

May 2015  
Vol. 4, Issue I

# Free minds Connect

## THIS MONTH'S THEME:

# Learning

Learning = Wisdom

$$2+2=4$$

$$\sqrt{9} = 3$$



# Knowledge is Eternal...

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learns life  
lessons  
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**NEXT  
ISSUE:**  
DC –  
Our City!

Cover art by LV

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Doug, AB, Helen,  
HF, CT, John,  
Christopher & Elijah

We are ALWAYS looking  
for new contributors.  
Write or draw something  
for our next issue  
and send it to us!  
Because of the volume  
of submissions, we  
cannot include everyone's  
work in each issue. If it  
doesn't appear in the  
Connect, we will share it  
at Write Night.

Free Minds Book Club  
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### Next Issue's

#### Theme:

"Washington, DC"  
(see back page  
for details!)

Dear Life-long Free Minds learners!

A big hello from beautiful springtime DC! I'm looking at our gorgeous pink cherry blossom tree outside our Free Minds office window and thinking about how this issue is like the tree: bursting with new growth and looking good! A huge thank you to all of you who wrote in on the topic of Learning. It clearly struck a chord as we got so many submissions we didn't have space to publish them all. We decided to highlight the common themes and asked our enthusiastic Write Night volunteers to read and comment on the rest. So know that your words have been read by many and your voices heard! We had a special Write Night at George Washington University so mail is on its way to you soon.

I'll be brief since this issue is chock full of so many fascinating stories! You will learn about FM member SH becoming a welder and hear about amazing recoveries from serious injuries from FM friend Chris on his job as an Occupational Therapist. A FM mom shares her journey of learning and you'll take a trip up north to Canada where some strange kissing is going on! You'll read about our Apprentices graduating and getting on the front page of the *Washington Post*! But the most important thing I hope you will realize after reading this issue is that while others might say you are incarcerated in a prison we all know that as a Free Minds member you are in a LEARNING LAB! You are using your time to soak up so much knowledge and gain so many news skills your brain's grey matter will be bursting with new neurons! So keep those dynamic minds of yours dynamic and engaged.

Until next time,  
Tara

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

### I Am

By VB, FM Member

Today I am outside, like a lion  
Yesterday I was live, like a ghost

On the street I am cold hearted, cold  
In my room, I am King  
To my mom, I am a Prince

To my dad, I am son  
My friends think I am big homie  
Really I am loyalty, just living my life

## FREE MINDS HQ



### Freedom Writers Teachers Come to D.C!

Remember Erin Gruwell, the teacher who turned a classroom of kids everyone else thought were "unteachables" into the Freedom Writers (the ones who wrote *Freedom Writers Diary*)? Well by the time you get this, more than 250 Freedom Writer Teachers from all over the world, including Tara and Kelli, will have gathered in DC to share stories about their students and celebrate National Teacher Appreciation Day. Erin Gruwell is a big dreamer (some of you met her two years ago at the DC Jail, so you remember!). They have a new documentary film about their stories of change, which we hope everyone can get to see.

### The Free Minds Family Gets Press!

Thanks to all of you, the Free Minds members, our message is being heard. Between your poems, which we've shared with so many in the community, and the hard work and dedication of many of our members who are back home, more people are finding out about the incredible power of books and creative writing to change lives. In February, Free Minds members made the front page of *The Washington Post*. That's right—FRONT PAGE, ABOVE THE FOLD! We are including a copy of the article with this edition of *The Connect*. Not only that, FM member Robert was featured in an article in the *Post's* Style section about the perseverance required to successfully navigate reentry. Finally, FM member Phil wrote a column that made the *Huffington Post* last month! We are proud of each and every one of you for making our collective voice heard.



**The new Free Minds literary journal is here!** The book is titled *The Untold Story of the Real Me: Young Voices from Prison*. It is hot off the presses and we will get copies out to you all as soon as possible!



# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

*Becoming a Life Long Learner, By Kelli*

Every day in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I would ask my teacher Mrs. Ellis if today was the day we would learn how to write in cursive. I'm not kidding. Every day she shook her head and said, "Not today." I have no idea why I wanted to learn cursive so badly, but I remember returning from recess one afternoon to find Mrs. Ellis writing a line of cursive "O's" across the blackboard. I think my head exploded, I was so excited. You are probably thinking one word right now: *NERD*. That's okay, I'll own it! Around the same time, we had this ratty old set of Encyclopedias (this was back in the day—no internet). I would lie on the floor looking at pictures of African tribes people and the Great Wall of China, or reading about an animal called a Lynx. I was hungry for knowledge about anything and everything.

Then something happened. I turned 13, got a crush on a boy named P.J. and started worrying about whether I should wear make up. I got sucked into friend drama, sending notes back and forth in English class about how "Amanda was now together with Scott and can you believe what she said to Renee???" Suddenly, the world outside of me took a seat in the wayyy back! I fell into that all too common self-absorption of the teenage years. Early on in high school, I cared a lot less about my grades than about what I was going to wear to the party Friday. The good news is it is all part of growing up and becoming the people we are meant to be and a lot of us go through it. Still, sometimes I think back to how superficial it all was and I am really glad that I grew up!

I had one really special teacher in my senior year of high school that helped my curiosity to come back. His name was Mr. Veeck and he taught a class called Global Studies. We learned about people from all over the world. He would take our entire class out to dinner just to try food from other countries. I remember one day, Mr. Veeck brought in these two tiny elderly Japanese women to talk to us. We didn't know why they were there, but it turned out they were survivors of the atomic bombs that the United States dropped on Japan during WWII. They told us how as young girls they had run down the streets of Nagasaki with their clothing burned off of their bodies, not knowing what had happened to them. They spoke in tiny whispers and our class was dead silent. I couldn't believe what I was hearing! I realized the world was so much BIGGER than what I had experienced. Mr. Veeck exposed me to new ideas, people and places. I realized I wanted to learn more about the people in the world and hear their stories.

It turns out that's what I love most. I studied International Studies in college and then went into journalism, working as a television producer. You all know how many questions I love to ask. Some people call it nosy. I call it curious and inquisitive. My favorite kind of person is "interesting" AND "interested." Think about it...if you meet someone and they talk about all kinds of interesting stuff, but then they never ask you a single question, isn't kind of disappointing? Those people aren't usually interested in much beyond themselves. Everyone should be asking questions. I also believe we are never too old to learn. In the last few years, I've learned how to play the violin (not very well), oil paint, cook Thai food, and have been working on my Spanish. Right now, I'm focusing on learning how to be a better writer. I took a class on writing fiction last year. Learning enriches every moment. Books allow us to learn anything, any time, any place. People can always teach us something new too. Ask lots of questions when you meet someone new. Who knows, maybe he can teach you how to speak another language, and you can help him with his English. Or maybe he can help you with your free throws and you can teach him how to divide fractions.

