

May 2013

Vol. 2, Issue III

Free Minds Connect

The Tribute Issue

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Free Minds Connect

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Want to be on this list?

Write or draw something and send it to us!

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**Next Issue's
Theme:**

Temptation

Have you ever been tempted to do something that you knew you probably shouldn't do? What tempted you? How can you resist temptation when you come home? How can you resist the urge to go back to the streets or negative influences?

TALK-BACK WITH TARA

Dear Cherished Free Minds Members,

This Tribute issue is close to my heart. It's at the core of why Kelli and I embarked on the journey of Free Minds. As TV news producers we had seen too much tragic loss of life due to street violence (see Kelli's article about the original Free Mind Glen on pg. 4) At Free Minds we honor our loved ones we have lost to gun violence in several ways. One is by writing about the wonderful gifts they brought to the world and expressing the pain that has left an enormous hole in our hearts since they've gone. Then we share this writing with others in our "On the Same Page" violence prevention program. We connect with and comfort students and families who have experienced the same heartache. I know this outreach from the Free Minds Poet Ambassadors (FM members home from prison) is stopping future loss of life. I can't tell you how proud I am of them and you. They represent all of you as they share their personal stories of loss and then offer their own changed life as a beacon of hope against more needless killing. I see firsthand the powerful impact this program has on the youth we reach. At New Beginnings or YSC they tell young boys that that their life is too precious to waste on the street life. In doing so, Free Minds members honor all those who didn't get a second chance. One example was when a young man at YSC read the poem "Talk with My Straps" by FM member KB and said, "I'm not picking up a gun anymore."

I believe we are all connected. And when one of us is uplifted, we all are. We need to share our stories so we can find ways through the pain and find solutions to violence. I want to thank all our contributors who shared their stories in this issue. A special thank you goes out to my good friend Joe Heim, a journalist from the Washington Post who shed light on how many scars there are from gun deaths in our city with his article "What's Your Number." That article is what inspired this issue.

I want to end with an excerpt from one of the most moving eulogies I've ever heard at a funeral. It was for the chaplain Mychal Judge of the NYC Firefighters. He died on September 11th at the World Trade Center towers when he ran in to help his brothers when everyone else was running out. I covered his funeral as part of my TV news work. I loved what his good friend said about him and want to share it because it applies to all our beloved Free Minds members we have lost too soon and to all your

loved ones who were victims of gun violence:

"And so this morning we come to bury Mike Judge's body but not his spirit. We come to bury his mind but not his dreams. We come to bury his voice but not his message. We come to bury his hands but not his good works. We come to bury his heart but not his love. Never his love."

Thank you for never burying your message of hope & peace. With love to my FM family,
Tara

May the long time sun shine upon you

All love surround you

And the pure light within guide your way on

P.S. I hope you are all reading this issue while taking a break from enjoying your new books! As always, let us know if you haven't gotten them or if you think you are not on the book order and want to be. All you need to do is drop us a note saying, "SEND ME SOME GOOD BOOKS!" We have a budget to ship out 3 books every 3 months. Unfortunately we only have funds to send books to Free Minds members that joined us at the juvenile block, so please share your books with your friends and cellies, as we won't be able to send them their own books. Someday if we win the lottery we're hoping that could change, but for right now we rely on you all to "pay it forward" and share the goods. This month you will be receiving one extra book thanks to the DC Humanities Council. You can read more about it on pg. 12. We love that no matter how far away you are, you are still a part of the DC reading community!



Art by EC, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison



Give us a call when you get

What's Your Number?

As some of you already know, this issue was inspired by a recent article in The Washington Post that asked people in DC to share how many people they knew who have been shot and to share their personal stories about gun violence. We're lucky to have Joe Heim, the writer of the article, share his own story and the history behind the article with us. We also asked the guys currently on the juvenile block and other Free Minds members to share their own "What's Your Number?" story, so we can remember that each person has a different story, and that each story matters. Many of these stories are included throughout this issue of the Connect.

How It All Started:

The history of the "What's Your Number?" project
By Joe Heim, Journalist and Free Minds Friend

I got the text message while I was at work. "Did you hear about Mark Hummels?" When you get a message like that, the news is usually bad. I hadn't seen Mark in a dozen years. We went to graduate school together in California where we were both studying to be journalists. We weren't close friends, but he was a funny, friendly guy with a lot of life in him. Everyone liked him.

I texted the friend who had sent the message, asking what had happened. The response was immediate. "He's been shot. Killed." I had anticipated bad news. I hadn't anticipated that. Shot? That didn't make sense.

Mark had gone on to become a lawyer. I stayed in journalism and am now working at The Washington Post. Mark was working in Arizona where he lived with his wife and two little kids. He had a client who was sued by a guy who was unhappy about a contract. A settlement had been reached, but the man who was suing was still unhappy. The man went out to his car, got a gun, came in and shot and killed both Mark and his client. He also shot and wounded another woman as he walked out of the building. Then he drove to a nearby parking lot and shot and killed himself.

As a journalist, I've reported on violent crime before. And, like everyone else, I've read and heard about people being shot before. But before Mark I hadn't personally known anyone who was shot. I guess I've had a pretty easy life because I soon found out that many people in America have first-hand experience with gun violence.

A friend of Mark's posted on Facebook that he now knew 9 people in his life who had been shot. He asked his friends on Facebook to write about the number of people they knew who had been shot. His friends started writing in: 12, 5, 17, 1, 0, 3. Everyone had a different number and a different story. Putting a number to something so personal felt really powerful to me. So for a story for The Washington Post magazine, I took that question to people around DC to ask them what their number was.

