
Now I want my legacy 2 be that of a man who refuse 2 be a
statistic,
A man there for his family & showing his kids dreams are very
realistic,
A real legacy is guys like Barack, Malcolm, & M.L.K.,
To the likes of Goliath, J.F.K. & Thomas J,
Where things you did & stood for going to be remembered
til da earth evaporate,
Man my legacy will be good if I can just be HALF AS GREAT!!

Legacy By KJ

If I died right now, I can honestly say that nobody will miss me
No one will bend over my casket with warm lips and kiss me
Salted tears won't stain my cold cheeks
Nor will there be pleas for me to return from death's mystery
Yeah the woman that birthed me
That I've seen less than 200 times in my life will probably cry
But that's expected etiquette
All three brothers and one sister have always been irrelevant
That is, until I hit the lottery or wins a million dollar settlement.

So if I died right now, believe me
The only thing I'd leave
Is a bunch of people I didn't like
And victims who wish they would've been the ones to kill me.

An abundance of misery
My gift which I bestow on the world.
Sad.
Pitiful.
Disgusting.
Shame.

To forever have the ignominy attached to my name
To die with honor but without honorable fame.
Unable to will nothing because I was nothing
And nothing from nothing leaves nothing
All the same.

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POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

But I ain't dead yet
My spirit is well kept
My desire to live is stronger than ten Vietnam vets
The desire to live as a living example
Of what one can do before his soul is put to rest.

So I continue to build myself, and better myself,
Strengthen myself,
Mind, body and spirit.
A ready missing tooth smile but not a joke.

So the eulogy of my legacy will denote
That despite hardships and heartache
Pain or oppression
My head remained high
And I never, ever, ever, ever, broke.

Remember Me **By LG**

Product of my environment
Menace to society
Unlawful abiding citizen
Allergic to sobriety
Very unstable neighborhood
Every neighborhood was unhealthy
Low class of section 8 housing
The life of the unwealthy

Fighting was inevitable
Peace was not an option
Became a savage to survive
Street life was my adoption

Obtained an outlaw degree
I was a high school drop out
A conviction left me incarcerated
It was best for me to cop out

I gave up hope of freedom
Prison became my home
Death was the least of my worries
Just wanted to be left alone

I discovered my true potential
My hope has been regained
The chain is finally broken
My shirt is no longer stained

Peace is my only encounter
My mind is free and clear
I must lead by example
My disposition is sincere

Full of a loving heart
That shines like the brightest star
Overflowing with blessings
That heals the deeper scar

Productive in my society
A mentor to the lost
My work is never finished
Supportive without a cost

Before I meet my destiny
I desire to leave a legacy
I want to be a pioneer
When people remember me

What Legacy Will I Leave Behind??? **By MK**

When it's all said and done
What legacy will I leave behind???
The answer to that precious question
Is held in the hands of time...
As for now in this present moment
I give the gift of my life in these lines...
I am a Muslim, I am a PO-ET, I am an artist
Painting pictures that will forever shine
Brighter than the darkness of crime
Would you believe even while confined
I find peace in having a FREE MIND...

Legacy **By QS**

A legacy is the story you give the world
Of all the experience that you went through.
It's grown through the struggles and storms you endured,
The product of the past which will forever define you.

A story continually unfolding that stretches through time,
Transmitting from one generation to the next
This journey we call life in one's mind.

It has the ability to teach, inspire and change lives,
A legacy, like pure matter, will never die.

Thirty to fifty years from now it won't matter if your intentions
were hollow,
What will matter is what you did of value
That will shine like a beacon of light
For other generations to follow.
Peace



REENTRY PROFILE

Free Minds Member Nick's Story of Success

By Kelli

If you had asked me what I wanted out of life when I was 16, I would have just shrugged my shoulders at you. I wouldn't have had any answers to questions about my future. I didn't have dreams. – Nick, age 27

Last April, Free Minds member Nick came home after serving 10 years in federal prison for a crime committed as a juvenile. He wasn't surprised to find himself on the DC Jail's juvenile unit at the age of 16, on his way to prison.

"I felt like all my life I was always messing up. Even when things were going good, I knew sooner or later, I would ruin it. So yeah, when I'd lie in my bunk in jail and fall asleep, I was hoping I'd wake up and the whole thing would be a dream. But no, I wasn't surprised to be there," he says.

