

September/October 2017  
Vol. 6, Issue 5

# free minds Connect



## THIS MONTH'S THEME: LABELS

*HOW OTHERS SEE US AND HOW WE SEE OURSELVES*

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*Free minds*  
Connect

## TALKBACK WITH TARA

Is brought to you by...

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We are ALWAYS looking for new contributors. Write or draw something for our next issue and send it to us!

(Pieces not published in the Connect may appear on our Writing Blog and at a Write Night Event!)

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**Next Issue's Theme:  
Entrepreneurial Spirit**

Colorful Fall Greetings, Free Minds Family!

I'm writing to you all while sitting on the top level of a double-decker bus riding on I-95 on my way back from NYC. Wow, it's a whole new vantage point! I would have never noticed the bright red fall trees before. I highly recommend it. Megabus is a super cheap way to get to NYC from DC, and you'll feel higher than any truck with those huge, jacked-up tires could take you, lol.



Speaking of new ways to look at the world... turns out one of our former FM interns is on the same bus! How astonishing is it that as I'm writing about this issue's theme of "Labels," who shows up in the seat next to me but Lila who wrote about being labeled as the "girl with the weird hair" in a *Connect* article way back in 2012. Lila has an auto-immune disease that causes her to lose her hair. I hadn't seen Lila in 7 years and we had a fascinating conversation about her studies, travels, and identity today. Just like Lila, our FM writing coach Gabe shares in his essay that he doesn't let assumptions people make about his identity define him.

I'm going to go ahead and label something, though, and that's this issue. I'm calling it AWESOME ☺ Inside you will find so many insightful and inspiring essays and poems that I hope will get you thinking even more about the labels others give us and the ones we give ourselves. I am so grateful for the deep sharing of vulnerabilities in this issue from the FM family. Demetrius writes about "the look" he gets when he knows someone is labelling him, and Brandon tells us how being called a "sucker" by his friends led him down a path to incarceration. Todd shares with Jessica how after receiving a sentence of life in prison, he never gave up hope and let the label "lifer" become him. Thomas loves his new label of "working man"! You'll find powerful poems that give us all strength to shatter stereotypes and break free of negative labels.

Our new FM friend Josh, who is Native American, writes about why he finds the name of our football team, Washington Redskins, offensive and dehumanizing to him and how it affects our whole community. FM friend Nicole shares how her friendships with people with disabilities have shown her the deep harmfulness of the slur *retard*. We believe at Free Minds that sharing personal stories like these is crucial to building an inclusive and compassionate world. The more we write our own stories, the more healing and understanding happens in the world. Thank you for all your sharing, and keep those poems and stories coming!

Now let's all take on a label we love at Free Minds and one FM co-founder Kelli got as a kid – *bookworm* – and start slithering into reading this issue! Remember, readers are leaders!

Until next time,  
Free Minds Forever,  
Tara

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

## FREE MINDS HQ



By Melissa

### Free Minds Wins National Criminal Justice Association Award

Free Minds was honored to receive the National Criminal Justice Association's Outstanding Criminal Justice Program Award for the Northeast Region! Our Executive Director Tara accepted this award on behalf of the entire Free Minds Family at NCJA's National Forum in Long Beach, California. Way to go, Free Minds!

### Reentry Book Club Apprenticeship Recognition Ceremony

In July, we celebrated our Free Minds members

who have been participating in the Reentry Book Club and Job Readiness Apprenticeship with an awards ceremony at the July Write Night. The evening was filled with joy, pride, and even an impromptu musical break courtesy from your Free Minds brother Mark who sang "Happy Birthday."



(Pictured: Cake to celebrate our re-entry members' and their birthdays!)

### A Special On the Same Page Event with Massachusetts High School Students

During this summer, we hosted a group of high school students from Massachusetts for an On the Same Page event. Poet Ambassador Myron shared his experience in prison and life after incarceration as a returning citizen. His mother, daughter, niece, and girlfriend all accompanied him – what a strong support system!



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

# WHAT'S IN A LABEL?

By RS, Free Minds Member



Dictionary defines a **label** as "a mark or title of identification."

Applying a label to ourselves is easy – truth be told, we must be very vigilant of the labels we use to associate ourselves with. We run a risk of placing our character in a box, which ultimately, leads to no personal growth or lack of mutual understanding or respect for another person's label. When one embraces a label to define self, one must suffer the good and bad that comes with it. Some people have so many labels to associate themselves with, they'll never lose. To me, a label is an action that may work in one situation, but not

necessarily in another. Labels are not to be mistaken for **principles**, which should be paramount in all our lives. Principles are to be engraved in one's heart as truths that cannot be changed or be circumvented. Sadly, people masquerade with labels on oneself.

Principles are a vanishing commodity today. We all must embrace a lifelong pursuit of strengthening our minds or run the perilous risk of developing habits that are destructive to the human spirit and relationships. This also makes one grow dependent on others' ideas, opinions, labels, and ill-advised rules and regulations. Any fool can make a rule, and only a fool will follow it. We need to move past who we want to be looked upon as, or thought to be, by labeling, too, who we ought to be.

So, whatever label you affirm to be – be that in times of not just comfort and convenience, but when the storms of life test the validity of a man.

I end with a vital piece from Niccolò Machiavelli: "It is not the titles that honor men – but men that honor titles."

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AMERICAN?

By JL, Free Minds Member

Before my incarceration, I was around those labeled black, white, Puerto Rican, and a few Mexicans. It was obvious why Mexicans and Puerto Ricans were labeled such – they're from the lands known as Mexico and Puerto Rico – but it was hard trying to understand where the *black* and *white* labeling came from. Even the *African-American* label didn't seem fitting because no one in our family knew which part of Africa our ancestry came from. Plus, *American* embodies every person from the Western Hemisphere (North, South, and Central Americas).



Since my incarceration in the federal system I've met people from around the world: Chinese (from China), Brazilians (Brazil), Canadians (Canada), English (England), Cambodians (Cambodia), Jamaican (Jamaica), Bengali (Bangladesh), Indians (India), Spanish (Spain), Egyptian (Egypt), Gambian (Gambia in Africa), and more. The dude I met from Gambia hated when anyone called him an *African* because, as he'd say, Africa is a continent, not a country. He's from the country of Gambia within the continent of Africa.

Many of these mentioned above feel the same. Even if made into citizens of the US, they prefer being referred to by their nation of origin in conjunction with the word *American*. For example, there's a guy here whose origin and ancestry is German. He was born and raised in Germany. He moved to the United States and became a citizen thereof in his late 30s and prefers to be known as a German-American (not European-American) because Europe, like Africa, is a continent – not a country or nation. This German-American (like many of the others mentioned above) stated that he never looked at another human being from a *black* or *white* perspective until moving to the US.

My family labeled me a *questioner* since around the age of 12, and the *black* and *white* labels we continue to give ourselves in this country still baffles me. Since it's all about being part of the land we're from, I guess the only alternative we have is to start using the words *United States citizen* more often when describing ourselves...but would that nullify our ancestry and ancestral origin?



# WHAT THE R\*DSKINS LABEL MEANS TO ME, A NATIVE AMERICAN

By Josh, Free Minds Friend

*Josh is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne & Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. He currently lives in Cleveland, OH and is studying to become an occupational therapy assistant.*

*Editor's Note: Author has stylized the Washington, DC, football team with an \* to note the offensiveness of the term to him.*

The Washington, DC, football team was named "R\*dskins" back in 1933 by then-owner George Preston Marshall and when the team belonged to Boston. He originally wanted to name his team the "Boston Braves," but Boston already had a baseball team named "Braves" (which later moved to Atlanta). So he chose "R\*dskins," because like Braves, it was a way of referring to Native Americans in stereotypical ways. (Author James Fenimore Cooper popularized the term in his novels during that time as a way to distinguish Native Americans by skin color.)

Recently, Amanda Blackhorse, a Navajo woman, along with other plaintiffs, filed a motion that six trademarks of the Washington football team should be cancelled because they are racial slurs that cause harm. Ultimately, the US Patent and Trademark Office cancelled the trademarks, declaring that R\*dskins is a racial slur. However, the team hasn't changed its name or logo.

Many people are resistant to changing the team name and logo because they grew up with it and were never taught that it is actually a harmful label that hurts Native Americans. Can you think of words you've heard people use that they think are harmless but actually insulting to who you are? For me, the Washington football team's name and logo cause emotional pain and stress. They are a reminder that the team, its fans, and the public at large don't consider me or my Native American friends and family to be human beings.

Additionally, many scientific studies have demonstrated that Native mascots and nicknames cause psychological harm to Native Americans. Other studies have demonstrated how psychologically damaging racial discrimination is. I'm especially worried about how this affects Native young people, who are already at high risk of suicide.

Native Americans have been fighting against the use of Native American mascots, nicknames, and logos since the early 1970s. The Washington football team's name

and logo perpetuate the stereotype that Native Americans are "bloodthirsty savages." This erases the history of aggression, violence, and genocidal acts committed by Europeans and Euro-Americans against Native peoples, who were wiped out by the millions through warfare and diseases brought by Europeans. The remaining Natives were forced onto reservations while their children were shipped into government and church-run boarding schools. At these schools, children were beaten for speaking their own languages.

If one were to look at Merriam-Webster's dictionaries over the years, one can see that since at least 1961, R\*dskins has been noted as "Usually taken to be offensive." This means the Washington football team has used as its team name a word even the dictionary has considered racist for over fifty years!