One of the first people I talked to was a guy named Tony. He lives just off of North Capitol Street. When I asked him how many people he knew who had been shot he just raised his hands. "I have no idea," he told me. He knew of so many people it would take him a while to count them all up. Eventually he stopped counting and just said that it was more than 250. Tony is in his early 30s. Many of his friends and family members had been shot. Many killed. It was just a fact of life for him growing up. That was also true of a few



other people I met. When they told their stories they did so matter-of-factly, as if this was the most common thing ever.

Eventually I talked to about 50 people. All of their stories were different. Some didn't know anyone who had been shot, but many did. One woman, a prominent Washingtonian, told me she still couldn't talk about her husband who had shot himself more than 25 years ago. Another woman mourned a niece who was shot and killed by her college boyfriend. Two of the people I spoke with had had their fathers shot and killed, both innocent victims.

It wasn't easy for the people I spoke with to talk about their experiences. A few of them didn't want to talk at first. But they gradually became more comfortable with the idea and wanted the chance to express their feelings about what they'd been through with their friends, family, and in some cases, themselves. They talked about the fear and anxiety and anger they felt. In many cases, talking about their number was cathartic. When the story was published many readers also wrote in with their own experiences. The story hit home because it took a number, a statistic, and made it personal. It told the stories behind the numbers.

I'm glad that I wrote the story, but I also think it's insane that it's even possible to write a story like this. More than 8500 people were killed in America by guns in 2011. That doesn't even include suicides. And it doesn't include the number of people who were injured by guns—only the ones who were killed. School shootings get most of the attention, but dozens of people are being killed by guns *every day* in America. Almost all of the people I spoke with think there need to be more controls and regulations on guns. But they don't see that happening any time soon.



Reprinted with permission from The Washington Post:

"I've Known 75 to 100 People That Lost Their Lives to the Streets"

By Nikki, age 37

My brother was shot multiple times back in the '90s in D.C. He survived. Back in those days, there were a lot of turf wars going on. I've lost maybe about 25 to 30 cousins to the streets. And my husband's brother got killed over on Kenilworth Avenue. Between family and friends, I've probably known 75 to 100 people that lost their life to the streets. I'm quite sure my husband knows more than that.

The one that hurt me the most was when I lost my father to a stray bullet April 11, 1996. My dad, his name was Cleo, was on his way to church on a Sunday afternoon. He was walking down 11th Street near Park Road. These guys, I guess they was beefing; I don't know. My dad was walking by the barber shop, and a guy in the alley came out with an AK-47 and started shooting. He hit my dad twice.

I was about 20, and I'll never forget it. They took away my best friend. He preached nonviolence, and for him to get killed like that... well that hurts. You have to lose your father before you get married. He never met his grandsons, and that's all he ever wanted. He was very into the neighborhood. In the summertime, he used to go down to the park and bring his grill down there and cook for all the kids. Remembering that, I just think about what my kids have missed out on.

My husband and I have five boys and a girl. We moved out to Maryland so they didn't have to experience some of the things that we did coming up in the city. We moved out for their education. I wanted my boys to experience something different than listening to gunshots. When I hear about the senseless shootings, what I think about is: *How are they getting the guns? Where are they coming from?* I'm just grateful that my boys haven't had to experience anything like that. I worry about my kids, but I also talk to them. It's very important that you talk to your kids and keep them aware. I always tell them, "If you feel something is not right, always follow your gut instincts, because that may save your life."

EVERYONE LOSES

By Kelli, Free Minds Co-Founder

R.I.P. Glen Charles McGinnis
January 11, 1973 – January 20, 2000

Every day in the U.S. people with guns murder an average of 30 people and injure another 162. So much of our focus is (understandably) on the victims of gun violence, that we tend to forget the harm that picking up a gun does to the person pulling the trigger. I know this may sound strange, but let me tell you a story. It's the story about the first Free Minds member. His name was Glen.

Glen was born in Houston, Texas to a crack-addicted single mother. His mother often brought men home that physically abused Glen. One of them even raped him. His mother was in and out of jail. When he was just 11, Glen dropped out of school and lived mostly on the streets, with several bids in juvenile detention facilities for theft and trespassing. As he became a teenager, his mom began prostituting herself to feed her crack habit. Glen was crushed. One night, when he was 17, Glen's mom told him that she desperately needed money. He decided that he would get it for her. He took a .25 caliber handgun from his aunt's home and attempted to rob a drycleaners service. When the clerk turned to pick up the phone and call the police, Glen shot and killed her.

In 1996, I was a television producer in Washington, DC when I received a letter at work from Glen. I didn't know who he was, or how he'd gotten my name. He had written to a number of newspapers and television news outlets because he felt like the world didn't know how many young Black and Latino men were on death row in America. We ended up filming an interview with Glen and producing a documentary on the subject that aired on television in Australia (they don't have the death penalty in Australia—they are one of 140 countries around the world that have outlawed it).

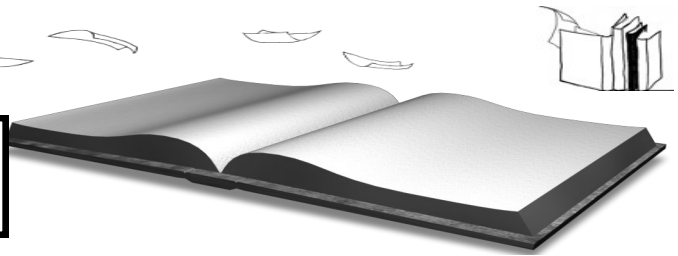
Glen and I began to write to each other and I learned the tragic story, not just of his crime, but of his life. His father left when he was little, and the men his mother brought home would burn him with cigarettes and whipped him with electrical cords. Even though he dropped out of school at the age of 11, Glen taught himself to read and loved books—everything from James Patterson to J. California Cooper to science textbooks. I began to order him titles that we would read at the same time and then discuss through letters (so now you know why we call him the first Book Club member!) Glen was extremely intelligent. We wrote back and forth for almost four years and became the most unlikely of friends. Glen had an enormous heart, a great sense of humor and was interested in everything. I went to visit Glen in prison in November, 1999. Two months later, he was executed by lethal injection.

