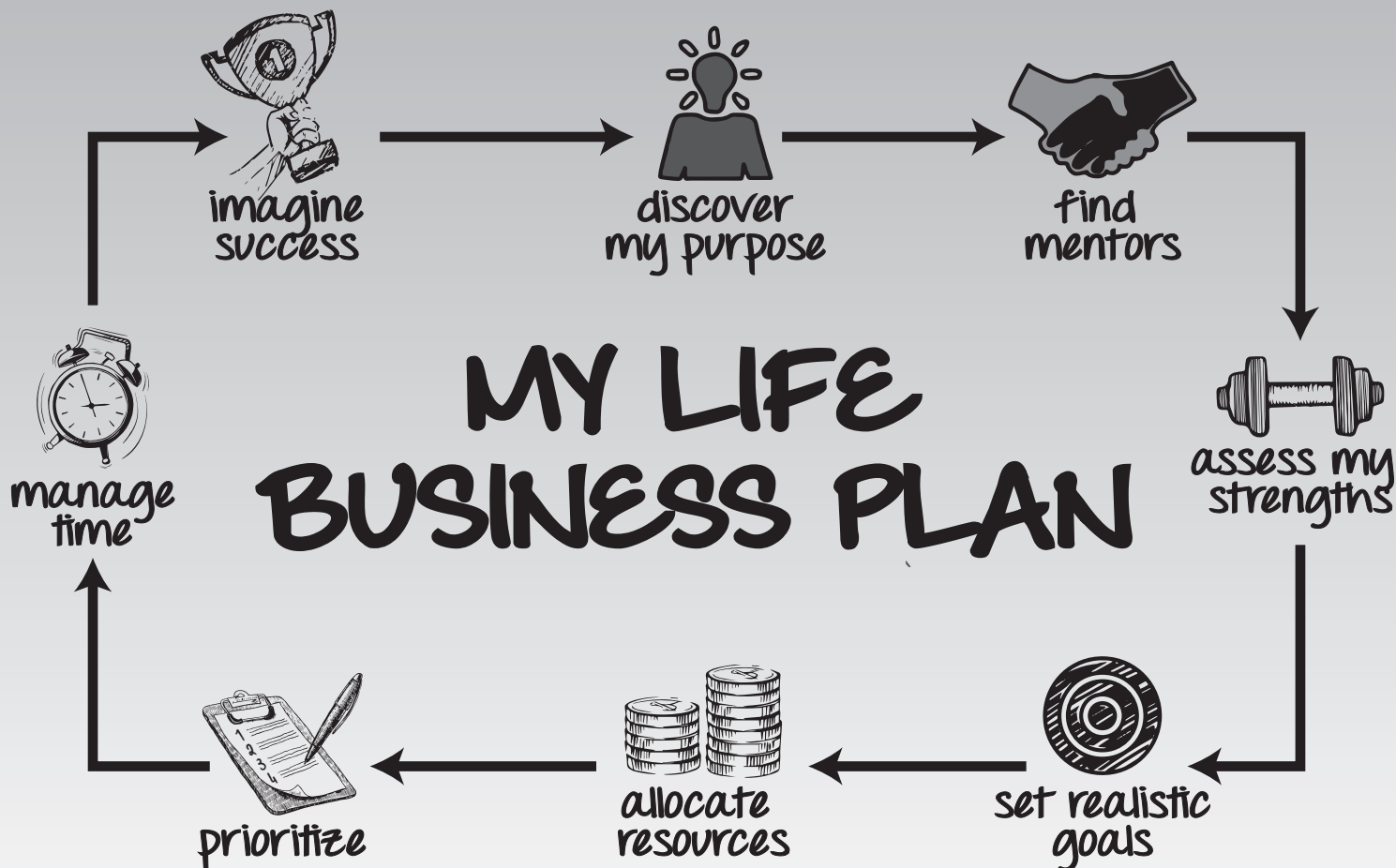


January/February 2018  
Vol. 7, Issue 1

# free minds Connect



**THIS MONTH'S THEME:  
ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT  
BECOMING THE CEO OF MY OWN LIFE**

**FM MEMBERS SHARE  
HOW THEY REBOUND  
WHEN LIFE CHANGES  
THEIR PLANS**  
PAGE 4

**HOW WRITING FROM  
THE INSIDE KEPT A  
MARRIAGE STRONG**  
PAGE 5

**SOCIAL  
ENTREPRENEURS  
DO GOOD WHILE  
MAKING MONEY**  
PAGE 7



## THE CONNECT TEAM

**Executive Editor & Publisher**

Tara

## Managing Editors

Julia, Jessica

## Contributors

### FM Team

Keela, Kelli, Melissa, Mbachur,  
Chelsea, Terrell, Brandon, Alexa

### FM Friends

Bea, Kate, John, Sally

### FM Members

JG, HF, AB, AC, AP, BF, DJ, EH, HF, HS,  
JGK, JL, MJ, MV, QS, SH, TD, TTB, TT, WB

## THE FREE MINDS TEAM

Tara, Co-founder & Executive Director

Kelli, Co-founder & Book Club Manager

Julia, Deputy Director

Keela, Reentry Manager

Mbachur, Outreach Coordinator

Jessica, Prison Book Club Coordinator

Melissa, Program Associate

Terrell, Reentry Assistant

Brandon, Prison Book Club Assistant

Gabe, Writer-in-Residence

Chelsea, Reentry Book Club Facilitator

Thandor, Reentry Book Club Facilitator

Marcus, Reentry Facilitator

Michael, Reentry Facilitator

Alexa, FM Intern Fall/Winter 2017

We are ALWAYS looking for new contributors. Write or draw something for our next issue and send it to us! (Pieces not published in the *Connect* may appear on our Writing Blog and at a Write Night Event!)

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

**Next Issue's Theme:  
Education**

# FREE MINDS HQ

By Melissa

## Free Minds Goes to Philadelphia

In October, the Free Minds team (staff and poet ambassadors) hit the road to participate in the Inside-Out 20th Anniversary Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and to share Free Minds poetry and stories with students at St. Joseph's Prep School. The conference celebrated the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, in which college students and professors go inside prisons to learn alongside incarcerated students.

Pictured to the right:

This statue of the famous fictional character Rocky from the movie of the same name is right outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art (where the famous Rocky training scene where he ran up the steps was filmed!) Photo credit: BostonHerald.com



## Write Night International Visitors

Our Write Nights have lately attracted international guests including an official from the Mexican Embassy,

a representative from Prove They Are Alive (a human rights campaign protecting the rights of political detainees in Turkmenistan), and a French YouTube personality (HugoDécrypte) who posted a video about his experience at Write Night.

## Free Minds Poet Ambassador Speaks on Ending School-to-Prison Pipeline

DC Councilmember Grosso introduced a bill called the **Student Fair Access to School Act** to reduce exclusionary discipline (taking a student out of their educational setting by suspending or expelling them, for example) in DC schools. He recommends that a new law should prevent taking students out of school and offer more restorative justice. At a press conference about the bill, FM Poet Ambassador James shared his experience of always being suspended, meaning less time at school and more time doing nonproductive activities.

*What have been your experiences with disciplinary action at school? Do you think you would've stayed off the streets if you weren't suspended from school? What do you think of Grosso's bill?*

# TALK BACK WITH TARA

Happy New Year, Free Minds CEOs!

Sending you warm wishes for a year filled with learning and joy. My motto for this year is "Fulfilling dreams in 2018." © January 1 is one of my favorite holidays, right behind Martin Luther King, Jr. day and Thanksgiving. Why? It's the "do-over" day – the "wipe the slate clean and start afresh" time for setting new resolutions. As my yoga teacher says, each breath can be a new start. By March will I have swerved off my path? Of course! But I've discovered that life isn't about falling off – it's about jumping back on the track. Trying again (and again) and learning more each time.

You're in luck because this issue is a guide for getting back on that path to your goals more quickly. We at Free Minds HQ call it your **Life Business Plan**, where you are the **CEO** (Chief Executive Officer) of your own life. It's a plan where you view achieving your goals exactly the same way a business owner would. I come from a long line of small business owners in my family and I've seen it firsthand. The plan is VITAL! Read this issue and follow the sage advice and you will become the "man with the plan" who can't be stopped! A life business plan is for everyone – not just someone who wants to start their own business. This advice has been gleaned from many successful returning citizens we've worked with over many years.

From the Cover:

- **Discover Your Purpose:** What brings you a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment?
- **Assess Your Strengths:** What are you good at? What do you like to do that you can improve on?
- **Set Realistic Goals:** What can you accomplish in your current environment? What is doable?
- **Allocate Resources:** Decide where to spend your time, energy, money, and connections.
- **Prioritize:** Figure out which goals need to be accomplished first to make other goals easier to get done.
- **Manage Your Time:** Make a schedule and work to stay on track!
- **Imagine Success:** Create a detailed picture of where you want to be. Visualize good things happening.

- **Find Mentors:** Seek wisdom and expertise from your partner, family, friends, experts in the field, etc.

Think of how our actions can be good or bad investments in our futures – like FM member JL talks about in his essay "Bad Investments." FM friend Marcus shows us you can be a good leader in your community and in business at the same time. He is what is called a **social entrepreneur**. We feature other **social enterprises** like Together We Bake, Tightshift Labor Coop, RZero, Flikshop, and more in this issue. In DC, we're also lucky to have the ASPIRE program for anyone who decides they want to start their own business, and you'll read about how to connect with them.

