

March/April 2018
Volume 7, Issue 2

Free minds Connect



THIS MONTH'S THEME: EDUCATION

HOW KNOWLEDGE CAN SET US FREE

**LIFELONG LEARNING,
85 AND STILL A
STUDENT OF LIFE!**

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**FROM CELL TO
ATTORNEY: HOW
CHRIS BEAT THE ODDS**

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WORKING IN THE
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HE GREW UP**

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Free Minds Connect

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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!)

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Next Issue's Theme:
Chosen Family

TALK BACK WITH TARA

Happy Spring, Free Minds Scholars!

I hope the winter months brought plenty of opportunities to dive into some good books. I know you'll want to dive right into this power-packed issue on Education. To me, education is liberation and one of the great joys of life. Recently, I was playing one of those "would you rather" games with my friends where you have to pick between two distasteful choices. The question was, "Would you rather live the rest of your life without learning anything new or only be able to taste and smell one thing all the time?" The choice was easy. Yes, Tara here would rather only smell and taste one aroma and flavor because life without learning new things would be pretty torturous.

I know it's a silly game, but it really made me think. Do I appreciate learning? Do I take full advantage of it? My introspection worked because I decided to learn about a country I've been really curious about for a long time: Cuba. I'm leaving just after writing this for a trip to Cuba with my yoga studio, and I'll give you a full report out in the next "Around the World" column! I'm passing off the rest of this column to Julia, who will introduce you to this enlightening issue.

Alright, Free Minds, Julia here! There is so much wisdom, experience, and creativity in this issue. Here are a few of the highlights. FM member Varvie tells us about his job working at a youth home. We meet Chris, who went from prison to law school. We learn about the incredible work of organizations like the School Justice Project and Reach Incorporated. Kelli introduces us to her first teacher: her mother! LV shares what he would like to teach others... *and that's just the tip of the iceberg!*

If you aren't familiar with that saying, "**the tip of the iceberg**" refers to the idea of being on a ship on the ocean, and seeing an iceberg. But you can only see the tip of it that is above water. There is so much more beyond what you can see. Kind of like what we're talking about here – that there is always more to learn! I learn new things at Free Minds every day. And you know who my teachers are? You!

So until next time, keep reading, writing, learning, and teaching... and keep your mind free!

Sincerely,
Julia and Tara

FREE MINDS HQ

By Melissa

Free Minds:
A Life

Stories

Production

Lights, camera, action! Your Free Minds brothers committed to 10 weeks of rehearsal and acting,

storytelling, screenwriting, and directing training with Theatre Lab instructors and showcased their final performance to a live audience in January. Each member performed a scene of their own life stories. So proud of their commitment!

Shout out to our members who have been published or won awards!

- MK, DR, and EU won Scholastic Awards for their poetry
- Brandon's poem was published in *MelaNation*
- TTB's poem was published in the *Florida Review*
- Nick's essay was published on *The Marshall Project*

Congratulations to Free Minds brother, CM, who got his GED!!!

CM: I have been locked up since 2007. I dropped outta school in 2004, so about a year after being locked up, I

enrolled into the GED unit at the DC Jail. I didn't take it seriously because I really thought the work was too hard, so once again I quit. Years passed. In 2012, I was convicted and sentenced, so I told myself while I'm in, I'm going to better myself. I've been in GED classes for 6 years struggling to get this in my past, but look at me now. I have a GED and I feel great because I really wanted it. When you really want something, nothing or no one will stop you from getting that but you, so never quit and make it your goal to overcome any task you encounter.

Congratulations to Free Minds brother, RD, College Graduate!

A couple of issues back (Nature, Vol. 6, Issue 4) Free Minds member, RD, wrote about his pursuit of an Associate Degree in Business Administration while he was incarcerated. Well, we have great news: Our Free Minds brother, RD, graduated in December *summa cum laude* – which means "with greatest honor" in Latin.

RD: I feel like I have accomplished something meaningful in my life. I feel even more jubilant about it because I achieved it in these circumstances – being incarcerated. By educating yourself, you are giving yourself an edge. I refuse to end up back in jail with the sad excuse of not being able to find a job or not having the skills to succeed. All that knowledge is out there for us, so let's go get it!



A POEM FOR FREE MINDS MEMBERS...

Liel is a high school student in Minnesota. After attending a Write Night with Yachad: The Jewish Education Program for Teens, she wrote this poem and these words of encouragement for Free Minds Members!

I want you to be brave.
I know it's hard, but believe me when I say you are strong.
Life chews us up and spits us out but we stand right back up again.
Famous words said "fall down seven times and stand up eight."
Nothing comes easy in this world and that's ok.
Life's not meant to be fair.
We didn't ask for life, no one alive asked to be a part of this world,
but here we are and what we do with this gift is what matters.

I want to tell you... I'm proud of you guys for making it this far. This is no easy task and look at this, you are breathing today. Just waking up in the morning is an accomplishment and I am so proud! I'm also so impressed with all of your writing skills. It brings my heart to tears.

You guys are stronger than you think. You are so special; always remember that please. I want you to say to yourself when you wake up, "I am strong. I can do this. I am capable. I am resilient. I am special. I am unique. I am the best me!" And when you go to bed say to yourself, "Tomorrow is another day to be positive. Tomorrow I'll find a reason to smile. Tomorrow good will happen. Tomorrow will be special!"

I do this every day. Promise me you will. I said this before and I'll say it again - I AM PROUD OF YOU. Keep going. YOU GOT THIS. - Liel

QUOTE-I-VATOR

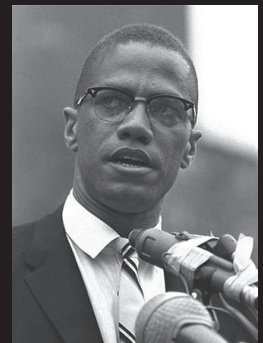
"Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world." - Nelson Mandela, South African political leader

"Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit, wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad."
- Miles Kington, British journalist and musician

"Books were my pass to personal freedom. I learned to read at age three, and soon discovered there was a whole world to conquer that went beyond our farm in Mississippi." - Oprah Winfrey, American media proprietor, talk show host, actress, and philanthropist

"If you're walking down the right path and you're willing to keep walking, eventually you'll make progress." - Barack Obama, American politician and 44th president of the United States

"Education is the passport to the future for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."
- Malcolm X, American human rights activist



Malcolm X

FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the Jan/Feb 2018 Connect on Entrepreneurial Spirit.

AB: It was very inspiring to see guys go back into society and become productive. I hope to get my shot at another chance of society.

JK: The interview with Juan was interesting. I was just studying about a cooperative so I had to smile. I'm going to go the LLC way once my feet are firmly back planted in the nation's capital. But I was glad to see someone not wasting their time, which is definitely a precious commodity.

JKG: I enjoyed reading the interview with Juan in this month's *Connect*. It's amazing to me how men and women are achieving such success within their life after prison, and it gives me confidence that I can achieve my dreams as well. It would be cool if you could interview me one day!





MEMBERS CONNECT: EDUCATION

Education: A Tool to Help Us Survive

By PJ

Education – especially grade school – is important. This is where we learn to read, write, communicate with words, and interact, mostly with non-family members, at a young age.

One thing I found personally counterproductive in grade school was suspension for bad behavior, which only hurt me, education-wise, because it kept me out of school. How could I learn if I wasn't in school? That only aided my demise, in more ways than one, leading me to more time in the "streets" and in "limbo," which led to me dropping out.

All education is valuable. Whether it be in the streets or the classroom, it's a tool to help us survive. Me, I dropped out in the eighth grade. I feel my private Catholic school education from second to sixth grade was better than my public school education. I left public school after being there from kindergarten to second grade. When I went to the Catholic school, I had to repeat second grade (which I'd completed in the public school) because I wasn't up to speed with the curriculum in the Catholic private school, which charged tuition, by the way.

In school, I learned to write, read, study books, and be structured in a classroom setting, as well as mathematics and comprehension. In the streets, I learned comprehension also, as well as how to be aggressive, use my anger to fuel my ambition, and how to disconnect myself in certain situations, for my own good. Even though the streets and classroom may be considered opposites, they share or have things in common, such as compassion, love, unity, jealousy, anger, ambition, and dreams – people.