I feel so sad for the woman who lost her life because Glen picked up a gun. Her name was Leta and she was only 30 years old with a husband and two little children. Their lives were forever shattered. I don't excuse what Glen did. My point is that the gun that killed Leta also killed Glen. It left his mother (who has now been sober for over 10 years) without her only son. And it left the world without a young man with an unlimited positive potential.

People are desperate. They are desperate not just for a sense of security (i.e. enough money to take care of themselves and their families), but for love and a sense of belonging. As a community and a society, we have to find the right ways to fill those needs for everyone. I believe that too many people, especially young people, mistakenly see guns as symbols of power. They believe that if they have a gun in their hand, it somehow lifts them up. The dirty truth about guns is that they don't just harm others, they do irreparable damage to the individuals who hold them and pull their triggers.



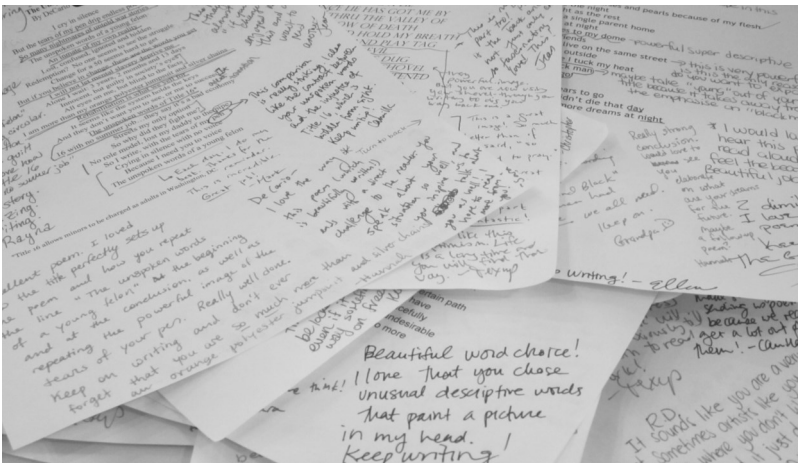
THE WRITE WAY



Hey Free Minds, the full "Write Way" column is taking a brief hiatus this month to make room for all of your powerful tributes. However, we wanted to tell you about a certain type of writing that relates to this issue. Have you ever heard of an elegy? An elegy is a poem or a song written for someone who has died. This newsletter is one giant elegy, in a sense. Poems can also be their own form of memorials. They're a way for us to honor and remember people we've lost. As you continue to grow as a writer, we hope you take with you all the memories you have of your lost loved ones and use those feelings to fuel your writing.

YOUR VOICES AND STORIES BRING US TOGETHER

By Ellen, Free Minds Write Night Volunteer Coordinator



Powerful. Uniting. Inspiring. These are three words I frequently use to describe Free Minds' monthly Write Night events. Every fourth Tuesday of the month, 40-50 people from all over the city gather at a small church in Dupont to read and comment on poems written by YOU, Free Minds poets. Your words inspire us, connect us, and keep us coming back each month to read more!

I have been a part of Write Night from the beginning, back in 2011 when it was a group of about 10 reading about 20 in a cramped church kitchen. I became involved with Write Night because I taught art at the DC Jail and wanted to stay connected to my students. Some of you might remember me from DC Jail, and I certainly remember you. Personally, your poems have inspired me to make artwork and attempt to write my own poetry.

Since starting Write Night in 2011, we've grown to a formidable group of about 350 volunteers from every walk of life —Howard students, lawyers, poets, artists, teachers, and social workers just a name a few. At Write Night, we read your poems quietly to ourselves and write our responses to you; we feel your pain, celebrate your breakthroughs, and appreciate your insights. A few Free Minds poets join us each time to represent those of you who can't be with us in person. These poets help us understand what it is like for you in the federal prisons. Your voices and your stories bring us together each month and for our volunteers, Write Night is the highlight of their month!

While you might be far from home, you have a legion of supporters here in DC. Keep writing!

Writing Creates Freedom

By QE, FM Friend in Federal Prison

Writing is a form of expression, and the feelings come from the artist behind the pen. There is no such thing as doing it wrong when it comes to expressing how *you* feel. For starters, the most difficult part is finding that first line. To overcome this hump, just pick up the pen and go! Write the first thing that comes to mind, and don't stop. Guide your instrument across the page without a destination. Your goal was to begin. Now that we're passed that stage, allow your words to paint that mental picture. There are no rules when it is you leading. *Writing creates freedom, and a free mind creates a way!*

That Same Song

By CD, FM Friend in Federal Prison

I've just lost a nephew to gun violence—Lil Henry, who everyone said looks just like me. I don't feel I'll ever get past this. So much so that I've grown to hate guns. I've heard and been a part of a conversation like this so many times:

"Aye, you know (name) died?"

"What! How did he die?"

"Somebody shot him."

And then we're crying.

It's like I keep hearing that same song. You know, like that song that you don't like that they just keep playing on the radio over and over and over?

Somebody shot. Somebody shot.

Somebody shot Lil Henry.

Somebody shot Tonya.

Somebody shot Donell.

Jeff shot himself.

Somebody shot Brown Eye.

Somebody shot Whitney.

Somebody shot Big-T.

Is somebody gonna shoot me?

Somebody needs to stop.





JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

By JG, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

Debo Was My Right Hand Man

What's up Free Minds?

You know, it's sad to acknowledge the fact that I was having trouble deciding on which one of my dead homies to write about. None of us should have that many options. So I decided to shoot all of them out.

Rest in peace Uncle Nose, who was one of the most giving people I knew. Rest in peace Woop, who was a very mellow and laid back dude. Rest in peace Dawan, who was one of the smoothest, coolest, flyest dudes I grew up with. Rest in peace Big Paul, who stayed off the boat, but was a true hustler, he knew how to get money. Rest in peace Timmy, who was known for his dirt bikes, pit bulls, and aggressive personality. Rest in peace Lil Bump, who also was a go-getter. Rest in peace Debo, who was my close friend, and whose death affected me the most.

Debo was 6 feet tall and strong as an ox. He was cut up like crazy, and very aggressive on top of that, so it's not hard to figure out how he got the nickname Debo. He was a quietly attentive type, partly because he was always on alert for his next move, being the stick-up kid he was, and partly because that's naturally who he was: quiet, analytical, reserved, ambitious, strong-minded, sensitive, thoughtful,

and very loyal.

Debo was my right hand man. We were together almost every day, including the day he was shot and killed. The night before he was killed, we were getting drunk and high, and he all of a sudden became really serious. He told me that I was like his brother, and that if and when anybody has a problem with me, they've got a problem with him, and that he loved me. All that guy-to-guy affection was extremely awkward for me, so I said something like "yeah man, I feel the same way," then tried to jump right back into high, goofball mode. When I reflect on these memories I always feel like Debo maybe felt his time was coming soon—he just didn't know exactly when.

Everyone I've mentioned with the exception of one was under the age of 21 when they were gunned down, and none of them truly deserved to die so young. I believe that given the right circumstances and an opportunity, my man Debo would have turned his life around, and so I choose to honor my friend by changing my own life, and becoming the kind of man that he never got the chance to be. Till next time, Peace and Love.

Not Just My Brother, But My Teacher As Well

By MB, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

What's going on Free Mind family? How's life treating all the members and followers? Hope all is well. I really had to move my pride to the side to write this story about someone I lost. My brother Antonio AKA T.O. was the best brother and person that anyone could know. He wasn't just my brother, but my teacher as well. He showed me how to be a man at a young age, and I respect him for that. He was there when I was feeling lost and felt like nobody loved or cared about me. But I was wrong, because he was always there, and he still is, in my heart. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about my brother and wish that he was still here with me. I know right now he's probably looking down at me asking himself how I got in this situation, as well as saying that he loves the way that I went from being a baby boy to a respectable young man. A few years ago, when I first became a member of the Book Club, I wrote a few lines about how my brother and I grew up. But now I understand why he had to go to a better place and get away from this war that some of us is living. I just want to end this by saying, Tonio, I miss you and I wish you was here with me. slim... —Dawud

Swearing On My Man: **When My First Friend Died**

By MB, Free Minds Member Home in the Community

I came up in DC and I've been losing friends ever since I was 12-years-old. When I was growing up and I didn't know someone who had died, I used to think, "dang, I don't know anyone who died—I'm not cool." While in reality, I was fortunate because I never knew the pain it makes you feel. When I didn't know any better and my first friend died, I was swearing on him, thinking, "yeah, I got a person to swear on now." But in reality, it was ignorant. I realized that when you have someone you sincerely care about that dies, and someone swears on that person and is telling a lie, you experience feelings that even to this day I have no exact word to express. But I know now that I don't do the swearing because as I developed into a man, it made me try to refrain from the actions I did when I was a child. So my brothers, if you still do the "on my man" thing, I ask you to develop a better etiquette of speech. It's hard because I still battle, but the easy thing landed us all in jail at one point so sometimes it's better to take the hard way. I hope when this article reaches you it can give insight and guidance.



In the News

By FM Friend
John

Headline News

Sadly, the biggest news from the last few months is the two bombs that exploded during the Boston Marathon, a 26-mile race that takes place every year. Two brothers, who were both born in Europe and grew up in America, planted bombs near the race. The explosions killed three people and injured 264. Many of those injured lost body parts. The bombers were Tamerlan (27) and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (19). They were both bright students, and most of their friends and family were completely blindsided by the news that they had committed these terrible crimes. One of the bombers, Dzhokhar, was captured alive and is recovering from serious wounds suffered during a shootout with law enforcement. Government officials believe that the men acted alone and were not part of a larger terrorist group.

A couple other interesting things in the news:

1) There is a horrendous civil war raging in Middle Eastern country of Syria, and more than 70,000 have died in the battles between the rebels and the government. This puts the U.S. in a tough spot; we do not support the Syrian government, but nobody wants our military to enter this fight.

2) An organization called the Annie E. Casey Foundation announced that the number of youths put into juvenile prisons and residential facilities dropped from 105,000 in 1997 to 71,000 in 2010. Advocates hope that if that number keeps going down, it will be easier for courts to handle more serious offenders without sending them to the adult system.

THE GRIEF CHANGED HIM

By Ms. Keela, Free Minds Program Manager

I remember it like it was yesterday: getting off the bus after school and walking up the block to see several people crying, screaming, and hugging one another. "What's wrong?" I asked friend of mine. "He's gone. They killed him, they killed him." "Killed who?" I asked. "G, they killed G—shot him up right in his car." I went totally numb. I had just seen G the night before, standing across the street from my house, smiling and doing his regular thing, selling. Now don't get me wrong, G was a dealer, but G was also the dude in the neighborhood that looked out for you when you were hungry. He was that dude who would tell the little kids to go to school and make something of themselves.