Sadly, the Washington R\*dskins are not the only professional sports team that dehumanizes and perpetuates harmful racist stereotypes toward Native Americans. The Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves, Chicago Blackhawks, and Kansas City Chiefs are guilty of this as well.

**What do you think? Write in to tell us where you stand on the R\*dskins name change and why!**



Image of a protest sign

## FREE MINDS MAILBAG

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

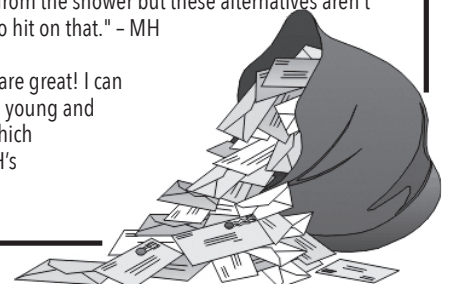
"I would like to share the experience I had with nature the same day I received the newsletter. I was driven to the hospital in reference to my eyes. By divine decree, the doctor was examining another patient and we were compelled to wait outside. Gratefully, I sat at a table while anticipating my turn.

My senses were so high to my surroundings. I felt attuned with the birds that were chirping, and the squirrels that were running, jumping and eating acorns. Though I was fettered hands and feet, my mind and spirit was free to immerse in the sound and the philosophical view of cosmology.

Consequently, I brung this energy into the cell. The institution was on lockdown but my mind was free. As it will remain!" – MS

"I have to applaud 'I Am Nature' by QS because that was a well-written poem. It was like a polar opposite take on my poem about nature. I wrote that poem sitting in SHU, where nature is mostly non-existent. From 6 AM to 9 PM, fluorescent lights become the sun. And the rain comes from the shower but these alternatives aren't even close to the real thing. I swear sometimes I feel tortured by the lack of natural stuff in jail. So I wanted my poem to hit on that." – MH

"HF's words are very wise and admirable, giving good, sound advice. I'd really like to sit and build with HF. The poems are great! I can relate to DP's 'Untitled' poem because I often close my eyes to free my mind, viewing scenes of nature that I saw when young and free to sights of nature viewed from rec yards. MH's 'Artificial Elements' hits hard, showing how *elements* of nature (which usually makes us feel free) are manipulated to hold many in bondage, i.e., prisoners. Nature perverted. I'm feeling MH's poem deeply. QS's poem gives a very vivid, detailed description of nature, helping me picture the scenes of nature he described. All of the poems are AWESOME!" – JL



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



# FAMILY TIES

The column where Free Minds family and loved ones weigh in.

By Kelli

With special thanks to Free Minds members AM, JG, RD, LJ, and MT

I like to read the obituaries in the *Washington Post*. My habit is not motivated by fascination with death, but by a fascination with life. People have so many stories and have lived through so many different experiences, both good and bad! One of the things that really interests me is the nicknames people have. In the obituaries, they'll put a person's nickname in quotes after their given name. So, it might say something like: "RIP, Ronald Lee, 'Chief.'" Okay, so that's a cool one. But not long ago, there was a man's obituary, and it said "RIP, Henry Curtis, 'Nose.'" Nose? Seriously? I squinted to get a better look at the man. Sure enough, he had an enormous nose. Huge. And he was like 95 years old when he died. I sat there thinking how this guy's entire life – 90-some years – he was labeled and defined by his big nose. That's so unfair!

We've already established that labels can be hurtful and damaging. It's bad enough when a kid on the playground calls you *stinky* or *stupid*, but what about when it comes from your sibling, or worse, your parents or grandparents? What happens when your own family labels you? Studies by psychologists have proven that when family members, especially a mother or a father, label a child, the impact can be enormous and sometimes devastating.

I asked some Free Minds members what they thought. Several felt that the labels given to them in their families created a sort of expectation of who or what they would become. In other words, they essentially grew into the labels.

As a young child, FM member AM was labeled *spoiled* because he always got his way and had all of the material things he wanted before his little sister was born. Looking back, he says his own mother perpetuated the label by giving him too much. When he grew older and was introduced to the streets, that label from his mother stuck. If he wanted something, he says, he went out and got it for himself no matter what, or who, was in the way.

FM member JG has never forgotten how an older cousin used to look at him with disgust and call him *bad* and a *thug*. "One time she even told me, 'I'ma come see you over the jail when you get there.' And it bothered me a lot because in my mind, I'm like, *You don't even really know me*. But that always stuck with me."

When we are children, we usually look up to our parents and older relatives. So, it can be very confusing to be labeled by a family member. One young FM member disclosed that his own father called him *soft*. "I remember thinking, *You think I'm soft? Well I'll show you I'm not soft!*" he says now. Unfortunately, it was right after this that he was charged with armed robbery and incarcerated as an adult.

Negative labels can also deal a serious blow to a child's self-esteem. Another member, MT, laments the way he was labeled by a family member years ago. "You'll be dead by the time you're 18, you piece of s\*\*\*."

LJ says he was always called the *black sheep* of his family. It caused him to isolate and become a loner, feeling he wasn't adequate or able to fit in with his peers. Now though, he's come to believe he has an important story to tell. And like many of the members I spoke with, LJ feels that labels are not always bad. JG, for example, remembers how his aunt used to call him smart and say he was good with words. "That motivated me to keep building my vocabulary," he says. And while he's been given negative labels over the years, RD says he loves when his family members call him *smart*, *mature*, or even an *old soul*.

"And as for the negative labels, it's all up to the person being labeled. You can get called a *dummy* and allow it to define you, or you can use it to drive yourself to learn more and show your smartness," RM says.

# ASK HF ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

Dear HF,

One of the things I hate the most about being incarcerated, for real, the thing that is the most difficult for me, is ALWAYS having to be around other people. It feels like this constant pressure upon me and it makes me feel angry and anxious all the time. I know that you have been in prison for a while. How do you deal with the stress of always having people around you, and you can't pick the people? Sometimes I just need to get away from them all! What can I do to handle it better?

Sincerely,  
SJ

Dear SJ,

After serving almost 21 years in prison, I can honestly say that every day I hate being around these guys even more. When I was home, I kept a small trusted circle. I do not like being surrounded by strangers in here that, most of the time, do not mean me any good. However, when I made a commitment to the life of crime, I also made a commitment to accept the prison life and all that came with it. Even though I was only a child, I understood what came with the life of crime: prison or death. I embraced it wholeheartedly anyway, because I was in love with the fast money and other rewards that came with it.

In life, sometimes you have to take the bitter with the sweet. When you make the choice to touch a rose you accept the thorns that come with the bush that produces the beautiful rose.

Is it hard? Hell yeah! However, when you look at life, difficult people, places, and things are meant to make you stronger and smarter, not to crush your spirit.

Now that you know, just make sure to spend whatever time you may have left preparing yourself to NEVER return to the life of crime. Use all of the current discomfort and hate that you feel as fuel to get yourself together to do the right things that will keep you out of this living hell.

Transcending Adversity,  
HF

**Note from the Free Minds team:** We know the challenge of being around people all the time (we work in a small office), and we couldn't help but weigh in with our tried and true ways of getting away from the world: breathe and meditate, read, and write it out! Write down your frustrations about how people bug you, make up stories using the people around you as inspiration, or just write!

And remember AM, the *selfish* one? He feels the label from his mother became a self-fulfilling prophecy in his childhood, but now that he's a man, he's working hard to change his selfish ways. "I don't want to lose good relationships with people I care about because of my selfishness."

One of my all-time favorite quotes comes from Father Gregory Boyle, a Catholic Priest and the head of an anti-gang outreach organization called Homeboy Industries, in Los Angeles. Father Boyle says, "*Each one of us is so much more than the worst thing we've ever done.*" I'd like to take that quote to the next level and say that each one of us is so much better than the worst thing we've ever been called. Because really, we are all imperfect, complex, sensitive little beings. Let's remember that and pledge not to use words or labels to tear down loved ones (or anyone else for that matter!)

Finally, let's take any negative labels that might be clinging to us – whether they came from family members, friends, enemies, or strangers – and let's just let them fall away... Put 'em in the rearview... Each one of us has the power to define and label our own dang selves!



# THE WRITE WAY

By Gabe

For this Write Way, we're going to look at a poem by Willie Perdomo, from his book *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime*. Perdomo dedicated the poem to Edmund Perry, Jr., a black 17-year old from Harlem who was killed in 1985.

Perry, Jr. had just graduated from an elite prep school, and had a scholarship to attend Stanford University that fall. But less than two weeks after his high school graduation, he was shot dead by a plainclothes policeman in the park near his house. The police said they had witnesses who saw Edmund and his older brother Jonah mugging the white undercover officer.

Many people explained that it would be completely out of character for these young men to attack or rob anybody. But some people who knew Edmund from his time at the prep school described his resentment of the white people at his school who made no effort to understand the different world he came from. There is no doubt that Edmund had to learn to exist in two completely different universes: the streets of Harlem where he grew up, and a white prep school.

Let's take a look at the poem (it's on the right.)

This poem is not only about Edmund Perry, Jr., it is about the narrator who identifies so much with Edmund's story and shares his own. Perdomo uses the childhood game "Monkey in the Middle," where one person (the "monkey") stands between two people and tries to intercept the ball they are throwing, as a metaphor for the way Edmund Perry, Jr. had to live, moving between those two different worlds.

