

July/August 2019  
Vol. 8, Issue 3

# Free minds Connect



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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!)

Please write us when you are transferred so we have your up-to-date address as soon as possible!

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**Next Issue's Theme:  
On the Same Page**

*The Connect is a bimonthly creative writing newsletter published by the members, staff, and friends of the Free Minds Book Club. Each issue focuses on a specific theme as well as highlights the discussions of the Free Minds long distance BAM! (Books Across the Miles) book club. We publish five issues per year.*

## TALK BACK WITH TARA *Letter from the Editor*

Happy Summer, wise and mature Free Minds Members!

I hope this issue finds you in strong spirits and filled with belief in new possibilities for the future. Our theme of Adulthood has brought forth incredible stories of overcoming the loss of childhood that so many of you have been forced to undergo. I remember when I was a TV producer and I first did a news story about the practice of incarcerating teens in the adult system. I asked myself how could we as a country hold youth to the same standard as adults, and how could we lock people up – sometimes for decades or longer – for actions committed when they were children? How misguided could lawmakers be to think this would bring about positive change and community safety? I feel some hope now as I see growing awareness of the causes and drastic consequences of incarcerating youth. All of you are contributing to this by sharing your stories!

"When They See Us," one of the most watched shows on Netflix ever, is playing a big part in changing the narrative of youth caught in the criminal legal system. The four-part drama by Ava Duvernay tells the true story of the "Central Park 5," teen boys in New York who were wrongfully convicted and later exonerated. Free Minds members David, Tyrone, and Cliff, and Free Minds Facilitator Norman, participated in a screening and panel discussion after a showing of episode 4 about the brutal experience of one of the boys, 16-year-old Korey Wise, in adult prison. I am so proud of them for their courage in sharing their personal stories. This is what changes laws. We are seeing this in DC with laws like the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act that allows for youth charged as adults to apply for judicial review after 15 years (page 11), or the Youth Rehabilitation Amendment Act (page 17) that gives young people the opportunity to have their conviction set aside. We must keep this progress moving forward.

A legacy of racism and fear mongering contributes to more youth of color being disproportionately arrested and incarcerated. A 2014 report showed that our society views African American boys as older than they really are – and this practice is a significant

factor that contributes to youth of color being charged as adults. By writing about your experiences, you are changing this narrative. On page 7, YA shares, "I'm glad that authorities are realizing that sometimes we commit mistakes but are not fully conscious of the damage that we are doing to the society, but most important to ourselves. Nobody wants to spend his whole life in prison, so why would a completely developed brain make that choice?"

VC illustrates the pressures so many young people experience, leading them to undertake what are called crimes of survival: "The point where I felt like I was an adult was at the age of 13 years old when I had to make decisions on my own because I had no parental guidance, which led me to have to adjust quickly to the crimes around me in order to provide for myself."

In an ideal world, every child would have the opportunity to develop into adulthood through a process of learning and exploration in a safe environment with caring adults. On page 4, Caleb shares a way that adults in his community used African Rites of Passage traditions to help prepare children for the transition to adulthood.

On page 10, JG shares his "Words of Wisdom" about how he made a conscious decision to learn from mentors and defy "the labels, stereotypes, and stigmas... so that when I am released, I am as prepared and grown up as I can possibly be."

There are so many inspiring stories of resilience and courage in this issue. When you read, the most important thing I want you to remember is that you are not alone on this journey. We are all with you.

Until next time,  
Tara

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

## FREE MINDS HQ

*All the latest updates on what's going on at the Free Minds office*

*By Jordan*

### How to Tie a Tie

In our weekly reentry book club titled "The Build Up," we hosted our own formerly incarcerated Free Minds member Nick for a session with the guys on how to tie a tie. This was a big session for the guys, and especially relates to our adulthood theme in the *Connect* because most members go into jail and federal prisons while they are still very young, and don't get this type of knowledge for things such as job



interviews, meetings with important people, etc. Everybody in the room gained something from the session, including myself, because I personally did not know how to tie a tie until I was 16 years old.

### Shaka Senghor Visit

A couple of weeks ago, Free Minds hosted formerly incarcerated author Shaka Senghor (*Writing My Wrongs*) for a visit in our office. Shaka was incarcerated at the age of 19 for second degree murder, and during his time spent in prison, he says that his child was his motivation for changing his life around.

### PBS NewsHour

Free Minds members were on nationwide TV! PBS NewsHour, a program watched by people all over the country, aired a segment about Free Minds, including the book club on the Young Men Emerging Unit at the DC Jail (where they were discussing *The Hate U Give*) and one of our community outreach sessions at a local elementary school.



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

# FREE MINDS MAILBAG

*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the March/April/May 2019 Connect on Healing.*

**VC:** Rita's story really touched me because for one, I really hate that she had to go through that, the losing of her sons. Second of all, I'm all too familiar with losing people to violence. But what really hurt me is knowing that I was once a full-fledged participant in that nonsense. You can't imagine the agony that's attached to realizing the things I've done and not being able to fully articulate my remorse. That's traumatizing right there, but I can't expect most to even understand, or try to understand.

**DK:** Congressman John Lewis Fellow Josh – Forgiving yourself... it's something I have struggled with since my arrest. Please tell me exactly how one does this. I want so bad to forgive myself, but it's just not as simple as saying "I forgive myself." I don't know how to put behind me my crimes, the guilt eats at me daily. I have forgiven everyone that's did me wrong. My victims have written me, one has even visited me a few years ago to express their forgiveness for me, but I just don't know how to forgive myself. Can you help?

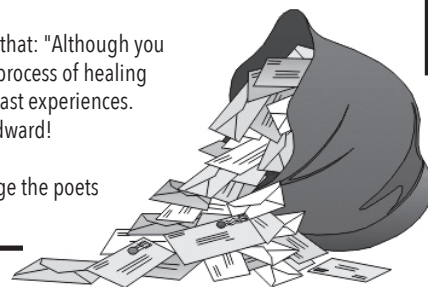
**RJ:** A Walk by Myself with my Own Thoughts... Lord knows I felt like he wrote this about me, and was writing it to me all at the same time, because it's true what he said, I notice it when I am down, in others that around me "When I am not able to heal, I only pass on a highly contagious sickness" because I start to see the negative in others due to how I act around them when I am being negative or seem to be depressed. Thank you RJ.

**Julia's Mom:** Grief in Solitude... yes I suffered that once, with my brother's death. My parents honestly thought that they were protecting me while here in prison when my brother went missing, and then later was found dead. They didn't tell me for quite some time. It is most definitely harder to process and grieve when you have no one to do it with at the time of the death. Sure they were comforting me, but I wasn't able to share with them the grief as they did with other family members when it first happened. Thank you for letting me know that it's not okay to suffer grief in solitude. I appreciate your perspective.

**JL:** In James's article, he gives very thoughtful advice on dealing with being separated from a spouse while incarcerated. In the seventh paragraph James says to help (your loved ones) "...understand your situation rather than make demands and be mindful of the impact your current situation has on their life!" Many who are incarcerated should read James' words because most times those of us locked up do the opposite of what he suggests – we want our loved ones, particularly our wives and girlfriends, to make up for the lack our incarceration puts on us! So James is right when saying that an understanding between an incarcerated person and their loved one needs to take place to alleviate some of the problems that may arise due to one's incarceration.

I also appreciate Edward for writing the article "We Repeat What We Don't Repair!" I totally agree when Edward states that: "Although you are not to blame for the trauma you experienced in the past, you are 100% responsible for taking ownership over the process of healing from it!" At some point, I have applied Edwards three prongs to work on healing my own personal trauma caused by past experiences. What Edward says not only works, but helps confirm that I'm on the right track. I really appreciate the article. Thanks Edward!

The poems written by fellow FM members are also a good read. I really enjoy reading them and would like to encourage the poets to keep writing to express yourselves. Someone is always reading what you write to express!



## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*"I am convinced that most people do not grow up... We marry and dare to have children and call that growing up. I think what we do is mostly grow old. We carry accumulation of years in our bodies, and on our faces, but generally our real selves, the children inside, are innocent and shy as magnolias."* – Maya Angelou, author (*Letter to My Daughter*)

*"Now that you're an adult, take refuge in the fact that some things are beyond your control. You owe it to yourself to steer clear of people who are harmful to your health."* – Andrea Lavinthal, author (*Your So-Called Life*)

*There is an expiry date on blaming your parents for steering you in the wrong direction; the moment you are old enough to take the wheel, responsibility lies with you.* –JK Rowling, author (*Harry Potter* series)

*"The great challenge of adulthood is holding on to your idealism after losing your innocence."* –Bruce Springsteen, musician

*"Childhood is not from birth to a certain age, and at a certain age the child is grown, and puts away childish things. Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies."* – Edna St. Vincent Millay, poet



JK Rowling, author (*Harry Potter* series)



## FAMILY TIES

### From One Generation to the Next: Passing on African Rites of Passage

by Caleb, FM Member

I was 12 when I went through the Rites of Passage program. My older brother did it before me. Our father especially wanted us to do it. I was nervous because I'd heard how hard it was. But I wanted to go. I understood that this marked an important transition for me.

The program is based upon African principles to prepare teenaged boys for the passage from childhood to adulthood. In Africa, they believe it's important to take the boys out away from the village, away from their mothers and the other women. So they took us away too – for three months, every weekend we left DC. My father was a Baba. That's like a father figure for boys who don't have their own father.

The most important part of the program was the brotherhood. Everyone was in a group of seven boys. We did everything together. We woke up and exercised together. We ate together. We learned our ceremonial step dances together. Sometimes they took us out into the woods in Virginia and we had to work together to find the things we needed to take care of ourselves. I learned from that experience that I am nothing without my brothers. We had to count on each other all the time. For example, we often had physical challenges. One was to carry cement blocks in a wheelbarrow up and down hills to get to the water. It was the middle of winter and it was freezing cold. We each had our own heavy wheelbarrow and the hills were steep! If one of my brothers was weaker than I was and was having trouble, I couldn't leave him behind. And if I was struggling, my brothers would help me. It was all of us or nobody. This has taught me so much, because being an adult isn't about being selfish. We have to stick together and take care of each other.