Free Minds is a community of learners. Seriously, I would love to hear from you all about what you are learning. Let's pretend we are all tweeting each other. Send me your hashtag #whatIamLearning, and I'll share them in the next issue. Until then keep learning, keep your mind open, and always, always...free. *Your friend, Kelli*

## JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

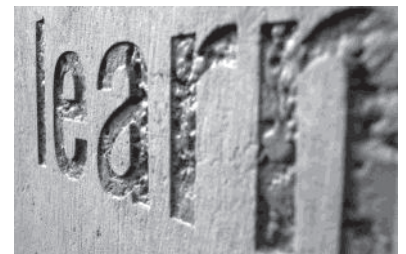
*By JG, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison*

*Learning is the true purpose of life. It is the main purpose for which we all manifested into this physical form, to learn the lessons of which the plane of things made manifest has to offer. "Know thy self and then thou shalt know the universe and God." Pythagoras*

To me, this comes with the understanding that everything and everyone is connected in some way. We're more similar than we are different and when we see a trait in another that we don't like, it's usually because we feel like we've just stepped in front of a mirror. I think when we develop this understanding (and it definitely takes some time to develop) it becomes easier for us to begin to forgive others or ourselves. Studying world history and having at least a

basic understanding of major events from the past is important as well because if we're consciously aware of the mistakes of the past and we've learned from them, then our future will be that much more promising.

This goes for our personal histories too. We're supposed to learn and seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave, so the learning process never ends and I think that's the beauty of it. Expanding our minds is so fun and exciting and we never have to stop!





# GUEST COLUMNIST

## What I Learned from My Little-Big Brother

By Doug, FM Friend

Below is a poem that I wrote for my brother, Ron. First though, I want to tell you a little bit about me and my brother.

Me (Doug): I've been a teacher for more than 30 years. I've taught in correctional facilities, community-based adult literacy programs, public schools, and for the past 15 years as a professor in university teacher education programs. By far my most fulfilling teaching experiences were in correctional institutions.

My brother (Ron): There were five of us raised by a single working mother; our father was an alcoholic. My little brother Ron started using drugs in high school, dropped out and was soon busted for dealing hard drugs on the streets of Washington, DC. He was a heroin addict. After doing time in prison he stayed clean for many years until playing drums in punk bands in NY in the 80's where drugs were ubiquitous. Finally, he got clean through AA and went to college where he would eventually earn his Master's degree. For 25 years he worked helping the most severe drug addicts get into rehab. He felt it was his duty. Ron died peacefully on December 26, 2014 from a heart condition caused by radiation treatments after four bouts with cancer. This poem, "Lost Letter from Prison" is about what I learned from my little-big brother.

### Lost Letter from Prison

My little brother...ever since I can remember  
he was a damn good drummer, a little kid playing a torn snare drum  
with pencils!  
being poor is, you know, not being given everything.  
I have fotos of him, years of him – becoming –  
baby, boy, man, musician, dad, husband, graduate, invalid,

but now I can't find the letter he wrote me.  
1970.  
18 years old, mailed from federal prison faraway in Michigan:  
hard time for selling hard drugs on the streets of DC for The Man  
to support his own heroin injections. You know the streets works.

It's not a letter really, it was a poem, to me it was a poem. I copied it out  
and  
sent him a 10-dollar bill.  
in the machine shop he fabricated a detailed miniature drum-set; it fit in  
the palm of your hand.  
They made him sit there until... he wrote me he had to sit in group  
therapy till finally, finally  
he opened up, he found himself. He spoke out. He joined in.  
I wish I had that letter now, how it put this in his own words...what he'd  
learned.  
Then the chip-on-his-shoulder, a chip the size of a greyhound bus  
let go of his heart.  
he always said he'd earned his college degree in prison.

When he got out he played drums in bands from Detroit "destroyt" to  
NYC.  
He played his heart out, that's how he played the drums at Max's Kansas  
City, at CBGB  
pushers always lurking backstage in the empty shadows...only a matter  
of time before

he was back on methadone,  
Living with a woman who'd paid for his habit  
Working the streets... their bewildered loving little dog.

Around that time a total stranger, an ex-inmate, killed me softly; put into  
my hands a book he got in  
prison  
The book said when you approach the Throne ya best be carryin' a  
rescued brother with ya.  
so I prayed like all gethsemane.

sweet Jesus got my little brother out of NYC, he got him back home, and  
he helped him up  
all 12 steps  
the license plates on his truck read, "Thanks AA". I have a photograph.

Sober, my little brother went to college.  
Sober, he earned his masters in human services at Lincoln University of  
all places...  
he proudly worked to get the down-and-out addicts off the streets and get  
into rehab,  
at a group home he proudly helped the-least-among-us get the respect  
they deserve.  
not easy work by a long shot. Where did he learn to be tough, and still be  
tender?

My little brother could make you laugh.  
He was more my older brother, my role model, he respected me when,  
even when, I didn't  
deserve it at all. Who does that, huh?  
From him I learned how to give and never give up...  
How he could make the tired cashier at Safeway smile, how he over-  
tipped  
at the carwash, and Latino day-workers from 7-Eleven, he knew they  
deserved it.

The deaf Hospice doctor said, "Never a dull moment with Ron."  
For six months in hospitals, one over in Southwest DC.  
He thought he was back in prison sometimes he thought the Nurses were  
guards.  
He fought for his unalienable right to go home. Once he escaped, the  
police found him wandering  
lost blocks away. He didn't give up.  
yes, they all remember him and his heart now.

He'd look at me, "I'm dying,"  
I'd replied, "You're not *dying*." shaking my head, but the nurse cocked  
her head as if...  
He'd survived so much. This too he'd get through.  
You'll outlive us all.  
O, morphine, morphine, morphine, morphine, morphine  
dying with dignity,  
Never ask Death why. all betrayals final

He died in peace. The day after Christmas. His son, his ex-wife, and me  
there.

His life flashed before my eyes that night. I cried with the soul of a  
wounded beast.  
we waited till spring to place his ashes where he wished them to be  
remembered

On that April day the sun smiled like it hadn't smiled for a long time, the  
wind on the hillside played its *appassionato*  
a hawk perched high in a tall centurion cedar tree, my little brother's  
spirit on its wings,  
no diggity  
somewhere I imagine a dove trembled in grief on a lonesome shadowy  
branch too  
Nature and our better angels conspired to celebrate my little brother's  
time on earth  
and the good Lord held us in his hands all day.

This poem is for you, you who are waiting and learning too  
because in you I have always seen my little brother.





# THE WRITE WAY

By FM Writing Guru Julia

I want to share some exciting (to me!) news: I just completed graduate school and got a Master's degree in Creative Writing. After college, I decided to go on to graduate school and get a Master's degree. I spent three years in grad school focusing entirely on my writing, surrounded by other people who are also totally focused on writing, and I completed what's called a thesis: a writing project that I worked on for two years. Now you're probably asking why—why did I decide to get my Master's?

It looks really good on a resume, first of all—but you don't need a resume to be a writer, and you don't need any fancy degrees to write either. So why did I do it? At the time, I just knew that I wanted to be the best writer I could be. My writing has improved so much over the last three years (I'm a little bit embarrassed of the stories I wrote pre-grad school now!). The truth is, before I entered grad school, I didn't know what I was going to get out of it because *I didn't know how much I didn't know about writing*.

Education is ongoing—you can never have all the knowledge because there's always more to be learned. And in order to learn, you have to recognize that you don't know everything. Before I went to grad school, I didn't know that I had anything left to learn about writing—and that's why when I look back on my writing three or four years ago, I see that I wasn't really improving. I had hit a wall—and what broke through that wall was the realization that there was more to learn. As a writer, you'll never find the solution if you can't even see the problem—and that was a big part of what I learned in grad school: how to identify what needed fixing in a story.