But there is even more depth to the game that Perdomo chooses as a metaphor, because this is a story of a young black man trying to make his way at a school filled with rich white people, and "monkey" is a racist slur meant to demean black people. Even a talented, promising young black man, with a scholarship to one of the best universities in the world, ended up shot dead by a police officer. Perdomo hits us with the painful reality that it might be impossible to escape the labels that society creates for us when

he drops the line "But once a monkey / always a monkey."

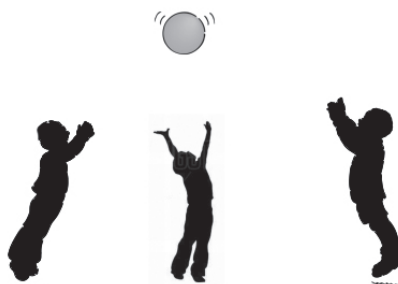
I spoke to Willie Perdomo recently and asked about this poem. The poem, Willie told me, was about "struggling to wear the right mask depending on what stage you're on." This struggle can have a lot of negative repercussions, and he explained how in this poem, he wanted to explore "the anger, and how that manifests itself in young men of color. Without any mediation, we end up hurting folks." He also expressed a hope for how young men in Edmund's predicament might make it through: "Ideally, you'd be able to bridge the two worlds, so that you can be the same person all the time."

**Have you ever felt the need to wear different masks in different worlds? Write us a poem about it!**

**Have you ever recognized yourself in the story of a person in the news headlines, or the history books? Write a poem where you talk with that person!**

**Is there a well-known game or a story that you think serves as a good metaphor for what you've lived through? Write a poem that makes the connection! And lastly, we haven't even discussed the very important conclusion of this poem! The narrator catches the ball, and stops the game. His story departs from Edmund's, and he announces to those around him in the different worlds, "I know/ who I am/ I know/ where I'm from/ and I ain't got no time to be playing/ games."**

**So, for the last prompt: Who are you? Where are you from? Where are you going? Write a poem and let us know!**



## Monkey in the Middle for Edmund Perry, Jr. By Willie Perdomo

When you finally  
got mad  
it was too  
late

You tried hard  
to find  
a space  
where you could  
be you  
and not  
get caught

Jumping  
ducking  
twisting  
dashing  
you died  
not knowing  
which one to  
do next

My heart  
use to beat  
like yours  
I use to be  
the monkey  
in the middle

If you was cute  
they called you  
Curious George

If you was ugly  
they called you  
King Kong  
But once a monkey  
always a monkey

Prep school pals in New Hampshire say  
they just love you and yell:  
"Dance for us, Eddie! We think you're the  
coolest, man!"

Boys back on the block look at you angry and  
they check you one time:  
"Damn, Ed. You been around them white boys  
too long, brother.  
You done lost all the ditty in your bop."

One day I  
caught the ball  
and threw it away  
And then I told them  
I know  
who I am  
I know  
where I'm from  
And I ain't got no  
time to be playing  
games



# CONVERSATION WITH KELLI



Fall is here! The things I love to do in this season are cooking and baking (chili and every kind of soup and these pumpkin bars with orange cream cheese frosting that sound weird, but are the BOMB), watching football or just hearing it in the background while I'm cooking/baking, hiking and seeing the leaves change colors, drinking coffee with friends (okay, that's all year round), and READING! For whatever reason, fall really feels like *BOOK* season to me! Maybe because of the whole back-to-school vibe? I don't know. But I really get my reading jam on in the fall. ☺

I grew up in Eugene, Oregon, which is a small-to-medium sized college town (Go Ducks!). I think it was partly growing up in this university atmosphere (my best friend Michele's parents were both professors) and partly because my mom was an English teacher, that I was raised loving words and books.

about girls with broken families.

That was one of the most important lessons of my life – to discover that reading books about people going through something tough could help me to go through something difficult myself. It reminds me of when our son Elijah was little. If he was scared or worried about something, he would always ask me wide-eyed, "Did that ever happen to you???" There is such comfort in knowing that we aren't alone – and books can provide that comfort!

So back to 4th grade me... I did get called "*bookworm*" more than a few times. I don't remember that bothering me, though, because I associated reading with being smart – something I definitely wanted to be. I also was called *tomboy* because of my love for basketball. I wore that label with pride because I thought that, with the exception of Michele, the other girls in my class were *prissy* (see I was out there labeling them just like they labeled me!).

Then one day, when I was around 12, someone called me a *boy*. That really hurt. It was a grown-up who said it to me, and it seems so silly now, but at the time the word was thrown at me in disgust. Suddenly, I got the message that I wasn't acting the way people wanted me to act, just because I liked to shoot baskets every day in my driveway. I kept playing basketball, but I'll be honest – the label stung and it had an impact. It threw me off. I started feeling more self-conscious about who I was. I started to worry about what other people thought. And for the first time, I felt uncomfortable about my tomboy reputation.

As kids, we used to say: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Well, it wasn't true then, and it's not true now. While I care a whole lot less now what people think, I've learned just how powerful words can be. They can lift us up (as in the case of the books I read growing up) and they can tear us down (as when we call people names). As human beings, too often we use words and labels as a way to force other people into categories and boxes that make ourselves feel superior. The truth is that each one of us is so much more complex than one word or label could ever describe.

**CHALLENGE:** What is one label you aspire to, or that you embrace? What is a label that you are ready to let fall away? Write to Free Minds and tell us!



My bike was just like this!!! Now just picture the basket filled with books like *It's Not the End of the World* by Judy Blume ☺ Then add a bookworm/tomboy/smart/strong/slightly dorky young girl with her whole life still ahead of her, and the power to define herself, pedaling the bike with handlebar streamers flying so she can get home to read

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

**"We must reject not only the stereotypes that others have of us, but also those we have of ourselves."** – Shirley Chisholm, First African American woman elected to Congress in 1968 and first African American candidate for a major party nomination for President of the United States

**"Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined."** – Toni Morrison, African-American writer, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for her novel *Beloved*, recipient of Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012

**"The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."** – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigerian writer and feminist

**"Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."** – Unknown



Writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Read the Label

By SMC

Label: a short classifying phrase applied to a person who  
sometimes doesn't know it  
Or a piece of paper attached to an object to give information about it  
Lower-class, bigot, racist, homophobe  
Religiosity, felon, affluent, and being a whore from what I'm told  
He's so smug, she's so narrow  
He act self-righteous, who's condescending  
We have to check you out so your application is still pending  
See even I label people as being "foolish" for one basic reason  
B/c I'm quick to Judge and it's easy and sometimes pleasing  
But now I'm learning that the opposite of a wise man, is a foolish one  
And a wise man never speaks on things he/she has no knowledge upon  
Read the label, check your labels, I label you, you label me  
While some labels can be nice and exciting I've only had negative labels  
placed on me  
Read the labels, please think before you stick them on  
someone else's shirt  
You not knowing they carry invisible needles  
So they just might pinch and you know that can hurt...  
Please read the labels!  
Did you read the labels?

## Black, Gifted, and Proud

By DB

Since I'm Black and considered 1/3 of a man  
They feel I can only relate to crime  
My physical imprisonment is a tactic  
To conceal thoughts produce by my creative, innovative strength of mind  
I'm united as one man  
& hope my brothers and sisters will unite as one Klan  
Stripped of our nationality and culture  
Only to become ancestors to no land  
My pigmentation is a pig temptation  
To annihilate our race and uplift America  
To a white man nation  
The truth is basic  
Only seek by those willing to see  
If you choose to face it you'll learn  
What seem to still be confusing to me  
One nation under God  
Was facilitated by a façade  
To weaken our defenses from simply  
Oppressing the odds  
Now who's in charge  
The last decision  
Is OURS  
As a whole we must proclaim  
We're Black, Gifted, and Proud.

## Labeled

By Terrell

I say who I am  
and you tell me what I'm not.  
  
Ignoring what I can become  
and that's what's holding me back.  
  
I tell you my name  
but you already gave me one.  
  
Previous actions labeled me  
now I'm everything but. A son,  
  
an uncle, a cousin, a friend, a brother  
where before it was like,  
a menace, a killer, or hustler.

## Labels

By JKG

I am the black label  
And I ain't talking no polo,  
Even though the PO-AIM-LOW,  
Turning black lives into matter...  
But when did altered material matter?  
Above what actually matters!  
I guess only  
Red, white, and blue is the true-life that really matters...  
As a matter of fact,  
Born at Children's Hospital 1982  
My inheritance is the self-endearment of being a nigga!  
Etched in the minds of the Confederates,  
But the arousing excitement of this ignorance,  
Is equal bliss...  
Invisible inside a nation that's indivisible!  
I had no choice but to become a victim,  
Within my blood-flowing, poverty-stricken come-unity,  
To some victimizer  
In sincere search of a victimless crime...  
Justice being accursed blind,  
Caused many monumental inequalities!  
Especially to an offense worse than treason,  
Walking while being labeled black,  
Is enough reason  
For me to lose my life this evening...