As a child Nick was shuttled from home to home. It was the heyday of Rayful Edmond in DC, and Nick's mom was addicted to crack. He lived at times with his father for whom he was named, but who was not his biological father. At the age of 9, he was sent to a terribly abusive foster mother who called him "monkey" and told him nobody wanted him.

"She used to beat me and hit me in the face," Nick says. "She'd keep me home from school because she didn't want the teachers to see my bruises. She locked me in a dark bedroom all day long. I found a box of Dr. Seuss books and would read them all day long. Then she took away the books. That experience was worse than anything that ever happened to me during 10 years in prison!"

After a year in foster care, thankfully, Nick was adopted by his godmother. When he would go outside with friends though, Nick would see his mother up the street prostituting herself. He wouldn't give up on her. "At night, I used to sneak out and look for my mother. We'd sit on the street corner and talk. I knew she was high, but I just wanted her to get herself together so I could live with her." Eventually his mother would get locked up and serve 7 years for carjacking.

At 15, Nick began stealing cars himself. He and his friends soon moved on to carjacking. In the end, it was an attempt to carjack an off-duty police officer that led to Nick being shot more than four times, arrested, and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

"When I first met Free Minds, I was just shut down. My reading skills were terrible. I was so scared to read in front of people, thinking I wouldn't be able to pronounce a word."

Eventually, Nick did read Cooked, Jeff Henderson's memoir about becoming a celebrity chef after a long stint in California prison. The book excited him and he began dreaming of a career as a chef. Then he read Hill Harper's Letters to an Incarcerated Brother. "That book spoke to me. It was like we were having a conversation and he was preparing me to come home!" Nick says.

In addition to reading and writing, Nick says that meeting some very self-aware men at a facility in Missouri aided his greatest period of growth behind bars. "They were conscious about politics, religion, and history. Being around them sparked something in me and I started reading more than I ever had before. We talked about the changes we could make in our communities. It gave me inspiration."

By the time he was released, Nick had detailed plans for a catering business and his own nonprofit to serve at-risk youth. He applied for more jobs than he can count, his chances often doomed by a background check. Nick didn't give up though. He eventually landed a job as a caterer at a retirement community in Delaware. Now back in DC, he's working his way up as a grill cook at a Chik Fil-A restaurant.

"You have to be able to multi-task and it's fast paced, but I like hard work! And the people are all nice. We laugh around and joke a lot!"

The job provides a much-needed paycheck and Nick is gaining and strengthening core culinary skills.

"Every hour I spend working in a kitchen is just helping me build that foundation I'll need to become a chef and start my own business!"

Nick is also pursuing a full-time position as a reading tutor in a program for youths who are struggling with their schoolwork.

As if that weren't enough, Nick is an active Poet Ambassador with Free Minds, speaking several times a week at outreach events around the city to share his story and bring a message of nonviolence to other young people.

His master plan includes a college degree from UDC in human services and building a catering business that will hire kids who've been in foster care, giving them job skills training and work experience. "These kids feel like there is nobody out there who cares about them. I want to be that person who steps up to let them know I will be there."

Nick's mother is sober now and they have a strong relationship. He and his girlfriend are expecting their first child—a son—any day. They plan to raise him to be a patient, loving, wise and curious human being.

Nick hopes his legacy will be as a person who gave back to his community. "I want people to say I helped homeless people, families that couldn't provide for their kids, and children who didn't have anyone else. I hope to be remembered as someone who didn't judge people for their race, religion or sexual orientation. I hope they'll say that I just helped people, 100%!"

Free Minds could not be more proud of the beautifully positive legacy Nick is creating!



CHANGE TAKES TIME: THE WOMEN'S MARCH

By Mimi, Free Minds Friend

On January 21, I stood in a sea of women, men, and children near Independence Avenue at the Women's March. The crowd stretched around me as far as I could see, half a million people, so many people packed together that I couldn't move. Activists for women's rights and civil rights spoke over the loudspeaker about our responsibility and power. There were so many of us that when we began to march, we could not all fit on one avenue, and instead we marched on three. My feet hurt, I was hungry and thirsty (the granola bars in my purse were long gone), but I felt an overwhelming strength and hope. This crowd was ready to argue, protest, and speak out for love, for equal rights, for welcoming immigrants and refugees, for protecting our planet.

This was the first march I had gone to in a long time. I believe in many things. I talk about politics with my friends. I vote. But this last year, with all the anger and confusion in politics, convinced me that it's not enough to just vote for what I believe in. I have to be more active: call or write to our elected officials, speak up for the causes I support, and show up for protests. Peaceful protests have power to energize movements and make change.