This was my first experience with gun violence. I was so shocked, I couldn't even cry. I became obsessed with news reporting on the death. I kept replaying the scene over and over in my head. G had a brother that I was good friends with, M. M was so fun and always the life of the party. After his brother was killed, his whole demeanor changed. The grief was just too much for him to bear, and he ended up doing some serious jail time. I've often wondered over the years what M's life would've been like if his brother hadn't been shot. He was so bright and personable. Which leads me to ponder about the destinies of the thousands of young men who've lost someone very close to them due to street violence. I wonder how many of our young men would've gone on to lead productive lives instead of going to jail due to unresolved grief, loss, and exposure to relentless, senseless violence.

Music

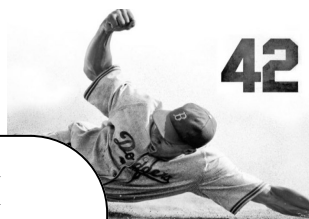
Two rappers learned the hard way that while they have the right to say whatever they want, it might affect their business. Pepsi dropped Lil Wayne as a sponsor because of an offensive remark in his lyrics that referred to sex and to Emmet Till, a black boy who was murdered during the Civil Rights movement. Earlier in May, Rick Ross lost his deal with Reebok because of lyrics referring to sexual violence.

Sports

The film "42" was recently released to movie theaters, and it tells the story of Jackie Robinson, who was the first black player to play in Major League Baseball. Robinson faced racial slurs and abuse at away games, and even some dissent from fellow players on the Brooklyn Dodgers. In the movie, Robinson is played by Chadwick Boseman, a young actor who attended D.C.'s own Howard University!

The Wizards had a strong performance in March, but collapsed in April and only won a single game. The NBA playoffs are well underway, and the Miami Heat looks pretty close to unstoppable, but you never know what could happen. Also, about half of the league's superstars are not playing in the playoffs because of serious injuries. Among the players on the sidelines right now: Kobe Bryant, Rajon Rondo, Derrick Rose, and Russell Westbrook.

The Redskins picked David Amerson, a cornerback from North Carolina State, with its first pick in the NFL Draft. The Skins followed that up with Tight End Jordan Reed from Florida, and Safety Phillip Thomas from Fresno State.



The Promise

By CR, Free Minds Member
at the DC Jail

Before I got locked up
I made you a promise
That I was going to get retaliation
For what they did to you
I didn't keep that promise
But I do promise to change
Just like you told me
Before you got taken away
Right now that I'm thinking about you
I realize that tomorrow is your birthday
And I'm locked up and can't put no flowers
Or even go visit you there
Rest in peace C.
1.18.87– 7.21.11



A Light That Went Out Too Quickly

By Anne, Free Minds Friend

Excerpted from an article originally published in The Washington Post in 2007



A young man died a tragic death in the violence of our city streets on July 26, 2007. He held great promise and hope for a future that was better than his past, and he was headed in that direction when he was struck by gunfire and killed just a block from home.

The story of Chris's death passed largely unnoticed in a city where street shootings are becoming part of the landscape. But Chris's life should not go unnoticed. Those who knew him want to keep alive the vibrant force and energy that inspired Chris and his irrepressible desire to overcome the odds of his day-to-day life. We should celebrate his belief in himself and his abilities, which gave him a positive perspective on life and his prospects outside the two-block area in Shaw in which he lived his entire 20 years. We should give the same hope to other kids in the city.

Chris's life was not extraordinary for a kid born to a struggling family in the District: He was the product of an impoverished and broken home plagued by substance abuse; he lived a risky life in public housing; and he spent time in a juvenile facility. But Chris had the determination to create a different path for himself.

While in jail he was introduced to reading and writing poetry by the Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop. Chris was writing all the time. Chris wrote "The Sight of Life

When I Became Free" just a week before he died:
*Living in a jail cell is not an easy thing to do;
 Waiting for a visit, but no one seems to come through.
 Then you become free, loving the air
 and to walk the pavement on your own.
 But hating the sight of the little ones,
 really feeling that they're grown.
 Coming home to a world of trouble,
 and trouble does come quick.
 But thinking back to jail, the worst that I went through,
 I feel that I've experienced too much
 There's no more bad left to do.
 So as I write this poem today,
 I feel I've been left here to be—
 One less person in the cell,
 and one more that can say, "I'm Free!"*

Chris stayed in daily contact with Free Minds after his return home, and he soon found his passion in music. Without any training, he taught himself keyboards and started a go-go band at night while working for the D.C. government during the day. This spring, the band became his life as he wrote songs and performed gigs at the Kennedy Recreation Center, where he'd spent much of his childhood.

Chris told his friends on the basketball court that they could dream for more. He was going to study music in college, and they could follow their dreams, too, he told them. They needed to get out of the violence that plagued their lives, he said, and he could show them how.

But time ran out.

A candlelight vigil at the Kennedy Recreation Center memorialized the short life of a young man with a quick, gap-toothed smile and a shining personality that touched all who knew him. Chris was an inspiration.

Read more about Chris, his life and death, and the legacy he left with the Book Club in Kelli's article on page 10

Utilize the Love

By HF, Free Minds Friend in Federal Prison

come with an expiration date. When someone we love is killed unjustly, we often seek to take revenge for this tragedy by taking another person's life. However, after the blood is shed, does the blood on our hands bring back our lost loved one?

The human body is 80% water, and so is the earth. No new water comes from outside the planet, so the water that runs through us has been on the earth for millions of years. Our bodies consist of matter that will return to the earth as fertilizer once we are placed in our graves. The water will disintegrate into the earth to the rivers, lakes, and oceans, which will evaporate into clouds, which will precipitate into rain, giving life to vegetation and other life forms. Grass, flowers, corn, may grow from the dissolution of our physical bodies. It's just a transition—not reincarnation, but science. Our spirits, souls, will return to from which they originated!

