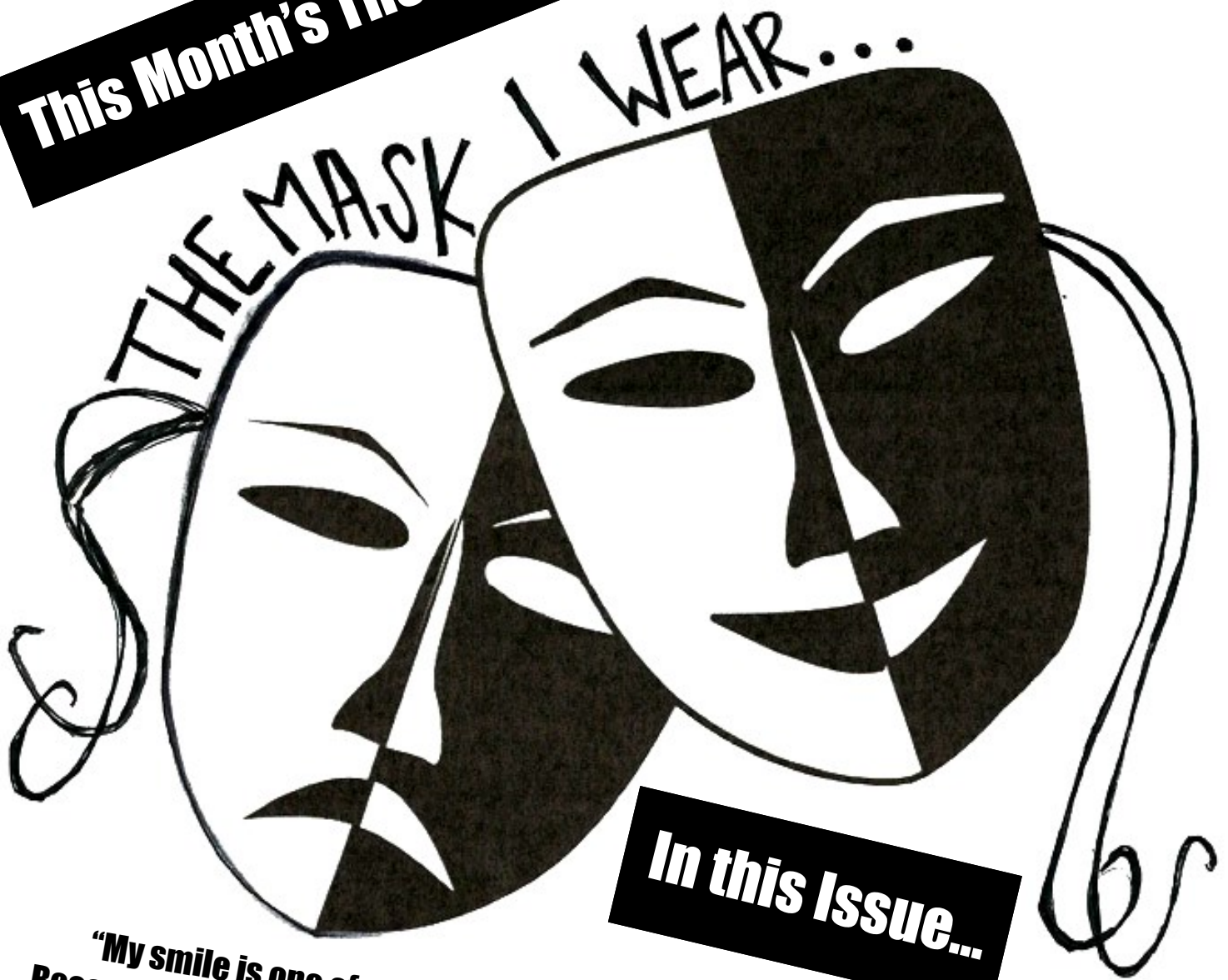


November 2013

Vol. 2, Issue VI

Free minds Connect

This Month's Theme:



In this Issue...

**"My smile is one of my masks
Because I smile when my soul cries"**
JP's Poem Page 11

**Inmate to Truck Driver: Traveling
the Country with my Commercial
Driver's License** *Page 8*

**In Memoriam: Free
Minds Loses Another
Member to Violence**
Page 12

Is brought to you by...

Tara
Executive Director

Kelli
Co-founder

Sarah
Editor-in-Chief

**Ms. Keela, Julia,
Melissa, and Alisha**
Managing Editors

**Mookie, Elaina,
Tim, and Courtney**
Free Minds Interns

FM Members:
MH, LW, JG, DM, TB,
JP, SG

FM Friends:
HF, Nadjeida, John,
Sam, NB

Illustrators:
Sarah & Capital City
Public Charter School
Student

*Want to be on this list?
Write or draw some-
thing and send it to us!*

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

Next Issue's Theme:

Persistence

What obstacles make you want to stop trying or give up? What motivates you to keep going even when you face difficult challenges?

Dear unmasked Free Minds members,

I write to you today with a heavy heart. It is with great sadness that I report that we've lost another Free Minds brother to the brutal violence of the streets. See our memoriam to Tyree on page 12 to read about what an inquisitive mind and open heart he had. It brings us heartache and loss beyond words when any young person falls victim to the war out there in the streets.

Tyree's life and death makes all of us here at Free Minds HQ even more determined to do everything we can to fight this battle with hope and education. It is imperative we convince young people that there is another way than the streets, and that they are worth more and deserve more; we must convince young people that they are loved and that they are not alone in their struggle for a new life. I hope you all know you always have the support of Free Minds right there with you.