In my fifteen years at Free Minds, I've never seen a member come home with what they think is a foolproof, airtight plan that doesn't go off track or isn't affected by something out of their control. Just like new companies face setbacks (50 percent of businesses fail in the first five years), we face setbacks in life, but the most successful entrepreneurs adapt, make a backup plan, and keep going! That's where Free Minds comes in to help you readjust, and get back on a path to success. Read about FM member Pedro's experience and call on us!

As you know, we believe education is liberation and a vital ingredient in your life business plan, so our next *Connect* will be on education. We want to find out the best way we can bring you more learning opportunities, so if you answer the questions included, we can know what you most want. And fill out the book ballot, too! There's not a lot of choice where you are, but you can always choose your BAM book. Make your voice heard and Life Business Plan a reality. Can't wait to read them!

Until next time,  
Free Minds forever,  
Tara

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



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

# MEMBERS CONNECT: ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

## Practicing "Entrepreneurial Spirit"

By Brandon

When I first learned the word **entrepreneurial**, I thought it was based solely on running a business, but I have grown to learn that it is every morning when we wake up that we are practicing entrepreneurial skills.

Something small as planning your day, week, or even month is tapping into the "entrepreneurial spirit." Identifying a problem that you want to solve, coming up with a solution to that problem, and then planning the steps you will take to get there is a basic life entrepreneurial spirit that we all have inside of us, but fail to realize most of the time.

Take me, for example. When I came home from prison, I needed money. So what did I do? I planned to get a job. But the problem wasn't only that I needed a job – I needed a resume and job skills. I had to look at my life as if it was a business, and I didn't want my business to sink, so I did what any other business man would do: I looked for help. I enrolled in this program I found called Project Empowerment, learned job skills, and built a resume along the way. Now I have two jobs and the problem is solved! It did not take me any

money, just a few phone calls, positive networking, and investing in myself.

On the other hand, I do know how important it is for us guys coming home to have our own businesses making money (and how much many of us want it), but many of us fall short for two reasons. Reason one is that we picture the finishing touches before the construction, get discouraged, and give up the thought of ever having the opportunity to create it. Reason two is that we fail to take the time to study ourselves mentally, physically, and spiritually.

You can't run a business if you are operating with a poor mentality, physically unhealthy, and spiritually drained. That is why I started this piece with talking about waking up and practicing entrepreneurial skills, because no business will be successful until you have studied who you are, what you want to be, and how will you achieve your goals. Remember it starts off simply with identifying a problem that you want to solve, coming up with a solution to that problem, and then planning the steps you will take to get there.

## Managing Money

By TD

Hello to all my Free Minds family, friends, and upcoming entrepreneurs. I'm thirty years old and one of the youngest behind-the-scenes entrepreneurs in prison. I would love to share my methods of success with you.

1. Have confidence in yourself and your ideas. Believe that you can accomplish the goal you want. There are days I talk to myself and say "I can do this" or ask "what am I doing wrong?" We are the way we think in life, so if you think you can't be what you want or it's impossible, that's what your actions will reflect.
2. Start off small. Crawl before you walk. I'll never forget when I only had 300 dollars to my name. I had my sister go buy candy bars at the Sam's Club. We sold 700 candy bars at one dollar a piece which turned into 700 dollars. I put back my 300 dollars and invested my profit. But the key is to save, save, save, and manage your money.

I named that business Candy for Communities. Then I took 25 percent of all my profits and donated it to struggling kids and community programs.

3. Save money. It's easier to get to the top than to remain there. When we're young and making money, we think it's gonna last forever and we don't prepare for the future. School teaches us how to make money, but not how to manage our funds. Start saving ten dollars a day for a month, take that 300 dollars, and come up with a plan that could turn your money to profit legally. Put yourself on a budget through the week.

Believe in yourself and don't touch that money you save.

4. Stop thinking just because we got felonies or a bad past that the streets are the only way out. It's not! We just have to start little and work our way up. I can work at McDonald's making nine dollars an hour but managing my money and you can work at the White House making fifty dollars an hour but not managing, and at the end of the year I'll have more than you.
5. Every job is worth taking. Why? Because there's nothing like getting paid to learn and I don't care if that means working at Pizza Hut – (1) I'm learning how to make pizza, (2) I'm getting paid, and (3) I'm saving and managing my money. So never look at any job like it's nothing.
6. Surround yourself with resources and business-minded individuals. Trust me, you'll see a difference. Get your pride out the way – especially you young men out there. We have to use each other in a good way to build and accomplish goals. Also remember there is nothing wrong with following if you have a great leader.
7. Money isn't everything. Everybody wants to be a millionaire, but just because you have money doesn't mean you will be happy. Honestly, it causes more issues and opens up a lot more responsibilities that I feel obligated to do because I don't want to feel like I'm letting everyone down. But at the end of the day, I smile because I didn't let these walls stop me from my goals and that's the most important part. I kept my spirit and put my back against the wall.

## Bad Life Investments

By JL, FM Member

Every time I hear or see the word "entrepreneur" some sort of business comes to mind. In every business, no matter how great or small, certain risks must be considered in order to calculate whether that particular venture will result in the gain or loss of time, money, resources, etc. A person starting a business has to take meticulous steps – not shortcuts – to be sure his or her business becomes successful.

"Entrepreneurial spirit," to me, makes entrepreneurship a more personal investment.

Being incarcerated I know the feeling of bad investments and now experience how taking certain risks–shortcuts–result in the loss of time out of life.

December 1st marked nearly twenty years of my incarceration. That's nearly twenty years' worth of loss of time I could have spent with family, friends, and stabilizing myself of the outside – time that I cannot get back. My past crimes, though seeming like a good investment two decades ago, simply proved to be bad business.

A message for anyone who is thinking of engaging, or who is already engaged, to the crime life: you better weigh out the risk(s) of such a venture, because any loss you take will be greater than any loss taken by a failed legitimate business.



# WHEN YOUR LIFE BUSINESS PLAN DOESN'T GO EXACTLY AS PLANNED

*No matter how prepared you are, unexpected adversity can always come along and throw you off, but just as you have to pivot in basketball (keep one foot on the ground while moving the other to re-position yourself), sometimes you have to pivot in life and adapt your plan to your circumstances – or to come up with a brand new one.*

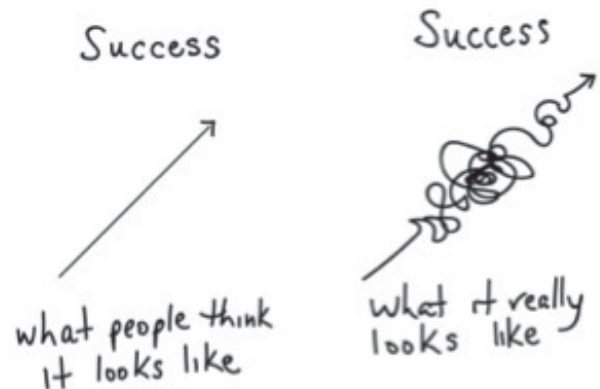
*Here are some ways FM members have overcome obstacles in their lives to continue on a pathway to success.*

**WB:** When my grandmother got sick, it threw everything off. I stopped going to work to be with her in the hospital and lost my job. Then I started getting really down and stopped going to my PO. I was on a downhill slide for real. I just didn't care. My grandmother told me the best thing I could do was take care of my own business, and there were others who could help her. Even though all I wanted was to be at her bed because she was there for me during the bid, I realized that the best way to be there for her was to support the family and to avoid getting locked back up. I was lucky. She got better. I was so afraid of losing her, and I had other family members to help, but if I lost her I don't know what I would have done. I'd probably be locked back up today if I didn't know that's the last thing my grandmother would want.

**SH:** I was working at a really good job and really liking it. I was doing good. Then my brother got shot and killed, and I gave up. I couldn't do anything. It was really bad. I'm just starting to come back around now. I'm applying for jobs and it feels good. My brother would want me to make him proud.

**HS:** It's so easy to have the plan on paper before you come home.

I worked really hard on it and had everything set and then reality hit! I couldn't live where I thought I could. My dream job didn't hire me. I started smoking weed. I was so stressed out and got into it with my PO. Free Minds really helped me get back on track and not say f\*\*\* it. Now I'm doing a carpentry apprenticeship. I learned to have the Plan A, but then have Plan B, C, D and E too!



## FREE MINDS MAILBAG

*Here are some of your thoughts on the September/October 2017 issue of the Connect (theme: Labels).*

**AC:** A label that I would like to let fall away would be "unapproachable," especially to those people I do care about. I have spent most of my life finding a way to set up limits and boundaries, trying to place myself behind walls. I would come out of my shell for the people I love and go back to hiding with anyone else. Well, that habit plus living in prison has really taken a toll on my socializing and communication skills. The longer I go in here, the harder it gets to hit the switch between being loving, caring, engaged, and an overall sweetheart, and being distant, cold, logical, and, at times, even heartless. As you may understand I won't want to be "sweet" in prison to other inmates, but at least to the people I do care about I want to be known as a caring person.