From people I love and trust, I learned how to love, trust, share, and how to do what's right. I learned about how to forgive, accept others for who

they are, and to live and survive anywhere. I learned from their example. I wish my parents would've taught me about sex; we never had that "talk." And I wish they would've told me more about their experiences in dealing with racism, and how they felt about those experiences. They never talked about these things, even though I know they experienced racism, living in DC, which I have read and learned was very racist in the 19th and 20th century, and was a major slave trading city and area.

Now I want to learn how to deal with myself in a way where I can be a productive citizen and succeed at my dreams and goals. I want to actually put myself to the test and "perform" in a productive law-abiding manner; you never know until you've been in that environment or are under pressure. I wish I would've learned through experience how to persevere in a law-abiding way of life, when I was younger and in society.

I want to teach others that God is for all types of people: thugs, men, women, white, black, yellow, believer, and non-believer.

I want to teach people that young men and women who have broken the law, lost their way, made mistakes, been in and out of the "streets," are worth another chance, and can still be productive, loving, contributing human beings, even after a few mistakes or tries.

It takes some longer than others. We take different roads in life, which is alright, as long as we get to the same place – where we need to be – where God wants us to be. Some people take different roads, as myself, but I want to show, by how I turn my life into a productive, successful one – by example – how people can use their mistakes, trials, and tribulations to be a better person and help others.

The Things You Don't Learn in a Book

By LV

The kind of learning that society treats as the most valuable in the world we live in, evidently what count as accomplishments are diplomas/certificates. I find it difficult to believe that only those who possess a title or a diploma of any kind are better human beings than the rest of the population. In life, there are many things that you cannot learn through a book.

The type of knowledge I have gained or picked up from others, first and foremost, I got to say is English, even when many people told me that I would never be a fluent English speaker. From the streets, there's many things that you learn. Many would say that gang members don't respect no one. That's far from reality. It all depends on your mentors, so thanks to all my mentors, and RIP to all of those that are no longer around but are always alive in my heart.

What I would like to teach others would be all of those things we don't read or learn from a textbook, Google, or social media. That in life we have to be versatile and able to improvise.

Primarily, I would like to teach others the importance of communication and of respect – respect for one another, respect for all living things. When we talk about respect, how would you define that?

I would teach others the importance of having moral values in our daily life and to be grateful for all the things we're able to have, even if we were poor living in a third-world country. Many are quick to complain about the way they're living. Nowadays, we're so obsessed with the materialistic things that we're forgetting the true meaning of life: to keep on growing as human beings, as a whole, the entire human race, not just individually. We all have families or a background. We're family (a team), no matter our ethnicity. We're all the same, no matter where you came from. We're all breathing under the same sky, breathing the same air. We're all living in the same world (we're family) so why can't we all get along and build? Build a better world (a better future) where we're all united.





MEMBERS CONNECT: EDUCATION (CONTINUED)

Education from Behind Bars

By BH

I entered the federal system at the tender age of 21 years young in 2008 for armed bank robbery. Academically, I was functioning at a ninth-to-tenth grade level. All because I decided to drop out of school, which, to me now that I'm more mature, was one of the biggest mistakes that I ever made in my life.

I'm often asked what is my favorite subject to study! Because I love reading difficult content, I would have to say that my favorite subject is studying law. Law is always evolving and no two cases are exactly the same. And within the framework of law, I'm always able to find a new adventure.

But since being incarcerated, I have taken back control of my life. I have obtained my GED, paralegal diploma, associate's in business management, doctorate degree in Christian counseling, master's degree in religion, and certificate to be a certified ordained minister. And no, you don't have to be a religious person to obtain these religious degrees. Just know your stuff and be passionate about serving others.

For those incarcerated in the Federal Bureau of Prisons like myself, I recommend finding an educational program at your institution that you enjoy. Conquer it, and I guarantee you that your hunger for more education will grow.

From a "History of Violence" to Testifying at DC Council

By James, Reentry Assistant

In January, I went to 1300 Pennsylvania Avenue (where the Office of the Mayor and the DC Council are located) to testify about the school-to-prison pipeline and to talk about the effect excessive suspensions and expulsions can have on people transitioning into adulthood. It was interesting for the simple fact that there were people there who had none of the types of issues guys like us had growing up, but were there to help. When I say "guys like us," I'm talking about young black men from poverty-stricken places.

observations of the older dudes doing illegal activities. But by following their path, I learned firsthand that everything that shines isn't gold. Just because the lifestyle looks good on the surface doesn't mean it is. You don't see what people go through to get to those appearances of wealth or the consequences people face if caught doing what they do to obtain it.

I was born in Southeast, Washington, DC. I grew up with the "defend yourself at all costs" and "it's whatever" attitude, which enabled a lot of violent actions on my part. It all started in an elementary school in Northeast called Charles R. Drew. I got into fights all the time for the smallest things and that attitude followed me throughout my years of schooling. Fighting and being a distraction to the class caused me to be removed from class and from school. Eventually I lost interest in school because I was missing a lot of days there and felt like if they're going to keep putting me out, why would I want to come back?

I decided to go to Job Corps in order to obtain my GED, but still straddled the fence. Would I get success in the streets or the legit way? I would do well all week and break law on the weekend. Eventually, it caught up with me. Prison time disturbed my life and made me reconsider my decisions.

I had no one to talk to and get certain stuff off my chest so I acted out. It wasn't the best approach.

After 64 months of prison, I returned to society and made up my mind that I wanted to see what the world had to offer, and it was a great decision. Continuing to learn and build my life around all positive things proved to be a key to success – along with investing in education, being around positive energy/people, and having the will to do better.

By the age of 15, I was forced out of school because of my "history of violence." I was just in the streets at that point and still had no guidance except my

These are the things I talked about in front of the DC City Council, because I hope they'll reduce the high rate of out-of-school suspension and find ways of keeping kids who were like me engaged in school instead of pushing us into the streets.

Changing Culture to Respect Personal Space

By JM

Summertime, 1994. People knew my car. They knew my band. I talked for Unique Band and Show. I wasn't there to perform, though. My brother was second mic for another band who I won't mention, but when I walked into the rec center they were playing at that night, they were just warming up. Something just enough to get your neck moving a little bit.

What was embraced by culture back then, we have now become educated to the fact that we may have been putting some young women in some very uncomfortable positions. It would have been simple for me to introduce myself and ask her if she felt like having me hang off of her back for a good hour and a half.

I was slapping fives and backs and one-arm dabs as I made my way through to the front of the spot. Gave a head nod to their lead mic just so I could get on display. I faded to the back of the room until the groove got going. I had on my Britches Great Outdoors Rugby shirt mixed with Guess jeans and some "Lo" one-buckle boots. We did that back then. I saw something out of the corner of my eye.

We laugh a lot about that whenever we get the chance to go down memory lane. We both admit to each other that not all situations like that end as happy as ours did. She finally admitted a couple of years back that she knew who I was and it took her at least half an hour to catch her breath because I noticed her enough to come over and dance.

She had it going. The soft socket beat was going so I stepped up behind her. She was feeling just like she was looking. I grabbed her around her waist and did not let go until the lights came on. I didn't even know her name – didn't even ask to be honest. In a couple of years, she would become the mother of my first child. A beautiful daughter.

I issue this challenge to everyone who may read this. Educate your little boys and girls and young men and women about the proper respect that should be shown to another person regarding their personal space. As we can see now today, every story does not end in success. Every encounter involving personal interaction does not end in success. If everyone educated themselves properly, it will only elevate our social standards and lead to more gratifying outcomes. We can insist that all cultures stand the test and evolve as they should. The more educated we are, the better we will be.

Thinking back to that time, I am not too sure how that would play out today.



FAMILY TIES

My Best Teacher

By Kelli

Family Ties is the column where FM family and loved ones weigh in. For this issue, Kelli talks with her first and favorite teacher – her mom! Loie was born during the Great Depression. She grew up a happy child who adored her family, treasured her friends, and embraced learning everything she could about the world. She would go on to have a long and celebrated career as a teacher.

*In 2014, at the age of 81, Loie suffered a massive stroke that affected the part of her brain responsible for language. She now has **speech aphasia**. While she can understand what others say, it is difficult for her to find the words she wants to express herself. She has essentially had to relearn how to speak, read, and write.*

My mom is a teacher. Do you notice how I say is and not was? It's true, she was a teacher in the traditional sense. She taught ninth grade English for many years, and later taught English as a second language to Hmong refugees (the Hmong are Asian people, many of whom escaped to the United States from Laos in the 1970s). To tell you the truth though, I believe she's always been a teacher and a student. There is an often-told story in my family about how she once stuck a crayon up her baby sister Joanie's nose because she "really wanted to know what would happen." (Their mother had to come home from work to get the crayon out!) Every day in my mom's life has been an opportunity to learn something new and to share that knowledge with others.