## Death by Label

By KW

Addie Mae Collins  
Carole Robertson  
Cynthia Wesley  
Denise McNair  
I let you down.  
I treated your memory as tales of the old  
And just another story about some people I'll never know.  
Treated it like it was something that didn't include me.  
I was born in '88.  
I was born too late to understand your death.  
To experience any feelings of loss.  
Nor could I recognize what it signified.  
Unable to comprehend your death... I went on to disrespect it.  
By embracing the LABEL that of which you were killed for... N\*\*\*\*\*.  
I didn't know that when I said it to one of my homies  
as a term of endearment?  
Or I sang it in a song or quoted from a movie...  
That I was actually accepting the terrorist act that destroyed your life  
As nothing else but something normal.  
No more!  
I understand now what you died for,  
What Dr. King and Congressman John Lewis marched for.  
What Mr. Rosa Parks sat for.  
Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer got beat for.  
For a LABEL, a LABEL called N\*\*\*\*\*.  
I dedicate this to you as I march toward becoming part of the solution  
and not part of the problem.







# JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM: LABELS

By JG, Free Minds Member

It seems to be human nature to want to label people and things. It makes them easier to identify when you slap a label on them, such as food items, clothes, and other materials. In the case of people though, things become much more complicated.

Growing up, many adults, including some of my teachers, counselors, and neighbors always told me how *bad* I was, or *terrible* or *useless* or *thuggish*. Terms like these were thrown at me so much that after a while I didn't pay them any mind. Little did I know that these labels were being impressed upon my subconscious, unconsciously most likely, by these adults, and I began to act in accord with what was expected of me. In times of antiquity this was called "casting spells," at least it was a form of it.

As Free Minders, we all know the power of words, and when used

negatively they can have catastrophic effects. Stigmatization comes from negative labeling. Murderer, rapist, liar, thief are a few examples of stigmas and negative labeling. There's something to be said about patterns in people's lives, however, labeling people for the rest of their lives for one thing they did completely ignores the fact that people can change.

We are in a constant state of change, whether we're aware of it or not. The past does not dictate the future as long as we learn from it. People can redeem themselves. This is one of the beauties of being human, we have the power of deliberate intent. So I urge that we be careful how we label people because people are so much more than any one label. Let's leave the labels to clothes, cars, food items, and other material things, their more proper designation.

## DC REENTRY CORNER

By Ms. Keela

Free Minders, what's up?

So I am going to assume that my flow must have left y'all speechless! Well there's more where that came from. However, for this month, I will digress to focus on my mission at hand, which, by the way, does not change – to get y'all ready to be the best that you can be once you reach DC. I am so excited about all that DC has to offer. DC is becoming more and more progressive, offering a wide variety of services, certifications, and apprenticeships that returning citizens can take advantage of. In almost every corner of the city, there is something that you can take advantage of to empower yourself. So in the spirit of the words of Steve Maraboli, author of *Life, the Truth, and Being Free*, "Your greatest self has been waiting your whole life; don't make it wait any longer." So let's go get it!

**Center for Employment Training (CET)**  
2300 Martin Luther King Avenue, SE, Washington, DC, 20020  
(202) 292-4460

The Center for Employment Training's mission is to promote human development and education by providing people with skills, training, and supportive services that contribute to self-sufficiency. CET is driven to help those who want a better life get the skills needed for meaningful work. CET's job training programs teach marketable skills to people of all educational levels and backgrounds, especially those most in need. In addition to teaching trade skills in growing fields, they provide supportive services and job placement assistance.

CET believes that everyone deserves the dignity of self-sufficiency and that can be gained in giving a hand-up, not a hand-out. They want to help lift people out of poverty and into a brighter future. Because Free Minds believes in these same principles, we believe that this is a match made in heaven! CET offers certification courses in business, construction and building maintenance, culinary, childcare, medical, technical trades, and trucking and logistics.

**LIFT DC**  
128 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001  
(202) 289-2525

LIFT DC has three goals, each focused on uplifting families and individuals. The three core goals are:

**Personal Well-Being**  
Health (both physical and mental), resilience, confidence, and efficacy are all critical to how an individual thrives.

**Social Connections**  
Healthy relationships formed among people, the community, and institutions promote trust and belonging that can offer a shield from depression, anxiety, and stress.

**Financial Strength**  
The ability to meet basic needs, obtain education, secure stable employment, and understand the impact of building credit and savings all increase a family's capacity to achieve economic security.

LIFT DC is determined to LIFT you guys up – all you have to do is connect with them when you return and let the empowerment begin!

Well guys, as always, it has been awesome connecting with you guys. It's funny because although it's my goal to empower and inspire you, I get so much inspiration just imagining you guys coming home and getting connected with these services. So I guess that's a win-win for all of us!

Until next time, read, write, and repeat!  
Ms. Keela



# REENTRY PROFILE

## "I had life plus 10 years, but I never gave up hope."

By Jessica and Todd

In 1993, Todd entered the prison system with a life sentence plus 10 years when he was 24 years old on the charge of "conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance" for selling crack cocaine. He had quixotically\* dreamed to be able to pay for a cure for his mother's multiple sclerosis through the profits. Today, he is free. After 23 years locked up, he's been out of prison since August 10, 2016.

He works in commercial water treatment, is setting up an HVAC business with his younger brother Charles and spends time with his fiancé, his three children, two grandchildren, and his other siblings.

Todd stopped by the Free Minds office to share some wisdom from his life.

### Preparing for Getting Out – Long Term

Take programs as much as possible and it will pay off. I dropped out of school at tenth grade, but during my first two months locked up, I got my GED. After that, I took college courses, got my Bachelor's Degree in Biblical Studies, became a certified fitness instructor, became a certified spin cycle instructor for Nautilus, got my HVAC certification, took parenting courses, and more.

I appealed my sentence after the Drugs Minus Two amendment went into effect. It meant I could appeal to reduce the offense level of my drug charges. The prosecutor and the judge looked at my courses and said, "you're really trying to do something with yourself," and they took the life sentence off. When I said "thank you," they said, "thank yourself – you did all the work. It paid off. It showed that it can be done."

### Preparing for Getting Out – Short Term

Prepare your mind for the transition you're about to go through, because even though I prepared while inside for many years (from day one, pretty much) – what you think it's going to be like is nothing like what it's gonna be until you get here. Prepare your mind to deal with the unexpected.

### Ignoring the Noise – Keeping Hope Alive

I was in max security at Lewisburg, so I was surrounded mostly by people who don't have any hope. It's hard to think positive, but in a place with a lot of people with no hope, someone has to be the light. When people made fun of me, I was just determined. My faith also helped me. I believe in God, He's my strength.

### Challenges of Being Out – Adjusting to the Halfway House

For a moment, I thought it would be better to be locked up than to deal with the type of life where you have some freedom but have to walk a fine line. For example, if you leave in the morning you have to sign a paper and provide details on where you're going and who you're going with and you can't be a minute late on return.

You don't want to make a mistake and you don't want to go back in, so you have to learn all the halfway rules, even if they were kind of petty. But this can be done, and I overcame it. I do get time to be with family, and I don't have to worry about strip searches and being humiliated like in prison, so I stayed focused and kept going.

### Working for a Sibling

I love it. My brother is my best friend.

### How to Deal with Re-Entry with Little to No Support

Keep your eye on the bigger picture: to get yourself together and in order. Get your IDs, your social security card, your birth certificate, and don't let anything stop you from getting these because you'll need them if you want to be able to provide for yourself. Having been gone for 23 years, most of my stuff was lost and I had to get it again. Don't get frustrated because it's worth it and will pay off. And once you have those things, people will start noticing that you're trying to succeed on your own – people will want to help you and they become your support system.

### Entrepreneurship

Do your research and have a plan. You don't have to have a lot of money, but you always have to bring something to the table because you need to make people with money believe in your plan and finance you.

### Parenting from Prison

Keep in contact with your children and with your children's mother/guardian. Even if they don't respond to you, keep doing it. Don't give up. I went through a span of time when I would write letters and not get responses. Kids are kids and you don't know the circumstances they're going through while you're gone. I kept calling and writing. They'll read and remember your letters. It'll go a long way even when you don't think it's having an impact.

### Life Mantras – Some Lessons Todd Lives By

1. I learned this in prison: Never allow your emotions or feelings to dictate the decisions you make because your feelings come and they go. For example, when you deal with one of those officers who does something wrong and gets on your bad side, you have to do the right thing no matter what because you don't want to get into deeper trouble.
2. Prove who you are to other people, and things will come together. They will see your character.
3. Even when I have downs and setbacks, there is still an upside.
4. Never rush the process – enjoy it. Don't get impatient. Everything I worked on is now falling into place and coming to fruition.

### Some Favorite Authors

TD Jakes, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer

\*Quixotic means idealistic, but in a starry-eyed way. Wishing things were better but in an impractical unrealistic way.

*The prosecutor and the judge looked at my courses and said, "you're really trying to do something with yourself," and they took the life sentence off. When I said "thank you," they said, "thank yourself – you did all the work. It paid off. It showed that it can be done."*



# THE REAL WORLD OF WORK

## A Day in the Office with Thomas

By Kelli

FM member Thomas was just 16 when he landed at the juvenile unit of the DC Jail. He spent nearly 7 years behind bars where he completed numerous programs and earned his GED. He was thrilled to return home in 2015, but nervous about all of the challenges he would face with employment and housing.

Thomas reached out to Free Minds when he got home and Ms. Keela referred him to DC Career Connections, which is the DC Department of Employment Services's job skills training agency. They placed Thomas in a hands-on automotive repair training program called Advanced Youth Technology Institute (AYT). While automotive mechanic was not on the top on Thomas's list of chosen career paths (not even close!), he went ahead and participated in the 9-month paid training program in NE DC anyway, believing any new skill he could learn might one day be valuable to him. Not only did he learn everything from how to fix hydraulic brake systems to automotive computer diagnostics, when he completed the program, Thomas was offered a job at the training program as an Administrative Assistant.