**TTB:** On Josh's column about the R\*dskins, wow, I never thought once to consider what the name for a football team to me something that is just a name and means anything but to me could actually mean for anyone else or a whole people. I never knew words do hurt as well as sticks and stones. Keep your head up, Josh, and continue your march to free your people from labeling that's offensive and hurtful.







# FAMILY TIES

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

**Reading and writing short (and not-so short) stories strengthens the bond between an incarcerated man and his wife at home.**

*By Kelli*

Borden and Jennifer met twenty-seven years ago. While they never had a wedding ceremony, they have shared their lives together. When they met, Jennifer had two young children whom Borden raised as his own. When Borden was arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison, he felt that he had let his family down.

"I knew that I had been doing something wrong. I was responsible for doing it. And now my actions had come home to roost. Jennifer and our children stood by me throughout my incarceration, 100 percent," he says. He was especially grateful to Jennifer for the way she owned the situation along with him. "Her attitude was always, *We're going to get through this together.*"

He credits his wife for her strength. "She had to do everything from make ends meet alone, to not having a spouse to support her with whatever she had to deal with in life. And yet she was always there for me," he says.

Borden knew it would take hard work to preserve their close bond throughout his incarceration and he was determined to do it.

"We maintained our relationship through writing. We emailed each other sometimes two and three times a day. I wrote everything from little poems to stories, or we just wrote about what was on our minds. Writing really kept our connection strong," he says.

Among his "stories" was one that ran more than 150,000 words long! "Okay, I guess that one was more like a good-sized novel!" he laughs. "But I wanted to give her a present. And there's not a lot you can give to someone when you're locked up. So, I wrote her stories. Just fiction. And sent them to her. It was just something I could do. Jennifer is from a family of artists, so she really appreciated it because she knew that I was putting my heart into it."

In addition to the stories, Borden and Jennifer had their own private book club together.

"She would order me a book and then get the same book on the outside. Then we each read the book and emailed each other to share our thoughts about the book. That helped us stay close because it gave us something to grasp, together," he says.

# ASK HF ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

Dear HF,

I'm having a hard time feeling and expressing gratitude. I've been behind bars for nine years, away from family and friends, most of whom have forgotten about me and I don't feel that grateful. How do you go about being grateful even when your current circumstances are hard and painful?

Sincerely,  
MV

Dear MV,

I find myself in the midst of another full institutional lockdown during my twenty-first holiday season in prison. You would think that because I have an opportunity to come home soon that I would be grateful, but being locked down before my resentencing sometimes increases my anxiety to come home even more. It is at moments like this that I have to pipe down and count my blessings.

Like myself, I'm sure that you know many people that you grew up with who were killed before the age of eighteen. We can think of someone who is in the unit with us who has been locked up longer than us, and others who may never have a chance to go home. We know people who are dying from bad health, who has no support at all from the outside, and who would love to trade places with us. So, when I start to whine too much about being in prison in California far away from my loved ones in DC, who seem to have forgotten about me, I am reminded to be thankful for what I do have in my life and not to focus on what I do not have.

If nothing else, I am deeply grateful for Free Minds! A lot of guys that I've met in the feds wished that they had an organization of great people to send them books, newsletters, and postcards.

Though it is tough right now in this cage far away from home, fight to find the little BIG things to be grateful for like life, health, and a release date when so many are dead, dying, and doing life. When you find your reasons to be grateful, grasp onto them as if your life depends on it!

Sincerely,  
HF

The best books were ones that focused upon the human experience and emotions. Borden says their favorite was Wally Lamb's bestselling novel, *I Know This Much is True*, a moving story of family conflict and forgiveness.

"In the prison visiting room, you would often see people just sitting there looking at each other. They didn't have anything to talk about because their lives had grown apart. Writing for each other and sharing books helped me and Jennifer have something to share. And that allowed us to keep the connection. When you're a rock climber, they call it **belay** when you have a line running between

*continued on page 20*



# THE WRITE WAY:

*The column where writers share writing tips and prompts to inspire your creativity.*

## What are you passionate about?

*By Chelsea*

Hello! My name is Chelsea and I help facilitate the weekly Build Up sessions where returned members talk, read, write, talk some more, and reflect. I really look forward to sharing what we do in our sessions with all of you here, and to hearing from y'all through you sharing with us your writing. Poetry, and writing in general, is something I love. It's something I use to pause the reality and somewhere I can speak my thoughts into existence. Sometimes, when the world isn't working out the way you want it to, or when no one is hearing you, there's nothing better than getting it out on paper – form does not matter, just write it out.

For this Write Way, I want to make space for reflecting on passion and its role in entrepreneurship. **What kind of person do you envision when you think about entrepreneurs?**

For me, one of the first people that comes to mind is Steve Jobs: founder, creator, visionary, and entrepreneur of Apple. For those of you who might not know, Steve Jobs was someone who never really liked school but understood the value and need of education. However, when he got to college, he realized it just was not for him. He made the decision to leave college and pursue something he was interested in.

With passion, a plan, and a gut feeling, he invented the first Mac computer in his adopted parents' garage. Jobs says, "I decided to drop out and trust in the process," when he talks about his decision to drop out of college. From there, he went on to design the first Mac, create Apple, get fired from Apple, found Pixar animation studios, and then come back to Apple and become the CEO.

What kept Jobs going despite getting fired from the company he created? What allowed Jobs to follow his gut and become one of the world's greatest entrepreneurs? Jobs says that it was his passion and his love for what he did each day. He believes that if you do not love what you do, then it is not worth it.

He gives us hope that all of us have something within us that we love, and it's that passion we channel into our work.

**What do you love? What is your passion? Do you have more than one passion? How can YOU use your passion each and every day?**



Now, in reality, sometimes the work we do is not something we love or are passionate about, but helps us survive. You can always grow, develop, and refine what it is you love to do and determine the ways you can have a job, while also narrowing in on your passion.

The iPhone, created by Steve Jobs

As I close out, I leave you with the following activity to reflect on what you are passionate about and makes you feel happier and more fulfilled:

**Write a letter to your future entrepreneur self** that sets forth a vision for your life. In this letter to yourself, explain your core values, your guiding principles, your passion, and what makes you happy. Step one of being an entrepreneur is putting your plans and ideas down on paper and writing it into existence. So, go ahead and do just that.

**Then, write an action plan** that lists the steps that you must take to act on that passion and build your new life plan. At the same time, think about what might be holding back your entrepreneurial spirit and your ability to act on your plan. What are some steps you can take to overcome those barriers to your goals?

Once you build the plan for your new chapter of your life, then you can continue on the journey to find that passion and take action.

# QUOTE-I-VATOR

*"The greatest revolution of our generation is the discovery that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives."* – William James, American psychologist and philosopher (1842-1919)

*"A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him."* – David Brinkley, newscaster for NBC and ABC (1920-2003)

*"The key to realizing a dream is to focus not on success but on significance – and then even the small steps and little victories along your path will take on greater meaning."* – Oprah Winfrey, media proprietor, talk show host, actress, and philanthropist (1954-present)

*"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."* – Mike Tyson, boxer (1966-present)



Oprah Winfrey



# CONVERSATION WITH KELLI



Hey Free Minds Family,

It's holiday drinks time at Starbucks. I'm all about that Peppermint Mocha! Join me for a venti with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles ☺

I love the theme of this month's issue. Not because I'm a businesswoman (which I'm not), but because I love the idea of identifying a problem and then setting out to solve it, either by oneself, or by mobilizing others who feel the same way that you do about something.

That's how Free Minds began! Fifteen years ago, Tara and I were TV producers in journalism when I met the original Free Minds member Glen, who was on death row in Texas. We read books together and talked about them in our letters to each other. Tara and I realized that young people who are locked up could use more support, reading, and writing in their lives, so we started a book club at the DC Jail, which eventually grew into all that Free Minds is today.

If you can identify a real problem, and work hard to come up with a solution, then you have my favorite kind of entrepreneurial spirit! I'm thinking of people like FM friend Marcus, who created **Flikshop** to make it easier for people to share photos with their loved ones who were incarcerated.

Or Chicago native Sheldon Smith, whose father was behind bars and absent when he was a child. Sheldon went to prison himself for felony robbery at the age of seventeen and became a father just three years later. Frustrated by the cycle of fatherlessness in his community, Smith founded the **Dovetail Project**, working with African-American fathers ages 17 to 24 to build skills and offer the support they need to be better fathers and positively contribute to their communities.

Or look at twenty-six-year-old Robert Lee, the son of Korean immigrants who often skipped meals growing up in a poor household. Lee saw that restaurants were wasting a lot of food and yet people in the same cities were going hungry. His company, **Rescuing Leftover Cuisine** facilitates the donation of leftovers to local homeless shelters in six American cities.

And finally, you have no doubt heard about our very own FM member Will, who built his janitorial company **Clean Decisions** so that returning citizens in DC could gain real work skills and experience that allow them to succeed.