We honor those whom we have lost by bringing them into the present moment with us. We should not lament in the memory of the past, but utilize the love that they demonstrated to us as inspiration to live fully for them by keeping them alive through our actions. Neither killing nor wailing will resurrect the dead, but representing them in a dynamic way keeps their legacy alive and well....

We have been taught that death is a reason to grieve, that murder is a justification for vengeance, that mortality is an end to our existence. We are all on our own our individual journeys in life, all that

LIFE IS SACRED

By AJ, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

Remarkable!
 How sharp are you?
 Gun violence hurt a few
 Forgotten faces
 Lost souls
 Oh lord! I pray I make it
 Blood covered acres
 The ground
 I lay twitching
 Burning and aching
 Could I have been mistaken?
 Yes, brave
 But God saved me
 I finally see
 A victim was me!



HOW MANY PEOPLE DO YOU KNOW WHO HAVE BEEN SHOT?

Free Minds Members Share Their Numbers

7

This doesn't seem like much but it means a lot when the people who died are relatives or close friends. It's seven more than I would've been ok with. Everybody has their own personal thoughts on the matter, me I try not to think about it much. Subhan Allah (Glory to Allah) I just accept the fact that it's the Divine Decree. Our Lord has a plan for everybody. —CM

?

I don't really know my number, but my perspective on that situation is that this is life and no one lives forever! So therefore I don't think a person should mourn too long. That's a part of my way of life, so I just keep living until it's my time to go. People die everyday just sometimes it might be someone you know! —AD

30

The number goes back to when I was six or seven, when I saw the first person get shot. Since then maybe or for sure 30. That includes people I know, people that other people shot. And myself, my brother, it's too depressing to talk about. —AW

?

I can't recall an exact number because I've been in jail the last 4 years, and all the killing and suicides happened while I've been in jail. I'm very grateful with God because somehow I'm safe and I'm still alive, but it's hard to know that your friends are dying in the streets and they are getting killed on the hands of people of their own race, hood, or community. —YA

10+

I know 10+ people that have died. I don't feel good about knowing that many people, but when you come up in certain areas, you

come to expect death or jail. The death that affected me the most was one of my men that I used to hang with on a daily basis. He was one of my closest friends. He was in school regularly and he was fun to hang out with and a loyal friend. When he died, I was hurt and angry. I started plotting to avenge his death, but after I thought about it, I realized that if I retaliated it really wouldn't solve anything and it would just keep being a cycle of death and incarceration. I feel that in today's world, guns are necessary, but the world would still be better off without them. I'm not sure what could be done. —DT

5

All five of them died. It doesn't surprise me. Stuff just be happening. Too many beefs going on. For real, for real? There's no reason. This stuff is happening for no reason at all!

My friend got killed right in front of me when I was 15. His name was Dontae. I don't even know what happened. We was in the hallway cooling. We didn't even know this guy. He came in and BAM! BAM! The noise was so loud, I blacked out. When I came to, everyone was just yelling. I looked at Dontae and he was on the ground. I figured he'd passed out too. I thought the sound was just too loud for his ears. He still had his hands in his Helly Hansen jacket. But then they rolled him over on his side and he started to choke. Blood just started pouring out of his mouth. After that I knew. After that, everything changed.

Dontae? He was a straight-A student. He wouldn't hurt a fly. He was respectful to his parents. And funny! That's what I liked most about him. He was so funny. His parents, they were so mad! But the police did catch the guy who did it. I don't even know. I just don't even know.

They will never be able to take the guns away from people though. Between law enforcement, the military, and then you've got crooked law enforcement. They won't let you take the guns away. There's too many ways to make money off of them. I don't have any idea what we can do to make the violence stop. I'm not gonna lie. I can't come up with anything. —MC

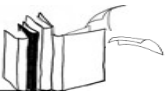
11

My number of people affected by gun violence is about eleven. Of course it was more, but only 11 mattered to me and I was mainly affected by the violence.

It cost me 60 months of my life plus aches and pains for the rest of my life. I am not a religious person, but I do believe everything happens for a reason, so I just take it in stride and try to continue to move forward. But one of the main people that affected me was my uncle. He was killed when I was younger and I took it pretty hard and it kind of made me cold. —DJ



By CD, Free Minds Friend in Federal Prison



An Eternal Song in his Heart: *Remembering Chris*

By Kelli, Free Minds Co-Founder

Reprinted from the book *Teaching Hope: Stories from the Freedom Writer Teachers and Erin Gruwell*



They say the first stage of grief is denial. "Are you sure it was Chris?" I asked when I got the phone call that Chris was dead. He'd been killed in a courtyard a block from his apartment the night before. They said an unidentified gunman speeding through the alley on a moped had shot into a crowd, and that as everyone else ran, Chris fell to the dirt.

I got into my car and started to make calls. All I had to do was find the right person and I was sure they could tell me that it was all a case of mistaken identity. Or, if it really was Chris, surely the bullet had only injured him. He'd come too far. A bullet couldn't have taken him down. He just had to be alive. Chris, if he were really dead, would be the fourth one of my students to die because of street violence. This time it felt like too much to bear.

I thought back to the first time I met Chris. The juveniles at the jail were on lockdown for a disciplinary infraction. Our normal book club session was cancelled, but we were allowed to talk with the kids individually at their cells.

"There's a new one today," the C.O. said, nodding toward the last cell on the block. As I peered through the bars, an enormous gap-toothed grin emerged from the darkness. It was Chris. "What's up?" he said. His smile was framed by a head of crazy braids. I could feel the *special* right away.