Kelli: When you were in high school, was it unusual for girls to go to college?

Loie: Definitely. I felt so fortunate. My mother and my uncles helped with the money. And I worked every summer to earn my college tuition.

Kelli: Why did you choose to study education and become a teacher?

Loie: Because there are so many important things for children to learn. Of course, learning starts in the home. We must teach children to learn about themselves, their family, and about how to be a helper. Cleaning, working in the yard, taking out the trash. History, art, music – all of these are important. I wanted to teach English though because communication is everything! We need to teach people how to use language.

At home, she taught us to see books as treasures. When I read a book, she wanted to hear all about it. And when she read a book,

ASK HF ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

Dear HF,

My scheduled release date is December 2021 and I have nothing/no one to help me out. I'm worried that I will "relapse" and commit another crime even though I don't want to. Because I have nothing. Literally. In my mind and heart, I know that I can succeed and I want to be a productive person, but I have nothing to give me the kick-start that I need.

Sincerely,
TP

Dear TP,

If, in your MIND and HEART you already know you can succeed, and you really want to be a productive person, do not allow the lack of resources in your possession at this moment cause you to doubt your potential. Most people never admit to themselves what they want because they cannot "see" how they can get it. So, their fear prevents them from pursuing their vision. Or when they do, they enter the journey full of doubts that crush their ability to succeed.

Don't worry about what you don't have. It's okay. Many people before you had less than you and have pursued their goals. A lack of resources is never an excuse to commit crimes, but rather a scapegoat for a lack of creativity to learn legal ways to make money with nothing but a dream and the audacity to pursue it.

Set clear goals. Write down a plan of action. Commit to your plan, even when you feel discouraged. Commit to it fearlessly. If you give up before you even start, prepare yourself to spend the rest of your life in and out of jail. There is no either/or. There is no "try." You either do or you don't. The choice is yours, but don't blame the world for your failures because you felt you did not have anything to go home to. You have Free Minds and all of the resources connected to them. That is a start.

So, correct yourself when you say that you have nothing/no one to help you. From Free Minds, you will attract other resources to help you succeed, but you've got to want it like a drowning man wants air. When you want it that desperately, nothing and no one will stop you.

Sincerely,
HF

she told me about it. As a child, I was surrounded by stories. That made me hungry to learn about other people and their lives. If you've met me in person, you know I always ask a lot of questions. Now you know where I get it from!

When we asked a question, she'd say, "Let's find out!," which meant lying propped up on our elbows on the living room floor reading an encyclopedia or going to the reference section of the library. She took us downtown to get library cards before I even knew how to read. The one thing she wouldn't tolerate was to hear any of us say, "I'm bored." It made no sense to her when there was so much to do, see, and

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THE WRITE WAY

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

By Chelsea

This month's Write Way is about applying poetry and writing to speak about and expose moments of injustice. Often people ask, how can we stop the events that are taking place today? How we can put an end to the violence, police brutality, stereotyping, hate, and inequality? These are difficult questions that have no simple or easy response.

However, one choice of action we all have is to put our pen to paper and talk about the events taking place to expose the injustice. Poetry is one way we can do this, and incorporating different and unique structures captures the reader's eye and might make someone really think. Below, read the poem by Clint Smith (author of the book *Counting Descent*). Before you read the poem, think about this: how can your voice have power?

How to Make a Cardboard Box Disappear in 10 Steps by Clint Smith

- 1) Find the scissors
- 2) Cut the sides of the cube
- 3) Attend the rally of Trayvon Martin
- 4) Attend the rally of Renisha McBride
- 5) Attend the rally of Jordan Davis
- 6) Attend the rally of Michael Brown
- 7) Attend the rally of Eric Garner
- 8) Attend the rally of Freddie Gray
- 9) Find another empty box
- 10) Attend the rally of _____

What is the purpose of his poem? What do these names, listed in the poem, all have in common? What does a cardboard box symbolize?

Why is he using a cardboard box to talk about the injustice? What is unique about the poem structure? Does this poem have power?

As you reflect on these questions and think about the unique list poem Clint Smith used to talk about recent police brutality and the rallies, protests, and marches that have taken place, let's turn to your own story and writing.

Challenge yourself to write a list poem that talks about a moment of inequality and brings to light a specific event. You can continue with Clint Smith's theme of police brutality or you can look to your own life experiences. The first step is to create a title to your poem. Try using the style Clint Smith uses. Your title should begin with, "How to _____ in 10 Steps." Next, make a list with the numbers 1-10, and write out the ten steps to accomplish the title of the poem.

I look forward to reading what you come up with!



Some attendees at the March for Racial Justice in Washington, DC, in September 2017. Photo taken by Julia.

"How to Make a Cardboard Box Disappear in 10 Steps" by Clint Smith was first published on American Literary Review.

FAMILY TIES (CONTINUED)

explore! Her inevitable response was always, "Go outside, lie on your back, and look at the clouds. That will give you an idea."

Kelli: What does "lifelong learning" mean to you?

Loie: It doesn't matter who you are, or how old you are. We all must learn more than just skills to get a job. We have to learn about the world. And we must never stop. Keep learning, even when you are old and gray!

Kelli: Are you still learning?

Loie: Oh, yes! It may sound strange, but I'm glad for the experience of having a stroke. God was helping me and reminding me that I need to keep on learning. Even now. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I feel frustrated about my speech. I feel like I want to quit and go on to the next world. But I know I still have more learning to do. You get tired, but you can't stop. God's plan is for us all to learn about peace and love. That's our job. To keep learning and work for peace and love.

Can you see why my mom is my best teacher?

It doesn't matter who you are, or how old you are. We all must learn more than just skills to get a job!



POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

What I Wish School Taught Me

By George

School didn't teach me how to read.
But school did teach me how to do math.
School didn't teach me how to respect.
But school did teach me how to listen.

It was at home that I learned how to read.
It was at school that I learned to disrespect.

It was Dad who taught me respect.
It was the streets that taught me to fight.

I wish school taught me how to free fears.
I wish school taught me discipline.

If I were a school, I would teach the students morals of respect.
If I were a school, I would give half days.
If I were a school, I would have school programs.

We Learn

By MS

Intrinsically, instinctually,
Upon departing the womb
We learn to breathe
We learn to cry.
It being the first sound from our throats.
At home, when our vision clears
We learn to sit up, crawl,
To take our tentative first steps
with babbling enthusiasm
We learn to talk.
For some
We learn from tender ages
We learn that there is fear here
Broken bones, unwanted late night visitations
Blackened eyes, bloodied lips,
Reminders of innocence breaking,
We learn the illusions behind some people's
Definitions of a "Happy Home."
Life encompasses the totality of our emotions
We learn to push through the pain
That is so often there.
Accompanied by regret, anger, and fear
We learn to either strengthen our resolve or
Just make do,
This is true of the Genius, as well as the Fool
Intrinsically, instinctively like breathing.
Who are you?
What lessons will you learn in any given situation?
Who are you in that moment?
When it passes
We are defined by our choices
Learning + knowing + applications = education.
We learn.

Knowledge of Self

By LM

Dumb, deaf & blind,
Ignorant 2 the truth of my kind,
Our value and beauty, and power of mind.

I felt sad & ashamed to see shackles & chains around the slaves,
Considered a plague.

My subconscious harbored images of being dirty and unworthy,
I felt less than,
Trapped in this dark hue'd skin...
But in the midst of this dark place,
"Knowledge of Self" illuminated the space around me,
Taking me on a journey 2 the Motherland that crowned me,
And my people Kings & Queens,
And knowing I descended from royalty put wings on my self-esteem,
And it began 2 soar and fly,
And with my head held high,
My shame turned 2 pride,
And my insecurities died

Knowledge of my heritage & roots,
From Ancient Egypt, to Timbuktu,
Queen Nzinga and Shaka Zulu,
Gave me unlimited aspirations 2 what I could do.

Not knowing my true potential was a cold slow death,
But I was resurrected through "Knowledge of Self!"

Inspired by the book Knowledge of Self by Supreme Understanding

Once Upon a Time, I Used To...