Marcus, Sheldon, Robert, and Will are all examples of a growing movement of **social entrepreneurs**. They have identified a problem in society and come up with a solution that will dramatically change individuals' lives for the better and drive social change at the same time. Now not every single one of us is going to come up with a product or program that does all this. But I do believe that each one of us can develop a social entrepreneurial mindset – We can look for and identify ways to use our imagination and our talents to make our little corner of the world a better place for ourselves and others. It might be something as simple as working together with the guys on the unit to design a system to efficiently access, share, and read one another's books through a rotating check-out program. I don't know! They say that entrepreneurship is driven by passion. So what are you passionate about? I am ready to hear your ideas! Until then, stay strong, keep reading and writing, and *ALWAYS...* keep your mind free!

Your friend,  
Kelli





# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## TMy Life Business Plan

By MJ

The problem is I got to stay on the streets  
I need to find a business plan  
But people don't want to see me shine  
I want to be a boss make money work for me  
But I got to stay focused and stay on my grind state  
I dream about being my own boss  
I will find a solution  
I will find a job by applying myself, closed mouths don't get fed  
I will make friends who want money, want success  
I will try things like find a circle of bosses  
I will find support from people that's bosses already  
I will find the solution  
I will overcome obstacles because the risk is worth the reward  
I will feel confident because to try is to fail, I will do  
I will be a better leader because people are lost  
I will feel peace because at the top is where I want to be!  
I will find a solution

## What We Should Know

By Terrell

We all must learn to move around the debaters and political dudes  
that always seem to have it figured out, and think they know what  
you're all about.  
We all have to learn to follow through with the things we really  
wanna do.  
We all must know there's a time and place for everything.  
We all must teach what's been taught and to apply what we learn.  
We all must make a better way for the ones behind us –  
and never let our current situation blind us.

## My Life Business Plan

By BF

The problem is I worry about what everyone thinks  
I need to focus more on my future  
But my criminal history is a setback  
I want to learn more about running businesses  
But I need money to attend a college for it  
I dream about one big happy family  
I will find a solution  
I will find a job by using all of the resources Free Minds gives me  
I will make friends who want to see me win in life!  
I will try things like visiting social clubs and new scenery  
I will find support from my family, my girlfriend, my heart!  
I will find the solution  
I will overcome obstacles because I believe in Allah!  
I will feel confident because I know I won't give up on matter what  
I will be a better son, brother, father because they all deserve it!  
I will feel peace because I'm Muslim and I'll be doing right by myself  
I will find a solution

## The E Spirit

By JKG

It's the same hustle,  
But  
New product...  
Learning street knowledge  
In the hard knock hallways of Hustlenomics University  
to  
A Master's degree in Howard University!  
It's the same hustle  
But new product...  
Making drug deals  
to  
Making executive decisions on contract deals...  
or  
Bust'en swerves while moving birds  
to  
Flip'en words in books, rhymes, or poems!  
It's the same hustle,  
But new product  
Moving fast money on the block  
to  
Making cash money day trading stocks...  
It's the same hustle  
But new product...  
Plott'en on who to brace (i.e. rob)  
to  
Plott'en promotional steps to excel on the job  
It's the same hustle  
But new product...  
Moving in a circle of thieves or "G's"  
to cold switching  
In an equal area of hardworking squares  
Unaware of the fact that  
360 degrees of success in those circles  
Brings  
A different success with longevity  
For a square measuring 4 equal sides of 90  
with this area totaling 360!  
It's the same hustle  
But new product  
Creating a new world of 720,  
The squared circle!  
Where police can't confiscate your property.  
or  
You can sustain a success.  
Without throwing rocks at penitentiaries...  
It's the same hustle – no luck!  
But what's your new product?

*continued on page 19*





# DC REENTRY CORNER

By Ms. Keela

What's up, guys? Another day, another opportunity to fulfill your purpose!

I am so excited to write to you guys about this month's theme ENTREPRENEURSHIP! When we think of being an entrepreneur, we, of course, think of being our own boss. Let me caution you though, because the first image that comes to mind is of us, laidback, in our huge offices in our recliners taking a nap, ordering food, or doing some leisurely reading, but man, before we get to that point, we gotta put that work in!

There is a lot of blood, sweat, and tears that go into birthing a successful business, but do not let that discourage you because it has been done time and time again by many returning citizens. As a matter of fact, according to Entrepreneurship.com, there are three reasons why returning citizens make good entrepreneurs:

1. **Fear of failure is less of an issue.** When polling returning citizens who started their own business, the one point that kept emerging was a lack of fear. Most returning citizens in the survey expressed a "what do I have to lose" outlook. After surviving prison and all that it entails, the fear of facing any new challenges has diminished significantly.
2. **Returning citizens are no strangers to risk** and starting a business is weighted with risk: financial risk, operational risk, compliance risk, and so on. Most returning citizens are no strangers to risk, often more willing to take more chances than others.
3. **The stakes are higher when looking to earn a living.** Returning citizens have fewer job options than those who don't have a criminal record, but instead of letting this fact be a discouragement, many returning citizens have used it as a motivating factor to launch successful businesses.

With all that being said, not everyone wants to be an entrepreneur, and that is totally fine. However, I just want to encourage you to never think that it is out of your reach. There are countless returning citizens that own their own businesses. I want to point out one business in particular, started by a guy named Cross Marte, which I love because of his bravery when picking a name. His business is called **ConBody**. ConBody is a prison-style exercise boot camp company that serves 400 clients a week! I am so impressed and blown away by this young man and hope that this is an inspiration to any of you dreaming of becoming an

entrepreneur, YOU CAN DO IT!!

There are also many failures that happen along the way. I am ALWAYS amazed when

thinking about Thomas Edison, the man who invented the light bulb. He was told by his teacher that he was not smart enough to learn anything and that he should go into a field that required little intelligence. Luckily, he didn't listen, but he did fail 9,000 times – yes, you read that right – 9,000 times – before he successfully invented the light bulb in the year 1879. Thankfully, this dude did not listen to all that negativity or else we would probably still be sitting in the dark! So just keep in mind that failure is almost expected, but it has also been the driving force behind so many successful business owners' determination to succeed.

Soooo, with all of that being said, I, of course, want to give you resources right here in DC that are returning-citizen friendly and can help you start your path to successful entrepreneurship!

**The Aspire to Entrepreneurship Program**  
**Center for Entrepreneurial Education & Development**  
**DC Department of Small & Local Business Development (DSLBD)**  
**441 4th Street NW, Washington, DC 20001**  
**(202) 727-3900**

DLSBD offers business development trainings, seminars, and all around support free of charge. Of particular interest to returning citizens is the Aspire to Entrepreneurship Pilot, which is a six-month business incubator program for up to twenty-five individuals with a conviction for a misdemeanor or felony as an adult. The Pilot is intended to operate for approximately one year, with a training phase and a business phase. The core Aspire to Entrepreneurship program partners directly with the Department of Employment Services' Project Empowerment program. Accepted applicants enter a six-month business incubator program while receiving a Project Empowerment stipend. I'll let Kate, who works at the Aspire program, tell you more about it on page 14.

*I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.*

*– Thomas A. Edison*



# THE REAL WORLD OF WORK

## Free Minds Member Starts Nonprofit Organization from Behind Bars

By Kelli

Despite doing well in school and going on to study biochemistry in college, Rich, a Free Minds member and Washington, DC, native, says he got caught up in trouble more than once. He was eventually arrested, convicted, and sentenced to more than twenty years on drug charges. While the idea of spending two decades behind bars could have broken him, Rich chose instead to see the sentence as an opportunity.

"I received a huge sentence. But I thought, if I'm going to do this time, I'm going to do it on my own terms." For Rich, and a couple of other like-minded men he met in prison, that meant using their time in prison to create and build something meaningful that would help others. Together, they co-founded a nonprofit organization, called **RZero** (for "Recidivism Zero"). I caught up with Rich by phone to talk about the organization's work.

**They say that every nonprofit organization needs to have an "elevator pitch," meaning, if you had only the average amount of time spent with another person on an elevator (20-30 seconds) to describe what you do, what would you say?**

RZero is a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to reducing recidivism by helping people who want to help themselves. We create the opportunities and the tools to enable people to get the things they need done, so when they come home they can live the crime-free productive life they have dreamed about. We don't do the work for them. We create the opportunity for them to do it, and help them through the process.

**How did you decide to start RZero?**

At first, it was really a way to do our time. We were already helping people as instructors for the prison's GED program. We also helped people with legal work and gave them advice on all sorts of things. We realized that in prison, we're all dealing with the same issues. So we thought, why don't we formalize this and make it more substantial? But there was one experience that really motivated us.

We had helped an inmate prepare a legal motion to gain release from prison seven years early. But on the day of his release, he lost his bus ticket. Frantic to get to the halfway house on time, and with nobody to help him get a new bus ticket, he ended up committing another robbery! He came right back with a new seven-year sentence. We did all this work and in the end, it produced absolutely nothing. We were knocking our heads against the wall, but we weren't mad at him. He simply didn't have the tools he needed. We can help people all we want, but unless we help them change their mindset, and give them the necessary tools to succeed, even getting them out of jail early doesn't help. And it didn't help the victim of the new robbery either! We had to rethink everything. We went back to the drawing board and developed RZero.

**Where do you even start with a project that big?**

With a lot of research! We surveyed more than 10 percent of the prison population about the issues they have, and what they think they need to succeed in reentry. Then we developed a practical workshop series at the prison to address the most

common needs. If we re-engage the incarcerated population to think about what they need to do to better themselves, it realigns their psychology on a more successful trajectory. That's the first step. But they need the necessary tools to do it. That's the next step, and the one we're launching now.