Even before joining Free Minds, Chris was already a reader. He fell in love with books in the fourth grade, and bragged that he would read anything. And he did. Chris also wrote beautiful poetry. During Book Club my eyes often fell on Chris when looking for a volunteer to read aloud. "Ah man, why you always have to pick me?" he'd complain. When he stood and read though, he spoke loudly and proudly. Ten other boys, who moments earlier had refused to read, now waved their papers asking to be next. At 17, Chris was already a leader.

When I got home, I took a deep breath and called Chris's mom, Tanya. At the sound of her voice, I knew the worst was true. I went to see her the following night. Their neighborhood has been wracked with violence for so long that Chris once told me he didn't think anyone still remembered how it all started. "All I know is which blocks I can walk down, and which ones I can't," he said. Chris didn't see any of this as a curse, just the hand that he'd been dealt.

The strong scent of alcohol trailed behind Tanya as she led me through the building where she shared a room with Chris and his brother. In the living room I saw a bookshelf

neatly lined with all of Chris's books, including Learning to Read Music Made Simple, the book we had given him two weeks earlier. A self-taught drummer and keyboardist, Chris had an eternal song in his heart. Throughout his incarceration, while other inmates dreamed of girls and money, Chris made plans to book gigs for his go-go band. He wrote letters to club owners and other musicians. He studied hard and obtained his GED, and after his release, he got a job with the city. Every paycheck was being socked away until he had enough money to buy his new keyboard. Now I looked at the books and felt sick. What a waste.

I gave Tanya some photographs of Chris. She needed them for the funeral program and didn't have any of her own. Except one. "Look what they did to my baby!" Tanya wailed as she pulled a black and white 8 x 10 from an envelope. It took a moment for me to realize what it was--a picture of Chris taken at the morgue. His eyes were closed peacefully, braids splayed across a pillow, and lips parted just enough to reveal the gap between his two front teeth. The only evidence of violence left by the bullet was a small black circle above his left eye.

Over the next few days, I seriously considered quitting my job. I felt lost as I alternated between numbness and extreme sadness. The only constant was the picture of Chris's face. The photo felt imbedded in my brain. I remembered an exercise that I had done a year before at a teaching workshop in Long Beach, CA. Each teacher was asked to draw a picture of our most challenging student. We were told to remember the picture, because this was to be our motivation as we taught. If we could reach that student, we could succeed.

All of my students were challenging in some way or another. But it was their situations that presented the biggest hurdles for them and for me--the poverty, the addictions, the fatherlessness, the low expectations, the hopelessness and the violence. I thought about the picture of Chris and how his death embodied all of these struggles. And yet his life spoke just as loudly of the promise and the possibility. I knew I would keep teaching.

Forgiveness

By Chris, Free Minds Member, R.I.P.

Forgiveness is hard but it happens
At times you will need to forgive
Or be forgiven

I have forgiven people
For the things they have done to me
Because after a while it just gets old

Forgiveness means a lot
Forgiveness can save lives
When a person does something wrong

To another person
Ask for forgiveness
It might not happen right away
But it will happen
Right out of the blue



A Note on the Cover Art

This month we had a very special art contribution from Ellen, longtime friend of Free Minds and current Write Night coordinator. Ellen used to teach art at DC Jail and created this piece in honor of a former student who lost his life to the streets.

Sick. That was how I felt after hearing one of my students from the Incarcerated Youth Program had been shot and killed. For me, a visual artist, the best way to grieve is to capture my emotion—no matter how silly, strange, or obvious it might feel—in a work of art. For Andre, I made a mixed media collage to remember his passing. I spent time sorting through and pasting down newspaper clippings of obituaries news for the first layer. Then I pasted a few layers of tracing and brown paper to cover up some of the newspaper stories while letting other words and headlines peak through. Lastly, I looked at images of street vigils with candles, stuffed animals, bottles, and messages for the deceased and came up with a simple drawing of three candles to draw on top of the collaged paper. When I look at the final result, it gives me a sense of peace. I hope it gives Andre the same.



The Memories Will Never Go Away

By M, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

To all my fellow Washingtonians, I know for sure you remember when the Recs were super live and in competition with each other. I know when I put my jersey on, I wore it proudly and I wasn't alone. You had JJ, Darrel, Mandy, Carlos, Robby, T-Man, Tay-Tay, Tre, B, and James, all rocking the same color jerseys. We all spent time at this rec, and I even got nicknamed after the Rec. But sad to say, I'm the only one out of that list who is still living. Most of them didn't even get to see 22, and all the males fell to the gun. But when I think of them, I don't even think of the craziness of how short their lives were. I think of when we dressed up for the banquet, getting trophies. I think of the fun when we played basketball, football, and baseball. I think of when TCB used to play at the rec and we would party tough. I know life played out and my homies are gone, but those memories will never go away.

ONE IS TOO MANY

By AG, Free Minds Member Home in the Community

Being raised in Southeast DC, citizens like myself have sadly grown accustomed to record-breaking statistics of gun violence. However, I've personally only been affected by one tragic experience due to gun violence. I sincerely believe that if a person loses even one loved one to gun violence, he or she can still be affected the same as a person who has lost ten loved ones. I stand on the fact that losing one person is one too many. This is a vital point because one death of a loved one or close friend forever scars a family, causing a lifetime of resentment and heartache.

LIVE FOREVER

By KR, Free Minds Friend in Federal Prison

When we think of death, the majority of us think of it in the physical sense. Don't get confused—physical death can and will reach us one day. Which is why my logic is: don't put yourself through so much grief and pain with something so certain as death. Instead, strive to stay alive while you're still breathing.