I believe one reason for so much street violence is that young people have to put on masks to protect themselves. Growing up in an unsafe environment with sometimes terrible things happening to them, young people have to put on a disguise of toughness just to get by. They wear their masks for so long that it becomes a part of them, and they lose sight of who their inner self really is.

The poems and essays we received from you for this issue's theme *The Mask I Wear* were so powerful. I can't thank you enough for being vulnerable enough to share your masks with us. This Halloween, I had teenagers come to my door wearing masks and saying they were dressed up as robbers. It made me incredibly sad that that of all the things they could have dressed up as, this is the costume they wanted. I told them to take off the masks so I could see who they really were and then would give them candy.

It's hard for everyone to take off our masks, including me. One mask I wear is to pretend painful things don't bother me. I make jokes about them and laugh them off. I used to think this was a good way to cope. I was taught as a child not to cry and to try to find humor in sad events, but now I see how much it has stunted my emotional growth. I need to take off the mask and show how much hurt I have so I can express it and move on.

Recently, my boyfriend of 8 years Mark broke up with me, and it's been incredibly

painful. I am trying hard not to just say "it was meant to be" or "all will be well." Those are fine statements to eventually get to, but not before I really feel the sad feelings. It's hard for me to reach deep down and really feel the sadness because I'm afraid if I do I won't ever feel happy again. But the truth is that once I do just that, then I actually can be happy.

As always, you all inspire me with your courage in expressing those hard, sad emotions and sharing them with others. Since it's almost Thanksgiving, I want to close by sharing my deep gratitude to all of you. You have made me a stronger, more feeling person. Enjoy the issue, and I hope you find the freedom of taking off your heavy masks. --Tara

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

FREE MINDS HQ



Hi Free Minds! Here's the latest updates from the FM Office:

—Remember when we sent you *The Conversation* by Hill Harper as your BAM! Book? Well guess what?? Hill Harper came to visit the Book Club at DC Jail!



—Our Poet Ambassadors participated in an inspiring "On the Same Page" panel at American University as part of Youth Justice Awareness Month. They talked with college students about the importance of taking action so that in the future no more youth will have to experience what it's like in an adult prison.

—We had our first paid gig! Free Minds is getting big!! The Poet Ambassadors were invited to perform poems and raps at Marymount University in Arlington, VA. They opened for musician Cas Haley from the TV show *America's Got Talent*.



BULL IN A CHINA STORE

By MH, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

One upon a time, there was this fine china store that sold something I wanted. The only problem was that the store owner saw me as a wild bull. If I was him, I wouldn't let a bull in my store either. So knowing this, whenever the store owner had his eyes on me, I moved with caution and care.

Now, between me and you, I'm still a wild bull. But like they say: there's a place and time for everything, and it's not the time for me to be a bull. As expected, over time with the right moves, the store owner went from seeing me as a wild bull to seeing me as a cautious, sly fox. And the next thing you know, I was allowed in the store to get whatever I had wanted.

I constantly change the faces I wear. In this struggle, over all on the pound, my face shows so much ambition that you might think I'm selling hope. With practice, I have learned to use certain faces for different purposes, becoming sort of a master of disguise. This results in me smoothly maneuvering and achieving difficult goals by using multiple masks. Not only is this a survival tactic, but it can be used for business purposes. But through all this changing of faces, it's a must to stay true to yourself and never put a mask on that somebody else wants you to wear.



See Beyond a Disguise

By LW, FM Member in Federal Prison

Can you feel my pain?
The agony I carry each day within
Can you hear my anxious heart beating?
All the while weary of losing friends
Can you smell the fear?
The scent of my bloody dreams
Can you see the years' worth of tears in my eyes?
Flowing like a never-ending stream
Can you see beyond a smile?
Beyond excited eyes
Are you truly capable of reading people?
If so, can you distinguish the truth from a lie?
Can you see beyond a disguise
Beyond a façade
Can you see beyond the mask I wear...
Concealing my fate and aching heart

JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

By JG, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

The mask I wear is one of silence.

My mother used to always say that "we were created with one mouth and two ears for a reason; you should listen twice as much as you talk." I've always remembered that. She would tell my sister and I that just by listening to a person speak for a while you would learn nearly everything you needed to know about that person. She said that a person who is talking 24/7 and never shuts up is most likely a liar, because there's not that much to talk about.

So, I wear a mask of silence. Not necessarily because I have something to hide, but more because I believe in discretion; everything isn't for everybody. A lot of the time I don't have anything to say, so I say nothing.

But I've come to realize that not everyone is as comfortable with silence as I am. As a matter of fact, silence makes some people very uncomfortable. I'm not sure why, but I notice it all the time. I guess different people have different reasons, but something else my mother used to say is that people like to be able to place you in their own mental compartments of stereotypes or preconceived notions, but when

*"I've come to realize
that not everyone is
as comfortable with
silence as I am"*

a person is quiet, that makes it difficult for people to do this, and people fear what they don't know or can't conquer.

So, I'm quite sure this has a whole lot to do with why a lot of people are uncomfortable with silence.

I'm cool with it either way, because what the ears can't catch, the eyes can. I'm not one to talk just to hear my own voice, or to make the next person feel at ease; it's a waste of time and energy. I'd much rather speak when I actually have something to say. If this is a mask, it has many more pros to wearing it than cons, so I'll continue to wear it. Until next time, Peace!





THE WRITE WAY



Writing Different Perspectives

By Julia, Free Minds Writing Guru

Today I want to talk about *perspective* or *point of view* (POV). In creative writing, there are three basic kinds of perspective: first person (I), second person (you), and third person (he/she). There are some variations within those, but those are the three big ones.