The men taught us about the culture of Africa where my ancestors come from. This is something that is really missing for a lot of African American boys. They don't know who they are. To truly know who you are, you have to understand your history. At the end of each day, I would talk about the activities with my father.

The whole program led up to a special graduation ceremony at the end. Each group had a part in the ceremony. My group performed a ceremonial dance that we had spent hours learning and perfecting. When it was over, everyone was shaking my hand and giving me congratulations. It just felt so good! I could tell that both my mind and my body were right. I had learned discipline and better understood my own culture. I had matured. And I felt so important!

A few years later, when I was incarcerated at the age of 16, in some ways I felt I had been blindsided by reality. I was forced to deal with my mistakes and their consequences, and adapt to a fully adult environment. There is always so much more to learn. But I believe that my experience in the Rites of Passage program was critical for me. It laid the foundation for me to become a man. In African rites of passage traditions, there are often tests and ordeals, many of them involving pain. This is based on the belief that suffering is an essential part of developing your personhood. I'm still on the road and there's lots of hills and speed bumps that people don't tell you about. Everyone's story is different. But if you have a willing heart and a contrite spirit, you can make it through.

We learned a lot of proverbs at Rite of Passage, and one that I really grasped on to was: "It's the man that tastes the bitter medicine." The proverb reminds us that life isn't always easy. Sometimes you will be outside of your comfort zone. And when that happens, you're going to want to quit and give up on yourself. Especially when you don't have a lot of people in your corner. I have to go out of my comfort zone almost every day. I swallow my pride and turn the other cheek and let the opposition get the last word. I have definitely tasted the bitter medicine. That's hard, but I've been doing it a lot.

Because I remember what my elders taught me.

## ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

*Hey Free Minds Fam! Exciting news from HF... you might be familiar with the DC law, the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act. Through this bill, people sentenced in DC Superior Court who were "Title 16" youth charged as adults can get a possible sentence reduction after 15 years. Well, HF came home this spring after more than 20 years in prison. So next time we hear from HF, he might be sharing his "Advice from the Outside" instead. Please join us in congratulating HF and welcoming him home!*

*We asked some of our readers to pitch in with their own advice, and then a committee of Free Minds members read through the responses. Today we're sharing Advice from JL. If you'd like to participate in this column in the future, let us know! Anyway, take it away, JL!*

Dear Advice Man:

Ever since I turned 16, I always thought I wouldn't be able to have children. None of the people I was ever with got pregnant. I love kids and so it was something that made me really sad. Well, now I am about to become a father. To go from thinking you'll never have children, to learning you're going to be a father? I'm not gonna lie. I was so happy when I first found out! To be honest though, the excitement is beginning to fade. Reason being, my girlfriend is so negative and moody. I don't even like to talk with her. She's not who I thought she was when we started talking. And now we're going to have a kid together. When we talk, all we do is fight argue and fight. So here I am, about to bring a kid into the world, one of the most "grown up" things I'll ever do, and now all I can feel is confused. I didn't have a father in my life coming up. Not every day anyway. And I always swore I wouldn't be one of those kind of dads. I will be home soon, but I just don't know if I can stay with my baby's mother. But what am I gonna do? I need help.

Sincerely,  
SD

Dear SD:

What you're going through with your future child's mother is almost a common thing. I went through the exact same with my children's mom. Your arguments, doubts, her moodiness is common. And you are probably catching a lot of it because you're the father of the baby, meaning you're to blame for what she's experiencing (in her eyes). Trust when I say that her doubts and confusion are bigger than yours as chances are she has more than witnessed that women are often left raising the child(ren) on their own while the father runs away (in some form or fashion) pursuing or attempting to pursue his own ambitions. Due to the pregnancy, her life is a new reality that has put her on an emotional roller coaster. And you're catching some of its effects.

Focus on the child and let her see that you mean business when it comes to being a good father. Never lose focus on the child! Even if you and the mother split up and move on with your separate lives she'll respect you in the long run and respect goes further than love sometimes. Love is an emotion which can come and go like the wind – respect can be permanent no matter how one is feeling at the time. Show your child how much you love and respect him or her by being there the best you can regardless of how the relationship between you and the mother goes. The mom will see a man, and everyone respects a man, especially children.

And try to remember that you're not alone in feeling the doubt, frustrations, and hurt. And be prepared for more of that to come from time to time. Being a father is not a free, exhilarating ride that many may think it is. But whatever one experiences and endures during the journey of fatherhood is what makes him a man and deserving to be called "Dad".

Sincerely,  
JL





# CONVERSATION WITH NEELY

*The column where different members of the Free Minds family – staff, volunteers, interns, members, and more – share their perspective on the theme*

Hello Free Minds Family!

My name is Neely and I am the new Program Associate for Free Minds, where I work as part of the Prison Book Club team.

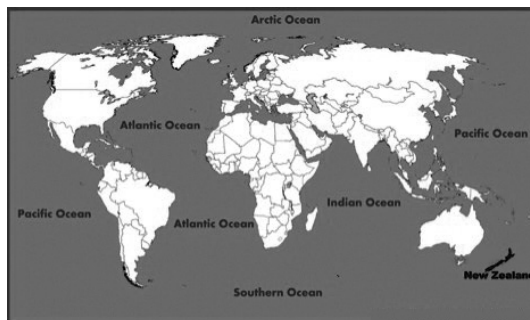
As I sit here on a rainy Monday afternoon drinking my coffee (with hazelnut creamer – the best kind of course!), I realize that the dark, cloudy skies outside are somewhat reflective of some of my feelings and experiences towards adulthood. When I was asked to write an article on this issue's theme of adulthood, I mildly panicked. Who was I to write about adulthood? What even is adulthood and how was I going to talk about it with so many people?

Growing up in Mississippi, I thought I had this whole adulthood thing figured out. I would become a teacher, get happily married, and have five kids – all before the age of thirty. This is what was expected for women in the south. Fast forward to my mid-twenties, and I can now say that I am nowhere close to the "adult" my 8-year-old self imagined.

After graduating college, I had a quarter-life crisis where I asked myself, "Okay, Neely, what is it that you *really* want to do with your life?" Realizing that I did not know, I ran away. I applied for a working visa and ran as far away as I possibly could – to New Zealand. Looking back now, I think I was running away from being an adult and what I thought were adulthood responsibilities. The irony of it all is that in doing so, I realized that being an adult is more complex than what I had thought. Alone, with no family or friends within 1,000 miles, I realized that this was all on me. I now had to be the adult in my life. Needing to provide for myself, I found small jobs at a mandarin (small, baby oranges) farm, as a waitress, and a bartender. In these jobs, I befriended people from all around the world who were similar in one way – we were all trying to figure out this "adult" thing. I made a friend from Italy who had come to New Zealand to escape the pressures of having to run his father's business. I became close to a Chilean girl who had broken up with her partner and felt burnt out at her office job, so she came to New Zealand to try and figure out her life. I befriended a Maori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) man who was in his 30s and had left his rural village in the north to pursue economic opportunities in Auckland (New Zealand's biggest city), which had gotten in the way of his other desires to have a family. Looking back now, I realize that the journey of figuring out what adulthood is, and realizing that it may not be as obvious as we first think, is universal.

So, in conclusion, what is adulthood to me? Adulthood is finding out how expensive toilet paper really is (don't get me started). Adulthood is trying to grill vegetables and accidentally burning them. Adulthood is realizing that I am, indeed, turning into my mother ("Bless my heart," as she would say in her southern drawl). Adulthood is drinking more water. Adulthood is finding out the type of person I want to be in life and striving to achieve that. Adulthood is learning that happiness is found in experiences and people, not material items. In New Zealand, I was working long hours as a waitress and as a farm hand. It was taxing, but in the process I made friends from all around the world. The money from my job helped buy clothes and my first car, but it was the laughter, smiles, and friendships that brought me true joy and happiness. Finally, adulthood is trying. All of these things, at least, are what adulthood is to me. So, what is adulthood to you?

As I currently try to shift through the hazy clouds of adulthood, I am reminded that clouds are not forever. Learning what it means to be an adult is not a linear process, but a journey that is constantly evolving. As we all continue to travel on this journey of adulthood and try to understand what that means, I have hope that the clouds will eventually go away, and the sun will be there to shine on us.



I worked on a mandarin orange farm that looked like this.

## MEMBERS *CONNECT*: ADULTHOOD

### What Children Suffer in My Neighborhood

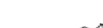
*By Nick*

With the murder rate increasing here in DC, I remember when I was 15 years old. It was a windy, cold, dark night, with a full white moon. I was in my bed wrapped in my blanket like a caterpillar in its cocoon. Warm as ever. I was in a deep dream about how fly I was gonna look the next day at school in my new Foamposite and outfit that I had laid out at the edge of my bed. Then I was awakened by the sound of what appeared to be a small rock hitting my window. I quickly got up from my bed, went to my window, and lifted the blinds up slowly to see who was on the other side of the window in the windy, cold, dark night.

It was only my man, Lil Jay. Lil Jay was dripping with sweat as if he just ran a marathon. He was breathing heavy and told me that he just saw someone get killed in the laundry room of the apartment building he was walking by, and he think that the killer may have saw him. Because it was late and I didn't want to wake anyone else up in the house, I just told him to climb through my window and that he can stay the night. That night Lil Jay didn't sleep. He stayed up until the morning came and was gone.

The next time I saw Lil Jay he was packing heat, and he said that he was never gonna get caught slipping in these streets.

I tell this story because I want to bring awareness about the PTSD that children suffer from in high violent crime neighborhoods. Trauma care should be the most effective treatment to bring about change in our communities. In these communities where any form of violence occurs almost every minute, how can we deny that the rates of PTSD are just as high or higher than Iraq, Afghanistan, or Vietnam veterans? We have a whole population that is traumatized, and these are children who have fallen into the cycle of being taught "to get or be gotten," or like Lil Jay who simply witnessed a homicide that made him feel the need to always have a gun on him. So next time you think of PTSD, let's not forget about our children or adults who have fallen into the mix of violence in these communities, and think how we can bring about mental healing in the communities. Because they too are soldiers fighting for peace and freedom of mind.