**What are the necessary tools?**

Our research showed inmates don't have access to comprehensive, current and accurate reentry resources. We spent more than three years creating the RZero Reentry Resource Information Search Service, an online database of reentry resources with continuously updated contact information for key businesses, agencies and organizations that help returning citizens across the country.

**How does it work?**

Anyone can access the database using TRULINCS. If they add [info@RZero.org](mailto:info@RZero.org) to their address book, they will receive an email with detailed search instructions. If they don't have access to email, they can ask a family member, a friend, or even a counselor at their facility to submit the request on their behalf. Requests via email usually get replies within twenty-four hours.

**Can you give me an example of the type of information someone might request?**

So, let's say someone with culinary skills is being released to live in a suburb of Detroit. They might want to get names and addresses of restaurants in that town so that they can plan their job search or even send out resumes before they're released. Or maybe the same person wants to get their CDL [commercial driver's license], but doesn't know the requirements for the state of Michigan. Our Search Service will give him a list of DMVs so he can contact them about CDL requirements.

*Now I get high from solving problems. When I see a complex problem and I solve it and then I see I'm actually helping other people? You can't put that in a pill!*

*continued on next page*





# OWNER AND OPERATOR

## Interview with FM Member Pedro

By Tara

FM member Pedro is what they call an **O&O** in the trucking business: Owner and Operator. I caught up with Pedro on a brief stop at his home base of DC before he headed out for his road trip.

### Did you always dream of running your own business as a kid?

No. When I was in elementary and middle school, I always wanted to be an astronaut. Science was my favorite subject, and I was fascinated by outer space and always wanted to travel there. I guess you could say the urge to travel has always been there though.

But in high school, I just ended up playing video games, smoking weed, and not going to school. School had always pretty easy for me, so I think I got bored. I was absent for 130 days straight once. I've always been drawn to people older than my age and when I was in high school, I had older friends who had cars, drugs, and beautiful women hanging around, so that's where I wanted to be (when I was in the ninth grade, my girlfriend was in college!).

At fifteen, I started hustling and selling weed to buy those things on my own. I wanted to be Mr. Fly Guy. I wanted to be "the man" who had the money and cars. But dealing drugs was unsustainable for the long term. I wanted to be a good role model for my daughter and earn a living the legal way.

I've also always really liked architecture, design, and computers so one day I'm thinking I'll go back to school once I get my business where I want it to be. For right now, I need to save some money which is why I got into commercial truck driving.

### What other jobs have you had?

Since I was twelve or thirteen, I've always really had a job. At fourteen, I was a construction helper making ten dollars an hour. I've worked at Popeye's, in janitorial services, in a gift shop – I learned barbering in prison, so I've done that too. I was always hustling to make more money.

### What got you into the trucking business?

It was my girlfriend at the time who challenged me to be more than someone who just goes in and out of jail. I also wanted to be better for my daughter. At the time, I was working two jobs and barely making \$600 a week. It just wasn't enough to survive especially because I want the finer things in life. So I looked

around to see what was going to make me the most amount of money in the shortest amount of time and I thought it was either FedEx or UPS until I saw that truck drivers could make \$1000 a week and that hooked me. It sounded like freedom to me, and I wanted freedom, that's for sure.

In only six months, I could have a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) so I said, *where can I sign up?* Miss Keela and Free Minds helped me fill out the application. My advice to anyone getting back is to get your goddamn driver's license if you don't have one. Simply by having a driver's license, you can always get a job. Now DC has a program where you can pay off money owed on tickets in installments. Do it!

I took the training, passed the test, and got my Class A license. At first, I drove a **freightliner truck**, an eighteen-wheeler tractor for a company out of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and saw the country! There's so much out there. Beautiful landscapes, beautiful women, and really interesting diverse people from all over the world. Don't get me wrong, it was stressful, too. One time, I got caught in a blizzard and was stranded. I ended up having an accident in Chicago and was let go, but I bounced back and worked for another company. Then, I got shot during a robbery when I was back home resting off the road. But I didn't let that stop me.

Luckily, I had savings for when I was recovering and couldn't work. Then, a friend schooled me and I got hip to the game of being an O&O, owner and operator. I built my credit, got loans, and bought my own cargo van. I can carry loads up to 4000 pounds. I'm a sub-contractor that companies call to help with their workload until the big eighteen-wheelers can get to them.

### What about it do you like so much?

I like being my own boss. I have my own authority. I work really hard. but I can decide to take days off to be with my daughter. That's really important to me. I've been to all forty-eight states and I've seen so much.

### What qualities are needed for this line of work?

Ambition and hunger. You also have to do your due diligence. You have to not always complain but be willing to listen to people sometimes. Be proactive. I have friends from all over the world because I ask questions and I'm a people person. Most of all, constantly hustle for that money!

## THE REAL WORLD OF WORK CONTINUED

If you expect a person to succeed in reentry, they need to be able to reach out to the organizations, agencies, and programs that can help them with their needs, and the sooner they can contact them, the more likely success will happen. That's what this tool does.

### How does it feel to be helping people?

I feel high from doing this [*laughs*]. I've substituted the great feeling I get from helping others for my previous drug use. I've been sober for years and I don't have any desire to use drugs ever again. Now I get high from solving problems. When I see a complex problem and I solve it and then I see I'm actually helping other people? You can't put that in a pill!

Free Minds is so proud of Rich and his team at RZero for working to cut recidivism. Rich was released this year. He spends thirty hours a week on the project. His partners remain incarcerated but are as dedicated to the cause as ever. Rich doesn't earn any money from RZero. The technology he developed for the search service has unlimited applications though, and this has led to a growing list of clients for his newly launched computer software business. Rich's advice to anyone interested in starting a nonprofit? "Don't do it for the money. It's called a nonprofit for a reason! The most important thing is research, research, and more research. Before you start a nonprofit, you should do the work as an informal organization to test the waters. You have to have a really solid idea of what you want to do, and how it will serve the community."

But, Rich says, "If you really wish for something, figure out how you can bring it into existence."



# ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT IN ACTION

## Interview with Marcus, FM Reentry Facilitator

By Sally

When Marcus was fifteen, he was tried as an adult and served eight years in maximum-security prisons. After his release in 2004, Marcus chased his dreams, becoming the CEO of **Perspectives Premier Contractors**, launching the tech company **Flikshop** – an app that helps families and friends send personalized postcards to incarcerated people (you’ve probably received them from us before!) – and using his experiences and entrepreneurial skills to help others.

I chatted with Marcus to hear more about how he forged his own path to success.

### What does entrepreneurial spirit mean to you?

Entrepreneurial spirit to me is waking up in the morning and telling myself I am going to be successful. I knew when I was younger that I wanted to be where I am now—a successful business owner and CEO. I couldn’t imagine what exactly I would be doing, but I knew there would be something. And now I have a job I love where I get to do what I want to do every day. I get to drive my own destiny. There’s no one to tell me what it takes to be successful – I get to define that.

### In addition to owning Perspectives Premier Contractors and running Flikshop, you founded the Flikshop School of Business which uses entrepreneurship as a form of mentorship. Can you explain what the “life business plan” is?

The life business plan focuses on four major components which I believe—when mastered—will have you well on your way to becoming a great business leader and thinker. You must address that a problem exists, discover a solution to the problem, understand what benefits come with the solution you have created, and prepare your elevator pitch – a thirty-second statement that can outline the other three components.

### How can someone who is not interested in starting their own business use the life business plan?

I think if you take the four components of the life business plan and apply them to any opposition you face in life, you will probably be successful in the outcome. If you recognize and

compartmentalize the issue that you face, if you get down to the nuts and bolts of whatever the problem is, it will allow you to identify a solution that you need to build for that problem. Then, you will be able to assess your potential solutions and weigh out what benefits will potentially be as you plan your next move. You will be better positioned to articulate whatever it is that’s going to get you to the finish line. We want to get you to the finish line, and this is the surefire way to get you there.

### What are some traits that a successful entrepreneur possesses?

A successful entrepreneur tells themselves over and over again that the capacity for giving up is zero. This is different from perseverance, which is when a person tells themselves that they are going to keep fighting. Perseverance allows the idea that you could lose your battle. If you tell yourself that there is no other option, that you have to just keep going Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, in five years from now you will continue to succeed because you have been doing it Monday through Friday for all that time.

A successful entrepreneur does not quit. The reality of this is very, very hard. You have to tell yourself that incremental failures are the building blocks to the sweet success at the end.

And, a successful entrepreneur recognizes their self-worth. This is something that I’ve learned recently. In the business world, it can be hard to accept the success that we have dreamt about. The quicker that we assure ourselves “I belong here, I deserve to be here, this space would not thrive without me being here,” the quicker you will realize your goals, and the quicker you will see yourself on the other side of success.





# WHERE THE WORKERS OWN THE BUSINESS TOGETHER

## Interview with FM Friend Juan

By Jessica

I chatted with my friend Juan who I met last year on a bus from New York to DC because I was reading Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and eventually we struck up a conversation. He started a labor co-op for returning citizens. What the heck is that? Read my chat with him to find out ☺

### Hey Juan, tell me about yourself.

I was born and bred in the LeDroit Park area of DC – the typical ghetto story. Moms and steppops on it like a hornet. I never knew my real dad. The streets raised me, but the prison system molded me.