First person: This is pretty common, and you guys have probably written poems or stories in the first person before! It is when you tell a story from the perspective of just one person. For example, you might say, *I woke up from the craziest dream last night*. The important thing to remember, though, is that just because the narrator says “I” and “me” doesn’t mean that’s the author speaking. This is true for poems, books, lyrics, whatever. You can say “I” while still writing fiction. There’s a famous book written in the 1300s by Geoffrey Chaucer called *The Canterbury Tales*. In the book, a writer named...you guessed it...Geoffrey Chaucer meets a bunch of travelers on the road, and each traveler tells him a story from the “I” perspective. So it’s like a story within a story within a story; so many layers of masks!

Second person: This is the least common kind of perspective because it’s sort of hard to do, but maybe some of you would like to give it a try! This is when you write a story, poem, song, or essay from the perspective of “you.” Sometimes that means that you’re directly addressing the reader, maybe even giving them directions. Sometimes the “you” is another mask for “I.” For example, a person could write: *You wake up from a nightmare, covered in sweat*. Even though the sentence says “you,” the author might really be talking about himself. This is a form of deflection—when you’re writing about a subject so difficult that you would rather pretend it’s not about you, but about someone else.

Third person: Third person is when you tell a story from a third point of view. So you would say something like, *The man woke up in the middle of the night*. This is the most common form of storytelling these days, but it’s also pretty complicated. It has a lot of variations. First of all, there’s what’s called an “omniscient” point of view. *Omniscient* means *all knowing*. An omniscient narrator, then, knows

everything—they know what every character is thinking or feeling. On the opposite end of the scale is what’s called “limited” third person. This means the narrator only knows what’s inside *one* character’s head, usually the hero of the story. I always think of movies when the camera zooms in on someone’s face. A close narrator zooms in on that one person and gets really deep into their head, but a more distant narrator maybe shows more of the big picture.

All of the different forms of perspective have their uses in creative writing. It all depends on what you want to write, and how you want to write it. For me, I usually write in **third person**, but sometimes I use **first person** when I want to hide things from the reader and make them see only what the character sees. I have to admit, I’ve never written a story in **second person**...I encourage you to give it a try!

Writing Exercise:

Pick a perspective (first person, second person, or third person) that you haven’t used before or don’t normally use. Write a poem, story, lyric, or essay using that perspective. Send us what you come up with!

MASK WORD SEARCH

E	G	F	U	J	T	E	X	L	W	T	H	D	R	H
S	H	A	L	U	W	Z	S	Q	P	I	E	N	X	A
N	O	C	J	R	X	S	R	I	T	D	T	K	B	V
E	Y	A	F	W	C	P	P	J	U	H	E	I	H	P
F	H	D	E	P	B	E	P	Q	G	G	K	D	E	E
E	R	E	T	C	A	R	A	H	C	Q	S	R	N	C
D	T	O	O	C	J	S	U	H	A	F	S	I	S	A
X	K	V	G	J	D	P	R	N	I	O	O	S	D	F
L	E	C	O	N	C	E	A	L	N	D	T	W	F	X
R	U	T	Q	M	T	C	W	A	M	W	I	V	Y	Y
U	P	I	X	A	O	T	L	P	Q	P	K	N	B	O
O	M	N	E	B	O	I	T	N	O	R	F	S	G	E
O	P	H	E	W	T	V	I	B	X	R	Z	E	A	M
M	T	L	Q	Y	X	E	Y	F	E	E	U	S	U	M
F	H	R	Q	S	B	W	S	P	B	A	D	S	U	C

WORDS: CHARACTER, CONCEAL, COVER, DEFENSE, DISGUISE, FAÇADE, FACE, FRONT, HIDING, MASK, PERSONALITY, PERSPECTIVE, THEATER



This Mask Stares Back

By DM, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

The mask I wear now
Is the mask y'all stare at and then run from it
Because this mask stares back

I know the mask y'all are used to seeing
Y'all are used to seeing that mask
Blowing smoke on high school bleachers
With my men huddled, looking like a track meeting
That mask had me looking like a fool
In reality, hanging with y'all had me looking not as cool

And some of the girls liked the dude in that mask
But didn't approach him
Because they thought he was just like them dudes
All the action I miss wearing that mask (LOL)

The mask I wear now is like Jason,
Dropping the knife to pick up positive thoughts
Instead of talking the talk, I am walking the walk

Speaking of masks:
Me with that old mask?
You must be dumb if you think I still have it on
Watch how they looked when they heard I trashed it

The mask I wear now
Is the mask y'all stare at and then run from it
Because this mask stares back!

QUOTE-I-VATOR!

"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." -- Oscar Wilde

"Love takes off masks we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."
-- James Arthur Baldwin

"No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true."
— Nathaniel Hawthorne

ASK HF: ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

Our column "Ask HF" is back this month! As a refresher, HF is a DC native and honorary FM member-he was incarcerated as a juvenile over at DC Jail before Free Minds started! HF has been in for around 15 years and has a lot of wisdom to share. Please send us any question or problem you might have (about love, family, getting by in prison, etc.) and HF will answer it.

QUESTION: I have a long bid ahead of me. How can I get by?

ANSWER: Education is the key to make it through any bid, short or long! To make it through your bid, you'll also have to learn how to preserve your health and to learn home remedies, because medical care is in prison is scarce and ineffective.

The administration and officers are human, and sometimes they make mistakes handling your personal issues while you are in their custody. Therefore, you will have to learn some 'civil' law and procedures to utilize the administrative remedies available to secure your human rights during your bid. Whether you pled guilty or was convicted at trial, you may have some situations that occurred during your court proceedings that may have led to the violation of your constitutional rights. Through education, you can become aware of these constitutional infringements, and correct them through litigation that will lead to your long bid becoming short and you returning back home.