Writing is a craft like any other—take carpentry for example. We all agree that you can study carpentry, learn techniques, and improve your skills. This is 100% true of writing as well.

The way to improve my writing was to A) practice, B) study other writers (READ!), and C) surround myself with other writers. Now you guys can practice, and you can study (by reading!), so here's the really important thing, the best advice I can give you. Create an environment for yourself where you are focused on what you want to achieve and what you want to learn, and surround yourself (as best you can) with other people who want the same things and will help you achieve those goals.

Writing, for me, is not a solitary activity. Although I do spend a lot of time alone in my room writing, I also spend a lot of time sharing my writing with other writers to get their feedback, and talking with them about problems that I'm having so we can brainstorm solutions together.



**Writing Prompt:** *If you could go back in time, what would you tell your younger self? What do you think your FUTURE self might want to tell YOU?*

## WHAT WE'RE READING

I just finished the novel *Code Name Verity* about a spy who has been captured by the Nazis during World War II. This book was a real page-turner—I couldn't put it down. I would recommend it to anyone who likes a good adventure story, with plenty of twists and turns. —Julia

I just started a book called *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stephenson. Stephenson is a lawyer and champion of justice and human rights—especially those from poor and underserved backgrounds. The book tells how he was drawn into helping condemned prisoners on death row. I bought the book because I really admire him and so far he is an amazing storyteller! —Kelli

Check out *Born Ready: The Mixed Legacy of Len Bias*, by Dave Ungrady. The player's death to cocaine overdose was one of the cruelest tragedies in sports in the last quarter century. It still strikes the hearts and minds of many in a generation that witnessed the uncomfortable and developing synergy of big time sports and drug abuse. —Keela

## THERE'S SO MUCH YOU CAN SAY ABOUT LEARNING!

By AB, FM Friend

Growing up, all my experiences with learning were bad. I didn't like anything about it. I couldn't read or write at all so it made me dislike school and I went to schools for slow children. I still have a lot of work to do on it now. That's one of the reasons I started getting high and being on the street. Addiction will consume everything that is good about a person.

Education conquers all things...It's a lot I still need to learn. If you don't pay close attention to the lessons being taught, you won't learn nothing. It's not who you are, but it's the content of your character that makes you the person you are. I like learning about history. Black history the most, but I love history!







## CONNECTING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

### *Never Too Old to Learn*

*By Helen, a FM Mom*

Mothers are very special people. Moms provide the very first learning experience that their offspring receive.

Being a mom, you sometimes don't think about learning from your children or the things they encounter outside of your teachings. Dealing with a son in trouble with the law has been one of the most eye-opening experiences in my life.

Incarceration is, if nothing else, a learning experience. As a mom of an incarcerated youth I have learned the true meaning of pain, terror, surprise, injustice, character building, survival and unconditional love. What do I mean? We moms become seemingly helpless until that day comes when we stop feeling sorry, helpless, sad and scared. We wake up to a brand new self, opening new possibilities for our children and ourselves. Although you are away in different situations we begin to draw off of your unwavering strength. We learn to be more observant and in tune to new ways of communicating and coping with life's twist and turns.

When you write and say, "Mom I enrolled in this," or "I completed that," or "I took a young man under my wing and taught him the ropes," these things teach us that no matter what happens in or out we can rise above and make it thru.

Please, keep teaching and showing us that, "Yeah Mom I made some mistakes in life that caused you pain but the young man you taught me to be is still there with you." When I/we look to the sky in the day and the moon at night we all are connected together in the most intimate way imaginable.

Keep living and being the stand up men we raised you to be. Thank you, Son(s).

Love, Mom(s)

**Would anyone in your family like to write a piece for *The Connect*?** Tell them to send it to Kelli at Free Minds, 2201 P Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037.



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

## ASK HF: ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

*HF is a Free Minds Friend doing a long bid in the Feds. Send him your questions about doing time, family, loved ones, or anything else and he will answer you in his column!*

***"I just received the bad news that I will have additional years added to my sentence. I'm wondering if you can shed some light on the whole idea of becoming 'institutionalized.' What is it and how do I avoid it?" –MH***

Dear MH and Free Minds Brothers:

When we, those of us that have been incarcerated, hear the word "institutionalized," we automatically think about prison or jail. However, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) is an institution, Harvard University is an institution of learning, and other fashion, designing, and culinary arts schools are institutions of learning. Life within itself is an institution of learning; we just decide which institution we ascribe to as our source of information.

To be institutionalized as a prisoner often means you have become used to having someone feed, house, and clothe you. An institutionalized inmate is one that needs to be in the custody of another adult and has to be a ward of an institution that controls his daily life in order to be productive. An institutionalized person is not responsible enough to organize and operate their lives effectively without having other mature adults to constantly make them conduct themselves as adults.

To not fall into this form of institutionalization, you first have to develop the desire to be responsible for yourself. You have to begin to resent the notion that you need other adults to take care of you like you are a child or mentally challenged person that cannot make their own decisions without a guardian. And lastly, you have to really "be" a mature, responsible, and productive adult that can live in society independently.

I have a personal policy to not concern myself with prison issues unless they are an immediate threat to my personal safety. In prison, there is a lot of gossip about who is a snitch or who is having sex with whom. I steer clear of all of the "Inmate.com" news not in direct alignment with my health, freedom, and wealth. Once I became grounded in minding my own business, I had to create some business of my own that didn't concern the prison culture. To escape the institutionalization of the prison culture, I am always reading newspapers and magazines about what is current and relevant in society. I look for journalists and powerful people who inspire me and then I reach out to them by typing them letters and emailing them. My mind is always focused on getting out, connecting with people in society, and actualizing my dreams and vision for myself in the "REAL" world. Your friend, HF



# PAY IT FORWARD

*Free Minds interviews Christopher, a Board Member and good friend of Free Minds. Christopher decided to get involved in Free Minds because of his own brief stint behind bars. He has dedicated his life to helping others as an Occupational Therapist.*

**FM: First, can you just tell me a little bit about your background. What you were like as a teenager?**

CHRISTOPHER: I am 30 years old and originally from a small town called Lake City in South Carolina. I grew up in South Carolina and after college, lived a short stint in Dallas, Texas before moving to DC to attend graduate school at Howard University. I fell in love with the culture of DC and have been here ever since.

Growing up, I didn't know what I wanted to be. Lake City is a small town that didn't have many opportunities, but as a teenager I stayed busy doing different programs in the school, church and community. I grew up in the concept that it took a village to raise the child. Several adults in my life positively influenced me. On the flip side, I had several friends who began to head down the wrong path. Unfortunately, several of those guys are dead or in jail. I have faith that the ones in jail will get another chance to do great things. I also made some wrong decisions as a young adult. I even went to jail for about a day. The things I remember the most from jail were the humanity and intellect of the men. I also remember the poor selection of books at the jail. I never forgot that which is why I am so dedicated to the Free Minds program today. Fortunately I have been able to bounce back after every challenge in my life... every time.

**What is an occupational therapist?**

In my words, an occupational therapist (OT) is a health care professional that identifies any physical, cognitive or social problem that is impacting a person's ability to do everyday activities and then adapts the person's environment and rehabilitates the person so they can live independently again.