I started getting arrested at ten years old. By the time I was eighteen, I was on the run for an attempted murder. I was a misguided young king, facing thirty-five to life in prison for defending myself from a strong-arm robbery.

In total, I served fourteen years with seven of those years in solitary confinement. I did thirteen straight, came home to no support, and violated parole in six months. I chose to do one more year instead of getting back on supervised release. I did that one year standing on my head – reality smacked me in the face.

When I came back, I started **Tightshift Laboring Cooperative** with a 5,000-dollar grant from an organization called Diverse City Fund.

### What is Tightshift Laboring Cooperative?

Tightshift Laboring Cooperative is more than just your typical business.

We're a community of disenfranchised people united in our struggle to take control over and reap the benefits of our own labor. I was basically forced to start Tightshift because of the unfair economic system here in America. I personally believe people with my background have no true opportunities to enrich the lives of their families and community.

### What is a cooperative?

A cooperative is a business model where the workers/customers own the business. It's democratically operated and the profits are shared amongst the member owners.

### How does that work exactly? Members invest some amount into the business and whatever money is brought in is split equally?

Yes. For example, we charge ninety-nine dollars for a three-man crew moving job that doesn't require a truck. We pay seventeen dollars per hour to the three guys and the rest goes into the costs of running and investing in the co-op. Whatever's left over is split equally amongst the members.

### What kinds of services does Tightshift provide?

Moving, hauling, fencing, residential and commercial cleaning, landscaping, car detailing, catering, green infrastructure (making buildings eco-friendly), and all kinds of other services (from assembling furniture to packing boxes). The sky's the limit.

### How many people own the business right now?

There are two members right now and a total of seventeen member apprentices training up. You have to accrue 1,000 hours before you can become a member.

### You're giving me all these details - aren't you afraid people are going to copy your idea?

No – we want that. We invest part of the money we make into a fund to help returning citizens start co-ops.



### How'd you come up with the idea?

When I got out, no one was giving me a job. I worked in a kitchen for a month and although that was the first time the kitchen received an A on its inspection, my coworkers were threatened by my presence and I was asked to leave.

I've been in survival mode and hustling all my life so I started getting creative. I'd go around my neighborhood doing whatever errands – buying and reselling, auctioning and raffling things, grilling hot dogs and burgers to sell, anything I could do to make money.

I did what I needed to do and got callbacks for work from people in my neighborhood. I started getting so much work I could pass it on to other people. Then I learned about co-ops, which sounded like an equitable and liberating way of doing things.

### How'd you come up with the name?

When people hit me up, I'd say, "I run that tight shift," and it was true.

### How'd you get from that mindset to the entrepreneurial and positive mindset you have today?

Some of it is a front. I have to work on it every day. Prior to my incarceration, I was sick with anger, guilt, shame, sexual trauma, violent trauma, you name it. And it was just cultivated in prison. Prison was like stepping into a time-traveling machine to the pre-Lincoln era – same construct of slavery, different tools: the degradation, inhumane living conditions, borderline food, poor healthcare, sexual and psychological abuse, and the forced labor.

We have to deal with the fact that oppression is reality and we created that reality. Freedom requires us to unlearn a lot of things we got used to. While in solitary, I really got thinking about what freedom means to me. And when I got out, I realized support and unconditional love were the most transformative things for me.

### Have you faced challenges/setbacks and how do you get past them?

Yes, definitely. One happened recently. The church in my neighborhood doesn't want to give us a contract, even though we initially had a good conversation about how our co-op gets people off the streets and does good work.

But if you're motivated by love, it's worth it and your motivation won't die. That keeps me going.

### Do you have advice for aspiring entrepreneurs?

We need to see it in ourselves. We have a tendency to self-sabotage. I know I am my own worst enemy, but we have to believe in ourselves. The game wasn't made for people like us – so we need to make our own game!



# WE ASPIRE

## DC government program helps returning citizens start businesses

By Kate

*Kate is a program manager at the DC Department of Small & Local Business Development.*

You can start and run your own successful business. You can. Anyone can. Everyone can. I don't care who you are – you have it in you if you want it.

It is hard. Sometimes it is harder than hard. But entrepreneurship at its core is solving a problem – any real or sometimes a collectively imagined problem – with a positive revenue model. It has to be or become **revenue positive** (which means make more money than it costs to operate the organization) for your sake. It can take years to build a business. The phrase blood, sweat, and tears is on point to the experience. So why do people do it?

It's about claiming, making, and owning your destiny. It's a tangible way of *telling your story*. Small business owners live and write the story of their lives every day. The future is yours to define.

I work for the city government of DC. I do not yet own my own business. My job is to support those who do or aspire to. Two years ago, we started the **Aspire to Entrepreneurship** program specifically to support DC returning citizens into business ownership.

The competitive program is run in partnership between the **DC Department of Small & Local Business Development (DSLBD)** and the **Department of Employment Services Project Empowerment**. Through that, participants get intensive business coaching, **wraparound support** (which means help with other things in life that are related to starting a business), and a stipend for the first six months of business development.

We recognize that too often returning citizens face more structural barriers to entrepreneurship than most other groups, and thus specific supports and a supportive environment are needed.

But it can be done. Many of those who have successfully gone through the program have overcome significant challenges from their past and in their present. They have overcome their own past, abuse, homelessness, substance abuse, personal or family illness, trauma, and more. Some are still working every day to overcome barriers in their personal lives, but they use the power of entrepreneurial goal-setting and the community around Aspire to develop their personal support and fight every day.

It is hard, but it can work. I don't have space to list all of the great stories of the nearly twenty businesses that DC returning citizens

have opened through the Aspire program, and I certainly do not have space to list the many others who are part of our broader stakeholder community that meets regularly to support returning citizen entrepreneurship. Each deserves their own profile to highlight both their struggles and ultimate successes.

But we could not be prouder of the transportation companies, caterers, CPR instructors, bookkeepers, hair dressers, cleaning companies, t-shirt makers, city janitorial contractors, landscaping businesses, security, event, social media, financial literacy, and marketing companies that have built their futures from the ground up. And these are just their first businesses.

For those who walk this path, there are a few keys to success. They do their research on business and every issue surrounding the type of business they want to have. They get savvy and careful with their money. Funding for a business is hard and many people **bootstrap** – they work at the same time as launching their businesses to be able to afford it. And they network constantly, meeting all sorts of other people who are running businesses to learn, trade, and share ideas and resources.

Businesses come in all kinds, shapes, and sizes – there is as much diversity in business as there is in humanity. Many people starting a business for the first time are seeking a lot of support, and there is support available through programs like Aspire, free trainings, or otherwise. But the biggest source of strength that entrepreneurs tap is their own deep well of personal strength, strength everyone has and can find through determination. Such strength is necessary, because it is a roller coaster ride with highs and lows, so there is also a love of the game.

We look forward to having our friends, family, and neighbors return to us in DC. When you do, if you are interested, come learn more about the Aspire to Entrepreneurship program. It is a competitive process to enter, but so is business. And even if Aspire is not for you, both Project Empowerment and DSLBD are here to help if you and your family if you are interested in work, business, or both.

---

**The Aspire to Entrepreneurship Program**  
**Center for Entrepreneurial Education & Development**  
**DC Department of Small & Local Business Development (DSLBD)**  
**441 4th Street NW**  
**Washington, DC 20001**  
**(202) 727-3900**



# PAYING IT FORWARD

## Giving Women a Second Chance Through Baking

By Bea

My partner and I stumbled upon a bag of granola branded Together We Bake at a wine and cheese shop in Shirlington, Virginia, several years ago. I tried a sample of this deliciously nutty granola and was immediately hooked, but the real draw came when I turned the bag over in my hand and read what was written on the back of the package: "Combine equal parts of job training and personal development for women in need of a second chance."

Not only was this product truly delicious, but it also had a social purpose. Founded in 2012, Together We Bake's mission is to provide a comprehensive workforce training and personal development program to help previously incarcerated women or those who have experienced homelessness, gain self-confidence, workforce skills, and hands-on experience that will allow them to find employment and move toward self-sufficiency.

Together We Bake was conceived by two mothers in Virginia with a shared desire to make a difference in their own communities and help women whose lives had taken a tragic turn and needed a hand.

The program is centered around a small baking business through which women actively learn and participate in food production, food safety education, and business administration. It also offers empowerment and life skills classes to help women develop self-confidence, healthy coping

strategies, and a strong support network as they move toward self-sufficiency. Topics include stress and anger management, triggers and reframing, healing from trauma, positive coping skills, communication skills, healthy relationships, and building a support network.

One of the books that participants are encouraged to read is *Houses of Healing* by Robin Casarjian, which presents an emotional literacy curriculum focused on prisoner healing and rehabilitation. It deals directly with the root causes of crime, violence, and addiction and offers a practical approach to emotional growth that speaks specifically to the challenges facing incarcerated men and women.

More than 120 women have gone through the Together We Bake program over the past five years, and more than 80 percent of program participants complete the two months training program and receive their food safety certification. Together We Bake program alumnae have a 70 percent employment rate and most importantly, very few women end up going back to prison, which is a major indicator they are on their way to successful recovery.