## MEMBERS *CONNECT*: ADULTHOOD

### My Life By CM

I was born and raised in NE D.C. Some call it being cursed at birth; I just call it my life. Before I was born, my father was shot 7 times. He survived and got my mother pregnant with me. At the time of my birth, my father was doing 16 to life down Lorton, so the abandonment started early. At first it was just me, my big sister, and my mother. With my father being in prison, my mother started hustling. Two years into my father's bid and 3 days after my second b-day, my mother was shot and killed. At the time I didn't understand. I was too young. But the tragedy and damage had just started.

Me and my sister were pushed off to our grandmother; none of our other family wanted anything to do with two kids. By age seven, I was already into everything kids are supposed to stay away from. A year later, one of my cousins who is around the same age as me came to visit. We got into a fight and I beat him up then pushed him down the stairs. He cried and told my grandmother on me. I got yelled at and sent to my room. As I'm laying on my bed, he comes in and puts the steaming hot iron on my back. You could smell my skin burning. I suffered 3rd degree burns. I still have the iron imprint on my back till this day.

After that, CPS got involved and I got welcomed into a nasty system called foster care. After running away from 2 homes, the system allowed my grandmother to legally adopt me; so, I was back home but I was still mad at the world and I'm only 10. At age 12, I made my first visit to Oak Hill Youth Center and it wouldn't be the last. When I turned 14, I got shot and as I'm laying in my own blood, nobody said

I'm going to be okay, the only thing my homies said was, "Don't tell the police who shot you." I went from the hospital back to Oak Hill; that became my 2nd home.

On Sunday, July 21 2004, I'm still at Oak Hill. We had a football game on this day but I didn't get to play; I had a visit and it was my father who I never met. It was a good feeling, but I was too angry at him to enjoy the visit. My childhood was rough. At 17, I was arrested and Titled 16. I just had my daughter and now here I was, repeating the same cycle as my father. I was hurt, but now I was mad at myself. I beat my charge and that's when I grew up. I told myself that I need to be here for my child. So, I tried to change, but I stayed in the same environment, which makes it impossible for full change. Now I've been incarcerated for 12 years and I can say prison helped shape me into a real man. My views are clear, I'm happy with who I am, I'm a great father from prison, and I do all I can to help others change and want better for their lives and future. You can do it if I can. Just apply positive things and people to your life.



### Finding Purpose By CS

I'm highly overwhelmed by the many memories of my transcending adulthood. I've been on my own since I was 14 years old, born and raised in Norfolk, Virginia for the most part. I wound up in Washington, D.C. where I would wind up residing for 18 months, just before my 15th birthday. I was alone, motivated by my inexperience and curiosity. It was 1996 and I was residing in the North East Trinidad area. If you're 35 years old, or older, you can vaguely visualize where my reality began to unfold.

I relied on instinct during that time of my life to help me navigate through that chapter of life as a juvenile delinquent. A couple of years thereafter, I began to rely on experience. Still young, alone, and clueless, but comfortable (back and forth, from D.C. to the 757 Hampton Roads area). I had friends and associates, but no family in the D.M.V. area (where I mainly resided)! The aspect of friends as associates was one I was striving to fully understand, until I began to overstand! To be familiar with something (life) is to understand it (reality)! To know and acknowledge something, is to overstand it. To overstand something, you have to utilize it (wisdom). Otherwise, you're not manifesting your knowledge. Now that I'm older and wiser, I make it my business to educate myself (pay attention) on a variety of subjects. That way, I'm not forced to play Russian roulette in an attempt

to live. Also, I don't speak on stuff I don't know about; unless, of course, I'm striving to educate myself on a topic. As an adult, I'm experiencing the aspect of finding purpose in everything I do. It's healthy. It's refreshing! And of course, it's always a blessing. To be able to experience maturity. It's the best part of adulthood!

Did I say, Adulthood?

Indeed.



### Forced to Think and Act as an Adult By GD

The Apostle Paul once wrote: "When I was a child I did childish things, but now that I'm a grown man I must cast those childish ways aside." If we are to look at adulthood from this aspect it would mean that being an adult is not doing things that are childish. Yet, is there such a way one must behave or understand adulthood? Is this notion of adulthood another social construction that we all adhere to blindly? Coming into prison at the age of 16, my perception of being an adult was not to be like the "adults" that I was surrounded by. So, an adult to me is a person who has morals and ethics; a person who understands the notion of responsibility; a person who is upright and intelligent; a person who not only wants the best for themselves, but also for those around them. When I reached adulthood, I knew who I was and who I wanted to be.

I never thought about adulthood as a child because I was placed in a situation where I was forced to think and act as an adult. If I could ever go back and tell my

younger self what lies ahead, I would let my younger self know that all that you hold will become you – only difference would be you will have a different body and an older face. How we are nurtured gives us our notion of who we are supposed to be and how we are to act.



# MEMBERS CONNECT: HEALING

## Charged as an Adult

By YA

If somebody asked me, "Are you the same guy that you were 11 years ago? Are you still thinking like the guy you were 11 years ago?" I would answer those questions with a definite "HELL NO."

I'm not that same kid that used to act by impulse, not thinking about the consequences of anything he did either good or bad, or how many people he was going to affect or hurt. I'm not that kid that used to think that he was invincible, unstoppable, and that nobody can tell him what to do or what not to do.

Looking back at those years, the only thing that came to my mind is "How could I've been so dumb." But it was not completely my fault. Unfortunately my brain was not completely developed at the time, and I couldn't make the best decisions at that moment, especially under pressure.

Even though I vow to myself not to commit the same mistakes over and over since the very beginning of incarceration, I've just started to see things different, with a different view, a different judgment I would say, since like 2 years ago. I'm 28 now and I got locked up when I was 17.

Now I'm like, "So this is how old people see the world." I would say that everything is based in experience and education in life, period.

I'm glad that the laws are changing on how to judge the juveniles. I'm glad that authorities are realizing that sometimes we commit mistakes but are not fully conscious of the damage that we are doing to the society, but most important to ourselves. Nobody wants to spend his whole life in prison, so why would a completely developed brain make that choice? And to emphasize that sometimes we don't have no choice.

## I Became a Man While Incarcerated The Write Way: My Bildungsroman

By LC

As I ride down 6 St, in the back of an MPD squad car, on my way to the Robbery Division downtown, I look to the city I love, knowing it is going to be a long time before I see these city streets again. I'm 19 and I've just been caught on the scene of a robbery gone wrong. Plus, I'm currently on the run from a case I was Title 16 for and given 3 years of probation. I'm certain this is going to end with a long sentence and even though I am now "legally" of age I know that I am merely a child soon to enter a man's world.

The bus ride from the D.C. jail to Harrisburg, PA didn't seem like that long. I had a lot on my mind. I had 206 months (17 years and 2 months). At now 20 years of age, I was headed to the feds, a United States Penitentiary. Before this trip, the D.C. jail was all I had known about prison. I had done 9 months on North One's juvenile block at 17, where I first became a Free Minds member, penning two poems - my first ever. Then I had sat on the adult block NW2 for the last 10 months before making this trip.

Nothing can really prepare a 20-year-old kid for the penitentiary. I soon found out I was the 2nd youngest person on the compound. For a while, I just watched all the big homies and tried to mimic them. I always knew the strong survived in this type of environment so I ain't take no s\*\*\* and was always quick to fight in those early days. But trying to fit in got me quickly caught in a web of greed I never saw coming.

Being as though I wasn't a complete fool while I was free, I had access to about \$20,000 when I got locked-up. So, when I came to the feds young and naïve I wanted eagerly to fit in with the crowd. I noticed that gambling was a favorite social pastime for inmates. So, I learned how to play tickets (bet on sports), I learned how to play poker, shot cee-lo and I already knew how to play craps, as it's a favorite on many D.C. corners. Any true gambler will tell you learning cost a lot. And it did. Over my first 18 months, I lost thousands of dollars. Plus, I was also spending

thousands on the phone, commissary, email, and drinking lightning (prison alcohol).

All this made me "feel" like a man. Everybody knew my name. I was financially able to do anything I wanted in the feds but I was going nowhere. And after also looking out for a couple of people on the street I was also almost broke! Only down to a few thousand dollars with still well over a decade to do in prison. I was 22 and even though I thought I was doing adult things I quickly realized that if I didn't change and grow up fast this would be a long, hard 17 years in prison.

So I signed up for the Challenge program. This program starts asking some key questions that I hadn't really thought about before. Like what am I doing NOW to prepare me for the world? When freedom finally does come for me, what type of person do I want to be? They talked about taking responsibility for your life and placing yourself on course to accomplish your life goals and dreams, first knowing what those dreams are. As I began to complete the packets and classes, I felt a change. I was no longer running around reckless, but preparing myself for manhood. I stopped feeling like the child who wanted to "fit in," but the man who was headed somewhere in life. I learn that the penitentiary for me did not have to be all work-call, gambling and getting high, but a school in which I could master my skills and ideas and go home at 34 ready, finally, for adulthood.

So, two years to freedom, just passed my 32nd birthday with 12 years and 4 months down. I can say I became a man while incarcerated. I've learned what it means to be an adult. What accountability means. What responsibility means. And I owe it all to the penitentiary.



## At what point did I feel like an adult?

By VC

The point where I felt like I was an adult was at the age of 13 years old when I had to make decisions on my own because I had no parental guidance, which led me to have to adjust quickly to the crimes around me in order to provide for myself. You see, I had the misconception that an adult did what they wanted, how they wanted,

when they wanted, and to whom they wanted. The real time is when (decades later) I challenged my erroneous concept; it was then that I realized that I didn't have the slightest clue in my wonder years. And with that recognition I begin to delve into adulthood.



# THE WRITE WAY

## Lessons from Famous Speeches

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

*By Imanee*

Good day to my Free Minds family! I hope you all are experiencing the utmost positive vibrations, and that this next article uplifts you. This "Write Way" will focus on one thing every single soul on this planet has in common: the vast power of words!