For example, imagine a student who broke their hand and has to type a paper for a college class. An OT would train the student how to use adaptive technology such as speech dictation software so they could finish their paper by talking into the microphone of a computer instead of typing.

Think of a grandmother who had a stroke and can no longer cook for her grandchildren because she can only use one arm. An OT would show the grandmother how to cook with adaptive cooking utensils. An OT would take her to the grocery store and have her cook a meal. The OT would use all kinds of cool equipment such as electrical stimulation devices, upper extremity robotics and even video games to help improve the functional use of the grandmother's arm.

Think of a child who has a learning disability and acts out in school. An OT would help the child figure out new ways to learn and help them channel their stress/frustration through purposeful and fun daily activities.

Think of a young male who is struggling to find a job after completing a jail sentence. An OT that works in the community would help him prepare a resume, teach him how to search for appropriate interview attire and work on interview etiquette.

**Where do you work now?**

I work as an occupational therapist that specializes in neuro-rehabilitation and stroke rehabilitation at a hospital that serves the military population and their families. So if a soldier gets shot in the head and suffers a penetrating brain injury, I help them regain function. If a schoolteacher has a brain tumor removed and

suffers from cognitive deficits, I help her find her way back into the classroom. If a painter has multiple sclerosis and loses function of her arm, I help her paint again. These are all real cases that I have had as an occupational therapist.

**What is your favorite part of your job?**

Seeing someone achieve a goal whether it is small or big. It makes it all worth it.

**What is a typical day like for you on the job?**

In addition to documenting casework and keeping up with the latest research, on some workdays you may see me playing basketball or the Xbox with my patient. You may see me training my patient on how to use an iPhone for life management. Or I may take a patient to DC to work on taking public transportation. My days are pretty exciting. I have taken patients several places from the Florida Keys to the Pentagon all in the name of occupational therapy!

**What is one great thing you have learned in this job?**

I have learned about the cool concept of neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is your brain's dynamic ability to form new pathways to facilitate learning. I have learned that as an occupational therapist I can directly affect someone's brain and generate new learning pathways.

**Why is it important to you to "pay it forward?"**

Paying it forward is so important to me because I had so many people that helped me! Man, I wouldn't be anywhere without the village that raised me. When you "pay it forward" you bring your blessings full circle. Helping others is an infinite process from generation to generation.

If you want to live your lives in a way to help others, I urge you to study the concept of Sankofa which means "reach back and get it" in the Akan language of Ghana. Know your history. Respect your ancestors. Period.

I also task you to incorporate the concept of generational wealth. I am not necessarily talking about finances, but as young men, we have a responsibility to positively influence and elevate the younger generation so that they can view the world from our shoulders... from a better vantage point. This means we have to be responsible and honorable and start spreading positive energy amongst others and ourselves.

**Anything else that you want to share?**

I want to encourage you young Kings to stay motivated and begin preparing yourselves to fulfill your destiny to be great and contributing members of society! My mom was an English teacher so she taught me about the power and immortality of words. Consider introducing this word into your vocabulary: NEGUS. Definition: "King," "Ruler" or "Emperor" in the Ethiopian language of Amharic. Allow your vocabulary and behavior to uplift yourselves and others. Get rid of negative words in your vocabulary that hurt and weaken yourselves. Be the Kings you were designed to be. From one Negus to another- Christopher

*Free Minds Note: There are a lot of professions in the medical field. Some are not open to people with a felony on their record. However, there are many that will allow you to petition for a waiver, which means you would write a letter to a Board explaining your particular circumstances, and why you want to pursue the profession. It is possible you would be granted a waiver. The American Occupational Therapy Association explains that this is the case with Occupational Therapists.*





## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever. — Mahatma Gandhi*

*Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom. — George Washington Carver*

*The beautiful thing about learning is that nobody can take it away from you. — B.B. King*

### Blessed

*By DD, AKA D-Nice, FM Member*

I am blessed. Being blessed doesn't mean being rich or even happy but being blessed means I am still breathing, waking up every morning and not being hungry and having family or people who care for you and still show you, not just tell you. Your circumstances can change and when you have the weight of the world on your shoulders you have to fight and not with fists—it's 70% mental and 30% physical, so fight the fight with knowledge and mental strength because we never know what's next. The system is looking at all of us black men the same, so giving up on education and knowledge means you give up on life. So, when you open your mind to the idea that any and everything is possible it sends a message to the unconscious mind that there is an unlimited horizon for you to accomplish anything you set your mind on. So count your blessings and don't take them for granted.

### What I Am Learning

*By CT, FM Friend*

I feel about learning how an artist or musician feels about the classical works of the one whom he aspires to be like—or rather better than (driven!) Right now, I am learning the language of the Arabs and American Sign Language. I am memorizing from my religious texts and the text of a book entitled *The Three Elemental Principles*.

### Beating a Learning Disability

*By BH, FM Member*

Back in elementary and middle school, the word "learning" meant "embarrassment." Anytime I was called on to answer a question or problem, my mind would go into panic mode and I would yell, "I don't know!" or just put my head down. Because of my ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), I would pretend to understand what the teacher was teaching. And that caused the other students to pick on me, calling me dumb, stupid and placing me in the back of the class as if I was not worthy to sit up front.

I had a choice whether to let this disorder take over or fight back. I chose to fight back, studying day and night, pushing myself to become an A+ student. After graduating high school, I ran into peers here and there

from elementary and middle school. When I'd ask them, "Where you headed?" the response would be "To night school." Instead of picking on them, I would encourage that person to finish strong! Right now, I'm learning how to be myself.

### FEEDBACK FROM WRITE-NIGHT VOLUNTEERS

Scores\* of students at the George Washington University turned out to an April Write Night to read your poems. We asked them to share one thing they have learned. A few highlights:

*I have learned that in life, you have to pick your battles. Sometimes it's better to just brush something off rather than make a big deal out of it. You will be able to live a happier, simpler life.*

*I have learned we are all members of the human race, each with a unique story that helps to make us who we are. When we step out of our comfort zones and share those stories with one another, we are truly able to connect and learn more about others and ourselves.*

*You're going to fail at things in life. You're going to not succeed and it's going to be OKAY. The biggest indicator of your character is what happens after your failures. How you bounce back--and that you bounce back--is more important than the failure itself.*

*I've learned that one must uphold standards in their lives. With standards, no one else can control your life. You decide what is okay and what is intolerable at all times. It brings you closer to the life you want to lead, even if it means saying goodbye to some people in your life. I was forced to learn this the hard way, but I found that it actually only made my values stronger and my life enriched with different experiences.*

*I've learned to have patience. Patience with myself, and patience with others.*

*I've learned that words are so important. You always have your word and more often than not, what you say will stick with people. Mean what you say. Even if it changes moment to moment. Be impeccable with your word.*

*I've learned that smiling can trick your mind into happiness. Just tightening that upper lip to expose your crooked teeth can bring you joy. Whether or not your curved lips alone can do the trick, I've found that I'm in control of the way I use my face. If nothing else, I have absolute power over what makes me smile, sharing that with the world.*

(\*One definition of the word score that you may or may not know: a group or set of twenty or about twenty. If you are like me and are bad at estimating how many people are in a crowd, but you're pretty sure it's a little less than 100, you can just say "scores"!)