By James

I used to believe everyone had a lot the same morals.
Now I understand the way of the world, different cultures
and different lifestyles.

I used to wonder what life had in store for me.
Now I try to take as much control of my life as possible.

I used to love dancing and being with friends.
Now I enjoy writing music and being with family.

I used to hate feeling locked down and restricted.
Now I move freely and try to enjoy life.

I used to want to be the reason my family and people
around me are successful.
Now I still have the same goals.

I used to care about what people think of me.
Now I care less about opinions.

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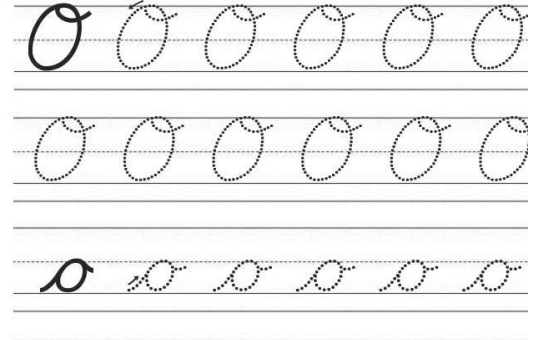


CONVERSATION WITH KELLI



Dear Free Minds Family,

I've been so excited about this issue of the *Connect*. Learning is something I am beyond passionate about. When I was in the third grade, I absolutely *could not wait* to learn how to write in **cursive**. Don't ask me why. I was a nerdy child. All I knew was that we were supposed to learn sometime in third grade. Every day, I would ask my teacher, Mrs. Ellis, "Are we learning cursive today?" The answer was always, "Nope. Not today." And then one day, we came back from recess and Mrs. Ellis was writing a line full of cursive letter Os across the chalkboard... Holy cow! Finally!



Did you learn to write in cursive when you were in elementary school?

I know each one of you has your own story of a time when you learned how to do something new. Maybe it was playing the drums, or speaking Spanish, or dunking a basketball. And you couldn't wait to show off what you learned. Learning is an exhilarating feeling! And one that I love to experience over and over again. Several years ago, I decided to take violin lessons. I'm not gonna lie. I'm pretty bad. But I have *so much fun*. And I feel like I'm always growing if I'm learning new things.

A Free Minds brother named AH emails me on Corrlinks. He and his cellmate have started a Word-of-the-Day challenge. They take turns choosing a new word each day. They both learn the definition of the word and how to use it. Then they discuss the word and wrestle with it. I. Love. This. I'm always telling guys on the juvenile block that words are like currency. Every time we learn a word, it's like money in our own intellectual bank – and once it's deposited, it's yours forever. And AH and his cellie are getting RICH!

There's a great quote by Mahatma Gandhi: "Live as if you were to die tomorrow; Learn as if you were to live forever." Pretty good advice, right?

Let's keep learning and sharing knowledge with each other! Stay strong, and ALWAYS keep your mind free...

Your friend,
Kelli

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

The Things I'd Like to Understand

By Lorenzo

The things I'd like to understand
About fathers
Why do they leave?
Why do they never learn?

The things I'd like to understand
About mothers
Why do they yell all the time?
Why do they love us?
Why do they care for you?

The things I'd like to understand
About boys and men

Why do they do the things they do?
Why we gotta do everything?

The things I'd like to understand
About girls and women
Why do they cry a lot?
Why do they fall in love so fast?

The things I'd like to understand
About love
Why do we feel it?
Why is it so easy to say?

The things I'd like to understand
About life
Why are people born?
Do people get picked?

The things I'd like to understand
About death
Why do we live to die?
We do we gotta die?

The things I'd like to understand
About myself
Why do I get so angry?
Why do I get feelings?



DC REENTRY CORNER

By Ms. Keela

What's up Free Minds family (or FM Fam which to me, sounds much cooler)? As usual, I'm coming with some resources to uplift, enhance, and encourage you for that long-awaited journey from prison to home.

This month's theme is all that and a bag of chips (someone guess how old that little saying is). Education, education, education, we need it like we need food 'cause without it, we can't grow and there is so much to learn! No matter how old you get, there will always be more learning to do.

Consistent learning will also keep our brains sharp so that when we are 99, our minds can still be sound and sharp if we keep feeding it. You don't believe me? Well, you haven't met Nola Ochs. In 2007, at the age of 95, Nola graduated from Fort Hayes State University in Kansas. She then went on to receive a Master's Degree in Liberal Studies with a concentration in History at the age of 98. Nola continued to take classes and courses until she was 100 years old and passed away in 2016 at the age of 105! I don't know about y'all, but I think all that learning prolonged her life. I'm trying to be like Nola!

So you know what's up next, right?! I'm about to drop some knowledge. I've shared this one before, but it's so slept on. This FREE educational resource is available to all DC residents:

The **UDC Community College Division of Workforce Development and Lifelong Learning** provides District of Columbia residents with job skills training that enable them to pursue employment opportunities. UDC Workforce development focuses on industries that provide the highest number of employment opportunities within the District and in the metropolitan area.

The seven areas identified by the District of Columbia as most in demand include:

- Pathway 1: Automotive and Truck Maintenance and Repair
- Pathway 2: Construction and Property Management
- Pathway 3: Early Childhood Education
- Pathway 4: Healthcare-Direct Care and Healthcare Administration
- Pathway 5: Hospitality and Tourism
- Pathway 6: Information Technology and Office Administration
- Pathway 7: Infrastructure, Transportation, and Logistics

In order to register for UDC Workforce Development, call 202-274-7181 or email workforce@udc.edu.

Up next:

Goodwill of Greater Washington's FREE job training program focuses on careers in high demand industries. Each program is specifically designed for unemployed and underemployed DC residents. Goodwill of Greater Washington's job training program will help you obtain the valuable skills necessary that will lead to a successful career! In 2016, 70 percent of their graduates were hired for new jobs and 3 out of 4 of them retained their jobs for 90 days and longer. Goodwill offers training in the energy, utility, construction, hospitality and security industries.

In order to enroll, visit Goodwill at 2200 South Dakota Avenue N.E. or call (202) 719-1288.

Okay, guys until we *Connect* again,
Ms. Keela

DC PHOTOS OF THE MONTH

DC is changing. What do you think of the streetcars and the Spirit of Washington boat?



A streetcar on H Street in DC. The streetcars hadn't been in use for many years but now they're back. Fun Fact: They were first introduced in 1862. (Photo credit: Washington Post)



This is the *Spirit of Washington*, a boat on the Potomac River available for dinners and cruises. (Photo credit: Groupon)

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

“SO YOU WANNA BE A TEACHER IN THE GHETTO?”

By Mbachur

Since the theme for this issue is education, I'd like to share a little bit about my days as a teacher in New York.

I worked at a school in Manhattan for about six months, but later got a job at an elementary school in a neighborhood called Brownsville in Brooklyn. Don't get me wrong – I loved working in the city. All the kids had really rich parents who worked on Wall Street, or in fashion, or International Relations, and they were really great kids... but I wanted something more. I wanted to connect with students who looked like me, and who really appreciated the value of education because that's all they had.

In June of 2013, I sat down with my academic advisor and asked her to place me in a school with low-income students. She looked at me like I was being irrational and said, “So you want to work in the ghetto?” I said yes.

On August 26, 2013, I started my first year as a teacher assistant at PS 219 in Brownsville. My first day was tough. Some kids didn't even have backpacks, let alone composition books to write assignments down, but they all wanted to learn. These were kids that grew up in the projects and the streets. Kids that are automatically labeled by society. They wanted to know about the world, and had questions about everything. I admired it so much.

From that point on, I made it my personal responsibility to not only educate

myself about the crises underserved students in marginalized communities face outside of education, but how factors such as poverty, cultural incompetency, and even low expectations from other teachers can affect the success and achievement of students of color. These are important things everyone should know about.

I took away so many valuable things from teaching, especially the complicated relationship between the younger generation and guys in the street. Many of the older guys from the streets were invested in the education of the next generation, even if their own experience with schooling ended prematurely. I remember one year, the drug dealers in the area used to buy me and my head teacher supplies for our students. A lot of them have relationships with the kids and their families. We know that story so well.

These guys know their contributions will help the younger folks to become leaders to better the community... But the same time, they also know that their economic empowerment from the street life can be a disadvantage both to the community and themselves.

What do you all think about the messages that can and should be spread to the young people? Would any of you guys ever want to be teachers if you could?