I caught up with Thomas recently to hear more about his successful path.

**KELLI:** *What do you love most about your job?*

**THOMAS:** I love helping young people of my generation. They earn a certification in automotive repair so that they can have an actual career. I like helping others.

**KELLI:** *What is most challenging thing about it?*

**THOMAS:** [Laughs] Probably dealing with different kinds of people and personalities. I've gotten better at it though. People come in just looking for resources on everything from employment to healthcare and housing. My job is to point them in the right direction. At first it was hard dealing with so many different types of people. One day we had a young man who came in there acting belligerent, and he and I got into an argument. My old boss taught me that when you work in customer service, you need to have a thick skin because you never know who is going to come in. Ever since then, I really haven't had any problems.

**KELLI:** *What skills do you need to be successful as an Administrative Assistant?*

**THOMAS:** Technology is really important. I deal with emails and websites, so I have to know Microsoft Office, PowerPoint, Word, and all of those. It's also good to learn how to work with others. I work closely with my boss to write up bids for contracts for the

program. A desk job can be boring at times, but if you get bored you take that time and perfect your computer skills. Take

that time to learn more about different kinds of websites, so that you can become more resourceful and valuable to the company.

**KELLI:** *What are your goals for yourself?*

**THOMAS:** Honestly, I don't know yet what my dream job is. I just want to help people – youth especially. My more immediate goals are to get my own apartment and to be paying all of my own bills. I feel like I've made a lot of progress. I have great a relationship with my family, including my mom and my little sister. I found a place to live (I rent a room) and I'm working. I actually just got another part-time job as a busboy at a restaurant in Georgetown. It's a lot of fun. I like my co-workers. They are really funny and they just treat me like a normal person. We laugh all the time.

**KELLI:** *How do you feel about labels?*

**THOMAS:** I don't believe in them. I never have. Not as a kid or even a teenager. I get along with or like a person for who they are. And if I sense someone is labeling me, most of the time, I just keep it moving.

**KELLI:** *What message do you have for your Free Minds brothers?*

**THOMAS:** Just don't give up. There will be times when you just feel like giving up, 'cause I know I have! But just find that one person you can talk to that will keep you motivated and keep you pushing yourself. Just. Don't. Give. Up.

*Thomas became a voracious reader while on the juvenile unit, reading more than 80 books in his first year of incarceration! He still loves to read and is anxiously awaiting the release of the next book in George R. Martin's Game of Thrones series. And if you're interested in how to be a busboy, look for a more in-depth interview with Thomas about it in a future issue!*



A person is fixing their car



# MEMBERS CONNECT: PERSPECTIVES ON LABELS

## From Big Nose B to FM Poet Ambassador

By Brandon

I have been given a lot of labels, and *Big Nose B* was the first. I hated it with a passion. My friends joked about it for years and every time they did, I felt like an outcast. It made me wish I had a fist so big that I could punch everyone who said something about my nose off the face of this earth.

When I was eleven years old, I accidentally stepped on a guy's new Jordans. I was attacked from behind. I had never been in a fight before, so I ran home crying about being beaten. All my friends saw it! I was horribly embarrassed, and guys in my neighborhood started calling me a sucker for not fighting back. In my household the unspoken rule was fight, ask questions later. I had never been in a fight, nor was I prepared for a sneak attack! I got so tired of being labeled a *sucker* that I beat up a guy on my school bus. I thought that if everyone heard I won a fight, I wouldn't be called a *sucker* anymore. But, now I was being *shunned* for beating up an innocent kid. I felt pressured to change what people thought of me.

I quickly turned toward crime and received a new label – *U.U. King B.* – where U.U. stood for **U**nauthorized **U**se of a Vehicle. I was the only guy in my circle

of friends who learned how to steal cars and actually drove them to school or around the neighborhood. This label brought a different meaning to my life. I felt unique because everyone wanted to hang with me and learn how to steal cars. *Sucker* was hardly mentioned again. I started skipping school, having sex, and smoking weed just so guys in the neighborhood could talk about me being a badass.

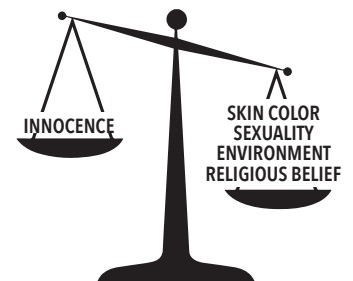
I spent years try to be viewed this way, and it almost ruined my life. I stopped caring about my dreams and goals. Protecting my pride became my main focus. Years later, I was convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to five years. I remembered when my grandparents told me how smart I was and how much they thanked me for being responsible and obedient. I valued those labels the most because there was meaning and love behind them words. When my grandparents died I lost focus of those labels. I let one label I didn't like turn me into a menace to society. Moving forward, I am now proud to be recognized as a *Free Minds Poet Ambassador*, a *responsible father*, and a *legitimately hard-working man*.

## Labeled at First Sight By SC, Free Minds Member

Am I labeled because of where I have been or where I am from? Absolutely, we all are. It is the way we are identified in society. Rich or poor, success or failure. It is how we measure the world around us. It is also how we measure ourselves. We call ourselves "fly" or "gangsta," "smooth" or "rough." Then we go on to project the images/ labels so that we can be "labeled" according to our own self-worth. We create an image in our minds that is molded out of our own values and morals to form the picture that we can accept and identify with. And, this is where we, as people, misjudge and show bias.

The look that is "fly" or "fresh" to some will get you labeled "drug-dealer" or "thug" to others. People weigh and measure (label) ways of the world according to their own understanding. Have you ever been inside a store and had someone follow you around the store to make sure you didn't steal anything? Even though this person had no previous run-ins with you? This happens because the moment you walk into that store, you are labeled and judged with one glance. Why? Perception. For some reason or other, people tend to connect a certain look with a certain mindset. How else could two people walk in a store seconds apart, and one immediately gets labeled suspect while the other is put in the "good consumer" category?

No matter how you look at it, it is never fair to come to a foregone conclusion about a person's character based on how you label them personally. And, I am not talking about how a person dresses. I'm talking about skin color, sexuality, environment, and religious belief. What makes this way of thinking so horrendous is the fact that it blocks out one's objective way of thinking. One place where this biased way of thinking has been more detrimental to human life than anywhere else is the court of law. In particular with the way that a jury views a person of a different class and different color.



There is one reason that an innocent person gets convicted for a crime that he or she didn't commit – and that reason is they were labeled at first sight. So, instead of a person being innocent until proven guilty, they are guilty until proven innocent.

## Getting "The Look" By Demetrius

When I was little, my older sister named me *Meaty*. I liked it because it sounded healthy and strong.

When I was 13, I got addicted to marijuana and had to leave school because I was smoking so much. That's when I got "the look." You might know it. It's not a friendly look – it's saying they don't trust you.

At 15, I was known as *cool* among my friends.

At 17, I was first arrested and held at the DC Jail. The other guys thought I was kinda *goofy* because of what I said and did, but at some point I had to be some kind of way to survive. They were always laughing at the things I said even when I didn't mean to be funny. People have always also said I'm an *old soul*, and I do think it's true in some sense. When I was at maximum, I didn't let "the

look" and actions there personally beat me up. It's like a training camp to me.

After I came home, people saw me as a *convicted felon* and now I get that "look." When I take my urine on Indiana Ave., you can see how it's segregated and how people try to separate themselves from us. They know why we're there. You can see them give you "the look" and then move away. I feel brave enough to face it because I'm used to it, but when I first came home, I wasn't that strong and it made me feel bad about myself.

Then I graduated from culinary school and became a *chef*. I saw people respected me there and I got a different "look" then. Now, I'm known for being a *Free Minds member*. People know we're *disciplined*, *humble*, and *on the move*. We are known for rehabilitating lives through books and poetry!





# "WHAT ARE YOU?"

By Gabe  
Free Minds Writer-in-Residence

The DC neighborhood where I grew up was almost all black, and I remember my neighbor Miss Betty describing its history: it had been a white community until Jews started to move in, and the whites left. Then when blacks started to move in, the Jews left. (If you went there today, you'd see that a lot of white folks have moved back in.) My mom is black, and my dad is Jewish, and I had to learn early that these communities didn't typically mix. That also might have been my first lesson in labels. I thought my dad was a white man who happened to be Jewish. But Miss Betty taught me that there had been a time on the very block where I lived that Jewish wasn't white enough.

My mom always told me when I was young, "You're black." She explained how in this country's not-so-distant history, it only took one drop of blood to be considered black, to be excluded from the world of the whites. She came from Haiti with her family when she was a young girl, and told a story of being turned away from a pool outside of DC when her white friend's family took her there.

But my mom is pretty light-skinned, and since my dad is white, I have an even lighter complexion. I think it's human nature to label people, to group them into different categories, but people never know what to do with me. I've been asked some variation of the questions "What are you?," "Where are you from?," and "What's your ethnicity?" more times than I could ever count.

I remember waiting for the bus as a kid, and many days people would come up and speak to me in Spanish. People might guess that I'm from all over the world – Brazil, Greece, Palestine – but hardly anyone ever recognizes that I'm black.