I understand this issue is about losing a loved one to violence. However, I feel it's imperative to briefly touch on the issue of "mental death," which is more devastating and crippling than physical death. The misinterpretation of the phrases "you only live once" and "we all got to die someday," has been delivered to us on a cold plate of "reckless perceptions." What I mean is, the masses have tricked us into believing that it is okay to walk through life without a care in the world, and that once you're physically dead,

your life is over. I adamantly beg to differ.

Life and death start and end in the mind. We give ourselves away to negativity and a reckless "death style." People may argue that it's their life and they can do whatever they please. Or they may say that they know no other way. But we can see that laziness and selfishness both speak with a fork tongue. Needless to say, those are nothing but excuses. And excuses are nothing but tools for the weak.

When one decides to dwell in the weedy grass of the "mental graveyard," his or her decision doesn't only bring death to that individual, but also to whomever that person's decisions affect. If we can consciously take the necessary steps toward resurrection, then we will not only live forever, but also give life to those after us so they can live fully, even after our physical demise. Peace!



BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!



By Kelli, Free Minds Co-Founder

What's up, Free Minds? It's time for the BAM! Update.

The Wealth Cure by Hill Harper

You gave this book an average of 4 1/2 STARS! ★★★★★^{1/2}
Do you remember when you first joined the book club, how one of us sat down to talk to you about your life? Well, one question I always like to ask is: "Why do you think you first started getting into trouble?" The number one answer I get is peer pressure, or hanging with the wrong people. But the number two answer is **money**. I guess that money is often a piece of peer pressure too, in that we want to have as much as the next person in order to fit in. For this reason, I believe that reading this book struck a nerve with many of you. According to Harper, putting money and wealth into their proper perspective can help us all chart happier futures. I loved the way that Hill Harper admits his own mistakes and weaknesses. Here are your thoughts and insights:

I really like the book. It has some very good stuff. —M.T.

The Wealth Cure is definitely a '5' hands down! I really enjoyed it, maybe because those types of conversations and books grasp my attention. —DeVonte

My favorite character was Sean because he lost everything and still kept a good spirit and was a good friend. Reading this book showed me how to make money the right way and keep it, and how I shouldn't take certain things for granted. I give this book 2 1/4 stars out of 5 because it took me a while to get into it and I didn't get many new tips as far as money. —Delonte

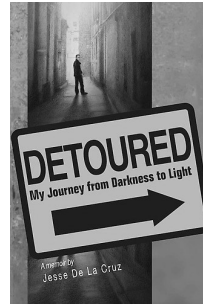
I read The Wealth Cure and I was amazed, really. Something in that book blew my mind. Harper said that doing the things that bring you the most joy will ultimately lead you to your purpose in life. It's not like I had never heard that before, but for some reason I had a revelation and it was like a brand new notion! Harper's honesty and sensitivity stood out to me. Now that I'm older I realize my sensitivity is one of my strengths, as opposed to being a weakness. The way Harper flowed with that strength that comes along with vulnerability....I was in awe. That's something I aspire to. I want my book to be like that. I want my life to be like that. —Jonas

AND THE NEXT BAM! TITLE IS...(drumroll)

Detoured: My Journey from Darkness into Light by Jesse de la Cruz.

The next book order just went out, so you should have received it already or will be getting it soon.

We read this book on the juvenile unit and I can't wait to see what you all think of it. De la Cruz was raised in the barrios of California and at age 12 began a journey that led him to become a convict, heroin addict, and gang member. He served 30 years at Folsom and San Quentin before finally becoming free for good. This is the gritty true story of his journey and ultimate redemption. As you read this book, I hope you will consider these questions:



—What were the barriers to success that de la Cruz faced?

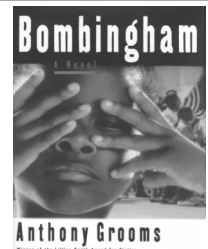
—Throughout his childhood, de la Cruz says he "expected to go to prison." It was seen among his peers as a rite of passage. In fact, he looked forward to the day he got locked up as the fulfillment of his destiny. How much does what we believe will happen to us affect what actually does happen to us?

—And the most important question I want you to answer: What will it honestly take for me to get out and stay out?

Write to us with your thoughts! And don't forget to give us your rating in stars!

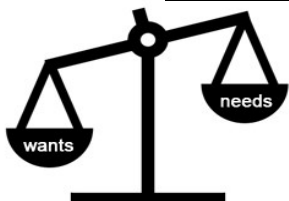
BREAKING NEWS!!

FREE MINDS CHOSEN
TO RECEIVE COPIES OF THE
2013 LIVE TO READ TITLE



The DC Council for the Humanities announced the book **Bombingham** by Anthony Grooms as the title for 2013 Live to Read. It's kind of like a city-wide book club, where people from all over the DC community are encouraged to read and discuss the same book. The great news is that the sponsors were so excited for Free Minds to be a part of this, that they bought books for all of you who are in touch with us! **Bombingham** is a historical novel set amidst the high drama of the civil rights movement in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 (the city became known by blacks at the time as "Bombingham" because of the terrible violence against blacks in that town). The book is fantastic and we are enormously grateful to the Council for this honor. Give us your feedback on the book! (If you would like to express your appreciation to them in a letter, please write it c/o Mr. Michael Chambers – DC Council for the Humanities and send it to us at the Free Minds office. We will make sure they get it!)

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: TEMPTATION



Have you ever been tempted to do something that you knew you probably shouldn't do or that had negative long-term consequences? Tell us what tempted you and if you gave into it. If you did, how can you resist temptation when you come home? How can you resist the urge to go back to the streets or negative influences? How do you distinguish your needs from your wants? Send us your stories, poems, articles, and artwork for the next issue of The Connect!