SCHOOL JUSTICE PROJECT

By Sarah, director of programs and co-founder of the School Justice Project

As an education attorney, I LOVE this month's theme: EDUCATION! I work at School Justice Project (SJP). If you haven't heard about us, we are education lawyers for young people (ages 17-22) with special education needs who are in DC's justice systems. Many of our clients have been committed to the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (“DYRS” or DC's juvenile justice agency), on juvenile or adult probation, or in BOP facilities.

I started SJP in 2013 with another attorney to make sure that young people can be in school and in the right classes even when they are not in the community (for example when in residential, jail, or prison). Before SJP, we worked as attorneys for the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia (“PDS”) at Youth Services Center and at New Beginnings, two youth detention facilities in DC. We saw what I'm sure many of you know: young people were not getting a good education when they were locked up, or the work they did in school while they were locked up didn't count when they came home.

If you don't know, the law in DC is that young people with special education needs have THE RIGHT to be in high school until the semester that they turn 22! This means if you ever had an IEP (an individualized education program), you should be able to go to school no matter where you are – even if you're locked up. But, we all know that doesn't always happen. Have you ever been turned away from school? Have you earned credits that got lost or didn't count toward your high school diploma? Have you received work packets without any teaching? Have you been locked up in a place that didn't have a school? I wish I could say that all of you answered, “No,” to those questions. But I'm

sure that many of you said, “Yes.” As education attorneys, our entire job is to fight so you don't have to go through those situations and so you can finish school. You have the right to be in school until you are 22 if you have an IEP! If you don't have an IEP, there are GED and high school programs for students of any age and places that can enroll you and help you get other services (in DC, one example is the ReEngagement Center).

If you feel like you haven't been given the education you deserve or that you have not been enrolled in school even though you have an IEP, we can help. If you want to know more about your rights and options, we can help. To be our client, you have to be between the ages of 17-22, but even if you are older than that, we can talk through your options and answer your questions about education.

Please reach out – I'm Sarah Comeau at School Justice Project. You can call me: (202) 618-1247; email me: scomeau@sjpdc.org; or write to me: 1805 7th Street NW, 7th Floor, Washington, DC 20001. We look forward to helping you pursue your education goals. Because nothing should be getting in your way!





"MY CELLIE TAUGHT ME TO READ"

Interview with Barry

By James

I first met fellow Free Minds member Barry when he gave me a ride to an elementary school where I was speaking to students as a Poet Ambassador for Free Minds. He told me about his life and many stories about growing up during a time of school integration practices, when the government proactively tried to put kids of all different races into the same schools. He allowed me to share his story in this issue of the Connect to raise awareness about the importance of education.

Barry, tell me a little about your background.

I am a New York native, but I relocated to Washington, DC, in 2008.

I was raised in Brooklyn, New York, in a neighborhood nicknamed "the Bottom." It was called that because it was an area where people felt there was no hope and that you couldn't get any lower than where you are. There were very few resources as far as income was concerned."

I came from a single-parent home. My mom tried her best to keep me and my siblings afloat. She gave us all the love in the world but as for the material things, they were very limited. As I think back, I can remember times when I would put cardboard in my shoe because there were holes at the bottom. That struggle led to my love for clothes, shoes, and the finer things in life.

What was your experience of school?

I was brought up in an era when they were actively trying to get Black kids in "white only" schools. It was a terrible experience for the simple fact that the white community, especially the parents, didn't want to accept us in school with their kids. It was a point in time where we were out of school for seven months because of protesting and rioting.

There were grown men and women trying to fight kids and their parents because of the strong feeling they had about young Black children attending school with their kids. It was a horrible experience.

Needless to say, I didn't make it too far in the school system. I lost interest quickly. As I got older, I chose the streets over school.

You've mentioned in one of our previous conversations that you had a cellmate that helped you learn to read. Do you mind elaborating?

I went all my life without the skills of reading and writing. I used to get my cellmate to read the letters my family sent me. He did that for me for quite a while, but eventually got tired of it and told me he would teach me to read.

He told me he no longer would be a part of the problem. He made me promise to meet him at a specific table at a certain time every day. If I was

to miss one session, he would cancel all classes. I did this for years until eventually I obtained my GED.

How did it feel when you read your first book?

IT FELT REALLY AMAZING! I couldn't believe how natural it felt. The first book I read was the Bible. I read it cover to cover – yep, the whole thing.

How about when you got your GED? How old were you?

When I got my GED I was 40-something. I was actually upset I passed the test; I passed by accident. I was receiving good time for going to school, so when I passed, I stopped getting that extra good time. Anger and confusion were just my initial reaction, though. All in all, I'm grateful.

What was it like coming home after all that time?

It was like I was on the old TV show *The Jetsons* – everything had changed. I remember getting discouraged because I thought getting my GED would be enough. I came home to smartphones and computerized everything. On top of that, I wanted to fill out applications, but I couldn't spell. I could read but couldn't spell past an elementary level. I thought to myself, "How'd that happen?" So yes, it was frustrating.

Do you feel like reading and writing have helped you in any way?

I feel like reading helped me a lot because before I could read, I thought everyone was trying to get over on me. I had a complex, because I thought people knew I couldn't read, so I'd react violently. I hid it well though. My wife said to me, "I had no idea you couldn't read or write this whole time." I've been with her 20-something years! She just recently told me this.

What advice would you give to someone in your position?

I would tell people to reach out. Let somebody know when you're not capable of doing things you will need in life.

People would hand me magazines while laughing, and I just stared at it, then start laughing just because they laughed while at the same time hoping they wouldn't ask me what part I found funny in the article. You don't want to be that guy, and I wouldn't want anyone to go through that.

Not being able to read and write is the main reason I stayed in the streets so long. I didn't have the skillset to even apply for a job.

I'm now striving to be better. A better me. I want to be a better son, a better father, and a better partner. So please, in order to avoid a life of heartache, gain all the knowledge you can. What you don't know, seek knowledge on it. It'll cause so much growth.

PAYING IT FORWARD

Reaching struggling readers: DC nonprofit helps teens learn by teaching them to teach others

By Kelli

As a social worker in the District's foster care system, FM friend Mark worked with young teens who were significantly behind in school. Teachers often treated them as if they were unintelligent or didn't want to learn. But Mark knew there were valid reasons they weren't achieving. Many had experienced trauma. Others spent hours of every day helping to raise younger siblings. These were bright kids. Instead of treating them like they couldn't learn, Mark felt we needed to raise the bar.

Research shows students must practice reading at, or just above, their own level. This sounds good in theory, Mark points out. But what if you have a 6'2" tenth-grader who is reading at a second grade level? Just try handing that kid a book called *The Adventures of Taxi Dog* or *Roger the Jolly Pirate*. He's going to look at you like you're ridiculous! Mark wondered what would happen if you didn't just hand that kid the second-grade book, but also handed him a second grader to read it to. Maybe everybody would win. This is how the successful nonprofit organization Reach Incorporated was born.

Recently, I sat down with Mark to learn more.

So, what exactly does Reach do?

It's an after-school program where we hire high school students to be elementary school reading tutors. We train them to develop literacy lesson plans and then they use those plans to tutor second and third grade students. We now have about 220 tutors across DC at 9 different high school sites. Each of those high schools is paired with at least one elementary school across the city.

Why do you focus on reading?

Reading is the key to everything. Whether you're talking about math word problems, filling out job applications, getting information about court hearings... everything! If you want to advocate for yourself, you need to understand how to read, write, and speak. Reading is key not just for a successful professional life, but also to succeed as a citizen living in the world.

How do you choose the kids to be in the program?

For tutors, we look for teens who aren't yet succeeding. Many are reading between a third- and sixth-grade level when we meet them. But if we need to start with the sounds of letters, we can do that too. We work with them to get them ready. Then we pair each tutor with a second or third grader who is also struggling. The tutors gain self-esteem and confidence, and the little kids want to please their tutors. Everyone is learning!

Can you tell me a story about a pair of your kids?

Kanye is a second grader who doesn't like sitting still, doesn't like listening to teachers, and unfortunately, he's acting out in ways that get him put out of the classroom and sent to the principal's office. We know

that can be the beginning of a really negative trajectory. We partnered him with the calmest teenager I've ever met... nothing rattles Malik! Their tutoring session is an hour-long negotiation. Malik will tell Kanye, "Okay, answer these three questions and then you can go get a drink of water," or "Let's draw for 10 minutes, then we'll try again."