I know I'm black, but the world doesn't always treat me that way. This is an important distinction, because on a day-to-day basis, society doesn't let a black man forget what color he is. It's almost been like a secret identity for me. I care deeply about the things that affect the black community, I know well the experiences that my darker-skinned relatives and friends deal with on any given day, but since people usually don't see me as black, they treat me differently. Sometimes that spares me; I know I haven't experienced as much discrimination as others in my community. Other times, it can be difficult; at school and at work over the years, I've heard white people tell racist jokes and say things they never would if they knew they were in the company of a black person.

It can also be hard to be a part of a community and have people in that very community see you as an outsider. There have been times when a brother has referred to me as a white boy, and he might not even mean anything by it, it might just be an observation. But it's a reminder that he doesn't see me as one of his people, he sees me as an "other." It's not so different from the feeling I have when a white person asks me "What are you?" It's a reminder that he sees me as different, as an "other."

I'm proud to be black, and throughout my life I've learned how much diversity exists within the black community. Every once in a while, someone I meet will know I'm black without me saying a thing. "How did you know?" I'll ask. Sometimes they'll say something about the texture of my hair, and other times they'll say, "I just knew." It always feels good to be recognized by your people.

## DC PHOTOS OF THE MONTH

*We love the murals and street art of DC. Do you recognize any of these?*

By Mbachur



Do you remember this once popular spot on New York Ave NE in NoMa? (It closed its doors for good in 2015.)



The mural across from Howard Theatre on U Street, including the Redskins logo.



Another cool mural on U Street celebrating Black musical tradition. Do you know who this musician is? Write to us with your answer! 😊

**Answer to last issue's Guess the Location:**  
Minnesota Avenue NE

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!



# PAYING IT FORWARD

## Being a Volunteer with Best Buddies

By Kelli

*Do you have a best buddy? Okay, maybe that's not what you call them, but at some time in your life, has there been that one person who you laughed with, counted on, and confided in? If so, then you know what a wonderful gift it is. But for many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, making friends can be challenging. And having a best buddy is not something they often get to experience.*

*That is what motivated the 1987 founding of Best Buddies, the world's largest organization dedicated to ending the social, physical, and economic isolation of the 200 million people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). For individuals within this community, Best Buddies helps them form meaningful friendships with their peers, secure successful jobs, live independently, and feel valued by society.*

*Nicole, a 20-year-old Junior at Virginia Tech has been volunteering with Best Buddies for eight years. This is her story:*

I had been friends with some of the kids in the special needs classes in middle school. On the first day of high school, one of them, a girl named Ambar, told me that I had to come to the Best Buddies meeting after school. I went, and eight years later, I'm still volunteering with Best Buddies. And as it turns out, Ambar and the other buddies I've had have changed my life.

The whole idea of Best Buddies is to form a genuine friendship with your buddy. We have meetings and outings at least once a month. And then you're supposed to hang out with your buddy one or two times a month. But nobody sees that as a requirement. Most people do even more! My buddies mean the world to me! I can't even put into words how amazing they are. I definitely still talk to all of my buddies from high school and my buddies in college on the phone, or if they have cellphones, we text and use Facebook. Actually, a lot of people with special needs really enjoy using social media to communicate because it makes them more comfortable having longer conversations.

My buddy now is named Virginia. She is a little bit older than me and she really isn't comfortable going anywhere without her mom, so usually the three of us hang out together. She loves Virginia Tech and thinks we pretty much named the school after her. So, she wears a Virginia Tech t-shirt almost every day. Actually, she *does* wear it every day! She loves to go to this one small shopping center and get frozen yogurt and walk around trying everything on, like hats and scarves. We also have dances once a month and that's probably Virginia's favorite event ever! It's become this whole community of people that come together – members of sororities, fraternities, and everyone from Best Buddies – to put the dances on and get to know each other. It's one of the most accepting atmospheres I've ever been a part of. And I think that's one of the things the buddies love about it. It's just so comfortable. Everyone around you is there because they care and so everyone is just dancing, eating, and laughing.

I think it's sad that we have been seeing people with disabilities for just that, their disabilities. The buddies I have just have so many amazing skills. There was a buddy in my high school named Javier. He knew every single kid's name. He knew every class I ever took in high school and what year I took it. He has one of the best memories of anyone I've ever known. And my buddy Ambar, she played one of those app math games on her phone and she beat my high score by a long shot. And they are really great friends. Incredible friends with so much to offer. And yet, if it weren't for Best Buddies, which creates an environment for friendships to form, a lot of them just wouldn't have any place to go to make new friends.

One of my favorite stories is about Ambar, who I care about like a sister. In high school, we had a birthday party for her at my mom's house. It was a big one. There were about 25 people there, including a bunch of kids from school and everyone's parents. We had a cake and everyone brought Ambar a present. (She loves Justin Bieber, so it was easy for me to find something to get her.) But Ambar said, "Thank you, but I don't want presents. I don't need them, because I have you guys. That's all I need!"

It's heartbreaking to me when my buddies ask, "Why did that person call me *retarded*?" I think a lot of people don't even realize what they're saying when they use the r-word. When I hear someone use it, I'll ask them why and they usually say, "I didn't mean that, I meant something was stupid" and I'll tell them, "That's exactly my point." The word (or stupid) shouldn't be used because it's hurtful. Best Buddies has a "Spread the Word to End the Word" campaign every year to promote awareness and encourage people to pledge not to use the r-word. We're spreading the message that this label doesn't define people with disabilities. And it is not okay to use this word so casually!

I've watched my buddies be labeled like this, but they still come out at the end of the day with the biggest smiles on their faces and the best attitudes. They are just always trying to be better. One of my buddies applied to community college. He has just one more test to pass. He's been called *retarded* and *slow*, and he's going to community college! And if he can do that after being labeled such an awful word, I believe that FM members can have the same strength to get past any negative labels that people have put on to them.

*Nicole is pursuing a double-major degree in International Studies and Human Development in the hopes of working overseas with kids with disabilities. All because of her best buddies!*

**BEST BUDDIES®**



Best Buddies organization builds friendships between people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities



# AROUND THE WORLD

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

## A Glimpse of Morocco

*By Jessica*

Hey FM Fam! I'm the new Prison Book Club Coordinator and I joined the FM team in July. Some of you may have already gotten letters from me. I'm really happy to be working here and can't wait to be chatting with everyone about your poetry, writing, and what you're reading. Let me know what you think of this article. I've been lucky because I got to travel a lot internationally this year: I went to a few cities in China and Morocco, to Madrid in Spain, Copenhagen in Denmark, and Amsterdam in the Netherlands. And I'd love to share some of my travel stories if you'd like me to!

When I was in Morocco, which is located in North Africa, very close to Spain, I did not know what to expect because honestly, I didn't do as much research and planning as I should have – which is not something you can get away with if you only have a short amount of time to spend there.

I had about a week's time to spend in this beautiful country, and I was already pretty exhausted from travelling in Europe the week before. Travelling alone can be really hard work, especially on a budget.

Most people are industrious and entrepreneurial. You have to learn to bargain for everything or be overcharged. In many places, taxi drivers don't use the meter – they have set prices for certain locations or will quote you a price. If you look like you are a tourist, they will charge higher prices and you have to haggle with them to get lower prices. I found this stressful, even though often, their higher prices were not that bad for someone with US currency – 50 Moroccan dirhams (5 dollars) instead of 20 dirhams (2 dollars). But that's more than double the price for a local!

Then I put it in a different perspective: that extra 3 US dollars is an extra 30 Moroccan dirhams for them, which equals three more meals. It means a lot more to them to have that extra three dollars than for me to part with it, so I did not let myself get upset.

Of most concern to my friends and family was the fact that I was travelling alone in a country where I had never been before, but the Moroccans I met were genuinely kindhearted, welcoming, and protective.

One night, I decided to travel by train from the big city of Casablanca to Fès, the city known as the "Athens of Africa." Train seems to be the major form of transportation there and for the price of a Greyhound trip between DC and Philly or DC and New York, you could get from one side of the country to the other. But it was often late or delayed and if a nice young man named Saad hadn't offered to help me out with carrying my suitcase, I would never have known the train that night was running late and had actually been rescheduled to arrive on a different track! (At the end of my trip, I saw Saad at the Casablanca train station again – he had brought me a gift of saffron, an expensive and delicious spice that is grown mostly in Iran but also in Spain, Morocco, and a few other countries. I was so touched because it is hard to find real saffron. A lot of people sell fake saffron that doesn't taste as good.)

When I finally got to Fès at 3AM, the taxi driver dropped me off in the general vicinity of the riad where I was staying, but not at the exact street. I pulled up a map on my phone and started walking towards where I was supposed to be staying when an old woman popped her head out the window on the second story and started yelling down at me in a mixture of Arabic and French. I told her, in French, that I was a little lost and searching for where I was supposed to stay. She came downstairs and pulled me inside, saying, "*des voleurs, des voleurs!*" which means "thieves, thieves!" in French. She welcomed me in and let me stay with her that night, lecturing me to be more careful in a new country and that it could be dangerous to travel so late at night. I was very lucky to have met this caring woman I called Hajja that night.



Map of Morocco



Riad Alnais in Marrakech, Morocco. Riads are traditional Moroccan houses with a garden or courtyard in the middle.

*continued on page 19*





# IN THE NEWS

*By John, Free Minds Friend*

## WORLD

On the global front, the world continues to watch with a fearful eye as North Korea tests its ability to fire nuclear weapons at the United States and other countries it perceives to be enemies.