# IN THE NEWS

By FM Friend John

## World

Tragedy struck the Republic of Nepal this month, when a massive earthquake destroyed its capital city, Kathmandu (CAT-MAN-DOO). The quake registered a 7.8 out of 10 on the Richter Scale, and also produced several violent aftershocks throughout the region.



Nepal is a small country, about the size of Arkansas, wedged in between India and China. It is the home of Mount Everest, one of the highest points in the world.

More than 6,000 are dead in Nepal, more than 14,000 have been seriously injured, and thousands more remain missing.

*\*FM NOTE: Some of you know that our own FM member, SN returned to Nepal after serving his sentence. We are relieved and happy to tell you all that while their town was hit hard, SN and his family are alive and well. We spoke with him two days after the quake. He was on his way to Kathmandu to help in the rescue and clean up effort.*

## U.S.

Activists in major cities, including Baltimore and Philadelphia, continue to protest the abuse of police power.

In an era where virtually every adult and adolescent has a camera-ready phone, footage of questionable police shootings and beatings have emerged, fueling the protests.

In Baltimore, Freddie Gray, a man who was arrested for running from police even though he had not done anything, died from injuries sustained in a police van on the way back to the precinct. The state's attorney in Maryland has announced that she will charge the six police officers involved in Gray's death with crimes.

## D.C.

In an effort to push teens to think about continuing their education beyond high school, First Lady Michelle Obama hosted a "College Signing Day" for D.C. seniors at George Washington University.

It was a scene similar to what happens when big-time athletes commit to colleges. The Ballou High School band played as more than 100 seniors walked up to the podium and announced the college they planned to attend.

Obama spoke remotely by video, telling youths, "This is not the end of your journey; it's just the beginning."

## Sports

In one of the coldest D.C. winters on record, the Washington Wizards and Washington Capitals both set the place on FIRE! Both teams have made the second round of their respective playoff series.

The Wizards did so in shocking fashion. Led by John Wall and future Hall of Famer Paul Pierce, the Wiz swept the Toronto Raptors, a team they had not beaten all year. The last game of the series was a 30-point blowout.

The Wizards will play the Atlanta Hawks next.



The Capitals needed all seven games in round one to get by the New York Islanders. They head right back to New York to take on the Rangers, who are the favorite to win the Stanley Cup.

The Caps will need a huge series from their three-time MVP and NHL scoring leader, Alex Ovechkin. He got the team off to a good start in Game 1, with a goal and an assist to put the Caps up 1-0 in the series.

Redskins: For those who haven't kept up lately, the Redskins stunk last year and hired a new general manager to help add some talent to the team. The new GM, Scot McCloughan, got his first crack at the Redskins draft this month.

His first choice: Brandon Scherff, a massive offensive lineman with a nasty streak. Scherff is 6-foot-5, 319 pounds, and could either play guard or tackle for the Redskins.

The Redskins also picked up a two-year-option for Robert Griffin III, aka RG3. This is the year for Griffin; either he establishes him as the starting quarterback of the Redskins, or he will be in another city next season.



# INTERVIEW WITH SERGIO

*Free Minds member Sergio returned home in August 2014 after serving a total of 8 years and 11 months over two stints in federal prison. He joined Free Minds when he was just 15 at the DC Jail.*

## **FM: What were you like as a 15 year old kid?**

SERGIO: I was fearless then. Without a care. That is to say, I didn't care about anything. I think that was because of the way I grew up. I was surrounded by people who didn't care about anything. I was always smart though. I always took education seriously. I always loved school and learning.

## **What did you learn in prison?**

I learned patience. I learned how to make better decisions. That you don't always have to act. You can, and should, think things over first. I learned how to write better. I learned how to introduce myself to and meet all kinds of new people. Before, I only wanted to be around people who were just like me. Now I'm interested in meeting and being around new people who are different.

## **What was the hardest part about coming home?**

Everything is different. None of the same people are around. My old friends are either locked up or dead. The few that are still around have new problems. They have kids, or they have other situations causing them stress. I have to start all over.

## **What attitude did you bring home with you?**

This time, I'm staying focused upon doing the right thing and learning the new things that will keep me alive.



## **What are you doing?**

I go to welding school full-time from 8AM-4:30PM every day. During the evenings, I help out at a community program for families and I go to an education program on Saturdays. I'm trying to stay really busy. It's hard because it's all stuff I've never done before. But I don't want to do the things I used to do. I didn't get anything out of that life! I love welding because it's

hands on work. I can melt metal and make something completely new from it. I am creating something and I love that! I've always been artistic. I am happy doing what I'm doing because I know that learning this skill will help me get a job making good money. Welders make \$44/hour!

## **What matters to you these days?**

I'm different now. I care about being successful. I want to take care of my little sister. I care about not being a failure. I want to be on this earth and do something to change it for the better.

## **What is one new thing you would like to learn?**

I would love to learn how to do all the things that Navy SEALs do! That stuff is all just crazy! I'd also like to learn French and go to Paris. If I go there though, I'm not ever coming back!

## *Teach Me*

*By MD, Free Minds Member*

Teach me and I will learn  
Instead of pushin' me away  
Show me a way  
Instead of calling me dumb  
Make me smart  
My hand is out  
I'm willing to learn  
Teach me and I will learn  
When will it be my turn?  
Like Dr. King, I have a dream  
Stop the pain, it burns  
Teach me and I will learn

## THE NAKED TRUTH

*By CM, FM Member*

Stay strong, keep your head up, hard times don't last  
Frequent quotes I constantly hear  
But how can I truly be at peace  
Without a listening ear  
Barbed wires don't relate, cell walls can't hear  
So there's pain in every thought  
But strength in every tear  
Emotionally confused, spiritually weak  
Mentally stagnated I stand  
Vulnerable to any woman's attention  
Yet envied by man  
Anxious to learn, grow, and evolve...  
Captivity is my setback, love is my resolve  
Plagued by impatience  
Novice by knowledge  
To you, it's 30 years I've thrown away  
To me, it's 30 years in college  
A fool and his folly flourish when shown attention  
And to indulge in their child's play  
Will only cause future resentment  
Every day I strive to break the cycle of my family's contentment  
With pure intentions  
But it's their job to believe  
True happiness can be achieved  
I can only attempt to convince them  
I'm slightly hindered with that because I'm fenced in  
But my mind is free  
And absolutely unable to be held in captivity  
Regardless of the certain circumstances presently presented  
So listen...the message is sent  
And can easily be grasped with the right amount of attention  
A wise man can always play a fool  
But it's never the same in the reflection  
That's like a pig playing possum  
The point in that is  
Without the sun and the rain  
A rose would never blossom  
See, knowledge is food for the mind  
It needs proper nutrition  
And depending on what's consumed  
It can soon be undeniably proficient  
The naked truth is before us all  
Just draped in lies  
In which we unconsciously take heed to  
And it shapes our lives  
All it took for me was to pick up a book  
To free my mind  
And it brought light to all the shade  
The truth is behind



# REENTRY SPOTLIGHT

By Keela

Free Minds has a new and improved apprenticeship program that we rolled out in February and we hope that you will be a part of it when you get home. It is a month-long, paid program that is conducted on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. If you will be in a halfway house at first, you should know that we have been successful in getting approval from case managers for all of our interested members to participate.

