

# Free Minds Connect

## THIS MONTH'S THEME:

### Hope |hōp|

Noun. **1** a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen : • a person or thing that may help or save someone • grounds for believing that something good may happen : a feeling of trust.  
Verb [ intrans. ] want something to happen or be the case : *he's **hoping for** probation* | [with clause ] *I **hope** that the guys all enjoy the BAM book!*

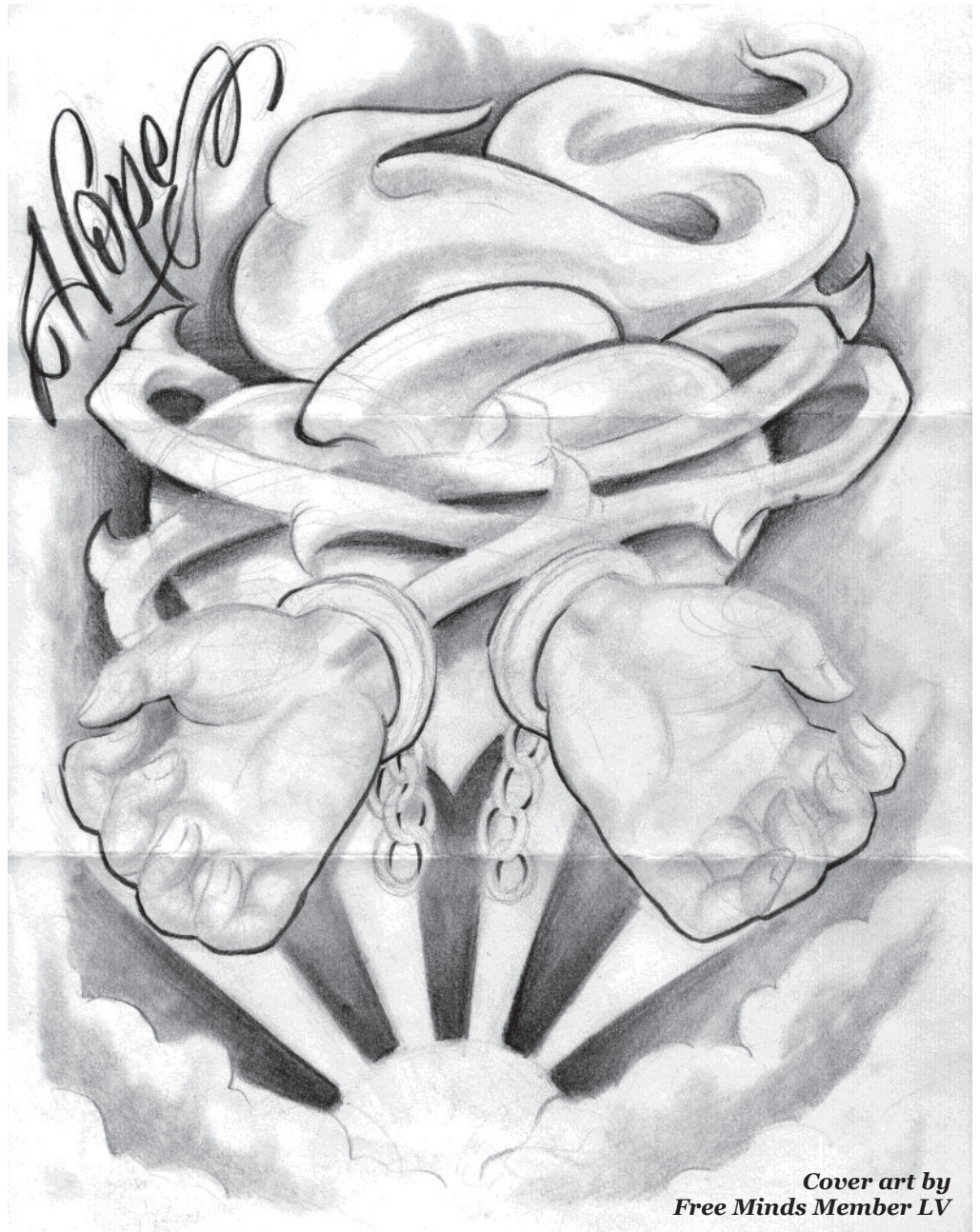
• [with infinitive ] intend if possible to do something : *we're **hoping to** support you in achieving big huge goals when you come home!*

## IN THIS ISSUE...

A brand new  
baby gives  
hope  
(page 11)

FM Member returns  
home with a desire to  
give back after 8 years  
behind bars (page 9)

Use your common sense!  
(or "senses!") How to use  
your eyes, ears, nose, mouth  
and fingertips to write  
beautifully! (page 4)



Cover art by  
Free Minds Member LV

Is brought to you by...

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LV, JN, KA, RW, DS,  
Will, Robert, MH, AL

### FM Friends:

Lillian, HF, AD (AKA  
Spoken Truth), XE,  
Shirley, Rich, John

*It's time for you to be  
on this list! Write or  
draw something for  
our next issue and  
send it to us!*

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

## Next Issue's Theme: PRIDE

What makes you feel  
proud? How does  
pride affect you? Is it  
always a good thing?

Warm wishes to my hope-filled Free Minds family! I connect deeply to this issue's theme of hope. In fact if you asked me for one word that describes Free Minds I would say HOPE. I really believe living life without hope is like trying to breathe without oxygen--it doesn't last too long. For me hope is the fuel that keeps up going in life.