Twice this summer, the United Nations approved severe sanctions on the North Korean economy, in an attempt to force the country to cease its nuclear exercises. Both times, North Korea has responded by firing a missile over Japanese airspace and into the Sea of Japan.

As we mentioned in the last *Connect*, there isn't a "good" option for handling this crisis. As North Korean leader Kim Jong Un continues to thumb his nose at economic punishment, the three other choices become more likely: accept North Korea as a nuclear power, destroy its nuclear capabilities, or attempt to remove the current government. All three carry the potential that at some point, North Korea will unleash a major war against United States and its allies in Asia.



Kim Jong-Un,  
leader of North Korea

A crisis has developed on the border of Myanmar, a large country in Asia once known as Burma. The Rohingya, a small group of Muslim people living in a nation that is majority Buddhist, are pouring into refugee camps in Bangladesh to escape what some have described as a genocide against them.

The Myanmar government has long taken the position that the Rohingya are not citizens of the country. Recent attacks have seen scores of Rohingya villages burned to the ground.

World leaders, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu, have condemned the violence and have appealed to the nation's de facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, to intervene in the region. She is herself a Nobel Peace Prize winner, who spent 15 years under house arrest when the nation was led by an oppressive military junta.

## NATIONAL

Two of the nation's largest states, Florida and Texas, were flooded by some of the most potent hurricanes ever to make landfall in the United States.

Hurricane Harvey slammed into Texas as a Category 4 storm, and proceeded to drop 33 trillion gallons of water. The damage caused by the storm was most acute in the Houston area, home

to more than six million people, where much of the city was flooded under more than 10 feet of water.

Hurricane Irma landed in Florida as a Category 5 storm, the highest classification there is, after it tore through several Caribbean islands including Barbuda, the Virgin Islands, and Cuba. Irma leveled much of the Key West area before turning up the west coast of Florida and causing severe damage and flooding in Miami. The storm continued up the coast with less powerful winds, hitting South Carolina as well.

Thousands of people will return to damaged or destroyed homes in both areas, and millions remain without power in the state of Florida. The damage from the two storms is expected to cost somewhere in the area of \$150 billion.

Over the summer, a group known as Unite the Right held a weekend rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, just a couple hours from DC. The assembled group consisted largely of Nazis, white supremacists, and members of the Ku Klux Klan. Not surprisingly, the group was met by throngs of protestors.

One of those counterprotestors, Heather Heyer, was killed when a white supremacist named James Fields drove his car into a crowd, injuring several others.

President Trump was criticized by several members of his own party for not unequivocally denouncing the rally, its organizers, and white supremacists in general. Trump initially said the violence in Charlottesville was prompted by people "on many sides," and days later said he thought that there were "fine people" there mixed in with the racist rally-goers.

For the first time in decades, the United States witnessed a total solar eclipse on August 21. This occurs when the moon completely covers the sun, leaving only the sun's outer layer visible.

The eclipse could be viewed from most of the continent by wearing special glasses that protect your eyes from the powerful rays of the sun's outer ring, which is called the corona. For people in a direct line of the eclipse, known as the path of totality, the sky actually went dark for several minutes in the middle of the day as the moon passed by.



The Free Minds staff all went outside together to see the partial eclipse in DC. Here's a photo from Mbachur.





# IN THE NEWS CONTINUED

## Sports

As we write this, the Redskins are 0-1 heading into their week 2 matchup with the Los Angeles Rams. It's a long season, and the Skins have new guys to work into the offense, but the first week was not a good omen by any means.

Washington fell 30-17 to its Northeast corridor rivals, the Philadelphia Eagles. The offense looked flat, scoring just three points in the second half. Kirk Cousins, who has expressed frustration with the front office for not signing him to a long-term deal, looked like he missed the steady hands of receivers Pierre Garcon and Desean Jackson. Both of those wideouts left in the offseason, and the Redskins never made an effort to sign either one.

As mentioned, it's just one week. And the team did bring in Terrelle Pryor, an uncommonly good athlete who played quarterback in college and emerged last year as a star receiver for the Cleveland Browns. Pryor, tight end Jordan Reed, and

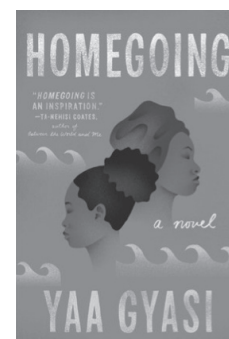
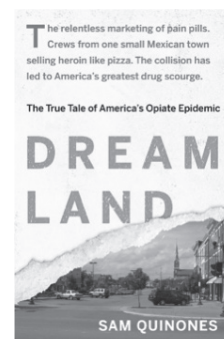
young receiver Josh Doctson will have to get it in gear quickly if the Redskins want to right the ship. The Washington Nationals have already clinched a spot in this year's postseason, locking up its second consecutive NL East Division championship. With 16 games remaining on the schedule, the Nats have 89 wins and a chance to gain homefield advantage through the playoffs.



The team's success has been anchored by a strong starting pitching staff led by Max Scherzer and Stephen Strasburg, along with a bullpen that was greatly helped by a flurry of moves made at the trade deadline. The team has also weathered serious injuries to starts Bryce Harper and Trea Turner, leaning on the bats of Ryan Zimmerman, Tony Rendon, and Howie Kendrick.

# WHAT WE'RE READING

- **Tara:** *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* by Sam Quinones. I heard him speak at the National Criminal Justice Association conference. The book won the National Book Critics Circle Award and I can see why. The author is a journalist and brings his expert investigative reporting skills to show the history of how the explosion of painkiller prescriptions in the '90s and the influx of black tar heroin from a small town in Mexico combined to bring about the current devastation of opioid addiction epidemic in the US. Reading this has also given me a chance to reflect on the different stories we tell about drug users and how they lead to different policy solutions. The biggest difference between the treatment of substance abuse now and the criminalization of it in the 1980s seems to be due to the media narratives about drug users of racial minorities and white drug users.
- **Julia:** *November (Noviembre in the original Spanish version)* by Jorge Galán. This is a novel based on what happened in El Salvador during the country's long, bloody Civil War – specifically the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and the housekeeper's daughter, and the struggle for justice that followed this atrocity. After this book came out, the author received death threats and he had to flee the country for his safety. I used to work with an organization in El Salvador when I was in college, so I was interested in learning more about these events. I'm reading it in Spanish to practice my language skills.
- **Keela:** *Hiroshima* by John Hersey. The back reads, "This book, John Hersey's journalistic masterpiece, tells us what happened on that day [August 6, 1945]. Told through the memories of survivors, this timeless, powerful, and compassionate document has become a classic 'that stirs the conscience of humanity.'" It's an engrossing read about what happened when the USA dropped a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, Japan.
- **Kelli:** *Homegoing*, by Yaa Gyasi. This novel tells the story of two half-sisters in 18th-century Ghana who are separated from birth. One is sold into slavery, while the other is married off to a British general. The book covers multiple generations as their descendants continue to deal with slavery and its legacy in America. I've always loved stories about peoples' lives and relationships, and this beautifully written book is filled with characters that I know I won't forget!





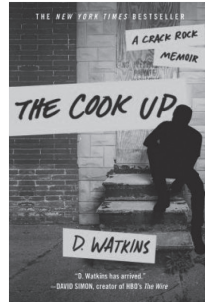
# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

## The Free Minds long-distance book club

Hey FM Readers,

Thanks for sending in your thoughts on *The Cook Up* by D. Watkins. Check out the great discussion below!

1. In the chapter called "The Beast," what is D. referring to as the Beast and when did he start to notice that the Beast was changing him?



**DK:** I believe "the Beast" is the inner-self telling you that you'll get whatever you want regardless of the price. The Beast started changing D. when he started getting a lot of money and material items. I think it's true when he stated "your mother couldn't protect you from it." How could she, if she isn't fully aware of it?

**CL:** What changed him was the death of his brother. In life, tragedies like death or being hurt changes people, some good and some bad.

**SC:** When D. speaks about "the Beast," he is referring to a mentality; the Beast he speaks about is an understanding that is accepted as a way of life, the rules of the game. As to where/when he first noticed the Beast in him, it was when he beat the dope fiend for stealing the stash. He didn't beat this dope fiend because he was angry or mad. He beat that dope fiend because when you are in the belly of the Beast, certain actions are expected. Your mother can't protect you from the Beast because the Beast is not only in you, it is in everything and everyone around you. The only person who can protect you from that Beast is yourself. It's based on the choices that you make.

2. How does his brother's death affect D. in the long run? Can you relate to what he's going through?

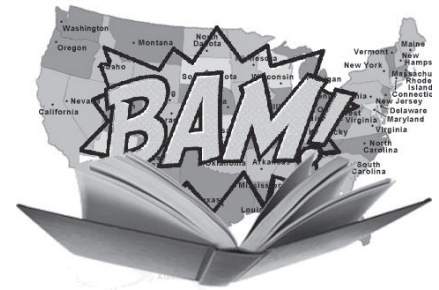
**DK:** After his brother's death, he found the safe. Without finding it, he most likely would have never gotten into the drug game. He may have very well stayed in college. His friends that he had working for him may still be alive, maybe not. Death changes a lot. I've lost my brother since being locked up, and I know the hurt D. felt.

**SC:** D.'s brother's death affected him in more ways than one. And, for the most part, I think had a positive effect on his decisions. The memories of his brother kept him conscious and aware. In the long run, he was able to think outside of the box.