Kanye loves Malik. Kanye's teacher told us that since he's been working with Malik, he has shown more growth than any other kid in his grade! When we first met Malik, he was struggling too. He was close to dropping out. To see him now providing this level of support to a kid, forces the adults to say, "Hold on a second, if this 17-year-old can help my little man grow faster than we could, what does that say?" This model is beautiful for what it does for Kanye and his achievement, but also what it shows Malik about the gifts he has to give to the world.

It seems like Reach is a perfect example of paying it forward.

Everyone in the world needs help with something, and everyone has the ability to help someone else. A big part of Reach's model is that teens no longer have to feel like they're only the recipient of services. They're giving back too. Seeing our teens discover their leadership skills and the ways they can make the world better is what energizes me to continue this work. Paying it forward goes in so many directions – paying it forward, paying it back, paying it everywhere!

Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to share with our readers?

Education allows you to be a problem solver. It puts you in position to help others and figure out how to do better for yourself. For those who are or will become parents, by investing in your own education, you send a message to your children of how important that is.

Sure, it can be overwhelming. Identify what your next step is, and walk towards it. That next step might be reading your first book. That next step might be reading a different type of book than you're used to. Or challenging yourself to learn something new. I'm still learning. I don't have time for shame. If the next step is reading *Cat in the Hat* because you've never read a book? Read it! Knock it out of the park! You don't get to where you need to be without starting somewhere.





AN UNLIKELY ROAD TO COLLEGE AND LAW SCHOOL

The Story of Chris, Free Minds Friend

Interview by Kelli

My childhood was a mix of privileges and challenges. My mom was a single mother. I don't know much about my dad, only that he is in the grips of alcoholism and mental illness. On the other hand, my grandfather was an attorney who stepped into the father role in my life as much as he could. Because of him, I grew up fascinated by law and justice.

I experienced some trauma, abuse, and violence. When I was 10 or 11 years old, I discovered that alcohol and drugs soothed me, and allowed me to be comfortable in my own skin really for the first time in my life. At 15, I had my first arrest for selling marijuana.

In high school, I lost my stepdad, one of my closest friends, and my grandfather, who died in my arms. I was dealing with all these deaths, and I was hopelessly addicted to a myriad of substances. My mom didn't know how to handle my behavior. She made me leave, so I was homeless. Somehow I got through high school. I did some college classes, but I became too sick with addiction to be able to function. I was getting in more and more trouble with the police. I dropped out and sold cocaine to support my habit.

When I was 24, I finally found recovery. I learned I wasn't just a loser, a junkie, or criminal. I had a treatable health condition called **substance use disorder**. I got well! It was transformative for me to understand that I had the power to define my own future and I wasn't inherently bad. Once I got treatment, I stopped committing felonies! Unfortunately, about six months into my recovery, I was indicted on five federal felony charges for cocaine distribution and gun possession, crimes that occurred before I found recovery. I was sentenced to 33 months in federal prison.

In prison, there were a lot of older, mostly black, men who became mentors to me, a white kid who grew up without a father. I am grateful to these men who were unable to be there for their own children, but played the role of father to me in prison. These men treated their minds, bodies, and souls as if they were temples, and I really became attracted to that lifestyle for the first time.

During my incarceration, I witnessed major incidences of inequality. For example, after my arraignment, I was in county jail, and my court-appointed attorney told me there was no way I was getting out on bail. Because my family had some money, I was able to replace him with an expensive private lawyer. I was released from custody, while all these other people who did the same stuff I did or less, were still sitting in jail because they didn't have access to the resources I did. I became determined to become a lawyer someday.

I got into college after my release. I got full financial aid through Pell Grants because I had no income as a prisoner. I'd go to classes all day and then hustle in a cubicle all night doing telemarketing.

College was an amazing experience. They had all this stuff like camping and hiking trips that I never did as a teenager because I was trying to literally survive. I even sang one night in front of a group of people. Without alcohol! Without drugs! Being part of a community, and finding

these relationships and new activities, is what made college so interesting and fun. I realized a high school diploma or the GED is just a necessary step to get to the next level where you can really choose and discover what it is you are passionate to learn more about.

I wanted to go to law school after college, but the idea seemed so delusional to me. I got a meeting with the dean of the law school. The dean said, "Chris, I hear you've overcome some adversity. We love having a diverse student body here. Why don't you tell me little bit about the challenges you've overcome." I said, "Well, my mom was a single mom." He was like, "Okay, okay we understand that." Then I said, "I was homeless for a time," and he's still smiling and nodding and saying, "I understand." Then I told him I'd been addicted to drugs and alcohol, and I'd been incarcerated on a multiple-year federal prison sentence. Once I said that, it felt like a wall was built between us. He said, "Well... I don't know how the legal community is going to receive someone with your background. Is there maybe another trade you might be interested in that might be more welcoming for someone like you?"

I paused for a long time. And then, for the first time in my life, I stood up for myself. I said, "Dean, why didn't the judge give me a life sentence?" He said, "I don't know." I looked right at him and said, "So why then are you giving me a life sentence here today?" When I said that, I could immediately see the shift because I stood up for myself, not as an ex-convict, not as a former junkie, but as a human being who is in long-term recovery and had an aspiration to attend law school. That year, I got my first A. I maintained a 4.0 GPA all the way until graduation. I went back to the law school with my application in hand. The admissions committee voted unanimously in my favor.

I wish more returning citizens would pursue college. I think there is a belief that's perpetuated by other people and by the media that higher education is not in the cards after prison. I think part of it is "contempt prior to investigation," or giving up before you get all the information. So maybe we hear that Bobby in the cell down the hall from us found out he didn't get accepted to one particular college. So he tells everyone, "Forget about it! We can't go to college!" Now, is that really the truth? Or did Bobby get denied from one particular school and now he's telling everyone on the unit that college isn't for us?

So where do you see yourself in five years? Whether you will be back in society, or still incarcerated, I promise you if you stay on this path of trying to do the next right thing and stay focused, whatever you're envisioning right now, will be eclipsed by something even more powerful, even bigger than what you can conceptualize.

Chris is now the executive director of Life of Purpose, a nonprofit organization that provides accessible drug treatment to college students while they remain in school. Chris dedicates his life to helping others overcome or avoid substance use disorder and supports a public health-based approach to substance misuse.





THE REAL WORLD OF WORK

Free Minds Member Works at the Youth Home Where He Grew Up

By Jess

Varvie has been a Free Minds member since 2004, when he was 17 and at the DC Jail. He always liked the poetry, and it was a great outlet in his transition going from DC Jail, to Montgomery County, back to the DC Jail, and to the feds. When he came home, he was really focused on taking steps in the right direction, making sure not to waste his time.

"I went from one job, to two jobs, to three jobs, so after a while Ms. Keela advised me to be careful, she said you know you don't want to burn yourself out."

Varvie is currently working at Sasha Bruce Youthwork as a direct care staff member! After growing up in the youth home himself, he decided to go back out there to see how he could give back to the community that had helped him.

"I always kept in contact with them. There was a man there who had always been a big inspiration to me. So I called him, just to see how everyone was doing, so you know it helps to always keep in contact."

He decided that if he could change their life from how his turned out, doing all this time, he didn't want to see their lives end up the way his did: "You can change your life when you're young, before it really gets crazy. There's some things they can't get back, when they change their life forever."

I caught up with Varvie recently to hear more about his successful path and the work he is doing now.

What do you do every day at your job?

I'm a direct care staff, so I supervise the guys, make sure everything's calm, help them go see their probation officers, and assist them with a lot of things they need like getting medication and setting up appointments. It's a lot like working in a department of juvenile services. It's a work program as well – so I also try to teach the guys carpentry.

What do you love most about your job?

The best thing about working there is really giving back. It's trying to change guys' perspective of life – because you've got some guys

who have no hope. They've been neglected, some of them have been abused. You also have some guys that have been involved with the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DC) or Department of Juvenile Services (Maryland) and we get to help them before it gets to the next step of them being incarcerated. You know I'm trying to help build young men.

What is the most challenging thing about it?

The most challenging aspect is holding guys accountable and keeping them responsible. There are some guys here that, all they really know how to do is commit a crime, and they really have no one. It's really hard to communicate and work with them and be an example for them. But you have to have patience and understand that the way you came up doesn't mean they came up the same way. This is a different time. So we are trying to show them the importance of respect and manners, and that they will take you a long way – and you will see things differently.