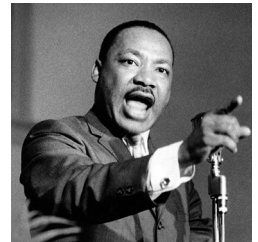
Freedom of speech is defined as "the right to express any opinions without censorship or restraint." However, the definition goes much deeper than that. Words are freedom, in that they give us the power to express our most intimate thoughts and emotions, influence people's opinions (whether positively or negatively) or even advocate for one's rights. We need words for everything: applying for jobs, communicating with parents, writing publications such as the *Connect*. But as the old phrase goes, when it comes to words what really matters is, "Not what you say, but *how* you say it," as all words – when put in the right order – can convey or show a powerful message. The *tone* or writer's attitude towards a feeling or situation can be positive, negative, uplifting, spiteful, etc.

Words can also *allude* or hint at the future or past. In Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech, "I Have a Dream," what kind of future does he allude to?

*"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.*

*This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: "My country, 'tis of thee sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride from every mountainside, let freedom ring!"*

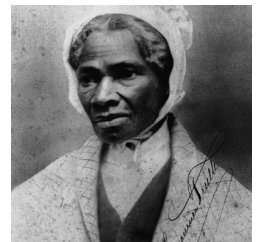
*And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring..."*



Words also give you the power to express your deepest emotions and desires. For example, even in times of bondage, Sojourner Truth (pictured below) – an African American abolitionist and women right's activist – had words to free her. Check out her speech, "Ain't I A Woman?" She uses a technique called contrast to convey different ideas. Think about phrases where contradictory or opposite words appear together, such as "bittersweet" or "deafening silence."

*That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?*

*If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.*



Do you see any examples of oxymoron or themes (central ideas) that contradict or are opposite to each other in her speech? What main emotions does she express in this speech? Have you ever felt emotions such as this before?

Now, I have a challenge for you!

1. Write a speech/poem that *alludes* to something, whether in the past or present. For example, if you allude to the past, you can write a speech where you are in Martin Luther King's time period and addressing crowd of people, or allude to the future, and what you hope the future brings.
2. Write a speech/poem where the main themes are contradictory. Try to focus on 1 to 3 main emotions that you want to convey to the crowd.
3. Write a speech/poem about what the phrase "freedom of speech" means to you.

Words are freeing! No one can confine your thoughts! I can't wait to see what amazing things you come up with, using the power of YOUR words.





# PAYING IT FORWARD

## Making College a Reality for Young People

Interview with Ruth, Educational Youth Director – By Imanee

Ruth is the Director of the Educational Talent Search Program (TRIO) and Upward Bound program director at the Southern University of New Orleans. TRIO includes seven programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post-college. Upward Bound targets high school youth from families where both parents do not hold a Bachelor's degree. Its primary goal is to have each and every member graduate from college with little to no debt, and assist them on journeys through adulthood.

*Southern University at New Orleans*



**Imanee:** Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, and how you got started with T.R.I.O. and Upward Bound?

**Ruth:** I'm the director of the Educational Talent Search Program and Upward Bound math and science program director at the Southern University of New Orleans. After I finished my Bachelor's degree in Social Work, I applied for the job with the Educational Talent Search Program. I got the job and I loved the work that I did. I worked with low income, potential first generation college graduates, where neither parent had a 4 year degree. I did that for 9 years. When I applied for the Director of Educational Talent Search position in 2005, Hurricane Katrina came shortly after. During the evacuation, we helped the children in our program by providing information and assistance in getting college admissions and financial aid scholarships. Then, in 2017 my team and I were successful in obtaining the Upward Bound math/science grant, and I directed that program.

**Imanee:** Since you work with a lot of youth, what do you think are their biggest challenges leading up to adulthood?

**Ruth:** The biggest challenge they face is education. The population that I serve, they don't receive first quality educational opportunities. Hence, they are not prepared for college so in adulthood they struggle. Also, many don't take high school seriously because the quality of education is so poor. They flounder. Because of media – TV, movies, social media – they are fully exposed to the finer things in life remotely, but with no opportunity to earn those things so they end up frustrated and angry. Therefore, many have made choices that alter their lives.

**Imanee:** What was your hardest challenge leading up to adulthood, and how did you overcome it?

**Ruth:** I got started rather late in life. I was one of those troubled youth. I was pregnant in high school then got married after graduation and I had a baby. I had 3 children before I went to college, and by that time I had been divorced, widowed and with no college degree. I realized the hardship I faced in trying to earn a living with small children and no post-secondary education. So, I went back to school and realized that my children, who were by that time college-age themselves, were not going to college. They'd start and drop out. So, I thought, "Maybe I need to set an example." Though rather late, that was my primary

reason for going to college – to set an example for my own children. At that time I did not know about the statistics and body of knowledge stating that children of parents who had no 4 year degree had a far less likelihood of completing college themselves.

**Imanee:** What is the most memorable moment or experience you've had at your job?

**Ruth:** The most memorable moment happened early on as I learned my job. As a young girl, the Ford Foundation had awarded our area a grant called "Project Opportunity." In that grant, 70 children were selected from 6th grade and we were provided a counselor, Ms. Holmes, who advised us and provided our academic and cultural advisement. We were taken to live theater, live cultural music performances and provided the best teachers in our segregated schools. Years later, I realized that Talent Search resembled less opportunity because we didn't get funds that allowed us to expose all our participants to those type of cultural activities. I loved theater, I loved to read and I was given the opportunity to experience those things through Project Opportunity. So, I wanted to provide similar opportunities to the students that I served through Talent Search.

**Imanee:** What is the hardest part of your job?

**Ruth:** The hardest part of my job is the limitation that we have in providing the services that are needed. We serve so many students with so little funding. I believe we could have a far bigger impact if we were provided sufficient resources to adequately serve more participants.

**Imanee:** How do we prepare ourselves and our children for adulthood in America?

**Ruth:** I believe it's a societal issue. As a society, we have to value education and our children. We do not do that. The checkbook shows you where your value lies. We spend our money on entertainers, athletes, CEOs get the lion's share of the income, and the pittance we relegate to education and protection of our children. It shows a great disparity. It's upside down. As a society, we need government to actually lead, to put an emphasis on education by putting real effective dollars to provide our young people with education. Then, we need to make college accessible. Those who do struggle and go to college end up with unbelievable debt. It becomes an upside down experience. When you leave college ready to take your place in the world, you should not be saddled with insurmountable debt.

**Imanee:** Many of our Free Minds members are adolescents; do you have any advice concerning adulthood you would like to share with them?

**Ruth:** We do this workshop with adolescents at our program: "Imagine if when you were born, there was a fund established to give you a million dollars – but you never know about it. How much good would it do you?" The students have to respond "none" because you don't know about the funds. So I tell them "We're here to help you find those funds, and make use of them." Find scholarships, find grants and go to college and leave debt free. In the prison system there are educational opportunities. Find out what opportunities there are. Your body can be incarcerated but YOU decide whether to incarcerate your mind – nobody can do that do you. Read, take advantage of G.E.D programs within the facilities. And most importantly, expand your mind. Find out what's available to you and make it work for you.



# REENTRY PROFILE: PAYING THE BILLS

*by Davon, Free Minds Member*

A lot of us thought we were grown when we started living the street life. For me, it happened when I was about 13. I got into the streets and was starting to get money. I used it to buy shoes and clothes, but I also pitched in with the bills at home. I thought, "Oh yeah, I'm an adult now!"

And a lot of times, we reach the age of 18 or even 21, and we're still thinking this way! Just making money doesn't make you grown. Not if you're making poor decisions. There are guys bringing home money who are still buying new shoes instead of taking care of their own necessities and helping others. You need to make sure everything is straight before you start spending on things you don't need. For example, my job requires me to go across town. I was taking several buses and the train. It wasn't working. I was arriving to work late because I couldn't always count on public transportation. I needed to get a car if I was going to keep my job. Well, putting up the money for a car meant I was going to have to go without my phone for a month. I didn't want to do it, but I knew I had to have my priorities right. I couldn't lose my job.



Recently, I have learned that being an adult is about a lot more than money. Being an adult means being mature. There is a difference. Where you become mature, you start taking responsibility for your actions – all of them. Yes, you take care of the bills and help out in your household. But being an adult is about doing what's right, and staying away from what you know is wrong. It's about leading young people by example – giving them good advice and not leading them in the wrong direction. Not only that, it's about being respectful to others. When I see someone who needs help, whether it's an older person, or maybe someone carrying a lot of bags who needs the door opened, I do it. You can't always put yourself first anymore when you become an adult. It sounds like simple stuff, but it's a really important part of adulthood.

I just started to truly understand right from wrong. I always keep my word and I help other people whenever I can. I like being an adult. Nobody likes to pay bills. But stepping up – in every way – it feels good!

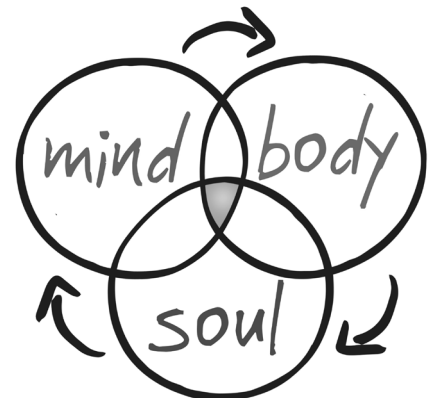
## JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

### Growing Up is a Decision

*By JG, Free Minds Member*

Adulthood is so much more than turning 18 or 21. It doesn't just all of a sudden happen when we hit these ages. It's a process. As a matter of fact, most people are starting to agree that this process of maturation into adulthood extends all the way into our mid-twenties. This is backed up by science. Adulthood requires continuous growth. And growing up requires your active participation!