## DC PHOTOS OF THE MONTH

*DC is changing. Do you remember these spots? What do you think?*



In December, they opened this skating rink.  
Photo credit: District Wharf (WharfDC.com)



Do you remember the Shrimp Boat restaurant on Benning Road? It's now a donut/coffee shop, but it kept the Shrimp Boat Plaza name for its historical value as a landmark in the community. Photo credit: @ShrimpBoatPlaza, Twitter.

**Answer to last issue's Guess the Location:** The mural on U Street depicts musician Marvin Gaye.

Have a request for next issue's DC Photos of the Month? Write us at 2201 P St NW, Washington, DC 20037 and let us know what you'd like to see!



# IN THE NEWS

By John, Free Minds Friend

## WORLD

In February, many of the world's top athletes will converge upon South Korea to compete in the XXIII (Twenty-Third) Olympic Winter Games, a month-long event including hockey, skiing, figure skating, and curling.



## PyeongChang 2018



The XXIII Olympic Winter Games will take place in PyeongChang, South Korea

The games will take place just 200 miles away from Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, a nation that rapidly approaches the capability to successfully fire a nuclear weapon at the United States. Some experts believe the North Koreans are already capable of doing so.

The nation's leader, Kim Jong Un, continues to antagonize President Trump and other world leaders by testing ballistic missiles, firing them into space and landing them in the sea just off the coast of Japan. It seems inevitable that either the United States will be forced to choose either accepting North Korea as a new member of the nuclear club, or engaging them in military action.

## NATIONAL

**Russia Investigation:** FBI Special Counsel Robert Mueller continues his investigation into the potential involvement of Donald Trump's campaign in Russia's attempts to influence the 2016 presidential election. A major development in the case occurred in early December when Michael Flynn, former national security advisor, pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI and agreed to participate in the investigation.

**Tax Reform:** The House of Representatives and the Senate, both of which are run by the Republican party at the moment, have passed bills that would dramatically change the way both businesses and individuals are taxed in this country. The idea is to lower the corporate tax rate to incentivize more investment and job creation in America, which is a possible but far from certain outcome.

On December 12, 2017, a special election was held to elect a new Senator from the state of Alabama. Prior to the election, Republican candidate Roy Moore was accused of having sexual relationships with very young women, including a fourteen-year-old, when he was in his thirties, causing some Republicans to publicly disapprove of his campaign. On December 12, Democrat Doug Jones narrowly beat Roy Moore for the seat, becoming the first Democratic senator from Alabama in twenty-five years. Doug Jones is best known for prosecuting members of the KKK who bombed a church in 1963 (FM members read about this in the book *March*).

*TIME Magazine* named "The Silence Breakers" as People of the Year, recognizing individuals who have spoken out against sexual harassment and assault in politics and the entertainment industry. The increased attention to this issue has led to some prominent politicians (such as Senator Al Franken and Congressman John Conyers) resigning.

## ENTERTAINMENT

The Grammy Nominations were announced in late November, and it's a big year for rap and R&B. Among the leaders in overall nominations: Jay-Z (eight), Kendrick Lamar (seven), and Bruno Mars (six).

Three of the five albums nominated for Album of the Year are hip-hop artists: Jay-Z and Kendrick, along with Childish Gambino. New R&B sensation Khalid is up for Best New Artist and Best R&B song for "Location."



Bruno Mars

## SPORTS

It's another year of disappointment for the Washington Redskins. The team's 30-13 loss to the Los Angeles Chargers in Week 14 cemented their elimination from playoff contention. The Burgundy and Gold will now play three meaningless games as management decides what to do going forward.

There will be two obvious questions on their mind as they head to next season. The first one is going to be whether or not to retain the services of head coach Jay Gruden, who has made the playoffs just once in his tenure here.

The second question is whether or not to hold on to Kirk Cousins, the team's starting quarterback for the past three seasons. Cousins is likely a Top Ten QB in the league right now, with quality players in short supply at that position. But because they have prevented other teams from offering him contracts for the past two years, using what's called the "Franchise Tag," Washington will owe Cousins more than \$30 million next season if they want to keep him.

Nobody is worth that much unless you are sure you have a chance at a Super Bowl.

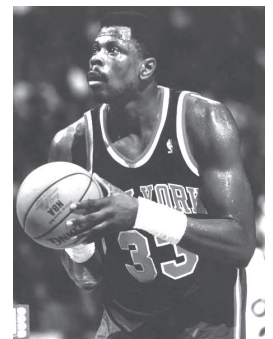
Meanwhile, the usual suspects are emerging as contenders in the AFC for this season: The New England Patriots, the Pittsburgh Steelers, and the Baltimore Ravens. And in a strange turn of fortune, the Chargers started out 0-4 and have won seven of their last nine games.

On the NFC side of the coin, the strongest teams heading into the final weeks have been the Philadelphia Eagles, LA Rams, Minnesota Vikings, the New Orleans Saints, and Carolina Panthers. The Eagles were the clear frontrunner until some devastating luck: their star young quarterback, Carson Wentz, is out for the year after tearing his ACL.

On the hardwood, the Washington Wizards are off to a shaky start to the NBA season, and are currently without the services of their star point guard John Wall. The team has been led thus far by Bradley Beal, who is averaging twenty-four points per game.

In college, the great Patrick Ewing has returned to his alma mater Georgetown as head basketball coach. Ewing's squad was off to an 8-0 start heading into its first big test against the Syracuse Orange.

*Reader poll: Should we write R\*skins like our friend Josh did in the September/October issue?*



Patrick Ewing



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



# AROUND THE WORLD

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

## Mexico City

*By Julia*

Some of you may know that I've been writing a novel in my free time. Two of the main characters in the novel are from Mexico City (the capital of Mexico). In October, I flew to Mexico City to see it for myself. I was a little nervous, but I've traveled alone before, so I knew a lot of tips to stay safe. Plus I speak Spanish – it's important to be able to ask for help when you need it (and to understand the answer!).

Mexico City is immense. I saw only a fraction of the whole city, but what I did see was dense and vibrant, full of history, art, and nature at nearly every turn.

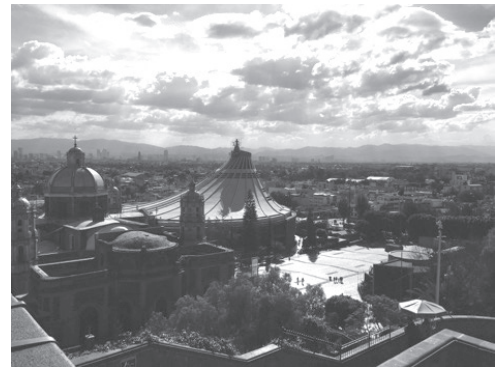
Mexico City has a population of nine million people (for comparison, DC has a population of around 600,000). Mexico City was originally called Tenochtitlan when it was founded in the 1300s by the **indigenous** (native) people, the *Mexica* (pronounced like meshica). The ancient city, Tenochtitlan, was built on a small island in the middle of a lake. The indigenous people created a system of canals and man-made islands to grow crops. A small piece of this system is still in existence today, in a neighborhood called Xochimilco (the X is pronounced like a Z), where tourists like me can take a ride in a brightly painted boat through the canals, looking at the different islands where they grow flowers and other crops. Everything is done on these small, colorful boats – including the cooking! A "restaurant" boat rowed up next to ours and made tacos for us.

The Spanish conquered the city in the 1500s after a long, bloody struggle; they destroyed most of the indigenous peoples' city, and began rebuilding it in the European style. As the city grew, they began to drain the lake and fill it in so that they could continue building the city. That's part of the reason that the city was heavily affected by the earthquake that hit in October – because a lot of it is built on unstable ground.

Anyway, there's a LOT more that I could say about Mexican history... if you want to learn more, let us know and we'll see if we can find a good book about it!

Before I go, I want to share a couple other things that I loved about Mexico City:

1. There were bookstores everywhere. On my last day in the city, I went into the subway and found myself in a subway tunnel filled with about half a mile of bookstores. Imagine if the Gallery Place metro was all bookstores...
2. The city was so artistic. There were paintings, murals, and fabulous graffiti on nearly every surface.
3. On a whim, on my last day in the city, I walked to a nearby art gallery, and after perusing the art for a while, I went outside and noticed a little garden. There was a sign that said "*Espacio Poético*" (poetic space). I didn't have a pen and paper with me, but I sat in the garden for a little while just relaxing and enjoying the poetic environment. For all the anxieties about traveling alone, this, to me, is the best reason to do it – the freedom to wander and encounter these unexpected joys.



A view of the city from a hill



Some of the decorated boats (called *trajineras*) that people use to row through the canals in Xochimilco



The little garden "*Espacio Poético*" where I rested for a while



# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

## The Free Minds long-distance book club

by Julia

Hey Free Minds readers! By now you all should have received your copy of *Hidden Figures* by Margot Shetterly (let us know if you haven't!). Maybe you've seen the movie, but I think you'll find that the book is pretty different! *Hidden Figures* is a nonfiction book about the African American women who played a crucial role in the American space program at a time when Virginia was still segregated.