I remember when I was a TV news producer and covered Bill Clinton's presidential campaign and was doing a profile of his hometown Hope, Arkansas and I asked a resident why she supported him and she said "What can go wrong with a President from Hope!" and I think that sums it up for me. Not much can go wrong if you have hope.

A few recent experiences where I pulled out my hope card and held it high:

- When the YOARA bill (to have Title 16 pre-trial youth placed at YSC and have a judge review the case to possibly send the youth back to YSC) did not make it to City Council this session. **We will not give up and are already meeting the new council members for January session!**
- When some local correctional facilities forbid inmates receiving books. **We will push for education and awareness so that policies will change!**
- When housing in DC is so tight that our FM members have to stay in homeless shelters. **We will talk to the new mayor Muriel Bowser and urge her to build more affordable housing!**

This issue marks a new era in the Connect as Kelli has taken over as Managing Editor from Sarah. I'm so excited about what lies ahead. Don't forget to send her those poems, stories and articles!

One area where I have great hope is our FM staff as we welcome new Program Director Seana (See her article p. 10) Seana is the embodiment of hope as she combines her huge heart with her drive to make things better. Some of you have already heard from her. She has already found many missing FM members who are home and brought us to a whole new level of programming. Welcome Ms. Seana!

Grateful thanks to all who wrote and offered words of healing and sympathy about my breakup with Mark. I can't tell you how touched I was and how comforted I felt. It truly shows me, like the song says "we all get by with a little help from our friends." Your FM brother LW wrote a poem titled "The Battle is Not Yours Alone" where he reminds us there is a circle of support around us as we go through struggles. I'm so proud of the brotherhood you have all formed where former beefs are laid down and you are united in persevering and lifting each other up instead. Hope Springs eternal!

I'll leave you with a quote that I found on a greeting card: *There is no medicine like hope/No incentive so great/And no tonic so powerful as the expectation of something better tomorrow* --Orison Marden

Yours in Hope  
Tara

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

## FREE MINDS HQ



**You know it's been crazy around the FM office when the November/December Connect issue is still in production in mid-December! Better late than never and worth the wait, right? So here are just a few of the things keeping FM busy:**

- Six of your FM brothers who are back home spoke on behalf of all of you in front of the DC City Council in late October. One by one, they took the microphone and eloquently told their stories urging the Council to pass a law called YOARA (Youth Offender Accountability & Rehabilitation Act). The law would prevent holding DC youth in adult jail while they are awaiting trial and instead allow them to be in the more rehabilitative environment of the juvenile system. Let's just say, the guys did you proud, and the DC City Council members were impressed! We will keep you posted what happens with the law.
- Free Minds held our first FAMILY FUN DAY on November 8<sup>th</sup>. We had 52 FM members, staff, volunteers, families and friends meet up at the Temple Hills Skate Palace (aka "Crystals") for an afternoon of skating, reunions and lots of laughs. If you don't believe me about the laughs, just close your eyes and picture Tara on skates!
- On December 12<sup>th</sup>, juveniles at the book club in the DC Jail hosted a visit from author Shaka Senghor. If you've finished the book, Writing My Wrongs, you know Shaka did 19 years for a murder committed when he was a 19 year old drug dealer. He now travels the country sharing his story and his message that writing saves lives. The visit was awesome. Afterwards, one 16 year-old said: "I could really relate to what Shaka was saying when he said that we wear masks. He said we are hurting on the inside and it's true. On the inside I'm a little boy that's crying. But you won't see that on the outside. I'm acting like I don't care. But I'm in pain..." If you haven't started reading the book, what are you waiting for???



On Halloween, guess who won first prize in our building's costume contest? Diego, the Free Minds dog!!! Check out his trophy ☺



## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

*By Kelli*

Can you imagine trying to say your own name, and having the wrong sounds come out of your mouth? What if you needed water, but instead, you said “wicker?” **This is the challenge facing my mom after she suffered two strokes this summer.** A blood clot damaged the left side of her brain where language is created. At 81 years old, my mom has to relearn how to talk!

I just came home after visiting my mom at an assisted living home in Oregon. I felt hope in just about every moment I spent with her. We went to speech therapy and practiced sounds for several hours every day. She looks in the mirror so she can watch her mouth produce the sounds in words like “*we*” and “*no*” and memorize what each one looks like and feels like to produce. Sometimes it takes several minutes before she can say a word correctly, but she refuses to give up. She even used a white board to ask if I could find episodes of Sesame Street on DVD that she could use to practice. On my last day, we were in the car when suddenly my mom started to count out loud. “One, two, three, four...” I couldn’t believe it! She counted all the way up to “fifty.” I wanted to honk the horn and scream out the window, I was so excited! Later, a nurse came to take notes on her progress. As part of the evaluation, she asked my mom to write out a full sentence. The nurse seemed to doubt whether she could do it. I watched as my mom carefully wrote out: “I study.” My mom loves learning with all of her being. She is one of the smartest people I know and has so much left to share and communicate. She gives me enormous hope!