I have been down for 17 years now, and through education, I have been able to overturn 3 of my convictions and have 10 years removed from my original sentence. Also, when my religious freedoms were violated during the month of Ramadan, I was able to have the court to impose an injunction upon Sussex 2 State Prison from infringing upon my 1st amendment rights.

Through higher learning I have self-published two books and I am currently in the process of releasing more. And, by being able to write creatively, I have the opportunity to write for one newspaper and two newsletters, which allows me to connect with many men and women beyond the confines of prison.

My studies have dramatically improved my ability to communicate with others that do not share my urban/criminal background, thus affording me the opportunity to network with an Ivy League professor at Princeton and with grassroots activists like Tara :) Communication is the key to connections, and the *Connect* newsletter is all able Connecting with the world through words. The more you know, the more you can do. Education is the key to life in all situations! The question to you is, will you have the courage and determination to stick the key in the door to open it?



Show Up and Be Seen:

A Life Coach from Haiti Shares the Benefits of Being True to Yourself

By Nadjajda, Free Minds Friend

Hello Free Minds members! My name is Nadjajda, and I'm a life coach. When Tara asked me if I would want to write something about this month's topic, my immediate response was "yes!" I know we all wear masks in life. I myself have worn them and still do at times, and I have to keep reminding myself to take them off.

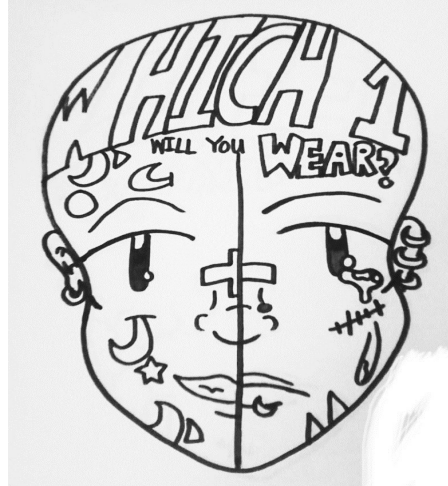
A little about me: I was born in Boston, MA from Haitian parents and was raised in Haiti. I moved back to the U.S. when I was 16 years old, and I've been living there since then. Over a year ago, I took a big leap in my career by deciding to become a life coach and start my own business, Light of Haiti, LLC. I left the nonprofit and private sector as I realized that this is the path that would lead me to fulfilling my purpose of empowering people. We all wear mask—we've been trained to wear them in order for people to not get to know the real us. These masks have protected us from harm and pain, but they are also keeping us from living a wholehearted life and are robbing us from fully expressing ourselves.

As a life coach, I've seen many clients wear masks that don't allow them to show up and be seen. While their masks have protected them, they have also caused them pain in their relationships with others and with themselves. I remember that one of my clients was going through a rough time in her marriage, and we discovered that the core of the issue was that she wasn't allowing herself to speak her truth in her relationship. She was wearing the mask that says "it's all good," and she was trying to be the supportive wife at the expense of being true to herself. It got really difficult for her and started to impact other areas of her life. Through our sessions, she eventually got clarity about what she really wanted and the courage to speak up about it. This totally transformed not only her marriage, but also her relationship with herself. All successful people in life have at some point had to remove their masks and let others see them.

There comes a point in our lives when wearing our masks is tiring and takes a lot of effort, that's when we know that life is calling on us to grow and transform. I can personally testify to this moment because it is one of the things that led to my career change. While the positions I held in the past have shaped me and contributed to my knowledge and experience, they didn't represent who I truly am and desire to be. It's no wonder I felt uncomfortable and it started negatively impacting my life. Being a life coach, starting my own business, and sharing myself with others are just a few of the ways that I've removed my mask. While it is scary, it is also liberating and feels great. We all need each other, and allowing people to really get to know, support, and love us is how we grow and learn to truly accept ourselves. I hope that like many of us, you'll thank your masks for protecting you all these years, but then take them off and allow yourself to show up as your authentic self.

DID YOU KNOW?

Haiti is a Caribbean country that shares an island with another country, the Dominican Republic. It was the first independent nation in Latin America, and became the first Black-led country in the world when former Black slaves who revolted in 1804. In 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake hit Haiti, leaving 316,000 people dead and more than 1.6 million homeless.



*Artwork by a student at Capital City Public Charter School

WHICH ME DO YOU THINK YOU'LL SEE?

By MH, FM Member in Federal Prison

There's ME and then there's...ME
One is exposed but most times,
There's the MASK
Same eyes, different sights
Same person, different lives
So with a ME and another ME
Depending on the situation at hand
Which ME do you think you'll see?

IN THE NEWS

By FM Friend John

DC

The mayoral election appears to have settled down to six individuals. Four current members of the city council are running: Muriel Bowser, Jack Evans, Vincent Orange and Tommy Wells. They are joined by two outsiders: Reta Jo Lewis, a former aide to Hillary Clinton at the State Department, and Andy Shallal, owner of the Busboys & Poets restaurants. Oh, and one current mayor: Vincent Gray. He hasn't yet announced whether or not he will seek reelection.

The actual election will be held a year from now, but the big vote is really on April 1. That is the day of the Democratic primary, and all of these candidates are Democrats. There is no Republican with any real chance at winning.

Meanwhile, many of the city's residents were sent home from work for nearly two weeks when the federal government shut down in October. That happened because Democrats and Republicans in congress could not agree on how much the federal government should spend in 2014.

For a while, it looked like many of those workers would be out for days or weeks without getting paid. But during the process, even though they could not agree on bigger things, Democrats and Republicans jointly agreed that the federal workers would get paid for the time they were out.