Since the Women's March, I've been thinking a lot recently about what I can do to make this world a better, more equal and just, more loving place. I've been doing small things: writing to my



Photo: Mario Tama/Getty Images

senators and our political leaders, donating to nonprofits I believe in. Every time I take action, however small, I feel some of the strength and hope that I felt at the march. I know that together we can make a difference.

If you are speaking up for something you believe in, hold on to that hope. Remember, change takes time. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Stay strong, stay peaceful, and most of all, stay active.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the water to create many ripples." – Mother Teresa (activist)

"Before you act, listen. Before you react, think. Before you spend, earn. Before you criticize, wait. Before you pray, forgive. Before you quit, try." – William Arthur Ward (author)

"It's your place in the world; it's your life. Go on and do all you can with it, and make it the life you want to live."
– Mae Jemison (astronaut, first African-American woman in space)

"I'm not interested in my legacy. I made up a word: 'live-acy.' I'm more interested in living."
– John Glenn (astronaut)

"Legacy is not what's left tomorrow when you're gone. It's what you give, create, impact and contribute today while you're here that then happens to live on." – Rasheed Ogunlaru (author)

"I would like my legacy to be that I gave a voice to those kids I see every day in Jackson, Mississippi, and to those kids all over the country who are stereotyped and dismissed. I want to give them a voice. I want to give them a mirror." – Angie Thomas (author)



Mae Jemison



FREE MINDS MEMBER WILL'S STORY: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

By Melissa

Will grew up in a poor neighborhood that was heavily impacted by gang violence. When he was six or seven years old, Will's mother left. Will started getting into fights and by middle school, he was involved in a gang. When he was 16 years old, Will was charged and incarcerated as an adult. He joined Free Minds at the DC Jail. Will has been in and out of prison several times, a fact that he is open and upfront about. Part of his motivation to change his life came from witnessing this revolving door, the cycle of incarceration and recidivism.

In 2014, Will found out that he and his girlfriend were going to be parents. As a father-to-be, Will felt driven to become the man he wants his son to look up to. After many rejections from jobs, he decided to take a chance. A month after his son Dylan was born, Will founded Clean Decisions, a cleaning and general contracting company that hires returning citizens. He felt that providing jobs to formerly incarcerated individuals was not enough, thus he founded the non-profit organization Changing Perceptions founded a year later.

I spoke with Will over the phone about his nonprofit, his family, and what he wants for his legacy.

What is Changing Perceptions?

Changing Perceptions enables formerly incarcerated individuals (returning citizens) to reach their full potential, personally and professionally. In doing so, we provide them the tools to become an entrepreneur. Changing Perceptions provides on-site job training and experience with Clean Decisions, connections to mentors who are also returning citizens, and a supportive environment for people coming home from prison.

Why did you start CP?

There's many reasons why I started CP. My first reason is I wanted to be a part of decreasing the recidivism rate. One of the main challenges for those with felonies or a record is to get a job. I know the feeling of countless rejections. Thus going into my second reason, which is to break the stigma that former felons can not be business owners. Also, for the returning citizen to not sell themselves short in thinking that they only can get low paying jobs. They should reach their full potential.



What would be your legacy?

Just like the name of the non-profit, I would want formerly incarcerated individuals to change their perceptions of others. I constantly see in our society where the black and brown are divided. People of different backgrounds should work together to build WITH one another. They need to get out of their comfort zone and shake a stranger's hand.

I want my son Dylan to be proud of me. I don't want him to think of me as just a criminal. I want him to have a better life than I did growing up. I want him to go to college and have a career. Being a better man makes me a better father. I don't want to let him down.

Something from The Alchemist that has stuck with me till this day: "Always seek your personal legend."

What advice would you give other FM members?

I would say that you were put into this world for a reason. Think about your future. As the poet Joseph Addison said, "The great essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for."





REENTRY CORNER

By Keela

Greetings Free Minds Squad!

Okay straight off the bat, how many of you guessed that *Unyaka Omusha Omhule* means Happy New Year in Zulu? According to the responses we received, not many, but it's all good! Just a little bit of interesting background about the Zulu language, the word Zulu means sky. Also, Zulu is the most widely spoken home language in South Africa (24% of the population), and it is understood by over 50% of its population. It became one of South Africa's 11 official languages in 1994. Wow, how cool is Zulu!