## AN IMAGE OF HOPE

*By Rich, FM Friend*



My mother, Maceola Harris was born in 1927 in Decatur, Alabama – the deepest of the Deep South. She was the daughter of a sharecropper and spent much of her youth picking cotton in the hot Alabama sun. Outward racism was normal and accepted for much of her life. Even after moving north to Ohio, where she met my father, and started a family of her own, she witnessed and endured countless episodes of wicked prejudice meant to humiliate, discourage and ultimately break her. But my mother never broke.

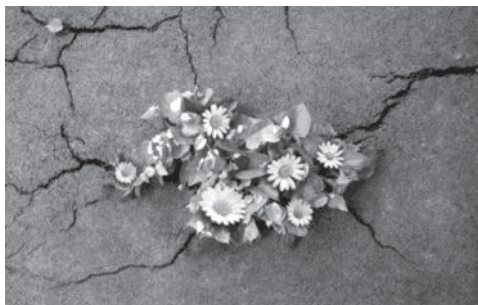
So, when the news that Barack Obama had won the 2008 presidential election was announced on that magical night of November 4th, I thought of what it must be like for her. Did she ever think she would see such a day? How could she? I am so thankful she lived to witness it for herself -- to see this African American place his hand on the Bible and take the oath that, for so long, was thought to be reserved for white men only.

The morning after Obama’s election, I remember waking up and needing a moment to realize the events of the night before were not a dream. To commemorate that great moment in history, my wife and I handed the front page of The Washington Post to our daughter (14) and son (11). We photographed them holding up the headline while standing before a wall covered with pictures of our ancestors. To this day, that picture, like the now-famous painting of Obama above, summarizes hope and possibility. Because if the daughter of a sharecropper born in the cotton fields of Alabama can witness the rise of a black man to the highest office of the land, there is every reason in the world to dream dreams and to have hope for seeing those dreams come true.

## JG’S WORDS OF WISDOM

*By JG, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison*

“Keep hope alive” is a phrase that most of us are familiar with, and no matter how cliché it is, it would be in all of our best interest to heed this statement. When hope dies, so does humanity. When hope dies, so does empathy. When hope dies, so does compassion. Hope is one of the most powerful driving forces; when everything in our lives seems to have gone to waste, and options seem extremely limited, it is hope for the better that strengthens our will to make a way out of no way. Hope turns into faith, faith turns into action, and action equals



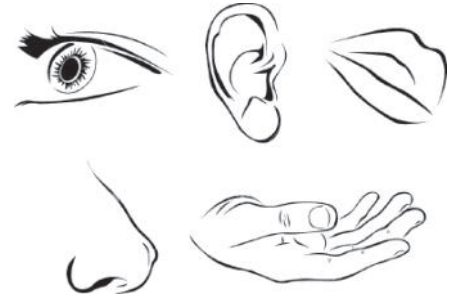
fruition. Simple mathematics, but profound as well, to come into the understanding of how much power we actually have when we exercise the strength of the will, especially when we do so within the bounds of righteousness. Hope is what enables a person to rise up from the dirt to improve their conditions. Hope is what drives the well-off individual to reach out and assist the downtrodden in his or her efforts to improve their conditions. So it is our spiritual responsibility, individually and collectively, to “keep hope alive,” because it truly makes the world a better place.



# THE WRITE WAY

## Using All Your Senses

By FM Writing Guru Julia



“The rose is red.”

As humans, we have five senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell (or eyes, ears, hands, mouth, and nose). But often in writing we get lazy and only write with one sense, usually our eyes. For example, describing a flower: *The rose is red.*

The only description is the color red, meaning we’re only using our eyes—and not our ears, nose, hands, or mouth. Now, roses don’t make much noise, and unless you’re eating it (!), it probably doesn’t have any taste to describe either. But that still leaves smell and touch, two very important senses. Try describing the rose again.

How about this: *The rose is red, with a heavy, but soothing scent, and petals that feel like satin.*

Better, right? The more sensory details, the more specific the object you’re describing. It’s not just any old flower. These sensory details also help us as readers feel like we’re experiencing the rose along with the writer. A good description makes it feel real, like if we take a deep breath we can smell the rose’s fragrance and if we close our eyes we can imagine how soft the petals are when we touch the rose.

We can also use our senses to describe a setting—maybe your home when you were growing up. What did it look like? What did it sound like at different times of the day or night? What kind of things did you have in your home, and what did they feel like? Did you ever run your fingers over the walls or furniture, or walk barefoot on the floor? What kind of food did you eat, and how did it taste? What did your kitchen smell like, or the street in front of your house?

I guarantee that if you write a description with all of those details, the reader will feel like they were there with you even if they’ve never been anywhere close!

## Writing Exercise

Write a poem using at least three of the five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell).

If you need help, think of it like this: I see ... I hear ... I feel ... I taste ... I smell ...

## HOPE IS POWER

by RW, FM Member

Hope is the power to believe and not give up  
To endure the hardships  
To develop patience and implement it  
Hope is confidence  
Having the courage to continue  
Hope is to struggle in any situation  
**And believe even though the struggle doesn’t stop**  
Hope is to listen  
To smile in times of crisis and relief  
Hope is kindness  
Everyone has hope  
You just have to dig deep inside of yourself  
and find it

## HOPE IS EVERYTHING

by XE, Free Minds Friend in federal prison

Without HOPE, my life would be a joke...I probably couldn't be around razor blades or ropes...because without HOPE, my spirit would be broke, I probably couldn't cope with all my stress and have a stroke...Without HOPE, I wouldn't think to be positive because I'm sure life would be too hard to live...Without HOPE, I would have no motivation, there would be no reason for me to have an education, b/c my will and drive wouldn't be alive...but having HOPE is how i survived!