Sports

It is a strange year in the NFC East, everybody. After ten weeks of play, guess how many of the four teams have a winning record? The answer is: ZERO. The Cowboys and Eagles are both 5-5, and the Giants and Redskins are both 3-6. So while RG3 and the boys have one of the worst records in the whole league, they are technically less than two games out of first place in the division!

The season started with a pile of losses for the Skins, but Griffin has played well of late and has formed a powerful connection with new tight end Jordan Reed. So who are the best teams in the league? The short list of favorites for the Super Bowl at this point would be the Broncos, the Saints, the Chiefs and the Seahawks. Among the other contenders: Patriots, 49ers, Jets, and the Carolina Panthers.

Meanwhile, we have some news from the Verizon Center that might shock you: The Wizards might be good! They are only 2-5, and let's be real, they won't be contending with LeBron and company anytime soon, but the future still looks bright. The Wiz paid point guard John Wall superstar money in the offseason, and so far he has earned it. He's averaging 18 points per game. Last year's high draft pick, Bradley Beal, is leading the team with 21 points per game.



In hockey, the Capitals are 10-8, second in the Metropolitan Division, and captain Alex Ovechkin is second in the league with 13 goals.

Music

The Grammy nominations for this year will come out within a month, and it sure seems like there are going to be some tough votes. Among the artists expected to be up for one or more awards:

-Justin Timberlake, who recently wrapped up a huge stadium tour with Jay-Z

-Pharrell Williams, who put together maybe the most-played songs of the year (Blurred Lines with Robin Thicke, and Get Lucky by Daft Punk)

-Drake, for his new album "Nothing Was the Same"

-Macklemore & Ryan Lewis, for their hip-hop debut "The Heist"

-Country and pop star Taylor Swift



THE ONE DAY IT WAS OKAY TO PUT ON A MASK



By Alisha, Free Minds Member and Outreach Assistant

Growing up, Halloween was my favorite time of the year. It was the only time when I could be someone else and not be judged for it. I hated being myself. I hated being the daughter of a crack-addicted mother and the sister of three needy little children. Every year I looked forward to Halloween, when I could be a carefree princess for one day and pretend that Prince Charming, instead of child protective services, was going to come rescue me from the tortures of my everyday life.

Growing up, I wanted to be everything that I wasn't. Rich, powerful, outgoing...special. But only one day out of the year was I able to make those desires true. Only one day out of the year was it ok to put on a mask and be something different from what you are. Now, it is Halloween season again. I am an adult that some may consider well-rounded, smart, outgoing, passionate, open, responsible, and pain free. I sit at home watching my own child prepare for a night of mystery. I listen to my daughter brainstorm the different creatures that she wants to expose to society's eye on Halloween night.

She asks, "Mommy, what are you going to be for Halloween? I'm going to be a princess!!" And she smiles that beautiful smile of innocents. I look back at my child with sore eyes full of grief, stuck in a place of uncertainty and despair. And I reply, "Your mother."



CAREER CORNER

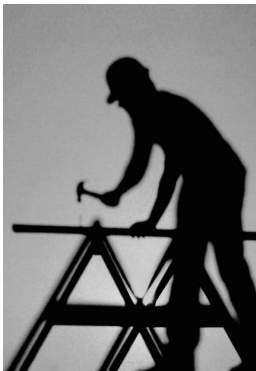
Coming home in the next 6 months? Write us a letter or give us a call at 202-758-0829 so we can help you plan for reentry!

REENTRY PROGRAMS TO CONSIDER:

By Shae, FM Reentry Specialist

BUILDING FUTURES AFL-CIO CARPENTRY PROGRAM

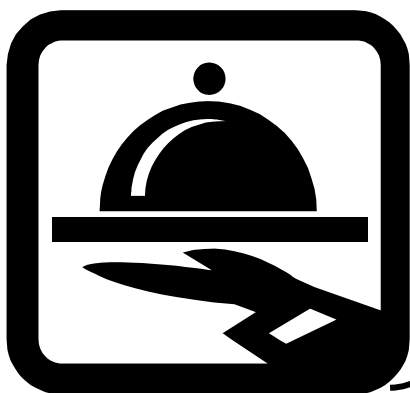
If you are thinking about what jobs will be in demand when you come home, consider the **Building Futures** program! This seven week apprenticeship program



prepares you for work in carpentry, painting, laborers, cement masons, and some electrical and new commercial building construction.

NEW COURSE CATERING

How are your cooking skills? If you're interested in pursuing a career in culinary arts consider the **New Course Catering** program. They teach you the essentials of cooking and how to gain a career within the hospitality field.



Reentry Spotlight



"Perseverance Does Pay Off!": Pursuing My Dream of Becoming a Cross-Country Truck Driver

TB is one of our first FM members! He served 8 years and has been home for almost 3 years now. We sat down and asked him how he's made it this far.

Free Minds: Can you tell us what you've been doing since you came home and what are the secrets to your success so far?

TB: Well I knew I would need a job right away if I was going to stay away from the streets, so I started my job search while I was still incarcerated. I read the newspaper nonstop to find out what jobs were easier to get for people with felonies, since I knew that would be my biggest obstacle. I found out construction was one of those jobs so I applied for a carpentry apprenticeship program the first day I got home. They help you get practical experience on the job, like an internship. [See the reentry programs column to the left to find out more about the carpentry apprenticeship!]

You need a car to get to the job sites, so I studied and got my license. I was lucky because my grandmother gave me her old car to start. I'm so grateful for the love and support of my family. But soon I realized I needed a better car that was more reliable, so I opened a bank account to help save money and take out a loan. Now I have my own car, which is great because it gives me the freedom to keep moving up.