Alright now, let me focus! I'm here with more awesome opportunities for some awesome dudes (of course that's you guys).

First up: (this may be a little nostalgic for some of you)

The Skyland Town Center Project – The Skyland Town Center is a new project underway on Naylor Road (right across the street from Good Hope & Alabama). I'm sure most of you remember the Skyland Shopping Center which featured a CVS, Murrays, a Discount Mart, AutoZone, a beauty & barber supply, and a host of other stores along that corridor. Well it's all gone, leveled to make way for the new Skyland Town Center. The New Skyland Town Center which will cost upwards of 70 million and feature, restaurants, shops, an upscale apartment complex with 468 units and many other new amenities.

Now, this is the part where you come in. The New Skyland Workforce Center, which by the way was put in place to handle the hiring of potential laborers to help build the Skyland Town Center, just announced last week that they are now moving into the recruiting phase. The new project will need many, many laborers to complete this project, which is estimated to take five years to complete. I have featured the Skyland Workforce Development Center before in the Re-entry Corner, but definitely thought that it was worth bringing back due to these new developments. Since the Skyland Workforce Development has been in

operation (since December 2014) they have helped 370 people secure employment, served 816 people (people either completing programming or receiving certifications) and have helped 243 people in resume prep and job search support).

The Skyland Workforce Center is located at 2509 Good Hope Road SE and also has partnerships with other community organizations which are housed in right there at the Skyland Workforce Development Center such as **SE Ministries** which offers personalized GED tutoring and prep, **Byte Back** which offers free computer instruction classes, **Thrive DC** which offers a 6 month employment assistance program that pairs clients with a job developer and caseworker that will work to make you job ready and get connected to employment. There's also Strive DC, **Strive DC** will put you through an intense 3 – week workshop that will prepare you to get hired and succeed on your job. A job trainer will show you how to market yourself and will connect you to employers. Then of course, there's the **Construction Job Referral** resource where the Skyland Workforce Center will refer candidates to construction positions, not just the Skyland Town Center Project, but construction positions in general.

If interested, please call the Skyland Workforce Center @ 202-793-2141, they also accept walk ins Monday-Friday from 9-4.

Well my Free Minds Squad, I hope this information will be of good use because here in our workshop at 22nd & P we got our Free Minds Squad on the brain always seeking ways to help you maintain. Now I am going to keep it real normal and just say **Peace** – Until next time!

Ms. Keela



IN THE NEWS

By John, Free Minds Friend

TRUMP'S FIRST MONTHS

Our last Connect focused on the election and inauguration of Donald Trump, a billionaire businessman with no political experience who tapped into unrest among some voters about terrorism, job security and immigration.

Here are a few of the biggest things that have happened since he took office...

Trump has ordered a halt America's refugee program entirely for the time being, and restricted travel of any kind from six Muslim-majority countries. This action is still being fought in court. Many European countries are facing elections in which at least one candidate favors similar restrictions of refugees. Much of this stems from the civil war in Syria, which has raged for six years and has forced hundreds of thousands to flee their country.

The Republican-led House of Representatives, with Trump's support, has introduced a replacement for the health care reforms championed by former President Obama. The new law would get rid of a requirement that all Americans either buy insurance or pay a tax, among other things. According to independent analysis the new law would cost about \$300 billion less, but would result in about 24 million people losing health insurance.

Trump has instructed federal agencies to begin construction of a massive border wall across America's southern border with Mexico. At the same time, the president has instructed Immigrations and Customs Enforcement to begin a more aggressive campaign of deporting undocumented immigrants.



Image Credit: United Nations

FAMINE

The Middle East has been the focus of foreign policy attention for most of the world: ISIS, the war in Syria, the actions of Iran since it reached a deal to not build nuclear weapons. But on a humanitarian level, the most troubling situation in the world today is playing out in Africa.

For the first time in nearly a decade, the United Nations has formally declared a famine, a term that means a rain drought so severe, it threatens the ability for people to find any drinkable water or produce any food to eat.

The formal declaration of a famine was in South Sudan, but other countries are facing similar conditions: Somalia, parts of Nigeria and Yemen. All told, approximately 20 million people are facing starvation, including 1.4 million children.

OSCARS

The award for Best Picture went to *Moonlight*, a small-budget film about Chiron, a young black man growing up in Miami, discovering his own identity and learning how to connect with others. *Moonlight* is the first film featuring an all-black cast to win the Academy Award for Best Picture.