When I was about 22, I consciously began to be more proactive and responsible for my own life. I started to identify older men, most of whom had been in prison for a decade or better, who demonstrated positive qualities that I admired and saw as conducive to my own growth as a man. I began adopting these qualities and behaviors myself: reading every day; exercising daily; ironing my khaki uniform; watching the news; and waking up at 6 am, just to name a few. I'd made the decision that the only way I was going to survive this 40-year sentence was by fighting. Fighting against the labels, stereotypes and stigmas, and fortifying myself spiritually, mentally and physically, so that when I am released, I am as prepared and grown up as I can possibly be.





## REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hello My Good People,

This month's theme is a very necessary topic as none of us can circumvent adulthood and it's way late for me to even think about it or slowing down the process; that ship has sailed around the world and back. What I'm trying to say is that I entered adulthood quite some time ago, but how long ago will remain covert if y'all don't mind.

Adulthood is one of those things that we cannot wait for when we are clueless kids, as soon as the brakes are pumped on something that we wanted to do by the wise adults in our lives, one of the first things we think or say is, "Man I can't wait until I get grown." However, as soon as the realities of adult responsibilities like bills are foisted upon us, we're like, "Man I miss being a kid when all I had to do was eat, sleep go to school and play outside." Nonetheless, being an adult has major benefits such as being able to make important life decisions on your own, staying up or out as late as you like, driving, voting, having your own place, the ability to choose your own associates and I could go on and on. Therefore, while you have to pay bills and make budgets and all of those adult things, you get to decide how all of those things are done, on your terms.

In my own experience of being an adult, I can honestly say that I have experienced immense joy, immense pain, sacrifice, accomplishments and disappointments. The beautiful aspect of all of this is that with my fully developed brain (it has been scientifically proven that the human brain is not fully developed until the age of 25) I can properly process my life experiences. I can adequately weigh the pros and cons of these life experiences, I take away from them the lessons that need to be taken away, I learn the lessons that need to be learned, and not all the time, but most of the time, I apply those lessons. So, with all that being said, I think that if you start understanding the importance of family and relationships then you are benefiting from Adulthood.

Now, let's stop being so serious and get to the good part! Check out the awesome opportunities that await you here in D.C. once you are back home!

**The Excel Automotive Institute**  
1235 Kenilworth Ave, NE  
Washington, DC 20019  
202-269-0384

**Excel**  
Automotive Institute

The Excel Automotive is the only nonprofit organization providing automotive technician training in the District of Columbia. This means that Excel is the only facility in the District equipped to graduate fully-accredited automotive technicians, immediately ready for employment upon passing their exam. Qualifications to participate are as follows:

- Between ages 20-24 at time of enrollment
- Not currently Working
- Not Enrolled in School
- Have a HS Diploma or GED
- Have a valid driving license

Well grown folks, it's been awesome, until we *Connect* again!  
- Ms. Keela

## DC'S SECOND LOOK AMENDMENT ACT (IRAA 3.0)

Have you heard of DC's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA)? This DC law means that juveniles sentenced as adults in DC Superior Court can apply for possible re-sentencing after 15 years in prison. Right now, DC Council (the local city government branch that writes laws for DC) is considering a new bill called the Second Look Amendment Act (also known as IRAA 3.0) that would expand IRAA eligibility to anyone who was under 25 at the time of the offense. This is not to be confused with US Senator Cory Booker's proposed bill with a similar name (Second Look Act)—that one applies to federal prisoners, whereas this is specific to DC.

### More information about IRAA 3.0 and what you can do to help:

With passage of the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) in 2016 and subsequent amendments, DC law provided an opportunity for the re-sentencing of youth who were tried as adults and given long sentences from crimes committed when they were under 18, and had served at least 15 years in prison. In determining whether to reduce the sentence, the court is to consider many factors, including whether the individual has demonstrated maturity and demonstrated sufficient rehabilitation to safely return to the community. Recently, DC Councilmember Charles Allen introduced the Second Look Amendment Act of 2019 to amend the IRAA to further align with the latest research regarding the emerging adult population. Specifically, if passed, the Second Look Amendment Act will expand the opportunity to request re-sentencing to young adults who committed their offense between the ages of 18-25 and would hold all IRAA candidates awaiting re-sentencing in DC's Correctional Treatment Facility. While this legislation doesn't guarantee release, it provides for a meaningful sentence review.

### Do you believe that DC should pass the Second Look Amendment Act?

#### Here are some things you can do to help:

1. Tell your friends and family in DC to sign the petition at this website:  
<https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/support-the-second-look-amendment-act>
2. Send letters of support to Tyrone Walker at Justice Policy Institute:  
Justice Policy Institute  
ATTN: Tyrone Walker, JPI Associate  
1012 14th NW, Suite 600  
Washington, D.C. 20005
3. If you have any questions about this legislation or petition, please contact Tyrone from the Justice Policy Institute via corrlinks at [twalker@justicepolicy.org](mailto:twalker@justicepolicy.org).



# 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."*

## Springfield, Massachusetts

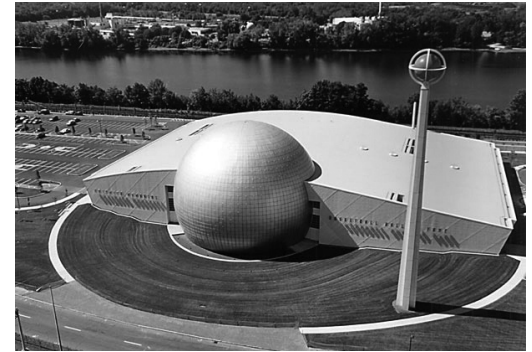
*By MH*

*MH wrote to us and asked if he could share his hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts with us. Thank you MH for taking us on a trip to Springfield!*

Hey Free Minds Familia, my name is Michael.

I just want to say I'm honored to write this column in the Free Minds Connect, especially since I get to represent my city in it.

Well, here goes. Let me show you around Springfield, Massachusetts! Springfield is located in the Western part of Massachusetts and is the birthplace of basketball. Way back when (I'm not sure of the exact year and don't want to lie to you) James Naismith, a Canadian fellow who worked at the YMCA in Springfield's forest park section was hired to create a sport to carry over between baseball and football seasons. Thus, he invented basketball with a peach basket and some sort of kickball. Springfield is also the home of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.



The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame

Springfield also has much more history as it is the home of the largest Smith and Wesson manufacturers in the nation, and even has a rifle named after it, the Springfield Rifle.

The Indian Motorcycle was originally manufactured in Springfield, which is the home of the Indian Motorcycle Museum. You can also visit the Dr. Seuss Museum in Springfield as Dr. Seuss is a Springfield native. The lawyer, Johnny Cochrane, famous for getting O.J. Simpson off on a charge of murdering his wife, is also a Springfield native.



A winter tradition of decorating the park with bright lights

Springfield is an amazing place filled with all kinds of culture, but more specifically Puerto Rican culture. I, myself, am a white male, and found myself a minority in Springfield. But that wasn't such a bad thing because I love Puerto Rican culture. The food is amazing, the people are beautiful, and the values are deep. I once dated a beautiful Puerto Rican girl, and whenever I went to visit her, her grandma would not let me leave until I had a plate or two of the most delicious food I ever tasted. I was seriously considering leaving my girlfriend for her grandma because her food was so good. ☺

Now, there seems to be a rise in Russian, Jamaican, Mexican, Dominican and Haitian populations. But second to the Puerto Rican population is the Italian population. Recommended restaurants are the Hummingbird, which specializes in take out Jamaican food. I still can't decide if I like Spanish rice and beans or Jamaican rice and beans better. Also, the best pizza in town can be found at the Italian Red Rose Pizza, and the Spanish owned Primos Pizza. That's without mentioning all the food trucks parked all around the city. Springfield hosts the Big E (a state fair), the Puerto Rican Day parade, and the birthday of basketball yearly. There are many free concerts in the park almost weekly.

Springfield is also home to "brightnights," hosted in Forest Park around Christmas time every year. This is where the whole park, trees and everything is decorated with millions of lights. It's very beautiful.

Springfield is the home of many colleges such as the University of Massachusetts, GO Minutemen! And MIT.

More recently, a huge MGM casino was built in Springfield's main street area, right off the Connecticut River.

Thank you, Free Minds. I could go on and on about Springfield, there is just so much going on there. I don't get to talk about Springfield that much being that I'm locked up in a Virginia facility. People always yell at me when I start bragging about Springfield. I get to go back in about 13 months! I can't wait! Springfield is definitely a place worth visiting. See you there! Just don't get caught up in wintertime snow, we get lots of it.

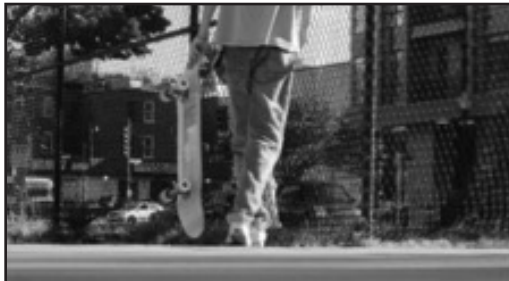
*Do you have suggestions for where we should go in the next "Around the World" column? Write to us and let us know!*





# DC PHOTOS: CRITICAL EXPOSURE

*We have teamed up with our neighbors, whose office is a few floors above ours, to share these photos of DC. Critical Exposure is an organization that trains DC youth to use the power of photography and their own voices to fight for educational equity and social justice. These photos, and their captions, are creations of the youths that Critical Exposure work with. Thanks, Daniel from Critical Exposure, for curating these photos for us!*



## **DETERMINATION TO GET BETTER** – Oscar H. – 11th Grade | Youth Internship

"On a hot spring day, we see a teenager who loves to skateboard and strives to improve this skill. After watching this teenager attempt and fail a certain trick, I decided to take a picture the moment he gave up. When the picture was taken, I thought he was going to walk away, but instead he turned around and continued to practice this trick. I was wrong to assume that this teenager would give up after failing multiple times. This teen showed dedication and eventually mastered the trick. He never gave up."



## **BEHIND THE SCENE** – Miguel – 11th Grade | Youth Internship

"There is more to just a grey hoodie than what Zimmerman saw. Maybe his life is more than what the eyes could see."