The carpentry program placed me at a construction site, which was good to get going and get some income. But I realized I didn't want to be a laborer for long. I wasn't happy with it because I didn't like the lifting. I knew the brain is more powerful (and better paid!) than muscle. I got another internship with the Department of Transportation as a bridge inspector. But I hurt my shoulder on the job and couldn't continue. So I asked all my friends and everyone I knew if they had any openings at their jobs. This is called networking and take note—it's important!! I have found it to be the number one thing that's helped me since I've been home. So then I got a job at a pet day care which allows me to still make money while I pursue my next dream of getting my commercial driver's license (CDL) and becoming a truck driver.

I'm taking classes right now on the weekends in Baltimore from 7am-7pm Sat and Sunday and work about 60 hours during the week at the pet day care. When I get my CDL, I will fulfill my dream of seeing the country. I've never traveled anywhere but now that I will soon be a truck driver, I have the opportunity to travel and get paid while I'm doing it! I was born and raised in DC, but I want to experience other cities and cultures. I don't want to be stuck here my whole life. I want to try different foods and meet different people. I want to go to St Louis, go to Vegas, go to France. I've always been adventurous. When I was locked up I didn't read urban novels; instead, I wanted to read books that were in other locations to expand my mind. I used to read books about places like Chicago or New York, but now I'm going to see them for myself.

Interview Continued on Page 9

MY PATH TO GETTING MY C.D.L.

Continued from Page 8...

FM: Has having a felony affected your job search?

TB: This is another area where I am lucky. I had a good lawyer who arranged a plea deal down from armed robbery to just robbery, which looks much better to an employer. At the time I had no idea how important that would be. I knew I was just going to get less time but my lawyer knew how much better that looks on your record.

Now, I'm not saying I don't get blocked from jobs. I just applied to Metro and I got denied because of my record. But I didn't let that stop me. I never give up and know someone out there will take a chance on me. The other thing I recommend for all the Free Minds members is making sure I had a good relationship with my P.O. Because he trusts me, I only have to see him every other month now, which means I can take this truck driving job. He's fine with it as long as I come back to see him every 60 days. So that gives me freedom too. You just have to play it smart.

FM: Have you had challenges since coming home?

TB: First of all, who doesn't have challenges! I guess I don't mention them is because they don't define me. I want to talk about all the positive things that are happening because I think that makes them happen more! But yes, as a matter of fact, I contracted a very dangerous infection they think I got from one of the dogs at the day care I work at. It's called Bacterial Meningitis, and it makes your brain swell. It's very serious—people die from it a lot. I was in the hospital for 2 months. I have a hard time remembering it, but I needed to go to therapy and my memory was affected. But I knew I would live and here I am. I'm a survivor.

FM: What advice can you give to your fellow Free Minds members coming home?

For one thing, on job interviews and when you're at work, don't speak like you're talking to your homies on the corner. Also, be honest about your criminal history, but don't elaborate too much if they ask. Tell them how young you were and that you've changed a lot since then.

Another big piece of advice: don't go around your old neighborhood if you can help it. If you have to live there, just get up, go to work or school, and come right back home. Don't hang on the corner or talk to your old friends. As they say at the Doggie Day Care, if you lay with dogs, you get up with fleas. Your old friends might have drugs and guns on them that you don't even know about. And then if you get pulled over, you are going down too. I'm serious—don't even stand on the corner for 5-10 minutes, because you never know what could happen.

You really have to change all your old behaviors, hangouts, and habits. Instead of going to the club, maybe go to the movies with a girlfriend. Once again, I got lucky; my girlfriend (who is my fiancé now) knew me since the 7th grade, and she is really supportive. She saw me when I was a knucklehead and knew my struggle. She saw me be wild and grow up. She's a good girl. She went to Howard Univer-

sity and is now a teacher.

The final advice I'd like to give is to always be planning your next move and be dedicated. Some dudes give up, but if you don't get in the front door of a job, try the back door. And if that doesn't work, try the windows. If they are closed, go for the chimney! Perseverance does pay off!

Just know that you want something better—and that you *deserve* something better—than what the streets can give you, which is nothing but trouble and death. We just lost a Free Minds brother to the hail of bullets, rest in peace.*

That's all for now. I might write from the road and tell you how it is out there in the wide open country as I drive all through it.

**For a tribute to our lost FM member Tyree, see p. 12*

A Costume for a Cause



Have you ever heard of real-life Superheroes? These are real people in the community who imitate the superheroes in comics and stories by dressing up in costume to promote a

cause. For example, one woman in New York who goes by "Terrifica" wears a mask, blonde wig, red boots, and a cape. She patrols the bars at night in her costume to prevent men from taking advantage of intoxicated women. FM Member and Outreach Assistant Alisha recently sat down with another real-life superhero, NA, to ask about her experiences. NA has been active in the U.S. Army for over 9 years, and she used to dress up in different disguises for causes. For example, she dressed as a homeless person to advocate for the veterans that come home that don't have housing.

Alisha: What type of mask do you wear? Is it an emotional mask where you hide your feelings from the world? Or is it a physical mask?

NA: Well, by day I am a sergeant trained in weaponry. And by night... I wear a different mask LOL.

I am a Philadelphian, and here the community super hero theme is pretty big. Regular civilians dress up as super heroes and most do it to fight for social change. A lot of people and friends that I know just do it for fun, but I am really serious about what I do.

I have one friend who dresses up as a human donut with a cape and goes into cafes and fights against "bad breakfast" lol... She is always complaining about the bad quality of coffee. She's been doing this for about 6 months. I think that it's ridiculous and I wish that she would stop because it makes the rest of us look silly. But we all have different opinions about what's important. I guess hers is hot coffee and fresh donuts LOL.