Also nominated for three Oscars: *Hidden Figures*, a film about a team of African-American women mathematicians who served a vital role in NASA during the early years of the US space program.



IN THE NEWS



SUPER BOWL

You've probably heard and seen about this, so we'll keep it brief. The Atlanta Falcons came out hot, scoring at will in the first half of the Super Bowl against Tom Brady and the four-time Super Bowl champion New England Patriots.

In the second half, the Falcons got conservative, which you cannot do against one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time. Brady led the largest comeback in Super Bowl history, and the Patriots won the first-ever Super Bowl overtime game 34-28.

DMV SPORTS

Let's start with the good news. Both of the winter teams, the Wizards and the Capitals, are poised to make some noise in the playoffs. The Capitals are the number one team in hockey at the moment, and made a trade at the deadline for Kevin Shattenkirk, one of the best defensemen in the sport.

The Wizards started the season horribly, and all of a sudden are the hottest team in the NBA. Led by the scoring of John Wall, Bradley Beal and Otto Porter, the Zards are third overall in the East, and are only four games behind the first-place Cleveland Cavaliers.

Now, the bad news: The Redskins appear to be in free-fall mode again. They re-signed coach Jay Gruden to a two-year extension, but parted ways with General Manager Scott McCloughan (Mick-Clue-Inn), who is widely credited with turning the team around over the past two seasons.

Shortly after McLoughan got the ax, both of the Redskins top receivers – DeSean Jackson and Pierre Garcon – left for deals with other teams. And then, the worst part came: Pro Bowl Quarterback Kirk Cousins announced that he wanted to be traded out of Washington. The team has still not completed a trade, but is now expected to do so.

Ravens: Further down I-95, the Ravens owner made it clear to management that it's time to get back into the playoffs. So team has acquired the best defensive back (Tony Jefferson) and defensive tackle (Brandon Williams) available in the free agent market.





REBOUND

By Michael, Free Minds Friend

We met Michael at AWP—the writer's conference we told you about on page 2. When he told us his story, we knew we had to share it with you. We hope you find it as impactful as we did.

A few months after I arrived in state prison, someone introduced me to a man who was going home the following day.

"Congratulations," I said, envious.

I thought he would smile and thank me—would show some excitement about getting his freedom back. But he didn't. Instead he laughed, right in my face. At the time, I didn't understand why this man wasn't happy to be getting out. Two years later, after my own release, I finally understood.



Guys in prison spend a lot of time talking about how great things are going to be once they get out. They pin photos of Maybachs and flashy sneakers up in their lockers, tell you about the record label they're going to start or the bestselling book they've been writing. I knew an inmate who said he was going to buy a van and tour the country as a traveling minister. Three months after his release, I saw him back in prison on a parole violation.

I hate to admit this, but after I got out there were things I missed about prison. It's a place where society can't see you, judge you, or shame you any more than it already has. Once I was released, there was nowhere to hide. I felt naked. I was ashamed and worried that everyone could see what a loser I'd become.

There's an important difference between guilt and shame. To feel guilty is to feel bad for something you've done. To feel ashamed is to feel bad for who you are—to feel that your identity has been permanently stained. Guilt usually passes soon enough, but shame is deeper and harder to root out. If you aren't careful, shame can kill you.

I succeeded on the outside eventually, but not before I failed. I applied for jobs as a gas station attendant and restaurant dishwasher, because I thought that was all I was good for. No one ever called back. I violated parole and was sent back to jail, and wasn't even grateful when I was let out with a warning. I drank and sulked and thought it might be time to check out.

With a little less luck, I'd still be lying on a couch somewhere, depressed, eating cold spaghetti out of a stainless steel mixing bowl. But I reached out just enough that, by a complete fluke, I found some help: an acquaintance helped me land a job. One night at a work event, I was introduced to a professor who encouraged me to apply to graduate school.

Now I'm back in school on a merit scholarship, earning a master's degree in creative writing—despite being a convicted felon who never graduated college. I recently won an open mic story slam speaking about my experience in prison, I'm on the editorial staff of two literary journals, and my writing has been published more than a dozen times.

None of this seemed possible; I never believed any of it could happen for me. But all of it has—and it could happen for you. It will happen for you, if you refuse to be denied.