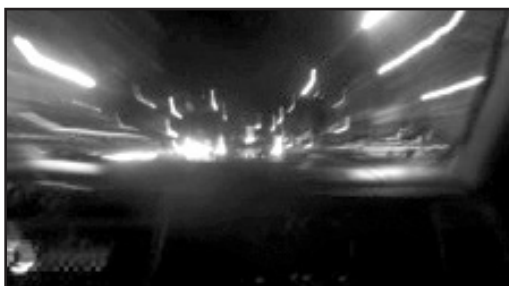
## **THE MASSES** – Sanera P. – 12th Grade | Fellowship

"Resistance in numbers can move mountains and towns. Showing that the oppressive power will not win continues to prove that the artists, the youth, and the educated will continue to resist. I took this at the [May Day] festival where people take off work to talk and fight against capitalism."



## **STRAIGHT AHEAD!** – Lorenz W. – 10th Grade | Youth Internship

"Always go forward until you reach the light. Hardships might hold you back but great things happen after the fact."



## **SPEEDING TOWARDS THE FUTURE** – Herminia – 12th Grade | Fellowship

"The moment you think about the present, the past, and the future. It makes you wonder how fast the time passes and if the decisions you're making are the right ones."

Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos?  
Write us at 1816 12th St NW, Washington, DC 20009 and let us know what you'd like to see!



# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Becoming

By CM

From boy to man  
Coming up I always had a plan  
Going hard was my brand  
Where was my helping hand  
No love, only hate  
I was way too important to wait  
Grew up too fast  
I'm bound to crash  
This is my story of becoming a man

## Strong and Strength

By DM

A strong man works out every day to keep  
his body in shape  
But a man of strength builds relationships  
to keep his soul in shape  
A strong man isn't afraid of anything  
But a man of strength shows courage  
in the face of his greatest fear  
A strong man won't let anyone get the best of him  
But a man of strength gives the best of himself  
to those who are worthy  
A strong man makes mistakes and avoids  
the same mistakes in the future  
But a man of strength realizes that some  
mistakes can also be unexpected blessings  
And capitalizes on them  
So what are you?  
A strong man or a man of strength?

## Titled 16

By IS

How is it that at the age of 16  
I can be punished as an adult  
But at the age of 16, I can't reap the same benefits  
16 years old with 30 year sentences  
This system stole my innocences  
So curse those who invented this  
At the age of 16 I can't legally buy smokes  
But at the age of 16 adult charges for having coke  
With a gun  
Just a product of where I'm from  
In my mind I'm still a child brain  
development just begun  
So all I know is what I see  
And what I see is what I do  
At the age of 16 my perception is still confused  
Repercussions are out of view  
Father figures are by the few  
And that fact that we are children, still biasly overruled  
So we are Titled 16, held accountable like adults  
No empathy towards our mistakes  
No attention towards who we are  
No replacing the time we lost  
In these prisons we must evolve  
From young boys to grown men  
Because our "Title" became a law

## When I Look in the Mirror

By RR

When I look in the mirror, I see a man who  
was a rolling stone  
When I look in the mirror, I see a man  
who laid his hat wherever and that was his home  
When I look in the mirror, I see a man who  
had a job here,  
A job there, a female here, a female there,  
a child here,  
and a child there.

When I look in the mirror, I see a man who  
got caught up in the struggle  
trying to put food in his stomach, clothes  
and shoes on his body,  
and a roof over his head  
When I look in the mirror...  
When I look in the mirror, I see my father.

No kids yet...  
When I look in the mirror, I see me having them...  
My own business?

When I look in the mirror, I see my having that...  
Continue to be like my father?  
When I look in the mirror, I don't see that.  
When I look in the mirror...

*Reality is only seen when the mirror is clean.*

*A mirror has 3 purposes:*

1. *is to show you who you are*
2. *to show you who you were*
3. *and to show you who you want to be*

## Untitled ("The Hate You Gave")

By GD

*Inspired by the book The Hate U Give*

The hate you gave  
Placed me in chains for life  
The hate you gave  
Destroyed my community by severing  
the bonds of husband and wife  
The hate you gave  
Placed my brothers and sisters in parallel  
formation at the bottom of ships  
The hate you gave  
Hung my ancestors from tree with knots that slip  
The hate you gave  
Told me that I could never read or write  
The hate you gave  
Made black faces want to be white  
The hate you gave  
Took our land and made us pay fines  
The hate you gave  
Told my tired soul that I had to go to  
the back of the line  
The hate you gave  
Went past Jim Crow and mass incarceration  
The hate you gave  
Turned savages of my glorious nation  
The hate you gave  
Had me believing that poverty was fine  
The hate you gave  
Had me thinking that if I kill another black  
it is not a crime  
The hate you gave  
Live inside forever

## Corruption

By AF

I was too young to buy cigarettes and alcohol  
But I wasn't too young for the system to  
Give me more time than I've even lived,  
You see never in a million years  
I would've thought the judge would give  
me 18 years,  
That was the first time I seen my mother shed tears,  
Caged behind these walls  
Man I then seen it all,  
Believe me when I tell you it's dog eat dog,  
Momma said just make it home,  
When she look me in the eyes  
She can see the pain I hide on the inside,  
over the past 10 years  
I then lost so many of my peers,  
Most nights I can't sleep  
Because my mind is too busy thinking of the streets,  
And who would I be  
If I was still  
Free,  
America don't care whether you're a  
juvenile or big dog  
Still I smile through it all,  
Too young to buy cigarettes and alcohol,  
But I wasn't too young for the system to give  
me more time than  
I've lived,  
You see never in a million years  
I would've thought the judge would give  
me, a juvenile,  
18 years,  
But like Trump say  
The system is rigged!!!

## When I Look in the Mirror

By LC

Two magic mirrors hanging on the wall  
Please tell me who's the realest me of them all  
In one I'm barely 17, peach fuzz on my face  
Cornrows to the back, not a hair out of place  
In the other I'm 32 with a full beard  
Fresh low cut with a razor sharp edge  
Physically I've changed  
From 135 lbs with no muscle or solid frame  
To 195 lbs all muscle; a solid machine  
But the biggest difference I can feel, not see  
One mirror is hanging on a wall at the Jail, DC.  
The other is hanging on a wall in the Feds, USP  
But as I look into the same set of deep brown eyes  
Only one set staring back is a man, is what I realize  
Though the physical changes are drastic,  
yet and still  
It is the internal changes that I so strongly feel  
In my 17 year old self I see a boy lost on  
the path of life  
Never being held accountable for his actions,  
never separating wrong from right  
But in the other mirror I see wisdom, that has  
come from a developed mind  
These traits were always in the boy, he just had  
to grow up and find  
So as the two mirrors on the wall become one  
My transformation to Adulthood is complete  
A MAN I've finally become



# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Adulthood: How I Participate

By TS

Quite often I entertain myself with  
Why do I drink in the future and meditate  
over our past  
Who's the coach that sat me on the sideline  
of life, out of the game  
Breathless I've had to ask for a time-out  
a time or two  
When I'm aware I'm continuously, selfishly,  
self-medicating on bad choices  
There in that moment I cease my mind from  
playing games with me  
Because this isn't my first game, I know I have to  
play what I'm dealt

My focus isn't about the game, my focus  
is about life  
What lasts is what I've learned, so I must  
keep in mind  
My portrayal of life is portrayed on a world stage  
How many times must I readjust, fix  
my mechanics, and demonstrate good  
sportsmanship

Sometimes it's hard, but I "Just Do It,"  
like the famous shoe saying  
When the adrenaline kicks in, I realize I'm  
not in it for the fame  
I do it for my believers, my family, for humanity  
At the end of the day I think about my legacy  
It puzzles me what will my children say when  
I'm not here

Say I slayed my inward demons like adversaries  
Fully my life I've survived because  
I took the vehicle of my mind and heart to get there  
Where I found myself at different arenas  
on different levels  
Are you not entertained I leave the lion's  
den not eaten

With ingenuity, somehow I manage to  
be where I'm most needed  
I love this game called life!  
The more I participate in it, the better I get at it  
My thinking didn't stink as it once did, which  
removed the trash out my mouth

It's hard not to remember the arena the landfill  
I frolicked in  
Do I go back past there or do I leave the past there  
At the trash heap how bout I drop my baggage there  
Pump one fist in the air while I pull away  
in my mental vehicle  
Looking through my rearview mirror  
Just a silent victory over all my past beatings

A white crown of age with wisdom in it is my treasure  
Can I still hold a position with the team  
"Human Race?"

Can you forgive me and we move on  
The hardest part of history is not keeping score  
Heavens! When do we recognize life is a team effort?  
I've been held accountable and now I feel  
I can do better  
I was Daniel in the den and Jonah in the belly  
Redeem me back to the boardroom, I'll  
woo you with my wisdom

I've forever known the game of life was  
deadly serious  
Now I know how to think through the serious  
game called life  
I'll run with what comes and I'll give it my best  
My life has been about learning from every  
defeat from my past

No matter what naysayers believe,  
I could never put my life in a cast  
Many before me taught me to endure, strive,  
seek, and find  
I don't know about you, but I think I'm  
ready again  
Coach put me back in the game

## When I Look in the Mirror

By VC

When I look into the magical mirror  
Of my youth, I witness the epitome within  
The innocence of my tenth view. Deluged by  
The freedom that enhances my face, I'm the son,  
For my purity emits warmth into a cold day.

Yet unbeknownst of the manipulation from  
A world I'm destined to embrace.

Is my reflection actually innocent, if the  
Sins it's witnessed finds refuge within the  
Eye?

Days, months, and years extend,  
corrupts my reflections, invades my thoughts.  
My adolescent  
Face no longer in accord with the mind, so  
Innocence dies in teenage eyes. Now witnessed  
Sins are reenacted solely by a resemblance of "I."

Unique disparity manifest decades away,  
While consuming the stages of my reflecting  
Soul, commencing the trek where my adulthood  
Unfolds.

When I look into the magical mirror  
My aged eyes do nothing but sweat, emphasizing  
Where I've been, and how far I've come to find  
Regret. Condolences to those sins, for I'll  
Never be seen like that again.