Some of the new and really cool aspects of our apprenticeship include:

- Expansion from 20 hours to a whole month!
- Training sessions with engaging and successful speakers and service providers, some of them returning citizens.
- Workshops on financial stewardship and budgeting.
- Informative community outings and an introduction to advocacy, including a trip to the new Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial.
- Health & Physical Fitness sessions conducted at the gym.
- Real life work experience and compensation from actual employers (you will have the opportunity to work a shift at a real company run by returning citizens!)
- Transportation stipends provided throughout the duration of the apprenticeship.
- Training on entrepreneurship conducted by a successful business owner who was formally incarcerated.
- Resumes, cover letters, mock job interviews and role-playing to prepare you to enter the workforce and be successful.
- A spirited and lively graduation ceremony celebrating your achievements at the successful conclusion of the apprenticeship.
- Last but not least, a weekly monetary stipend received at the end of each week.

Believe it or not, there's much, much more but to save space we'll fill you in on the rest when you get home! We tailored this apprenticeship with you in mind so please don't forget to inform us of your release date so that we can reserve a spot especially for you!!

## RESOURCES

I have two resources that I wanted to make you guys aware of so that you can take advantage of them when you come home.

**The Achievement Center** is a DC Workforce Development program featuring state of the art culinary classes, television and video production and video editing

Coming home in the next 6 months? Write us a letter or give us a call at 202-758-0829 so we can help you plan for reentry!

courses, GED, tutoring and mentoring, music production and small business classes.

- Located at 450 H street NW, in Chinatown and service youth and young adults between the ages of 16-24.
- They guarantee you two job interviews throughout the course of the program. Sessions last for up to 10 weeks and during that time, if you are placed with a job through one of the interviews they set up for you, you are eligible to receive a Visa gift card up to \$1050.00!
- We are happy to announce that three of our apprentices signed up this week! If interested, please contact Mr. Powell at the Achievement Center @ 202-251-5847.

**The Skyland Workforce Center** is a new initiative, as part of the development of the Skyland Town Center development, to help people connect with and prepare for jobs.

- The Center is located at 2509 Good Hope Road SE, Washington, DC 20020. Hours: 9am-4pm Monday-Friday. 202-793-2141.
- Six nonprofits will be providing services at the Center:

- 1) **LIFT-DC** and *Samaritan Ministry* are providing case management
- 2) *Jubilee Jobs* is doing job placement
- 3) *Southeast Ministry* is providing GED tutoring and adult basic education
- 4) **STRIVE-DC** is offering job readiness training
- 5) *Byte Back* is providing computer literacy training (classes will start in January)
- 6) *Building Bridges Across the River*, the nonprofit that manages **THEARC**, is managing the Workforce Center.

## The Mud

By SJ, FM Member

It's so hard to turn away from all that's wrong when it seems so right  
Why is it this wall that's so broad that keeps me from seeing the light?  
So much pain and struggle, but a man that stands tall will shine bright  
With a heart as the men we once called great heights  
But I never knew of the tools  
To even bare a chance of fighting a good fight!  
So as I rise into the man you see, I don't know it all  
But I know more now than what was kept in the mud







# AROUND THE WORLD...

## St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada

By Elijah, FM Friend



Last summer, I took a trip that I will never forget. I went to a place in eastern Canada called St John's, in the province of Newfoundland. Before going, I knew nothing about the area. I was invited to go there with my girlfriend and her family, so I was excited to explore and find out what this place was all about. When we first arrived, I immediately noticed how beautiful the area was. As you can see from the picture, it is right on the water. The weather was great the whole time too, which made for a more enjoyable experience. I'll tell you about the amazing things I was lucky enough to do there, as well as what I learned from the trip.

One day, we went out on a boat to go fishing. Everyone else was catching big fish, but I kept reeling in tiny fish that were even smaller than my hand! While I wasn't the most successful in the group, I had an awesome time fishing. We went back to the apartment we were staying in, and fried some of the bigger fish we caught, and ate them for dinner. I'm not usually a huge fan of seafood, but

this fish was pretty tasty, especially since we knew that we caught them ourselves.

Another cool thing we did was whale watching. This was also out on a boat, but we went much farther from the coast this time. I had never seen a whale in person before, so at first I had trouble knowing what I was looking for. I was worried that one would jump out of the water but I would miss it. This didn't happen at all though, since the first whale we saw jumped out of the water right near the boat! It was such an exciting thing to see in the wild. We could actually see the whale as it swam just beneath the surface, and we were able to see it swim directly under our boat! We saw a few more whales throughout the day, but none were as crazy to see as the first one.



The other thing we did on the trip was go zip lining. If you don't already know, zip lining is when you are in a harness that is hooked to a long cable that connects two platforms, and you hang from below the cable and "zip" across a valley or through the woods until you reach the next platform. The zip lines we went on in St John's were super high off of the ground! The best one was super long, and my girlfriend and I got to go across at the same time.

While I had a lot of fun doing all these new things, I also learned something from my trip. The whole time I was in St John's, I don't think I saw one other black person. Strangely, almost everyone there was kind of short. I'm 6'2" and a lot of the time I was looking at the tops of everyone's heads! It also seemed like everywhere you looked there were gingers (redheads). As far as I know, I could've been the only black person in the whole city. That being said, I never felt unwelcome in any way. It was totally the opposite, with everyone being extremely friendly to me. I think that while racial tensions are very high here in America, maybe some people in Canada are more accepting of others' differences. I realized how important it really is for us to just accept everyone for who they are.

My trip to St John's was the highlight of my summer for sure. From the thrilling experiences to the important life lessons, it was truly unforgettable.

## FUN FACTS ABOUT ST. JOHN'S & NEWFOUNDLAND

- St. John's is actually the oldest city in North America.
- The accent of people in St. John's is nearly identical to an Irish accent.
- There are 100,000 moose in Newfoundland!
- There is a crazy tradition in Newfoundland called a "screech-in." It's how you can become an "honorary Newfoundlander." Sounds cool, right? We went to the pubs with my girlfriend's parents and they got "screeched in." Some real Newfoundlanders bought them each a shot of rum. But then they had to kiss a cod (a big fish!) on the lips, say the words "*Long may your big jib draw!*" and toss back the rum. Then everyone in the pub went crazy, pounding them on the backs and cheering.

## Learning

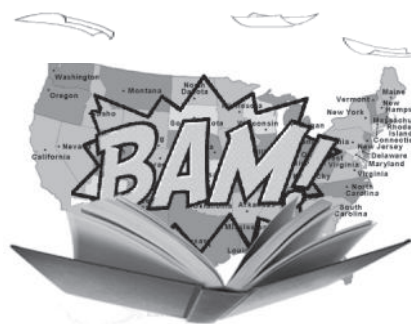
By MT, FM Member

Learning is a part of life, some good and some bad  
Some learn life's blessings and others learn life's hardships  
Learning to me is a must, but it's what you learn that makes a difference  
Growing up, I learned a lot of bad ways and things due to peer pressure  
And the lack of role models around the neighborhood  
Some would say I was a follower

I say I just didn't have no guidance  
You want to learn the things that will get you a long way in life  
And not in a jail cell or grave  
I want to learn how to be the best me I can be  
And through other people's experiences, as well as mine  
Reading, schooling, heart, and will  
I can be the best me I can be  
Learning from mistakes gives you the keys to life  
So please learn while you still can!