## 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 am waiting to be shipped out the Feds. I’m not scared, but I guess I do feel a lot of anxiety about what might happen because of the stories I’ve heard. Being as I am only 18, I will be the youngest inmate everywhere I go for a while. What advice would you give someone my age. How do I avoid being tried by some of the older dudes?”***

Contrary to popular belief, no one tries young prisoners anymore. It is no longer like back in the days where older convicts preyed on younger guys coming into prison; at least the federal system is not that way today.

I was sent to the Maximum Security Facility (known as “Behind The Wall”) in Lorton, Virginia when I was 17 years young. I did not attempt to portray an image of toughness. The fact that I stood up in court and took my two life sentences at the age of 16 was enough proof that I had courage and integrity.

**You know who you “really” are, and you do not have to prove to anyone who you “really” are. Just be you!** Everyone is not violent but that does not make a person weak. You may be a thinker, not a brute goon type, but someone that can analyze situations and resolve conflicts diplomatically. I have been in prison for 18 years now, and I am not the biggest nor toughest of men, but I am a critical thinker that does not paralyze in moments of crisis, so I have been in leadership positions within the federal system since I was 24 years of age. Take a look at the world leaders today and throughout history and you will see that the people like Obama, Hitler, Napoleon, Mandela were not physically intimidating but mentally strong.

There are over 9,000 D.C. inmates in the federal system; therefore you will generally be all right wherever you go from a numbers perspective. When you arrive to the new unit just treat people with respect, respect their space, their property, and you will receive respect. I promise!

## CONNECTING WITH FAMILY

*FM Mom Lillian has faced enormous hardship, including illness and loss. She is a recovering addict who is clean and sober and a model of strength and perseverance. She loves her son and cares deeply about all of his FM brothers. Like you, she is a writer!*

### I Have Hope

*By Lillian, an FM Mom*

I have hope that I keep in my heart every day  
Because I have a 25 year-old son that’s incarcerated  
and locked away

I have hope because I’m full of fears and I cry  
emotional tears

Praying and wondering if my son will serve them  
93 years

I have hope that God hears and answers my prayers  
My hurt is peeled off daily layer by layer

I have hope that the boy I raised who is now a man  
Will take this experience and truly understand

I have hope that he will be with me before  
I pass away

I felt responsible at first for the reason he  
went astray

**I have hope that the things I’ve been through and  
rose above**

Will show the world and my son that hope is only  
unseen love

I have hope that one day my son will be set free  
The strongest hope that I have in my heart for him  
to be home with his family and me

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

***Do you want photos from home? Remember to tell your friends and family about Flikshop, an app they can download for free on their cell phone that allows them to snap a photo, and in just three days, it shows up on a postcard in the mail for you to any federal or state prison for just 99 cents!***







# PAY IT FORWARD

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SHIRLEY, A FM FRIEND AND 90 YEAR-OLD POET

*Shirley recently attended a Free Minds Write Night event while visiting family in DC. She was thrilled at the opportunity to read and comment on the beautiful poems written by so many of you. She says her life has not been extraordinary, but you be the judge!*

*Shirley was born in 1924 and grew up in New York City. After her father died when she was 5, her mother, an immigrant from Poland who never attended school, raised Shirley by herself. Her mother's dream was for her daughter to go to college. Now remember, this was in 1942, a time when girls were expected to get married and have children, not go to college. In fact, only 10% of young women Shirley's age went beyond high school at that time. Shirley attended City College and studied psychology because she wanted to help other people. Her tuition was free as long as she agreed to work in social services. Among her many jobs was one helping refugees from Cuba. After marrying and raising her own two children, Shirley returned to school to get her Master's degree, eventually becoming a therapist. She is still practicing today!*

### **FM: What has been the biggest challenge you have faced in your life?**

**SHIRLEY:** Dealing with my husband's illness with Alzheimer's Disease, and his death last year has been tremendously difficult. Amidst the loss, I have had to reorganize my entire life. I have to begin again. So I can imagine what it's like for young men coming home from prison. Starting over. They have time though. I have had to hurry up, because I am 90 years old. I don't have that much time!

### **FM: What role have books and writing played in your life?**

**SHIRLEY:** I have always loved books and language, but I never saw myself as a writer. Three years ago, I went with a friend to a writing group. I fell in love with poetry! Once I started writing, I just found it so helpful in dealing with a very painful part of my life (my husband's illness). Very late in my life, I have seen that I can do something new that other people might enjoy! When I came to the FM Write Night event, I saw how therapeutic it can be to share one's writing. I just felt this great sense of identification with the young men--with their pain and their struggle!

### **FM: What has been your greatest joy?**

**SHIRLEY:** My family! Unquestionably. Next to that though is this wonderful opportunity to be helpful to others in concrete ways. Paying it forward has always been important to me. Being connected to other people, the community, and the world is a great source of joy and it makes me feel alive!

### **FM: What do you want to say to our readers?**

**SHIRLEY:** At 90 years old, I'm still kicking and interested in you guys and what you do with your lives. I want you to know that even though life is full of struggle and tough stuff, change does happen, and it's your birthright to know that you are worthwhile, and good, and can reach for all that's good. There are caring people waiting out there for you. Don't give up.