Life is still hard, every day, but every day I'm moving forward. The most important thing I learned in prison is that my life isn't about me. I owe it to the people in my life who make the struggle worthwhile. Everything I do, I do so I can walk with my head up, so my parents can be proud of me, so my baby niece won't grow up thinking her uncle is a loser. I do it so my legacy won't be one of shame.



STAFF PICKS: WHAT WE'RE READING

- Julia: The Ballad of Black Tom by Victor LaValle: A fast-paced novel about an alternate version of Harlem where magic exists, and a young man named Tom who stumbles across a world of power and danger. I would recommend this book to fans of urban fantasy.
- Aubry: But What If We're Wrong by Chuck Klosterman: The book explains how every generation thinks they have better ideas than the generation before, but inevitably the next generation comes along and thinks about the world differently. It tries to imagine what people in the future will think about our present ideas.
- Tara: What Color Is My World: The Lost History of African American Inventors by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. I found this in a box of books that was donated to Free Minds. It's a kid's book, but I enjoyed learning about all the inventions from African Americans that have been overlooked and not publicized, ranging from cell phone technology to open heart surgery.



WHAT THE YOUNG'UNS ARE READING

By Kelli



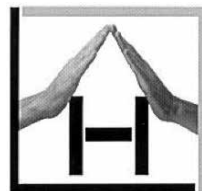
The young'uns on the juvenile unit just read Patricia McCormick's Sold. It's the story of Lakshmi, a 13 year-old Nepali girl whose poor family struggles in the mountains of Nepal. Lakshmi is thrilled when she learns her step-father has arranged for her to get a job in the big city of Mumbai, India so that she can help the family. Rather than a job as a house-maid though, Lakshmi quickly discovers she has been sold into prostitution. On February 28th, the award-winning author Patricia McCormick came from NYC to visit the book club. It was an awesome session and your Free Minds brothers were stunned to learn how pervasive this problem is not just in other parts of the world, but right here in the United States.

The "Not-So-young'uns" on the GED Unit are just finishing up Emmanuel Jal's memoir War Child. In the 1990's, Jal, like thousands of others, was forced to fight as a child soldier in Sudan's civil war beginning at the age of 7. The book tells of the horrors he experienced, his bold escape, and his 252-mile walk across the country to safety.

PAY IT FORWARD: BUILDING BONDS ACROSS THE BARS

By Kelli

For parents, the idea of legacy is often bound up in the future of their children. This doesn't mean a person should be measured by what kind of person their child becomes. It does mean that as parents, we have an opportunity to pass on the best of ourselves. To share our values, our guiding principles, and our own experiences with our children. But how does a person do this if he is incarcerated? It's challenging (*but not impossible!) to deepen your relationship with your son or daughter if you can only see them once or twice a year and you have to talk to each other through a sheet of plexiglass. Even



HOPE HOUSE

telephone conversations can be difficult when that woman keeps interrupting saying "This is a call from a federal prison, etc." (Grrrr!)

continued on page 18



PAY IT FORWARD: BUILDING BONDS ACROSS THE BARS

continued from page 17

Enter an amazing nonprofit organization--Hope House DC--dedicated to helping strengthen families and, in particular, the relational bonds between children and their fathers imprisoned far from home. We know that more than 2.7 million children have a parent who is incarcerated. This includes one in every nine African American children. More than 90 percent of the prisoners are men. According to Hope House founder and Director Carol Fennelly, many programs provide children of incarcerated fathers with a mentor, effectively *replacing* their fathers. Fennelly says that the mission of Hope House is to find ways for children's *own* fathers to nurture their kids.

They do this with several programs. One is an enormously popular Father/Child Summer Camp that brings children to spend a week with their fathers who are incarcerated at Cumberland FCI, in Maryland and Rivers CI, in North Carolina. The kids stay in a nearby camp facility and are bused to the prison each morning to spend all day with their fathers, doing crafts, playing games and sports, and writing and performing plays together. In order to participate, inmates must successfully pass several steps, including a record of good behavior for a year before the camp. Participants report that the camp develops strong new bonds between parents and children, setting the stage for a growing and ongoing relationship.

The Father to Child Teleconference program allows fathers at Rivers CI to communicate by video teleconference with their children every other week. Children go to Hope House in DC, an environment where they feel comfortable enough to share a song or a dance, or ask their dads for help with a homework project. Sometimes they even bring friends to meet their fathers.