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



## BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

Our last BAM! book was *Prison Noir*, an anthology of short stories all written by people who are incarcerated or have been incarcerated. I'm guessing that you guys have plenty of stories of your own worth reading...if the publisher does a *Prison Noir 2*, maybe we'll see some of your writing!

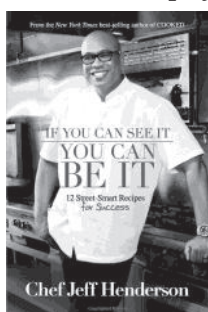
The stories in *Prison Noir* cover a wide range of topics: "Tune-Up" is about a group of guys who play music in prison, and about how this helps them cope, and helps them connect with each other and with their families. "A Message in the Breath of Allah" is about a guard who believes he is fulfilling his religious purpose by killing sick inmates. "The Investigation" is about a man who is many years into a long bid, and has just witnessed a murder. "There Will Be Seeds for Next Year" is about a man serving a life sentence and struggling with suicidal thoughts, while a heat wave makes everyone in the prison start acting up. And that's just a few of the stories!

We heard some reviews, both good and bad:

*"It was nice to read and a lot of the stories, I have some just like them that I would like to use to help keep the kids off the streets when I come back home."* DM

*"Thanks for Prison Noir. I loved it!"* MC

*"On the book Prison Noir, I did not enjoy this book because it really showed some of the ugly faces of incarceration. I felt the story 'Shuffle' because I've seen first hand how jail can mentally mess you up. I understood 'Tune-Up' because when you do things in here that you love, while you're doing them, you feel like you're not locked up. Then 'Immigrant Song' really hit home. Coming to the jail for the first time is something mind blowing especially if you can't understand the language. Then on top of that a lot of us are ignorant about the law."* MH



The next BAM! title is *If You Can See It, You Can Be It!* By Jeff Henderson. Some of you may remember Henderson as the author of the best-selling memoir *Cooked*; about the nearly ten years he spent in a California state prison for drug trafficking. While incarcerated, Henderson worked in the prison kitchen, deciding to learn as much as he possibly could about culinary arts. After his release, he worked his way up the ladder, surrounding himself with and emulating people who were doing what he one day hoped to do. Henderson is now celebrity chef at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas and a sought after public speaker who has hosted reality television shows. Some of you met Chef Jeff when he visited Free Minds Book Club in 2006. In *If You Can See It*, Henderson provides 12 inspiring "recipes" for you to discover your hidden business aptitudes, make life-changing decisions, and secure bulletproof personal and professional success. He shares his unique perspectives on the virtues of self-knowledge, hard work, determination, and leverage in the real world.

As you read, ask and answer the following questions:

- Have you known anyone you considered a "hustlepreneur"? What did/does that person do?
- What qualities do you have that you believe will make you successful?
- Is there something that you want to work towards becoming? What is it?
- What are the challenges you face in getting there? How will you overcome them?
- Does this book inspire you? What is the most important lesson you take from it?

We will be waiting for your book reviews! Send them to Kelli at: Free Minds Book Club, 2201 P Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037.

### WHAT ARE THE YOUNG'UNS READING?

The guys on the juvenile block are reading the mystery, *A Winter Kill*, by Vicki Delany. The action begins when Nicole Patterson, a brand new police officer in a remote Canadian town discovers the body of a high school student lying in the snow. Although she is under qualified and unauthorized, Officer Patterson throws herself into the center of the investigation.



## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: Washington, DC

Washington, DC, The Nation's Capital, Chocolate City, The District, Capital City, The City of Monuments...DC! This is our city. And whether you are from the heart of it, or from the surrounding areas of the DMV, you definitely have feelings for it. For our next *Connect* issue, send us your poems, essays and artwork about Washington, DC. What people, places, ideas or feelings most represent DC to you? What is the best of our city? The worst? How do you feel about areas being developed or "gentrified"? What do you dream for DC in the future? Complete this sentence: "You know you're from DC when..."

Until the next time, stay strong and keep your mind FREE!



## How a book club is helping to keep ex-offenders from going back to jail

By Robert Samuels February 25, 2015

Robert Barksdale steps in front of the students in an English class at Eastern High School, searching for some semblance of redemption.

“For me, school is a treat because I never got to be in school, for real,” he begins. He always envisioned visiting a school to speak to students but was beginning to realize the pressures of standing in front of the classroom. He scans the room and says: “Y’all are a little intimidating.”

Barksdale was around their age when he chose the streets over school. By 16, he was arrested and convicted on armed robbery charges, the culmination of a series of ill-conceived attempts to be a man.

Now, at 25, he is one. But after spending so many of his formative years behind bars, he wondered: What sort of man would he be? Behind him were two former inmates. They hoped they might find the answers together.

Phil Mosby, 26, hands out copies of a poem for the students to read. Juan Peterson, 24, confesses to the students that this Northeast Washington neighborhood makes him a little uncomfortable: It is close to the D.C. jail, where the three friends first met.

They were all teenagers then, charged as adults for their violent crimes. At the D.C. jail, they found solace in a book club, reading memoirs and reciting poems they had written.

Over the past year, they finally came home. They see themselves as reformed men who did dumb things as kids but who know that others may have trouble forgiving.

So they stick together. The support system that strengthened them then is the one they are counting on to help them now that they’re out. The unlikely community has become an unlikely lifeline, as they try to defy the patterns that send ex-offenders back to jail.

They fall into a high-risk category: Juveniles tried as adults are 34 percent more likely than youth tried as juveniles to return to prison, according to a 2007 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The alumni of the book club have no interest in becoming part of this statistic. So they work together to create goals. They applaud when someone meets his goal, such as when Barksdale got a job working full time as a city maintenance worker.

They share job leads and work out together and meet up for pancakes.

They particularly like to lead writing workshops, which is why they are at this English class on a January day.

Barksdale recites a poem he wrote in his sixth year of prison, at 22:

*“The things we took up are guns, knives and bats, yeah, we be armed and strong  
But how do you know it’s not right if you’re being taught wrong?”*

He stops to collect himself.

“I got to be honest, y’all are making me a little nervous,” Barksdale tells the class.

Mosby, 26, catches his eye. Mosby spent nearly a decade in prison on a murder charge before being released to a halfway house in September. He nods at Barksdale and smiles. The body language is unmistakable; it says, “I got your back.”

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The jail club is called “Free Minds.” The nonprofit was founded 13 years ago by two former journalists, Tara Libert and Kelli Taylor, after Taylor became pen pals with a young man on death row who loved books. Then the two realized the inmates they learned to love would need even more support after prison, so they extended their mission to provide support programs for the men when they came home.

Nearly 940 juveniles have passed through the book club. About 230 members have been released, 114 of them in the past two years, according to Free Minds.

Tired at the time of sitting in his jail cell, Barksdale joined the book club as an excuse to go to a room with windows. He would slip into the nondescript classroom in the jail and lay his head on a desk, saying nothing.

It took months for the two leaders to persuade Barksdale to write a poem. Then, he scribbled stanzas too profane to print, but the leaders applauded his sense of rhyme. Encouraged, he wrote more.