## Found

*By Shirley, FM friend*

Hello to parts of me  
I didn't know  
Couldn't know what couldn't grow

Somewhere in a child's secret place  
there lived a twisted version  
a discordant case.

Fixed in nowhere land,  
mummified in its "hide don't seek."  
A gust, a whisper, a sudden call, it  
took to allow a peek.

Dislodging a boulder that stood in the way  
of seeing that part of me  
in the fresh today.

## CHALLENGE FROM A FM BROTHER

D.S., a FM member wants to know: *If you started an organization like Free Minds to help the youth what would your organization be called, and what would it do?*

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*In a world filled with hate, we must still dare to hope. In a world filled with anger, we must still dare to comfort. In a world filled with despair, we must still dare to dream. And in a world filled with distrust, we must still dare to believe. — Michael Jackson*

*I know it seem hard sometimes but uhh/Remember one thing/Through every dark night, there's a bright day after that/So no matter how hard it get, stick your chest out/Keep your head up, and handle it — Tupac*



## PLEASE HOPE 4 ME

*By AD, aka Spoken Truth,  
Honorary FM Member who is in his 18<sup>th</sup> year of  
incarceration in a Virginia state prison.*

Please hope 4 me I tell you  
I'm just trying 2 breathe, this stress is killing  
I've been missing 4 almost a quarter of a century  
Bound 4 re-entry, soon I'll return from the belly of the  
beast  
I ask you 2 pray 4 me, or in other terms, hope 4 me  
Let's look at modern technology, the iphone is really  
watching society  
But it seems nobody see my youth dying  
When I'm being watched, it's called profiling  
I look back smiling, thinking to myself  
Why can't they hope 4 me, I tell you  
Do you know what I really been through?  
In fact, I had no silver spoon, my stomach has a thin  
lining  
I was treading on a thin line between love and hate  
I was influenced by blood diamonds  
The shine blinded my poor mind  
My illusion of power was introduced by crime  
Please hope 4 me, I tell you  
I've never done drugs, but it seems I'm high of these lies  
told to me  
Who shall I believe in, with so many forces controlling?  
Our country going back to war again  
Another girl is missing, college is the new attraction for  
abduction  
Please hope 4 her, I tell you  
10 shots fired, hands up, don't shoot!  
Please hope 4 me, I tell you  
And in the mean time  
I'll hope 4 you

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*They say a person needs just three things to be truly  
happy in this world: someone to love, something to do,  
and something to hope for. — Tom Bodett*

*Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head  
pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward.  
There were many dark moments when my faith in  
humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could  
not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat  
and death. — Nelson Mandela*

**Only in the darkness can  
you see the stars.**

**Martin Luther King Jr.**

## Hope

*By KA, Free Minds Member*

When I first got locked up, there was this saying  
**Hope for the best and be prepared for the worst**  
You have to be ready for both  
And accept that things will not always go your way  
You got to put actions behind hope  
If not, you going to be hoping til your last days  
**Don't wait on it, go get it**  
You got to be bold and go for nothing  
**Ain't earth yours too?**  
Go get your land and stop horse-playing  
If you keep hoping that the streets going to pay off  
**All it's going to give you is a long bid**  
Or worms in your body  
Take your loss  
And start laying your bricks to build your palace  
**The streets ain't nothing but darkness and the devil**  
It sells you lies, false dreams  
Do go for it  
I done did years behind these walls  
And only pain came to me  
I been robbed without a gun  
I gave years away  
**It's like chasing the wind or grabbing smoke**  
**It ain't happening**  
Play by the rules  
And stop trying to show off out there trying to make a  
name  
In the end when you lose  
Everyone is going to laugh at you  
**Because you was the devils's little puppet**

## HOPE

*By MH, FM Member*

Hope is a quest for future possibilities. It is the education  
for dreams and aspirations. It is the belief that I can become a  
better individual, and in turn create a better world. A world  
where the opportunity to succeed is inherent in the individual  
being given the chance and ability to thrive in any  
environment, absent of classism, racism, sexism, or any of the  
infinite number of biases and prejudices that incur  
limitations.

Hope is the abolition of cynical behavior. It is the  
institutionalization that we as a nation are better through the  
collective use of our individual parts. That our diversity is a  
strength that should be optimally maximized instead of  
discarded as an aberration. **We the People** is the preamble to  
the United States Constitution. It is a celebration of our  
collective might, and not an invitation to faction and  
stagnation. Hope allows us to accept this thesis that was  
created by the founding fathers and advocated over the years  
by such celebrated icons such as Abraham Lincoln, Langston  
Hughes, John F. Kennedy, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Barack  
Obama, Maya Angelou, and Tupac Shakur...That's hope.

# IN THE NEWS

By FM Friend John

## DC News

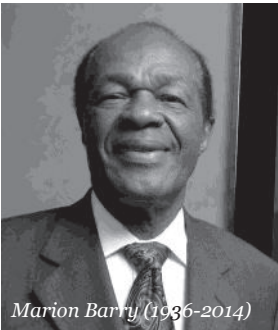
Washington, D.C. has elected a new mayor: Muriel Bowser. She was the councilwoman representing Ward Four, which includes Petworth, Takoma and Shepherd Park. Bowser has said publicly that her focus would be on helping low-income D.C. residents get a leg up.