Several facilities also offer Hope House's Father to Child Reading Program (*Cumberland – FCI and Camp; Rivers CI, Petersburg – Low and Camp; USP Hazelton; Correctional Treatment Facility; and Western CI and North Branch CI in Maryland*). Fathers are audio or video-taped reading a storybook aloud. The book and the recording are sent home to the child. Often it is the first time these men have ever read a story to their children! Can you imagine the look on the kids' faces when they hear Dad's voice reading a story just for them?

Coming soon, Hope House DC will implement the Homework Project at FCI Cumberland. Incarcerated fathers at Cumberland will work together to develop a weekly homework project through which they will teach their children values and critical thinking skills.

Three cheers to Hope House DC for paying it forward and helping families dealing with incarceration! They are making a difference in countless lives. If you are housed at any of these facilities, ask someone in the education office for more information on how to get involved.

*If you are not currently at a participating facility, don't worry. You can still adapt some of their ideas to use with your own children. Here are some possibilities:

- **Start your own *Father & Child Book Club*:** Have your child choose a book that he/she wants to read or is already reading. If the prison library carries that book, great! If not, see if a family member can order it for you through Amazon. If that fails, please write to us at Free Minds to request the book. As you read it, come up with questions to ask your child about the book. (*Which character did you root for? Why?*) Ask him/her to do the same. Then schedule a phone call when you can discuss the book, or write each other letters about the book. Together, come up with your own unique name for your club.
- **The 20 Questions Club:** Dream up 20 questions you'd like to ask your child. Send them to him/her in a letter. When they send their answers, they can include a list of 20 questions for you to answer. You will be amazed at the stories they will tell you! TIP: Avoid questions that can be answered with a yes or no. Instead ask questions such as: *Can you tell me a story about a time when you lost something important? Or even: What is your favorite color and why?*

One final note--We all know, sometimes the hardest part of writing a letter is what should be the simplest part: finding an envelope, addressing it and then getting your hands on a stamp. Enlist the help of a family member on the other end who is invested in your relationship with your child. It may be a partner, your child's mother, your own mother. Whoever it is, ask them to prepare some envelopes that are all ready to go, so that all your son or daughter has to do is insert letter, lick, seal and send!

Good luck and please share your stories with Free Minds. And if you have other ways of strengthening your bond with your son or daughter, send them to us! Who knows, maybe the success of your **20 Questions Club** will be featured in a future issue of *The Connect*!



AROUND THE WORLD: ELECTIONS IN THE GAMBIA

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

By Mbachur

Hello friends! Mbachur here again, with an update on the elections and past inauguration that happened in The Gambia recently.

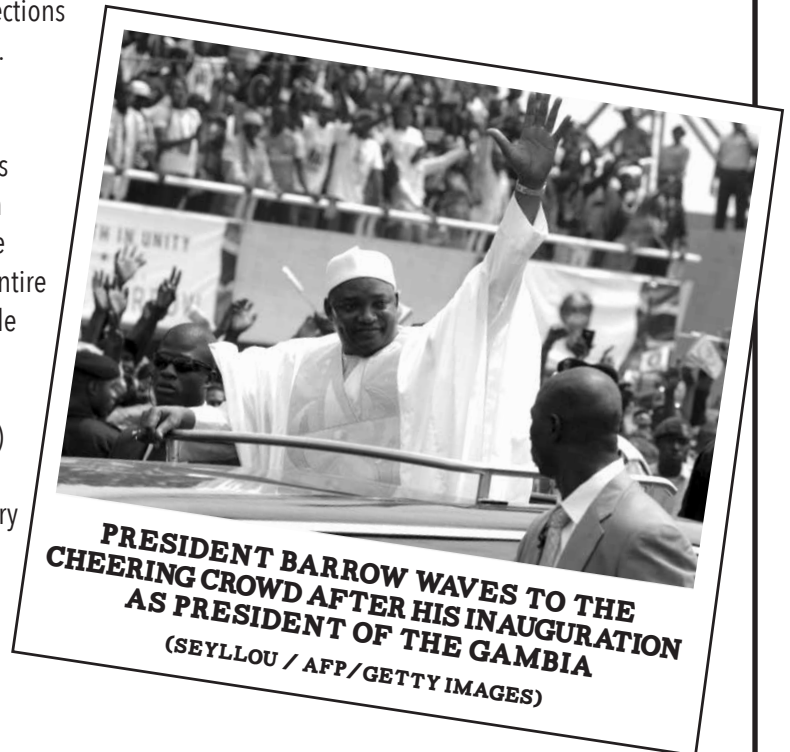
On Saturday, February 18, 2017, Adama Barrow was officially inaugurated as The Gambia's 3rd president after 20 plus years of rule by the dictator Jammeh. The Gambia was flooded with millions of people who celebrated the new president! But the former president Jammeh rejected the election results. The entire world was worried for the nation of The Gambia and it's people after the president refused to step down.

When Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced that they would send in military troops if ex-President Jammeh failed to step down by the time the January 19th inauguration rolled around, things began to get even more hectic. After closing three major radio stations, shutting off television, internet, and cable services, and numerous arrests of activists, Gambia's National Assembly declared a 90-day state of emergency in January. Many people fled the country in fear of their safety.

Although the state of emergency did not last the full 90 days, there were thousands of people that fled the country, including three of my mother's sisters and their children. From that point on, the newly-elected President Barrow stayed in Senegal for his own safety, and was finally inaugurated at the Senegalese embassy on Thursday, January 19th.

Towards the end of January, ex-President Jammeh agreed to go into exile, and he is currently in Equatorial Guinea, which is located in Central Africa. We have entered a new phase in the Gambian struggle for freedom and democracy. We are happy that we can now be at peace!

My family and I watched the live inauguration from the Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS) and were overwhelmed with tears of joy and so much happiness! People were laughing, dancing, and so carefree! Here in the United States, Gambians also celebrated the 52nd Independence of the nation with a huge celebration on February 18th. There were traditional ceremonies and celebrations in DC, Maryland, Atlanta, Florida, and even Texas just to name a few places. I want to thank all of you that have kept The Gambia and it's people in your prayers during these past couple of months! Hopefully I can take a trip in the summer and give you all more updates soon!

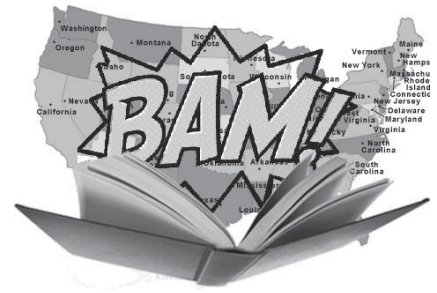




BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

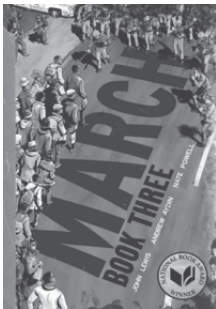
Free Minds long-distance book club
By Julia and Terrell

Hey Free Minds readers, our next book is on its way to you. If you don't have it by the end of April, please write to us to let us know. We're reading March: Book Three by Congressman John Lewis, the third and final book in the graphic novel trilogy March. If you haven't read the first two books in the series, here's what you need to know to catch up:



John Lewis (now a Representative for Georgia) was the chairman of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) in the 1960s, and he was a leader in the movement to end segregation, pass the Voting Rights Act, and promote education and opportunity for African Americans in the South in the 1960s. But that hasn't happened yet. Our story picks up in 1963, in Alabama, where tensions are rising between the activists and the state. After an act of horrific violence, John Lewis, Martin Luther King, and the other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement must find a way forward.

Discussion Questions for March: Book Three (from FM brother Terrell!):



1. In the beginning, did you think that Big Boom was a bomb? Did you know what was going to happen to the girls?
2. Bob Moses was a smart man, and he was well known in the movement. He started wearing a different style of clothes (page 43)—why? Have you ever tried to change the way people see you?
3. After President Kennedy's assassination, the protesters saw that his death was a way to bring people together. Have you ever been faced with a tragic situation that brought people together?
4. In 1963, black people couldn't vote, and if they tried they would be put in jail or worse. How do you think they felt about voting? How do you feel today about the importance of voting?
5. The N-word back then had a bad impact when white people said it. How do you feel about the history of this word?

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: INSIDE/OUT

The Inner Me versus the Outer Me
By Terrell

Since I've been home, I've seen that people still see me as somebody I am not anymore. I've seen that they see the outer me, and not me from within. It seems as though they want me to do things that I've grown out of, and go places I don't want to be. So for the next Connect, think about showing the inner you from the outside. How do other people see you? How do you show people that you've changed? How is your inner self different from your outer self?

Excerpt from "My Face"
by Derrick

*I think my face is only a disguise
To hide the pain that you cannot see
Because if my face was my heart
You'd probably see a different me*

Until then, stay strong and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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