What are the most important lessons you've learned while working at Sasha Bruce?

The most important lesson I've learned is you really, really have to humble yourself. And you also have to work on yourself. I'm not just dealing with the youth; I'm also dealing with their parents, their social workers, probation officers. If you don't humble yourself, you can come across as rude or disrespectful, especially when you are dealing with so many different types of people all day.

What message do you have for your Free Minds brothers looking for employment?

Out of 100, there will be 99 nos. But there's always one yes somewhere, so don't give up. Keep moving forward. Don't be discouraged if you get turned down, because if there's a will, there's a way. You just have to put your mind to it and find the determination to work.

Keep moving forward in the right direction, and definitely stick with Free Minds!

Varvie has been an avid reader for years, and his favorite book is As A Man Thinketh by James Allen.

EDUCATION SURVEY UPDATE

In the last issue, we asked you to fill out a survey about your education goals and so far, we've received **29** responses and counting. We learned so much about your interests, which were wide-ranging, including topics like business management, psychology, creative writing, culinary arts, communications, journalism, social work, real estate, and Islam. Thank you for sharing your needs and your dreams with us – we're working hard on researching ways we can best help with these goals and will do our best to support you.



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT FEDERAL AND LOCAL MARIJUANA POLICY

By Rashida, a defender at the Public Defender Service

In recent years, DC has changed its marijuana laws to allow its citizens to possess and use the drug recreationally, and for medical purposes. There are several things to think about before making the decision to take advantage of these changes, especially for people who are under some form of criminal justice supervision.

First, it is important to remember that every person in the United States is subject to their local laws and the federal laws at the same time. Regardless of supervision status, anyone who uses marijuana in DC is in violation of the federal criminal laws that prohibit the possession of marijuana for any reason. There did not used to be much risk of arrest and prosecution for possessing small amounts of marijuana for personal use because the Department of Justice had policy in place not to pursue those cases. However, with the recent change in administration, those policies have been **rescinded** (cancelled), and the new Attorney General (head of the Department of Justice) has indicated a different view on marijuana-related cases. There is nothing currently preventing recreational users in DC from being arrested and charged with criminal cases in federal court.

Federal laws aside, can a person on probation, parole, or supervised release use marijuana in accordance with DC laws and not face any consequences for their supervision? You must know what form of supervision you are subject to in order to answer this question.

People on probation are under the jurisdiction of the Superior Court judges who originally sentenced them. When DC allowed for recreational use of marijuana, it also made testing positive for marijuana not a violation of probation. Unless there is a specific reason in your case where a judge has ordered that you are not to use marijuana (the same way some people will be ordered not to drink alcohol, even though drinking alcohol is legal), you can use marijuana in compliance with DC law and not violate your probation.

However, people who are on either supervised release or parole have their cases decided by the United States Parole Commission, a federal agency and a part of the Department of Justice. The Commission views marijuana positive tests as violation of the terms of supervision. One of the conditions of supervision is that a person shall not violate any laws. The Commission believes that even use that is legal in DC is evidence of a person continuing to violate federal laws. Marijuana-positive tests are used to force

people into drug treatment; impose sanctions like additional reporting, GPS, and curfew; deny early termination of supervision; and to revoke supervision and send releasees back to prison. The Commission cannot be prevented from making these decisions when the marijuana use is purely recreational.

The Commission makes no distinction in the reason that supervisees are using, and has even punished people who use for medical reasons. However, while the United States Congress has not changed the federal drug laws to legalize medical use of marijuana, they have in the past several years refused to give the Department of Justice any money that can be used to prevent local medical marijuana laws from being fully implemented.

Federal courts have ruled that this congressional budget restriction prevents the prosecution of patients who use medical marijuana. The courts have not yet ruled on whether the budget restriction similarly prevents the Parole Commission from revoking patients who use medical marijuana. If a person can show, though, that the only marijuana positives they have incurred come from medical use that is fully compliant with the rules of DC's medical program – e.g. received and maintained valid registration through licensed doctor and Department of Health, got marijuana only through registered dispensaries, used in legal locations, etc. – then they may have standing to take the Parole Commission to court to challenge any action to prevent them from being able to take part in the medical marijuana program.

If you are on supervision and have questions about your ability to use marijuana, you can call the Public Defender Service at (202) 628-1200 and ask to speak to a duty day attorney.



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."*

An International Life: Austria to South Korea to the United States

By Jess

Hi Free Minds Family! My name is Jess and I'm the new intern this spring. I am super excited to be working here and have been so inspired by all of your poetry that I have gotten to read so far. I'm looking forward to reading what you all write next, and make sure to let me know what you think of this article. For this edition of Around the World, I thought I would take the opportunity to tell you a little bit about my life.

I'm currently in my second year at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. The beginning of my first year in college was a huge cultural adjustment for me. Obviously, living in a dorm with someone I had never met and eating in a dining hall were weird, but on top of that – I was living in a completely new country.

So many things seemed strange to me because I moved to the United States from South Korea, where I went to high school. I was living in South Korea because my dad was teaching history at a high school there, and my mom was helping out at an international adoptions agency. After the Korean War in the 1950s, hundreds of babies were shipped to the US and adopted by American families – and now a lot of them are getting the chance to go home for the first time. Just like being in a new place is challenging for any of us, coming home to a country you've never been to before can be a rewarding yet challenging process.

One of my favorite things about living in Korea is that there is street food everywhere. You can find something delicious to eat at any time of the day, even in the middle of the night! One of my favorite street foods to quench my late night munchies is curly potato chips fried on a stick.

Even though Korea feels like home to me now, when I first moved there, I felt completely out of place. Before my family moved to South Korea, we were living in Vienna, Austria. Living in Vienna, you really get to see history come to life. Most of the buildings are over hundreds of years old, and when you go downtown, you can walk right through the palaces where empresses used to live.

The aspect of Austria that I think I loved the most though, is how open people are to helping others. In the past three years, the Syrian Civil War has brought thousands of people to Austria in search of a new life. To make sure everyone knows that they are welcome, countless numbers of people wait at the train station with food, water, and toys for newly arrived refugee families.

Among other things, growing up in three different countries has taught me that every person you meet has something valuable to share with you or to teach you. That is why I am so excited to hear from all of you and learn about your unique perspectives and experiences that make up your stories.



Street corner in the neighborhood I grew up in Seoul, South Korea



Fried potato chips at a street food stand in Seoul, South Korea



IN THE NEWS

By John, Free Minds Friend

WORLD

Two major conflicts continue to dominate the global discussion. The most visible is North Korea's continued development of its nuclear capabilities. The nation, closed off to most of the world, may have the capacity to strike the United States mainland with a missile already.

Some hope on the horizon: North Korea has agreed in principle to discussions for the first time in a long while with its partner on the peninsula, South Korea. South Korea just finished hosting the Winter Olympics, and in an olive branch for peace, permitted North Korean athletes to compete under a unified flag with the South Koreans.

Another focal point is Syria, where civil war continues to rage as the regime of Bashar al-Assad continues to pound rebel-held areas of the country. The situation is a powder keg because of the many powerful countries with troops and money involved in the conflict. The list includes the United States, Turkey, Iran, and Russia.

Less reported, but a cause for concern, is the recent announcement that Cape Town, South Africa, will run out of tap water by the summer. The city of nearly 500,000 has exhausted its natural supply of drinkable water, and will be forced to contemplate more complex, and probably expensive, ways to supply the most necessary resource on Earth.



People have been forced to queue for extra water to top up their rations in Cape Town

NATIONAL

Four major headlines from the past month:

- The recent killing of 17 people at a Florida high school has prompted a fresh round of public debate about what can be done to prevent mass shootings. Among the proposals being championed by various groups involved in this discussion: restrictions on assault-style, high power weapons; stricter background checks or age limitations for gun purchases; arming more professionals in school settings; and increased attention to mental health indicators.
- Congress has struggled to find any room for compromise on an immigration deal, which has jeopardized the legal status given to certain young immigrants by the previous administration of Barack Obama.
- Obama established the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which permitted a path to legal status for people who arrived in the country illegally as young children. President Trump set that program to expire in early March, partially in hopes of forcing Congress to actually pass a law that would permanently protect these people. But Trump also wants funding for increased border security, and significant changes to the country's policies about legal immigration.
- The investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election has recently yielded 13 indictments of Russian citizens now formally charged with attempting to tamper with the presidential election.