Muriel Bowser

**“Education gaps, job gaps, income inequality gaps, economic development gaps,” she said at a post-election rally in Southeast. “I pledged ... this administration would have a consistent presence east of the river.”**

But shortly after D.C. elected its new mayor, it lost its **“mayor for life.”** Marion Barry, who was elected four times to lead the city, passed away before Thanksgiving at the age of 78. He was still in office at the time of his death, serving as a member of the council.



Marion Barry (1936-2014)

As almost anyone who grew up in the area knows, Barry was a colorful character who had experienced his share of struggles with drugs, alcohol and women. Sadly, the most famous image of Barry to the rest of the world will always

be the one in which he was caught on tape by FBI using crack cocaine.

Inside the city, he will be remembered as an unrelenting advocate and job creator for the African-American community. His summer programs connected thousands of area teens with their first job.

Barry's friend and fellow council member Mary Cheh told the *Washington Post* that people new

to the city don't **“fully understand...how important Marion Barry was to the district, and that when we first got home rule, how important it was that he was at center stage.”**

## Sports

In 2012, the Washington Redskins rattled off seven wins in a row and made the playoffs, led by phenom rookie of the year Robert Griffin III. RG3 was electrifying throughout the season, and had the entire Redskin fan base dreaming of a Super Bowl someday soon.

It is hard to believe that was only two years ago. For the second season in a row, Griffin has been benched for another quarterback and the Redskins are headed for what could be a second consecutive 3-win season. It is possible that both Griffin and the new head coach, Jay Gruden, will be gone before next season begins.

**Who's playing the best football these days? Without a doubt, it's the Tom Brady-led New England Patriots and the Aaron Rodgers-led Green Bay Packers.** The Packers beat the Patriots last week in the best game so far this NFL season, and it is very possible that the game was a preview of the eventual Super Bowl matchup for February 1.

**But it's not all bad news in the DMV! The Washington Wizards have emerged as an early powerhouse in the Eastern Conference, led by John Wall, Marcin Gortat and new addition Paul Pierce.**

The Wizards will have to keep winning to stay at the top of conference. The Chicago Bulls are a dangerous team if Derrick Rose can stay healthy, **and it's only a matter of time until the LeBron James-led Cleveland Cavaliers start to click.**





# REENTRY PROFILE: ROBERT

By his own admission, Robert was deep into the “street life” as a young teen. He already had a juvenile record and stopped going to school so that he could hang out on the corner.

“To tell you the truth, I expected to get locked up. My friends and I knew that one of two things was going to happen to us. We were going to prison or we were going to be killed. We accepted that. It was part of the life we were living and it’s all we saw in our community. And here’s what’s crazy: we were *content with it*. Well, I’m not content with it now!” says Robert, now 25.

When he first arrived at the DC Jail at the age of 16, Robert was scared and full of negativity. “The first time I came to Book Club, it was only because I wanted to get off the juvenile block. I didn’t have any interest in books!” he says. “And I definitely didn’t want to write poetry. Tara and Kelli were just so persistent. They asked me every week to write a poem. I’m not going to say they were crazy, but they just didn’t give up.”

When Robert finally agreed and wrote a poem, he decided to fill it with profanity out of spite.

“When I read it out loud though, I realized that despite the bad language, it actually had good rhymes. It sounded really nice!” That inspired Robert to try again. This time, he took it seriously and wrote a poem called *I’m Blessed*. “I mean, it was like a spark was ignited in me. I realized I could do this. I could express myself. I could show the good in me!”

As he began to write, Robert also began to pick up the books that Free Minds brought to him. The book that he credits with turning him into a reader was *Standing At The Scratch Line*, by Guy Johnson.

“I liked it because the main character, King Tremain lived by strong principles. His actions weren’t always good, but his intentions were. Everything he did came from someplace that was loving. And that’s how I wanted to be.”

Robert decided that he would not leave prison the same person that he was when he came in. He was determined to improve himself and grow both spiritually and intellectually.

“I have changed tremendously,” he says of the more than 8 years that he spent behind bars. “I think differently. I’m analytical and I think before I do anything. I am much more optimistic about my life now.” Robert says that Free Minds spurred his desire to change. “Y’all were the same every time you came. No matter what nonsense we threw your way, you just stayed positive and were determined to help us. Y’all were genuine and I learned from that. That’s how I wanted to be.”

When he arrived home in July, Robert put his words into action by volunteering to become a Poet Ambassador for Free Minds’ On The Same Page violence prevention initiative. He regularly speaks out in the community, sharing the story and lessons of his life to rapt audiences across the city. He also got a fulltime job working for the DC Department of General Services on a maintenance crew. He loves his job and strives to learn something new every day.

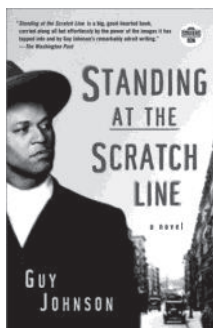
He plans to attend college to pursue a degree in Human Services so that he can become a youth counselor.

“I’ve been in the same predicament as so many troubled youth. It’s important for me to give back and mentor them, because it’s what I needed when I was their age. I’ve seen the weight that the label of ‘felon’ gives a person. I remember how Free Minds stuck with me throughout my bid. I remember how it felt when you were expecting mail from your family, or your man, or your girlfriend and you didn’t get anything. But then they called your name at mail call and it was a letter from y’all or a copy of *The Connect*. That shows you have somebody that cares about you. You helped me so much. Now that I’m home, I’m here for Free Minds. I ain’t going nowhere! Helping others? For me, it’s a necessity!”