### Here's what you all had to say about the book:

**EH:** I cannot believe that when I was growing up in school they never talked about any of the stuff that's going on in the book, not the NASA program or the women involved. I think the women involved should have plaques at NASA with their names on them for all the sacrifices they went through. And I was born and raised in the southwest so I had no idea about segregation or any of it. The book was great. But one lesson I think it teaches in the memory of the women is if you put your mind to it you can achieve all your goals in life and don't take no for an answer and don't stop till you get what you want.

**QS:** It was an amazing and eye-opening book. It's so sad to now know that these remarkably gifted black women were at the forefront of the American space race, but were pushed to the back and are just now receiving the recognition they so truly deserve. I guess better late than never, right! I often wonder when the evil stain of racial discrimination will ever be removed from this great experiment which we call American democracy. We still have such a long way to go. But if we continue to open our hearts, minds, and mouths we will eventually bridge the divide that will lead us to racial unity.

**AB:** I really liked *Hidden Figures*. It was well felt, feel me? I love how the mind can be such a power tool when used in a positive way. Those women define "Ambition." Loved it.

Here are your responses to the discussion questions we sent:

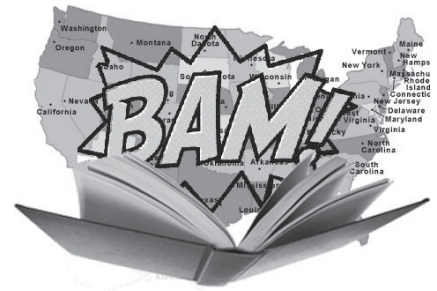
### What does the opportunity to work at Langley mean to Dorothy Vaughan and the other women? Have you ever had an opportunity or a goal that mattered this much to you?

**DJ:** The opportunity to work at Langley for Dorothy and the other women meant that they were at the top. It meant that they were in a position to not only change their lives, but pave the way for a new start on a new planet... Yes, I personally have had an opportunity and goal similar to the Langley women which mattered abundantly to me. My situation related to me having the opportunity and goal of proving to my peers and the community that I have grown into a responsible man who is ready to be a leader. Also, to show my self-worth through my actions and character in order to be a prime example of how reflection of self and dedication

to change is necessary and vital.

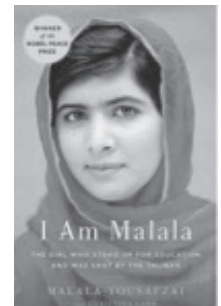
### Were the women who worked at Langley held to higher standards? Have you ever felt like this?

**DJ:** Yes, the women who became "girl computers" are held to higher standards... This role which the Langley women played solidified that we all as human beings play a relevant role in the world and must function appropriately off of this notion as if it was part of a daily creed. I feel the pressure of being held to a higher standard each day because I am convicted of a crime and it just feels like people are looking for that one mistake to justify further incarceration. But I reject failure and defeat by following the rules and not giving in to iniquity and temptation.



### The Next BAM Book (Winter 2018): *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai

Starting in 2018, we'll be reading *I Am Malala*, the **memoir** by Malala Yousafzai, the teenage girl who was shot in the head by the Taliban because she stood up for her right to an education (pronounced "mem-wahr," a memoir is a true story about the author's lived experiences). In 2014, Malala won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work for girl's and women's rights to an education. She is the youngest person to ever win a Nobel Prize. While you read her memoir, consider these questions (and send in your thoughts!):



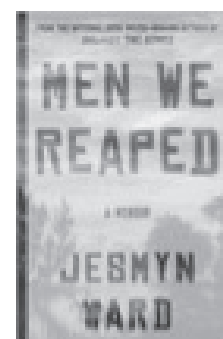
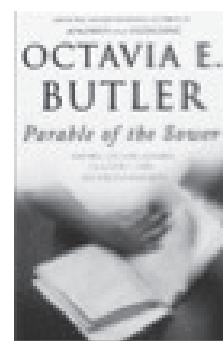
1. When Malala was fifteen years old, she was shot in the head and she almost died. How did this experience change her? Is it possible to live through something like that without being affected by it?
2. Malala wrote this book as a teenager, but she has already lived through extreme situations. Does she seem like a teenager to you? Did you or anyone you know "grow up too fast" as some people would say about Malala?
3. Malala argues that education is a human right—that everyone should have access to a quality education. What does education mean to you? What happens when people don't have access to a good education?
4. In a speech to the United Nations, Malala said, "Let us pick up our books and our pens. They are the most powerful weapons." What does this statement mean to you?



# WHAT WE'RE READING

Are you reading something you have really strong feelings about and want to share your thoughts with other Free Minds members? Send us your impressions (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next "What We're Reading."

- **TT:** *Small Great Things* by Jodi Picoult. This is the story of Ruth, a well-educated African American neonatal nurse who gets charged with a criminal offense when a newborn baby, the child of a white supremacist, dies on her watch. This book is a must-read by a contemporary white female novelist who confronts some of the most challenging social problems plaguing American society.
- **Julia:** *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* by Octavia Butler. I just finished this two-book series about a possible future for America in which climate change, a collapsing economy, and racism have devastated the country. Lauren, the protagonist, is a "sharer," someone who, due to her mother's drug abuse, was born with an ability to feel other people's pain as though it were her own. Lauren learns to survive, and eventually thrive, in this dangerous society.
- **Chelsea:** *Abstract Heart* by J. Iron Word. *Abstract Heart* is a collection of poems, saying, and various other tidbits that's put together like an abstract painting. It's about love, loss, relationships, hope, dreams, and so much more. It's really fantastic!
- **Kelli:** *Men We Reaped* by Jesmyn Ward. I just started reading *Men We Reaped*, which, so far, recounts the young African-American men in Ward's life who have lost their lives to drugs and guns. What I can say after reading just two chapters is that Jesmyn Ward is a crazy beautiful writer! I've already been rereading lines and even whole paragraphs two and three times just to take them in!
- **Tara:** *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* by Richard Rothstein. I LOVE this book. It's about how policy decisions over time have constructed and enforced racial and economic segregation in American cities. It is well-researched and very informative.



# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

continued from page 8

**"The Game"**  
**MARCO! POLO!**  
**By AC**

Life is more like a group thing,  
it isn't really a solo.  
I wish I would have known  
instead of finding out on my own  
that everything is better in company  
than going at it alone.

Marco! Polo!  
Always looking for something out there.  
Missing the small simple things,  
or how perfect they were  
and how they meant everything

Marco! Polo!...  
Just open your eyes,  
Wake up to the lights  
of all that surrounds you.

Take off from your face  
the veil that blinds you.  
Appreciate what you have.  
It may not all be good,  
but it's not totally bad.  
And try to remember:  
Keep your eyes on the ball,  
and that we tend to forget  
that the higher we get,  
the harder we fall.

I'm learning all this  
as I'm getting old.  
Whatever you do,  
Hold on tight to your soul.  
Marco! Polo!  
I found you.

Inspired by writing prompt from "The Write Way,"  
Connect, September/October 2017 issue (theme: Labels)



## FAMILY TIES CONTINUED

*continued from page 5*

the person who's at the top and the one who is climbing, connecting you to each other. Books gave me and Jennifer a kind of belay or line between us that we both could hold on to. We read a lot of emotional books. It allows you to share something real, and that really strengthened our relationship!"

Even so, as his release date approached last March, Borden felt nervous about reuniting with Jennifer.

"It had been a long time," he says. "But it's funny because it took us all of a minute and a half 'til we were back to just being us. It was a relief. Of course, there's that elephant in the room, but we just talked about it. And of course, we'd both changed, but we just talked about who we were now."

Borden and Jennifer learned a lot about each other and themselves during his incarceration. In his opinion though, their relationship is stronger than it has ever been. He hopes that others might benefit from their experience.

His advice: "Reading and writing together is just really powerful. The other key is honesty. Be upfront about your struggles while you're inside. Not just the silly things, like, *I'm sick of the food*, but also the real stuff. *I'm worried about what's going to happen to us, to me when we get back together*. And above all else, understand that your loved ones are going through a struggle that is every bit as hard as yours. And they didn't cause it. But they are going through just as hard of a time. Sometimes even harder. If you recognize that everyone has a hard rope to pull, it makes it easier for everyone."

## UPDATE ON THE PRISON BOOK CLUB

Since it's the start of a new year, we figured we'd share this reminder! If you are receiving this, you are a part of the Free Minds Books Across the Miles (BAM) Prison Book Club. If a friend shared this with you and you're interested in joining the prison book club, feel free to write to us and we'll review your request. We can't promise that we'll be able to accept everyone because we have a limited budget, but we'll still respond to your letter to let you know, and try our best to accommodate your request or to share with you other resources that may help.

## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: EDUCATION

Our next issue's theme is a BIG one (as usual!): Education. What does education mean to you? What kind of learning have you found to be the most valuable? What kind of knowledge did you pick up in a classroom, on the streets, from trusted people you respect? What kind of knowledge did you wish you learned when you were younger? What do you want to learn now? What do you want to teach others (your children, your readers...or anyone in the world)?

This issue comes with an insert that has a survey on one side and the book ballot on the other side. Please fill them out and return them to us. Knowing about your experiences with education will let us know how we can make the next issue the most useful to you and how we can support you in the pursuit of your goals!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!