Continued Page 10



AROUND THE WORLD...

The Mask I Put Up as a White American in India

By Sam, Free Minds Friend

Hi everyone, my name is Sam. It's an honor for me to write to you. I graduated from college in Ohio in 2010, where I studied politics. After I graduated, I was fortunate enough to find a six-month job working for a non-profit organization in India that works on the environment and economic development.

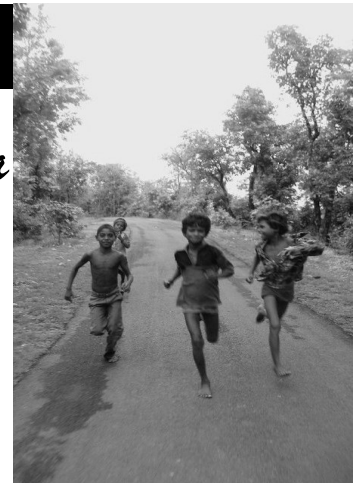
India is a fascinating country with delicious and spicy food, vibrant colors everywhere, a long interesting history and natural beauty all around. It also has a huge amount of poverty, and an American in India is always going to stick out as someone who probably has more money than the average Indian, who makes just \$3.33 a day. Because of that, being a white person in India for six months was the first time I lived with the feeling of discomfort bordering on fear because of my race. It feels like an absurd thing to say, because in this country, white people are often perpetrators of racism rather than victims of it. But there, I felt like I was constantly a target of people who might want money from me – whether through asking or attacking. It gave me a taste of what it's like to have people interact with you differently because of stereotyping.

When I first got to India, the first thing I noticed was *everyone was Indian*. It's not like the U.S., where we have people of all different racial and ethnic backgrounds. I walked outside, and on a crowded sidewalk I was the only white person. I visited villages where kids had grown up literally never seeing someone who looked like me, and stared at me like I was some kind of fallen angel. The first thing I wrote there was:

Fear. That's the first thing. They can smell it emanating from my pores. Venturing out of my hotel into the muggy dust I can't help but be stopped by taxi drivers every ten feet: "Where are you going? I take you to market I take you to shopping mall I take you to beach." They follow me several paces until I've made it absolutely clear that I'm just going for a walk. I turn the corner and press on, standing taller and continuing to see nothing but Indians around me, staring at me.

One woman around the corner from my apartment had no fingers, and sat on the side of the road pleading for change every day. Other women would beg with a baby in their arms. Almost every day, little kids would tug at me and ask for money. I gave money to people on the street at least once or twice a day. I wanted to help everyone, but I knew it was impossible for me to give to every person who asked—I wasn't nearly as rich as they thought I was! Plus, it was difficult because I felt like I was always being followed wherever I went. Sometimes I felt like I had to draw a hard line and put on a mask that said, "don't try me." I thought if I smiled it would invite people to take advantage of me.

One day I wrote this: *Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever let*



down my guard in the streets of India. When little kids run up to you and yell "money!" you begin to see that for many of them you're just a walking wallet. I often walk around with a grimace – my mask of fearlessness and indifference – only to see it reflected back at me. Who started it? Should I let the beer vendor and rickshaw (taxi) driver trying to rip me off affect how I interact with the waiter and the other rickshaw driver?

I never found the answer, the balance between treating everyone as a human while also protecting myself. My mask made me feel safer in the moment, but perhaps also less happy. I wanted to smile, but my mask wore a frown. I also met many great people there who didn't want my money, and allowed me to take off my mask and let them really get to know me as a person. And I hope if I ever go back I can take off my mask for everyone.

WEARING A MASK FOR VETERANS

Continued from Page 9

Alisha: So what is it that you fight against?

NA: I fight for our veterans. Before, I used to go out as a homeless woman with a cape. I would wear long shirts and tie a knot at the end to represent soldiers who have lost a piece of themselves fighting for their country. The rugged clothes were my way of showing the world what happens to a lot of us once we can no longer serve. I want to remind them not to forget the ones who put their lives on the line to keep our country safe. We have to remember our soldiers and that they have a reentry process too when they come home. Just like when you are coming home from prison, when you are coming home from the army or a war, you need a lot of support to succeed.

Alisha: Do you ever feel like you're fighting for a lost cause wearing your costume? Have you done anything else to try to help veterans?

NA: I attend meetings with congress and a military support and justice group. And though I am fighting for something that may seem like a lost cause to few, I know firsthand what my soldiers face upon discharge. I believe that you take care of those who take care of you. I will fight until this battle is won. My mask has been melted in my face and heart and it is one that will never come off.



PAY IT FORWARD

This month for our “Pay It Forward” activism column we wanted to share with you a special experience that some Poet Ambassadors had recently—they testified as public witnesses in front of DC Council about creating a library at DC Jail in order to prevent future suicides and mental health crises. Read below for our intern Mookie’s account of what happened and why it’s important to speak out about issues that affect you!

A Library to Help Suicidal Inmates Find Hope

By Mookie, Free Minds Intern

On Thursday, November 7th, DC councilmember Tommy Wells held an official roundtable to discuss the D.O.C.’s response the recent suicides at the DC jail. There have been 4 suicides in less than a year! This amount is much, much higher than the national average for prisons. A lot of different people gave testimony to talk about how to best approach mental health in the jail and prevent more suicides in the future. Doctors, lawyers, and community members all had things to say about the situation at hand.