## Da Journey 2 Adult-Hood

By MK

Born into an existence we're all just  
traveling thru da unknown  
Just babies in observation mode who may  
all one day be grown  
Da first classroom of life should be between  
parent and child  
However, firsthand guidance is often given  
to children in prison  
Misguided by guidelines followed by  
sentences given after trial  
Juveniles charged as adults just kidz sent  
off to do bid\$  
Some say, "It is what it is, throw 'em away  
dey did what dey did"  
Dey committed da acts of grownups  
Should dey really be treated like juvies???  
Just teens placed in adult jail\$ and prison\$  
But you must have parental supervision  
to see a R rated move!!?  
Young and impressionable  
A young mind shouldn't be molded in a cage!!!  
Exposed early to a fast life  
Some had to grow up very fast regardless  
of their age  
Babies having babies  
Brothers and sisters having to raise each other  
Coming up quick with absent fathers  
and mothers  
Most of da time most present is a  
hard-working grandmother  
Da stage of adolescence bears a lot  
of hard added lessons  
With many trials and tribulations from da past  
When in reflection dey can offer  
bittersweet presents  
ADULT-HOOD is a journey we may all one  
day have to explore  
Each step is a daily journal we must  
come to learn from  
When approaching dis progressive door  
towards becoming mature





# DID YOU KNOW?

## Coming of Age Traditions Around the World

by Ben

Did you know that the passage into adulthood is celebrated differently around the world? The journey from childhood to adulthood is full of challenges—so why not celebrate it? Here are some ways that this passage is celebrated by different cultures.

In many parts of **Latin America** (countries in Central and South America), a girl's passage into adulthood is marked by a Quinceañera. This celebration takes place on a girl's 15th birthday, and it is thrown by her friends and family. Also included in the celebration are lavish gifts, beautiful dresses, and (of course!) a birthday cake.

- **Did You Know:** People think that the Quinceañera came from the traditions of both the Spanish and the **Aztec** (an ancient group of people that lived in present-day Mexico).

In the Jewish community, adulthood is reached at different ages for boys and girls: at 13 years old for boys, and at 12 years old for girls. When they reach adulthood, Jewish boys are celebrated in a bar mitzvah, while girls are celebrated in a bat mitzvah. Although this celebration usually includes gifts and dancing, the boys and girls are also expected to act like adults. For example, during their bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, boys and girls must read from the **Torah** (the holy book of the Jewish faith) in front of everyone!

- **Did You Know:** The bar mitzvah was originally a legal procedure! According to ancient Jewish law, a boy was responsible for his actions at age 13—from then on, he was treated like an adult.

In Japan, someone is not considered an adult until they turn 20. Every year, those who have reached this milestone are celebrated on Coming of Age Day. Held on the second Monday of January, this celebration has local officials give speeches to encourage and support these new adults.

- **Did You Know:** Many young people are skipping out on Coming of Age Day! They see it as an **antiquated** (old-fashioned) event.

In the Sateré-Mawé tribe of the Amazon Jungle, a boy becomes a man at age 13. When this happens, the tribe creates a special glove for the boys to wear. But this glove isn't like other gloves—this one has a bunch of angry ants woven into it! After wearing the glove 20 different times for 10 minutes each, the boys are finally called a man.

- **Did You Know:** These ants are called bullet ants, and their bite is considered 30 times more painful than a bee sting!





# IMPORTANT CHANGES TO DC LAW

## What You Need to Know About the Youth Rehabilitation Amendment Act

by Ben

Were you sentenced in DC Superior Court? Did you know that, under the recent updates to the Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA), you may be eligible to have your criminal record hidden from the public after completing your sentence? Keep reading below to find out how it works!

The YRA is really two different things: (1) it allows judges to give out less severe sentences to youthful offenders (even if there is a mandatory minimum associated with the offense), and (2) it allows judges to "set aside" – that is, to seal and keep from public view – a conviction. First, we'll look at who is eligible for the YRA, before we see exactly what is included in its provisions.

### Eligibility

Here is a list of requirements for the YRA; you must meet all of these criteria to be eligible:

1. Sentenced under DC Superior Court (this is local DC legislation that only applies to people convicted in DC Superior Court)
2. Under the age of 25 when you allegedly committed the crime you were convicted of
3. NOT convicted of murder, first degree sexual abuse, second degree sexual abuse, or first degree child sexual abuse

### What is the YRA?

First, the YRA allows judges to sentence youthful offenders more leniently. Say, for example, that someone was convicted of an armed carjacking. Under DC law, a judge must sentence someone convicted of this crime to at least 15 years in prison. However, if that person is eligible to be sentenced under the YRA (see eligibility requirements above), a judge has the option to give them a more lenient sentence.

Second, the YRA allows the record of the offense to be "set aside." This means that the record cannot be accessed by members of the public (a potential employer, for example). However, it can still be used in future criminal proceedings. If you are eligible, you can ask for a "set aside" under the YRA after you have completed your sentence and any supervised release or parole associated with it.

### So What's Different?

Under the new updates to the YRA, you do not need to have been sentenced under the YRA to request the "set aside" – anyone who meets the eligibility requirements can ask for it. This means that you can file with the court to have each of your offenses "set aside"; as long as you meet the eligibility requirements listed above, the court will consider your request, even if you were not originally sentenced under the YRA.

Last, you should know that, just because you are eligible does not mean that you are guaranteed either part of the YRA. When you file with the court under the YRA, the judge will look at many different factors to determine if they will apply its provisions to your case. These factors include compliance with institutional rules and participation in rehabilitative programs.

*Questions about the YRA? Write to us for more information!*



## The Youth Rehabilitation Amendment Act

A Poem by Imanee

"Adult time for adult crime"  
is what echoes through the minds  
of adults paid by the dime  
to design a system that assigns  
youth of certain bloodlines

to be confined  
under sentences without deadlines.  
This law expunges from your record  
what has been released from your mind  
a mistake doesn't define you

and neither should a crime  
in the only country that imprisons kids till 59  
where punishment over healing  
is utterly enshrined.



# NEW CHAPTER: A LETTER FROM JESSICA

Dear Free Minds members,

How are you?

I'm writing to you now from Georgetown University's campus in a building that was built in the 1790s called Old North.

Fourteen American presidents have given speeches from the steps at the front of the building. I'm sure that's impressive, but it's hard for me to imagine the pomp and prestige without seeing something like that happen live.

The reason I'm here is bittersweet: I'm thrilled to be a master's student here studying public policy management, which teaches the skills for lawmakers and other public servants to think through how to make decisions and design policy that affect society a better way... but I'm sad because I've had to leave my posting at Free Minds as the Prison Book Club Manager to start this new chapter of my life.

I joined Free Minds in July 2017 and now, two years later, I feel like I've gotten a degree from Free Minds University, discussing books and poetry with my 500+ professors across the country. It's been a joy and privilege to get to learn from all of you. I hope you never stop writing, never stop sharing your stories, and never lose your curiosity.

As you know, no one ever truly leaves the FM Family, and I don't intend to be a stranger – so I hope you aren't either. I look forward to reading your poetry at future Write Nights and hearing about your lives from my friends and colleagues at Free Minds.

I'll leave you with one of my (many) favorite poems.

As always, take good care and keep your mind free.

## **Like You**

Roque Dalton – 1935-1975

*translated by Jack Hirschman*

Like you I  
love love, life, the sweet smell  
of things, the sky-blue  
landscape of January days.

And my blood boils up  
and I laugh through eyes  
that have known the buds of tears.

I believe the world is beautiful  
and that poetry, like bread, is for everyone.

And that my veins don't end in me  
but in the unanimous blood  
of those who struggle for life,  
love,  
little things,  
landscape and bread,  
the poetry of everyone.



Georgetown University

## **Como Tú**

Yo, como tu,  
amo el amor, la vida, el dulce encanto  
de las cosas, el paisaje  
celeste de los días de enero.

También mi sangre bulle  
y río por los ojos  
que han conocido el brote de las lágrimas.

Creo que el mundo es bello,  
que la poesía es como el pan, de todos.

Y que mis venas no terminan en mí  
sino en la sangre unánime  
de los que luchan por la vida,  
el amor,  
las cosas,  
el paisaje y el pan,  
la poesía de todos.





# THE REAL WORLD OF WORK

## From Prison to Georgetown University

By Marquis, FM Member

*Georgetown University has emerged as a powerful new advocate for criminal justice reform, access to higher education for incarcerated people and the movement to help returning citizens succeed. Take the Georgetown Pivot Program, for example. Launched last fall, the program aims to transform the lives of a highly select group of 20 District residents. Called "fellows," these are individuals recently released from jail or prison who show strong potential to become successful entrepreneurs, productive employees and role models in their communities.*

*Free Minds' own Marquis was released from federal prison last year. He applied for and was accepted to join the Pivot Program's first cohort and graduated in June. Here is his story.*

I served a total of 11 years behind bars. I spent a lot of that time thinking about ways that I could succeed when I came home, without being dependent upon an employer giving me a job. See, I knew there would be times when I might be qualified for a position, but my criminal record could be a barrier. So I dreamed about what business I would create for myself. Since I was locked up, I had to rely on my imagination and creativity. I knew I had to stay current. So I read everything I could about business. I have always been intelligent and ambitious.

When I heard about the Georgetown Pivot Program, I knew I wanted to apply. The application process was like applying to college, for real. I had to read 2-3 books, answer questions and write an essay. Then there was a series of three interviews. It was a lot of steps to go through, but it is set up like that to weed out people who aren't serious. Georgetown is looking for people who will apply themselves and be studious. Otherwise you won't make it.

Luckily for me, I got in!

Here's how the Pivot Program works. During the week, we learned the fundamentals of business and entrepreneurship, as well as literature, economics, philosophy, and civic engagement. And our courses were taught by actual Georgetown professors! The Director of Georgetown's School of Business even taught a class. And that's not all... I took a course from Professor Marc Howard (founder of Georgetown Prison Scholars Program at the DC Jail). They put you in an environment with people who are really pushing for a total reform of the criminal justice system.