## *I’m Blessed*

By Robert, FM Member  
(Written from the DC Jail in 2006)

I have a family  
And people who love and care about me  
I don’t need the streets  
The streets need me  
Without people like me  
People wouldn’t call it the streets  
I’m blessed  
I’m young, black and still living  
I’m in DC Jail, but I’m not trippin’  
While I’m here, I stand tall  
Can’t nobody bring me 2 my downfall  
I’m locked up and hopes still high  
And I’m still fly like a piece of French apple pie  
I’m blessed  
I read in between the lines  
Even though I’m doing time  
I must carry on  
And I remain standing strong  
Even though I stand alone  
Why try and put me 2 the test  
I’m the best  
But u gon’ fail, u know why?  
Cuz I’m blessed  
I do things cuz of me, not the next man  
I’m a good influence  
I know I can I know I can  
I’m so blessed I begin and never end  
I’m something like a kid at the playpen  
I’m supported in everything I do  
How ‘bout you? Can you say that’s true?  
I might shed a tear depending on how I feel  
But I don’t trip cuz it’s made of steel  
I’m blessed  
That’s all that matters  
How ‘bout u?  
Ma, I’ll be home soon  
So Ma, don’t get stressed or depressed  
You know why?  
Cuz I’m blessed



# CAREER CORNER

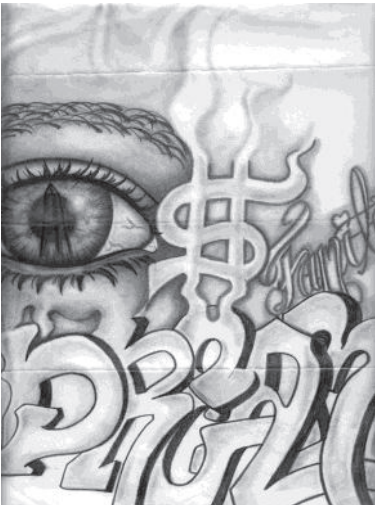
By Keela

Hey guys what's up. I wanted to let you know about a couple of resources to take advantage of once you're back home.



**The Welcome Home Reentry Program** serves men and women returning to society from incarceration by offering mentoring, employment search assistance, housing and community support. If you're interested, contact Catholic Charities located at 924 G street NW, 202-772-4300 ext. 040, and speak with Ms. Karen V Neal, the Program Manager.

I've mentioned **Office of Returning Citizens** before, and I feel compelled to list it again because for some strange reasons, most of the guys that I've recommended it to don't take advantage, and the few that did have actually gotten job training and jobs, so please check it out! ORCA offers CDL, computer and job training, GED classes, and housing resources, all FREE to returning citizens!



ORCA is located at 2100 Martin Luther King Avenue, Suite 100, 202-715-7670.

"Dreams"  
Art by  
Free Minds  
Member SE

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!

## Reentry Spotlight

## A Note from Seana!

Hi Everyone,

I want to wish you all a happy holiday season and take a minute to introduce myself. I am the new Program Director at Free Minds and am excited to be working with such a great organization.

I am originally from Canada (yes, it's as cold in the winter as everyone says it is!) but moved to the DC area about 8 years ago for my job as an investigator at the Public Defender Service in DC. While there, I was introduced to FM by some of my clients who were members (a few of them are likely reading this article along with you). I was impressed by all of FM's good work. I have seen first hand how valuable support is, both when you're locked up and when you're faced with the challenges of reentry, so I am grateful to now be a part of Free Minds full-time!

I hope all of you preparing to come home in the new year will come see us at the office when you get to DC. Our apprenticeship program is incredibly successful and has helped so many who have come home before you find school and work programs in their areas of interest. The apprenticeship is currently 1 week but we are working to raise money to make it a month-long program, starting in 2015. I hope to see you participate when you get home, as you work to reach all of your goals.

Sincerely, Seana

Art by  
Free Minds Member JN



# AROUND THE WORLD...

## Uniquely Similar

*By Suzie, New Beginnings Writing Program Coordinator & Book Club Facilitator*

During my junior year of college, I was lucky to get a scholarship to spend a semester studying in Singapore. This, in itself, was truly an eye opening and life-changing experience. On my way home though, I ended up turning my 12-hour layover in the Tokyo airport into a two-month visit during which I got to see Mt. Fuji, do laundry with sumo wrestlers (they're surprisingly helpful), eat more sushi than my stomach could handle, and have my hair constantly touched by giggling Japanese school kids. I bought a rail pass and traveled from city to city to attend street festivals and absorb all of the culture I could in two months. Though most of it was fast-paced, confusing and outright intimidating, I found comfort in my constant trips to Japanese temples and shrines.

I'm not a particularly religious person, and frankly I appreciate the idea of spirituality much more than I enjoy most religious practices, but I could not stay away from the mesmerizingly beautiful Japanese places of worship. I found myself walking to nearby temples, particularly at night, and just passing hours admiring bright lights and beautiful structures. I became **addicted to reading small wooden plaques, "ema" in Japanese, that hung around many of these temples.** On these plaques were wishes, prayers, and hopes that visitors would etch onto the wood and hang in hopes that they would be answered. I expected to see plenty of wishes for money and material items, but what struck me most was how many of those plaques publicly hoped for resolutions to extremely private and difficult situations. Some asked for help becoming better parents, others for the patience helping loved ones deal with cancer, and some, written in the handwriting of small children, asked for help passing classes to make their families proud.