To start the discussion, the president of Unity Health Care, gave an overview of how mental health is treated in the jail, and what is being done to improve conditions. Next, we heard testimony from members of the P.E.E.R.S. Coalition, a group that works to improve conditions for people who are incarcerated and suffering from mental illness. They talked about something called “trauma-informed care,” which is an approach to dealing with mental illness that focuses on understanding the struggles of each individual who is suffering. Other presenters included the DC Jail and Prison Advocacy Project and the director of DC Jail, who talked about constructing “suicide resistant” cells.

You all would be proud to know that Free Minds was one of the groups that contributed to this important hearing. Tara and three Free Minds Poet Ambassadors—Alisha, DeAnte, and Maurice—all spoke about the importance of having books in the jail, and how a full library could really help inmates who are feeling depressed. Alisha spoke about her personal experience in jail, and how being able to read books gave her a new, positive outlook on life. Maurice talked about how access to information would make inmates more knowledgeable, and would also provide idle minds something to focus on instead of despair. Finally DeAnte spoke about his own personal journey, and how reading books from Free Minds in the jail let him focus his thoughts on something other than the heaviness of his situation.

Something that I noticed sitting in the room for a full three hours, listening to everyone speak, was that there were very few voices of people who actually spent time in the DC jail. If it weren’t for the Free Minds members who came and spoke about their experience, councilmember Wells and the rest of the people at the hearing would have missed hearing from those most affected by this issue—the people who have spent time at DC Jail. A lot of us came up to us after the hearing and expressed how powerful it was to hear from Free Minds members and to share their support for the idea of a library at DC Jail. Now, because of Free Minds members, that idea is out there in the public, and the city council is more aware of the needs of inmates.

That’s exactly why speaking out about your experiences can be so powerful; you have a unique perspective to tell that *people want to hear*. Your voice really does matter, and it can help to change things for a better future. We would love to hear from you on this issue. What do you think is the best way to prevent suicides at the jail? Do you think it’s important for there to be an available library? Has a book been helpful to you personally when you were going through a difficult time? Send us your thoughts and we will pass them on to the DC Council!

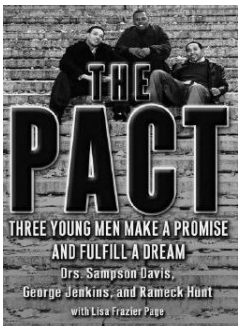


I SMILE WHEN MY SOUL CRIES

By JP, FM Member in Federal Prison

If common sense is the opiate of the masses
Then I’m the man of a thousand masks
Don’t try to figure out my character
Because it has chameleon characteristics
It changes with its surroundings,
The people who I may encounter
It is most times my defense mechanism
To keep others at bay
To throw you off
My smile is one of my masks
Because I smile when my soul cries
I smile when I’m angry
I smile when I feel crappy
But I never smile when I’m happy
The mask, I wear it with shame
Because it doesn’t portray who I am
But it pleases others
Plus it helps me fit in
At times I almost reveal the man
The man under the mask
Being the mask is easy
But being the me is the task
Without it, I feel naked
Like the world’s staring at me
Like they could read me
And predict my movements
But who really cares
Who really cares about the mask I wear?

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!



Our regular BAM! column is taking a brief hiatus, but in the meantime be on the look out for our next book!

The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream

The book tells the true story of three young men who grew up in the streets of Newark, NJ and beat the odds by all becoming doctors

When I Don't Want You to Know the Real Me

By SG, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

The mask I wear is to protect my identity
When I don't want you to know the real me
The mask I wear is to mask my emotions
To never give you the image of me looking vulnerable.
The mask I wear is to always smile giving you
The impression that everything in life is green,
When my current state of mind is blue.
The mask I wear.

IN MEMORIAM

Tyree

It is with enormous sadness that we share news of the loss of a Free Minds brother, Tyree, who was shot and killed in Washington, DC on November 8th. Tyree joined Free Minds in 2006. Like many, he wasn't sure initially about becoming a book club member. But as he discovered books that spoke to him, Tyree came to absolutely love reading. He wrote:

"I don't read necessarily to learn, I read to unlearn the things I shouldn't have learned in the first place."

As he began to think about and understand better what was going on in the community, Tyree wrote:

"The main reason for violence: people don't know what they are worth...If they think they are trash, they eat trash (excessive meat, liquor, narcotics etc.), think trash (think they are worthless, think they useless, think they ugly) and do trash (kill, steal, strip, unprotected sex, etc). You do the math. It all comes from the power of thought."

After his transfer to federal prison, Tyree's reading level soared and his curiosity grew. He devoured books on African American history, spirituality, and religion, eventually converting to Judaism. When he came home in 2011, Tyree got a full-time job, fell in love and got married.

The loss of Tyree to gun violence at the age of just 25 is devastating to the entire Free Minds family. We ask all of you to join us to ensure that neither his life, his awakening, his intellectual growth, nor his death be in vain. Instead, may this tragedy be a reminder to all of us that we **MUST** step up and play a role in resisting the streets and stopping the violence.

As Tyree once wrote:

"I believe anything is possible when it comes to love."

We invite all who knew Tyree to write to us with your memories. Your words will no doubt provide comfort to his family.

Next Issue's Theme: PERSISTENCE

Did you see our reentry spotlight about TB on page 8? He talked a lot about how he needed *persistence* to be successful in his reentry. According to the dictionary, persistence is: “the quality that allows someone to continue doing something or trying to do something even though it is difficult or opposed by other people.” What are some of the obstacles you face that make you want to stop trying or give up? What motivates you to keep going even when you face these difficult challenges? Do you think all people need persistence to achieve their goals? Why or why not? Send your poems, articles, artwork, and thoughts to the office and we’ll feature it in the next Connect!