ENTERTAINMENT

Black Panther, the first major studio superhero movie with a black lead character, opened this month to rave reviews and a massive draw at the box office. Already, the film has grossed over \$200 million, and is in the conversation for awards at next year's Oscars.



Black Panther

A quick plot summary: Centuries ago, five African tribes war over a meteorite containing vibranium. One warrior ingests a "heart-shaped herb" affected by the metal and gains superhuman abilities, becoming the first "Black Panther."

He unites all but the Jabari Tribe to form the nation of Wakanda. The Wakandans use the vibranium to develop advanced technology and isolate themselves from the world by posing as a Third World country.

The film was directed by Ryan Coogler, who also recently made *Fruitvale Station* and *Creed*. It stars Chadwick Boseman as T'Challa, the Black Panther, and Michael B. Jordan as N'Jadaka, who seeks to dethrone T'Challa.

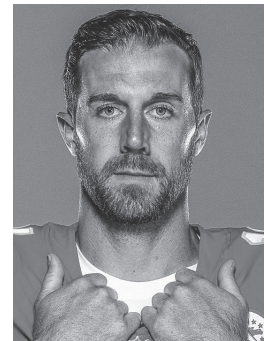
SPORTS

The New England Patriots again reached the Super Bowl this season, and arrived in Minnesota for the game as significant favorites to win. Their opponent: Redskins' rivals, the Philadelphia Eagles, who had played the best football of any team this season but lost their sensational starting quarterback Carson Wentz to injury in the later weeks of the regular season.



Philadelphia Eagles

The Eagles limped into the playoffs with a few mediocre games under Nick Foles, the backup QB. But in the playoffs, he brought the offense back to life. They torched the Minnesota Vikings 38-7 in the NFC Championship Game, then dropped 41 points on the Patriots to win the Super Bowl.



Alex Smith

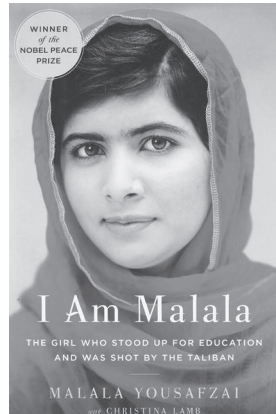
Meanwhile, it is another offseason of retooling and uncertainty for the Washington Redskins. The team acquired quarterback Alex Smith, formerly of the Kansas City Chiefs, which means they will almost certainly part ways with franchise QB Kirk Cousins.



BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

*The Free Minds long-distance book club
by Julia*

Hello Free Minds readers! By now, you should have received the book *I Am Malala* (let us know if you haven't!), the true story of Malala Yousafzai, a young woman who survived an assassination attempt and went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize. We asked you to think about a few questions while you were reading. Here are your responses. And as always, the conversation continues beyond the *Connect*... feel free to continue letting us know 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?

AL: Malala's life will forever be changed by the cowardly acts of the Taliban. However, her family faith, friends, and her resilience to overcome such obstacles has made her a force to be reckoned with for human rights... It is impossible to go through what people like Malala have gone through and not be affected. Life shows us there is a reaction to every action taken, and whether we are dealing with hate or love, we must all deal with the consequences.

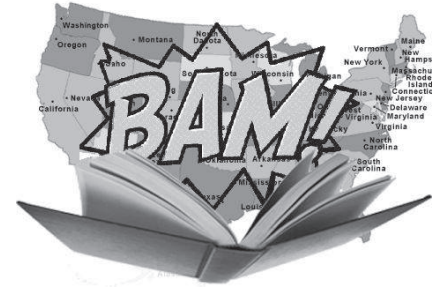
2. Malala wrote this book as a teenager, but she has already lived through extreme situations. Did you or anyone you know grow up too fast as some people would say about Malala?

AL: Too many of my close friends were forced to grow into adults due to the crack epidemic. Situations like that force children to take on the role of mother and father to support themselves or their siblings.

3. Malala argues that education is a human right. What does education mean to you? What happens when people don't have access to a good education?

EM: A lot of people need to hear the stories of so many other people from the world over that go through so much just to be educated when we as Americans take it for granted and drop out a lot.

EH: Malala is an amazing young lady. I wish there were more people in the world like her. She stands up for what she believes in. The Taliban is trying to repress the future of Pakistan because the children are the future. Think about all the kids here in the United States that don't go to school and wonder where their next meal is coming from. I have a 14-year-old daughter that lives in Mexico with her mom. She is a US citizen but her mom isn't, so she is being deprived the right to go to school in the US. The schools in Mexico are not very good at teaching the students there. This is a must-read book for all, and I respect Malala for all her work and wish her well and good luck. I think if one family taught one child to think like her and then taught another, we could change the world.



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?

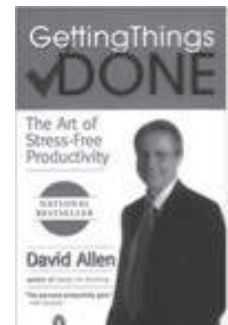
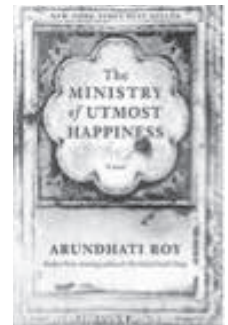
AL: Malala's statement speaks volumes, because what we read and learn from books opens one's eyes to the power of the pen. Whether it's through written laws that change human rights, or thought-provoking words that put new laws into place. The pen is mightier than the sword, while the book is more comforting than the shield. Malala's grandfather (Rahul Amin) quoted the founder and leader of Pakistan (Mohammad Ali Jinnah) as saying, "There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a third power stronger than both, that of women." Reading this beautiful story, I still find myself in shock of Malala! Her tenacity and will to fight and speak out against the Taliban, for the right of all children receiving an education is phenomenal. We tend to take for granted the blessings we have over here in America, not realizing that there are a million Malalas all around the world. I wish every child had the opportunity to read the words of this courageous young woman and learn from her words the importance of an education.



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."

- **Julia:** *The Changeling* by Victor LaValle: This is a strange (but awesome) novel set in New York City, about a man named Apollo, his absent father, and the mystery of what happened to Apollo's baby and his missing wife. Although it's in a realistic setting (NYC), the book has magical elements too. It's full of twists and turns so I don't want to give too much away. I loved it and would recommend it to anyone!
- **McKenzie, Friend of FM:** *The Ministry of Upmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy. It is set in India, within a cemetery, and it considers life and death and the path in between. I'm reading it for the beauty of the writing. I think it is amazing when writers can make an entire novel into poetry.
- **Heidi, Friend of FM:** *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. This book takes place in the seconds it takes a kid to decide whether or not to murder the guy who shot and killed his brother. As the main character, Will, rides the elevator to the ground floor of his building, it stops on each floor to accept passengers, who are all victims of gun violence. Ghosts. It's fast, it's furious; it's told in short, fierce staccato narrative verse, and I can't wait to see how it ends.
- **Jess, Intern:** *New Visions* by bell hooks. bell hooks is incredibly honest in exploring different aspects of our society (all the way from families and interpersonal relationships to how we think about money and work) and analyzing what it would mean for us to base them in love. It was an eye-opening read that made me reevaluate my values and how to think about my own upbringing. I would definitely recommend it!
- **PJ, FM Member:** I just finished reading *The Big Fight*, Sugar Ray Leonard's autobiography. I read about how he was, at one time, a drug user and alcoholic and how he dealt with and suppressed his experiences with sexual abuse, leading to anger towards and abuse of his wife. It led to a disconnect with his children and negative relationships with his family and friends. I learned he lived in DC at one time, where he started boxing.
- **Tara:** *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress Free Productivity* by David Allen. It was published 15 years ago and was a bestseller because Allen was a personal productivity guru in his time. It was so popular that people just said "GTD" when referring to his book and productivity method. I'm going for a gold medal in the productivity and organizational Olympics!



NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: CHOSEN FAMILY

We talk a lot about the Free Minds Family (#FMFam), but for this issue we'd like to explore that idea – the family that you choose, or that chooses you. There are families that we're born into, and families that we create. Sometimes the family that we're born into is not healthy, and we might have to distance ourselves from unhealthy influences. Some of us have friends that we consider family, mentors or older relatives that we look up to as parents. What makes someone family? Is it biological, or is it something else? How can we surround ourselves with positive influences who will accept and support us? How can our "chosen family" be there for us, and how can we be there for them?

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!