In the end, I think we all want some of the same things, regardless of who we are and where we live. I think we all just **want to come out of what we're going through as better people and see the people we care about do the same.** That can mean passing a test, mending a broken relationship, making more money, or beating a crippling disease. When I read disappointing headlines about injustice and racism as far away as Ferguson and as close as our backyard in DC, I try to remember the ema I used to read and hope that most of us really are trying to become better people and see the people around us do the same.

## FUN FACTS ABOUT JAPAN!

- Japan is made up of 6,852 islands.
- Japanese farmers have developed a way to grow square watermelons because they are easier to stack and store!
- Japan has more than 50,000 people who are over 100 years old!
- Ancient warriors of Japan were known as Samurai. They were very skilled fighters and swordsmen. Their main weapon was the Katana, a sharp sword with a slight curve to it.
- **Japan is an industrialized nation, producing some of the world's most technologically advanced cars, electronics, and machine tools.**
- Late night dancing is illegal in Japan. (Can someone do research for us and find out why???)
- Sumo is recognized as the national sport of Japan, although the most popular spectator sport is baseball.
- Japan has just 2 gun-related homicides per year. **You read that right...2!**



## HOPE IN THE FORM OF A BABY

*On September 6<sup>th</sup>, FM member Will's first child was born. He wrote this poem about the hope that his baby boy brings into his world.*

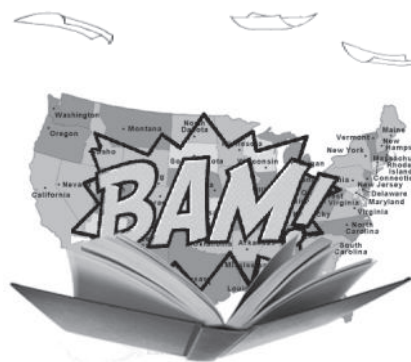
### Hope 9/6

*By Will, For my son, Dylan*

What is it that I dream for anymore?  
My freedom, my life, or maybe the thought of redemption?  
I consider myself blessed at points  
But condemned at others  
I have survived the walk with those of the forgotten  
I have survived the fights with the demons that I saw in my past  
But for some reason I have felt lost, at times abandoned  
My first reaction to see you was I hope that my sins won't carry on

My first hug to you was a prayer for forgiveness  
For all that you will soon witness  
I see you and we lock eyes and you see me with no emotion  
I am blessed  
You only consider me a man with the clear baby bottle  
Trying to keep your head up until you get stronger  
But to me I see the faith of those that linger around church  
To me I see those who prostrate for another chance at forgiveness  
When I see you laugh, all the pain, all the challenges disappear  
All I see is innocence  
I feel like the world stops  
And I have been given a chance to make someone smile  
instead of hate  
A chance to create peace  
I just hope you never lose that laugh  
Hope for you to be just you  
Because just you has made my hope for a better man come true





## BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

Hey again Little Bros, First of all, I want to apologize for the delay in getting your copies of Writing My Wrongs shipped. “Due to issues beyond our control” (I know that sounds like code for “my bad!” but it really isn’t our fault!) it has taken much longer than we expected. I hope that you’ve each received your copy by now though. Please mail us your reviews of the book! I can’t wait to hear what you think and see what kind of an impact it may have on your own writing. In our next issue, we’ll be telling you all about author Shaka Senghor’s December 12th visit to the young’uns at the jail. Hopefully, we’ll have pictures ☺



Our next BAM! title PRISON NOIR, selected by Julia, is coming right behind it. It’s a collection of short stories written by authors who are also inmates at jails and prisons across the country.

*Which is your favorite story, and why? Did any of the stories really touch you? Were there places or descriptions that were familiar to you? Which character did you like? Why? Do you like short stories or novels better? Explain your answer! SEND YOUR REVIEWS AND REACTIONS TO US AT THE OFFICE SO WE CAN PRINT THEM IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE CONNECT!*

**WHAT ARE THE YOUNG’UNS READING?** FM members on the juvenile unit are currently reading Snow, by Kenji Jasper. It is the story of Snowflake (remember him from the book, Dark?) The killing of his neighbor by a gang turns Snow “grimy.” He is falling deeper and deeper into the street life, but can the true love he shares with a woman and their daughter save him before it’s too late?



*Check this out! I was driving down the road when I saw this—look closely at what’s on the back window! (OK, I know I shouldn’t have phone out when I’m in the driver’s seat. I was at a stop light...it was too awesome to pass up, though. Do as I say, not as I do!)*

### HOPE

*By FM Member AL*

Honesty Opportunity Pursuing Everything  
Tough times don’t last long  
But tough people do...  
If you want it  
Go get it  
Only HOPE can make you strive harder

## NEXT ISSUE’S THEME: PRIDE

This theme was suggested by FM member KA, who is still at the DC Jail. He feels it’s something that will resonate with all Free Minds members. What makes you feel proud? How does pride affect you? Is it always a good thing? Send your poems, artwork, and stories about PRIDE to Kelli at the office!