“The brothers I used to roll on the streets with? All of them are gone. Except one, who is serving 60 years in prison,”

Barksdale said, reflecting on his time living near the Mount Vernon Triangle in Northwest. “I am not proud of what I did, but it turned out to be kind of beautiful. I get a chance to be somebody.”

At 16, Mosby was bigger than most of the other students. Intimidating. He rarely shared that he loved to write.

In his first year in the club, the group finished reading “Makes Me Wanna Holler” by Nathan McCall, a memoir of a former convict turned writer. The volunteers provided this prompt: “What makes you want to holler?”



After 10 minutes, Mosby stood up with a piece of paper and read a tribute to a close friend:

*"When I feel your family's presence*

*Makes me wanna cry*

*When I know I could have talked to you before your death*

*Makes me wanna cry"*

Trembling, Mosby stopped reading. The room watched as he turned his back to them, walked to a corner and started to weep.

"No one knew what to do," Taylor recalled.

Another inmate, Calvin Minor, now 26, stood up. He walked to Mosby, placed his hands on his shoulders and told him he needed to trust God. They talked until Mosby calmed down.

Mosby recalled: "You have to keep on a mask in prison to survive, so people don't mess with you. But then, Free Minds, it started feeling like a brotherhood."

The brotherhood did not last — it couldn't. As each inmate turned 18, judges sent them to federal prisons across the country. The volunteers sent them birthday cards.

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On Sept. 18, Mosby returned from prison. He reunited with Minor.

Home didn't fully feel like home, Mosby told his friend. His old housing project, the open-air drug market known as East Capitol Dwellings, had been demolished. He had no idea how to send a text message. No one even wore baggy clothes anymore.

"Everything's fitted," Mosby said. "Not too baggy, not too tight, just fitted."

Minor, two years out of prison, took on a professional air by pulling his dreadlocks into a neat ponytail and always wearing a button-up shirt.

"Be patient, take your time and execute a plan," Minor recalled telling him. It took years to find stable work.

In the middle of January, Mosby put on a pair of fitted jeans and walked into Dupont Circle's Church of the Pilgrims for a get-together with old book club members.

"Phil!" they shouted when he walked through the door.

Mosby hadn't seen some of them since he was sent to prison. Yet there they were, a group of 20 sitting in a circle of folded chairs with the two co-founders, as in the old days. They were no longer skinny boys in orange jumpsuits but men with facial hair and biceps that bulged through their street clothes. Some had kids. Some had their own businesses. They ate lukewarm pizza and sipped apple cider from plastic champagne glasses.

Libert, one of Free Minds' co-founders, brought up their biggest enemy: the "f--- it syndrome." That happens when members get frustrated, say "f--- it," and go back to their criminal ways.

About 1 in 3 members go back to jail, usually for violating probation or selling drugs.

"We're going to set some goals for the new year," Libert said.

One wanted to remove the tattoo on his face. One wanted children; another wanted none at all. Others wanted licenses for truck driving or pest control or to go to college.

Mosby summarized his goal in one word: "freedom."

"I want to understand freedom," he later explained. "I want to be able to have a job that can make a decent living, and put all of my past behind me. I can do it if I stay positive."

After they set goals, Taylor, the other co-founder, gave a writing prompt.

"It's a new year, a new you," she said. "Write about what it means to be 'new.' "

Peterson, who had joined the book club a year after Mosby was arrested on armed robbery charges, went to a corner and began to scribble. Now out of prison, his goal was to become a lawyer:

*"No more heartaching sins*

*from the dark place within*

*thinking of back then it's too complicated to comprehend*

*I'm awestruck from the view*

*It's like I'm seeing two*

*My mind is displaying a brighter hue*

*It feels good to be brand new"*

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Inside the classroom at Eastern, a nervous Barksdale explains his new self.

"Writing opened up a passion in me," Barksdale tells them. "That's what you need to get through. Phil and Juan know; they were on the block with me.

"I began to read books, I wrote poetry, got my vocational certificate because life is not a game. Nobody is playing out there."

The students are rapt.

“Y’all making me nervous, but y’all motivating me at the same time,” he says. “There’s no one that can get in the way of your future except you.”

Peterson spoke about how most of the men he met in prison had cycled in and out of jails since they were teenagers like him.

“They were old, dying, with heart failure,” he says. “They never got to see their kids. But they had wisdom. . . . So now, I’m doing better.”

Mosby is next.

“I actually went to this high school for one day, and then I was arrested,” he says. “I had hard times, depressing times.”

A male student with close-cropped hair raises his hand in the back of the room.

“Why did it take getting incarcerated for you to learn that your life had any meaning?” he asks.

Mosby takes a deep breath, looks into the student’s eyes.

“My life was chaos,” Mosby tells him. “Sometimes, things were moving so fast that you don’t know what to do.”

The student turns his head away from him but continues:

“You went to school, but you were looking at school an entirely [wrong] way. School was trying to teach you that the streets is not for you, and when they taught you that, you were not listening.”

Mosby replies: “But the thing is, like I said, there’s a whole lot of chaos going on in your life. And you really don’t have the time . . .”

“So you took a part in the chaos, instead of terminating it?”

“My life was hard, and it was hard to get out of that mind-set.

The student remained skeptical.

“So where you are from made you?”

The classroom begins to hum, with students debating among themselves: Are these men role models for turning their lives around? Or are they just bad kids who should have just listened long ago, as the student implied?

Mosby knows he needs to prove his case. The rest of his life will hinge on persuading employers, bankers, neighbors to look beyond his youth. He hopes his presence and optimism will charm others into giving him a chance.

Mosby thinks about telling him more about his neighborhood, besieged by drugs and crime, where boys felt they had little choice but to take on the personas of tough men. But the clock’s hands move closer to 5:30 p.m., the students are jumping out of their seats. Class is over.

Mosby keeps trying.

“You have a good head on your shoulders,” Mosby says as the student packs his backpack.

“Do you play any sports?” he asks as the student walks away.

The teacher rushes to Mosby. She says that the student is one of her hardest workers, which might explain why he was dismissive.

“He’s our honors student,” she says.

Before Mosby went to jail, so was he.

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As the three men walk out of the school, Mosby can’t stop thinking about the student.

“He had a good head on his shoulders,” he repeats, remaining positive.

“When I was in prison, I always dreamed about talking in front of school,” Barksdale says. “Now I’ve finally done it. I’m going to make a difference.”

Peterson tells the group that he might finally have a job. Another member of the club started a service cleaning restaurants at night. Looking out for his fellow poet, the owner was willing to hire him.

“I’ll clean toilets to start working,” says Peterson, as they walk toward the Stadium-Armory Metro station. “Phil, you should do it, too.”

“That might work,” he says. “But I have another job interview tomorrow.”

“Oh, yeah?”

They stand outside the Metro as the winter moon begins to glow, chatting about possibilities in the neighborhood. Steps away, young people are still in the D.C. jail. But from here, the place is merely a shadow.

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Robert Samuels is a national political reporter who focuses on the intersection of politics, policy and people. He previously covered social issues in the District of Columbia.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/how-a-book-club-brought-inmates-together-even-on-the-outside/2015/02/25/0468c8ca-a277-11e4-903f-9f2faf7cd9fe\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/how-a-book-club-brought-inmates-together-even-on-the-outside/2015/02/25/0468c8ca-a277-11e4-903f-9f2faf7cd9fe_story.html)