3. D. says one of his biggest fears is "not dying, but dying with the same story as everyone else." Do you understand how he feels? What can people do to make sure their stories aren't the same as everyone else's?

**DK:** It's how my brother died. With the same story as everyone else. Very

few attended his wake, my mother said, and the obit was very short. I don't want my chapter in life to end the same way. I wrote the most about him, with a eulogy that I emailed to my family to read at his memorial service. I have so many good memories of him.



**CL:** What he meant is that he didn't want to die without a purpose. People are dying every day and at a young age. The people dying barely ever lived. He wanted people to speak good of him when it's was his time. He wanted, like everyone else before they die, to leave an impact on the street/world.

**SC:** I have a similar fear, if not the same. I fear dying without doing anything substantial with my life. I fear dying as a failure. A man who in 100 years will be no more. And I'm not talking about *me*. I'm speaking about *legacy*. I have no children, and I have not created a "Great Wall of China"-like imprint or legend that will be cemented for centuries. And this scares me. What people have to do to make sure that their story is not like everyone else's is they must create their own story. They must use their time and ability to mold wisely and form the life that they envision for themselves. But, a lot of times this is where the problem lies: an astronomical number of people can't envision, picture, or even dream of a life of their own. And, this is mainly based on not believing in themselves.

4. D. wrestles with the idea of leaving home and the drug game. Why is it so scary for him? Why do so many people talk about going straight, but so few do it?

**DK:** Because he feels like he's let those who depended on him down. He will be leaving behind what is familiar to him. I feel people like my brother talked about going straight because truly deep down in his heart, he wanted a normal life. But I feel like his constant drug use caused by the demon that haunted him (his childhood sexual abuse by a trusted family friend) kept him from going straight. That man didn't physically kill my brother, but he killed my brother's soul, his thoughts, his happiness, his freedom, and his dreams. Yes, I wish my brother and I would've had the opportunity to leave our hometown to escape all of our past pain, and to start fresh, a new life, with no baggage.

**CL:** Why is leaving the drug game so scary? It's the same for everyone, even people with jobs – the part about being broke, unstable, and unable to help those you love. You lose your power. If I had the chance to leave now, I would go and help the kids first, give them hope because



# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES! CONTINUED

coming up where we are from you already labeled (a piece of s\*\*\*), with proof (schools closing, rec, playground, and everywhere that kid can go to get away from the streets), which is all we know. You go to school, don't learn nothing because the teacher is underpaid and don't teach you. So, we are left with a gun and drugs, so you rob or sell drugs, and I want to change that.

**SC:** The reason D. wrestles with leaving home and the drug game is the same reason that most people wrestle with it: unfamiliar territory.

There are two primary reasons that keep a person from following that straight path they so adamantly speak about. The first is, people are afraid to jump into worlds that they know little about. And this is mostly based on some type of insecurity that will cause them to look at themselves (or think others look at them) as being stupid, etc. They fear being out of an element where they can speak confidently, assured. So, therefore, *change* scares them.

The second reason, the one I believe is the most common reason, for a person not going straight? They have not found anything else that is positive and fills that timeslot. It's like this: A man speaks about getting out of jail and living the straight and narrow. But, then what? When he is not at work, what will he do with his time? If that man does not have a specific purpose for not selling/using drugs, for getting a job? Why should he change his entire life for no particular reason, other than his wanting to show people that he's not a loser? It doesn't work like that. In order to change, a person must figure out what he's trying to accomplish. Then he will want to devote himself to aligning the pieces and parts. This is when one has a purpose-driven life.

## Next BAM Book: *Hidden Figures*

Your voices have been heard! The next BAM book will be *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly. After that, we'll read, *I Am Malala*. If those weren't your choices, you can always request a book and we will do our best to get it to you. Now, let's get ready for some space exploration! *Hidden Figures* tells the true story of the African-American women who contributed to some of NASA's greatest achievements, including sending an astronaut into space for the first time.



## Questions to think about while reading:

1. What does the opportunity to work at Langley mean to Dorothy Vaughan and the other women? Have you ever had an opportunity or a goal that mattered this much to you?
2. Are the women who become "girl computers" held to a higher standard? Or do they hold themselves to one? Why or why not? Have you ever felt like this?
3. *Hidden Figures* uncovers the story of the women whose work at NACA and NASA helped shape and define US space exploration. Why is their story significant to our cultural, social, and scientific history?
4. In what ways does the race for space parallel the civil rights movement? What kinds of freedoms are being explored in each?

# AROUND THE WORLD CONTINUED

*continued from page 15*

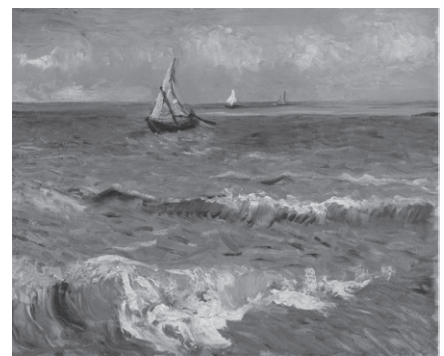
The next day, I spent the entire day with her family, friends, and neighbors, sharing common meals of couscous, saffron chicken, Moroccan bread, orange blossom biscuits, and Moroccan mint tea. Mmm...just thinking about it makes me salivate!

I did not know how to repay her kindness or to express my gratitude for her sharing her home and heart with me. I did what I could and gave her some souvenirs I'd picked up in Amsterdam: a print of my favorite Van Gogh painting, some stroopwafels (a dessert pastry made from two thin waffle layers with caramel-like syrup in the middle), and I gave a couple of lipsticks to her granddaughter.

I will always treasure the time that she welcomed me into her home and I know that if I return to Morocco, I will have a family there.



Moroccan mint tea at Hajja's mother's home in Fès, Morocco.



The Sea at Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, 1888 by Vincent Van Gogh



# FREE MINDS STAFF: THE LABELS OTHERS GAVE US AND THE LABELS WE CHOOSE

Everyone gets labels: ones we like, ones we don't like, and ones we aspire to identify with. Here are some labels FM staff members have gotten over the years: the ones others gave us and the ones we choose.

What labels have you gotten over the years and what labels do you choose for yourself? Let us know and we'll share all the labels in the next issue!



This is what a real pterodactyl looked like. Pterodactyls are an extinct flying dinosaur.

## Tara

### Labels Others Gave Us

- Tardy Tara: for always showing up late (but I'm trying to change this)
- TARAdactyl: for being behind on understanding the latest technology
- Talkative Tara

### Labels I Choose

- Nonprofit professional
- Change agent
- Thought leader

## Kelli

### Labels Others Gave Us

- Tomboy: I talk about it in my "Conversation with Kelli" column on page 7 – check it out

### Labels I Choose

- Bookworm

## Julia

### Labels Others Gave Us

- Teacher's Pet

### Labels I Choose

- Writer

## Mbachur

### Labels Others Gave Us

- Stuck-up
- Bourgeois: this comes from me being naturally and extremely introverted (still to this day). But in middle school, a lot of the African kids used to study together and the American kids used to tell us that we thought we were better than them. I HATE this.
- Unapproachable: I have also been told that I have "RBF" (Resting B\*tch Face) so people assume I am not approachable because I "look" mean. I never liked it because I am just a quiet and reserved person in many situations – not stuck up at all!

### Labels I Choose

- Confident
- Proud

## Gabe

### Labels Others Gave Us

- Care bear: I was made fun of for being nice

### Labels I Choose

- Author

## Excerpt from "See Me for Me, Not My Disease" by Lila, former Free Minds intern

I wished for people to see me as myself, not as my disease. I absolutely hated that people immediately formed opinions on me based on my appearance before I had a chance to show them who I am. I wanted to explain that I am not alopecia, I am not my hair loss, I am just me! I am a girl who loves reading and theatre and family and peaches and Harry Potter.

At some point, I realized that I had to stop separating alopecia and myself. I constantly worried about having people see me as just "the girl with the weird hair." I wanted them to see me as more than that. However, by wishing that people didn't see my alopecia they were missing a part of me because the reality is, I do have alopecia. That is an experience that makes me who I am. In fact, it is an experience that has ultimately made me a better and happier person.

All the years I hoped and prayed that people would simply ignore my alopecia, I was denying them a look into my full self. I was lying to myself and lying to my friends. I couldn't love myself fully while wishing that a huge part of me was different. I had to change my ways. Before I learned to love my full self, explaining alopecia was a chore. When asked about my disease before, I would grudgingly explain alopecia's effects. Now, I happily entertain questions with words about how alopecia makes me feel.

By accepting alopecia as a part of me, a big part of me, I've turned what could have been an extremely negative experience into a part of my life that has made me grow and change into the wonderful, beautiful person I am today.

*First appeared in Connect: Achievement August 2012*

# NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

An **entrepreneur** is defined as a person who organizes and operates a business. But what does it really take to run your own business and how can we all apply an entrepreneurial mindset to managing our own lives?

A core element of creating a business plan is identifying a problem that you want to solve, coming up with a solution to that problem, and then planning the steps you will take to get there. In what ways can the entrepreneurial spirit and practice – of identifying needs and creating solutions – be part of our day-to-day lives, no matter what career path we choose?

## Next Issue's Word Cloud

What word(s) comes to mind when you think of Free Minds? Send them to us and we'll create a picture of all the labels you associate with us!

Until then, stay strong and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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