They completely cater the program to us, knowing that we are just coming home from prison. They teach professional and life skills, such as personal finance, career planning, business communications, business etiquette, public speaking, self-advocacy, and conflict resolution. A lot of these are things that we just hadn't had the opportunities to learn before this.

At first, the program was so challenging. It kind of took over my life – but in a good way! I knew I wanted to create something lasting for myself though and I wasn't about to give up. I really enjoyed the academics. For me, coming home from the penitentiary, which as we all know is a crazy and chaotic environment, to slip straight into a school environment was a blessing. Rather than having

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

## PIVOT PROGRAM

to go on the job hunt, beat the streets, ripping and running, I got to sit in a classroom and learn about entrepreneurship. There were guest speakers on all kinds of topics that just really exposed us to a whole new world.

I will never forget one speaker in particular – Jimmy John Liautaud. He is the founder of one of the fastest growing franchises in America. Have you ever heard of Jimmy John's Sandwiches? That's him! I got to meet him and ask what advice he had for me. He said the secret to growing wealth is to live below your means. It's so simple, but it makes sense. Meeting him has inspired me to develop a business that I can grow and franchise.

Through the Pivot Program, we were also placed in part-time internships with local employers. I was placed at a DC digital marketing firm. I learned so much. Probably one of the most important lessons I mastered was how to network, which is key for anyone wanting to start their own business.

In the final week of the program, all of the fellows participated in a contest where we pitched our business ideas to potential investors. I presented my business, a premium mobile automotive detailing business called *Stay Clean*. It will be a two-person van equipped with a pressure washer, water tank and interior cleaning tools geared toward cleaning and detailing luxury vehicles. All totaled, I won \$1,750 to use to start building the business! My crew will offer professional cleaning with showmanship. A few of the guys told me the uniform's gotta have some drip with it (as they say these days!) I'm working on the color scheme now! I envision Free Minds members coming home, rocking this gear, and detailing cars. We FM members are different from the rest of our peers. If we get a platform where the more cars we wash, the more money we'll have in our pockets, well, that's a winning situation. We won't have to worry about our past history. It will all just be about how well you can detail a car!

Graduates of the Pivot Program receive a non-credit bearing certificate in business and entrepreneurship from Georgetown. It is a stipend-based program, and in that way, it's similar to Project Empowerment. Now you're not getting paid a lot. But the cost benefit is you are getting a college level education from Georgetown professors. You can't put a price tag on that! This is the first program I've seen where how much you put in is how much you get out... times ten! In these times, with our mindsets, anything is possible! One of Pivot's goals is for one of its fellows to be the next Steve Jobs, or Mark Zuckerberg. And it's possible. All it takes is one idea in one person that is disciplined, dedicated and determined. Literally, that is the math of it.

\* If you are interested in applying for the upcoming class of Georgetown Pivot Program fellows, ask your case manager for help accessing the application at [www.pivot.georgetown.edu/applications](http://www.pivot.georgetown.edu/applications). You can also write to Free Minds for assistance.



# IN THE NEWS by John, FM Friend

## DEEP DIVE: CHARGING JUVENILES AS ADULTS

*In every issue, we will bring you an in-depth analysis of a particular topic.*

In all but four of the United States, citizens under the age of 18 are recognized as juveniles in the eyes of the law. This means that when they are arrested and charged with crimes, their cases will move through the juvenile justice system, which has its own court processes and alternatives to the typical solutions offered in the "adult system" (jail, probation, prison and parole).

But as long as there has been a juvenile justice system, there have been ways for youths to be moved out of it and then treated as adults. There are four general pathways for this to happen:

1. Prosecutors have the power to try a youth as an adult if he or she is accused of certain crimes, or if there are certain circumstances identified (i.e., gun possession or gang affiliation).
2. Judges have the ability to decide if a child's case goes to juvenile or adult court.
3. State laws dictate that a youth be tried as an adult under certain circumstances
4. If a youth has ever been convicted as an adult, some states say that means he or she is an adult for any other future charge.

The presence of all three were ramped up in America in the early 1990s, as some researchers warned of a generation of teenage "superpredators" coming of age in the era of gang turf wars and mass school shootings. Those researchers have since apologized for their incorrect predictions, which spurred an "adult time for adult crime" mentality among Republicans and Democrats alike.

The effect of this is that teenagers as young as 13 and 14 can end up in prison for years, decades, even their whole lives, for a single huge mistake. Their crimes are often serious ones, such as murder or sexual assault – but not always. And in many instances, the crime that puts them away for a long time is the first one they have ever been accused of.

Lots of reforms have come to the juvenile justice system in the past two decades, and America has seen a large reduction both in the number of teens arrested, and the number of youths locked up in juvenile detention centers and prisons. Many states have "raised the age" of their juvenile systems to include more of the older teenagers – as mentioned, only four states continue to consider 17-year-olds all to be adults (Georgia, Michigan, Texas and Wisconsin).

But many of the so called "transfer laws" that allow youth to be tried as adults linger from the 1990s. Only recently has there been much momentum around the idea of rolling these laws back.

One of the states where this is happening is California, where a major ballot initiative in 2000 gave prosecutors wide discretion to try teens as adults. But just a few years ago, another ballot initiative took that power back, and gave it to judges. And last year, the state passed a law that

banned trials in adult court for anyone under the age of 16.

The District of Columbia allows certain youth to be transferred into adult court, but the mayor and city council have taken steps recently to offer a less punitive path for these teens and for young adults. The Youth Rehabilitation Act, which has been in place for decades, was recently updated to include new reforms and allows a judge to set aside an adult court sentence in order to offer young offenders a more rehabilitative path (see page 11 for more information).

## WORLD

The most contentious place on Earth at the moment might be a 24-mile stretch of water called the Strait of Hormuz (Hore-mooz), which connects the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman. It is a major commercial waterway controlled in part by Iran, a nation that finds itself in the crosshairs of the Trump Administration.

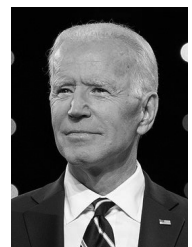


Trump walked away from a deal agreed to by former President Obama and several other major world leaders that eased economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for its willingness to not try and build nuclear weapons. Iran has lived up to that deal, but has continued to be an influential aggressor in several Middle East conflicts: the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, and the never-ending turmoil between Israel and Palestine.

Tensions between Iran, the U.S. and some of its allies have intensified lately. Iran has detained several oil tankers attempting to leave the Strait of Hormuz, and this has provoked naval responses from the United States and Britain. The small waterway is a powder keg of global hostility that could spark a serious military conflict at any time.

## U.S.

We are still more than a year away from Election 2020, and the Democratic field for president is still wide open. Among the leading candidates among a group of more than 20 people: former Vice President Joe Biden; Senators Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris; and Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana (the home of Notre Dame University).



Former Vice President Joe Biden

Among the big issues being debated within the Democratic Party and among its candidates:

- The future of health care: moving toward a single payer system, providing a public option anyone can buy, or just trying to fix what we have right now.
- Immigration: What is the right mix of border security, assistance to Central Americans seeking asylum or work in America, and what to do about undocumented people in the country now.



Senator Kamala Harris





# IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED)

by John, FM Friend

- Climate change: With scientists warning that we are running out of time to prevent irreversible deadly danger to the planet, what sacrifices are we willing to make?

## SPORTS

The US women's national soccer team won the World Cup (the biggest soccer tournament in the world) in July, beating the Netherlands 2-0 in the final. The US women have now won the World Cup title four times—more than any other country—and became only the second country in history to win back-to-back World Cup titles. Two of the players on the team, Mallory Pugh and Rose Lavelle, play for the Washington Spirit here in the DMV.

The Nationals have snapped out of their early-season snooze, and now sit fourth overall in the National League. The team has been paced by its stellar starting pitchers – Max Scherzer, Stephen Strasburg and Patrick Corbin – and by the hot bat of Anthony Rendon, who has 22 homers and is hitting .317 at the time we're writing this.

The Washington Redskins preseason is underway and it's safe to say that

there is almost no buzz for this time going into the season. The team drafted what it hopes will be the QB of the future in Dwayne Haskins, but no telling who will be this year's starter. Meanwhile the Skins best player, Trent Richardson, is angry at the team's management of his health and is currently holding out. With an unproven array of weapons on offense (minus the Hall of Fame-bound but aging Adrian Peterson), it is hard to see the Burgundy and Gold as a real contender this season.



The US Women's National Soccer Team – 2019 World Cup Winners

# MEDITATING ON THE LIGHT WITHIN

By Kelli

Hey Free Minds! Have you been practicing your meditation skills? Be honest ☺! We will all get better, the more we practice. Hopefully you're seeing some of the benefits already – even if it's just 30 seconds a day of taking slow deep breaths.

As I write this, the summer solstice is approaching (June 21st, the longest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere). Summer is a time of sunlight and long lazy days (it should be anyway!) And light itself is full of so much symbolism. Think about some of these sayings: "You light up my life!" and "I've finally seen the light!" and "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!" (title line of the old gospel song that became an anthem during the civil rights movement). You've probably noticed too, that light is often used in literature to signify illumination, revelation, and knowledge – all of which are key to growing up.

One of my favorite things in the summer is to sit outside as the sun goes down. Just as the light starts to fade, the fireflies start flashing. Have you ever seen it? The darker it gets, the more magical they look. I've always thought that fireflies were awesome little creatures. Did anybody used to catch them in jars?

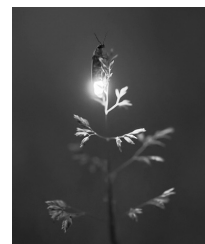
There are two ways to do this meditation. One is to have a cellie/friend read the script aloud slowly while you meditate; the other is to read through the script yourself one or two times, and then close your eyes and meditate on the images left in your mind.

Are you ready? Let's relax and meditate on what we can take from the magic of fireflies...

*Close your eyes, with your feet on the floor, and your arms relaxed... Take a deep breath in... and out. Now imagine you are sitting on a back porch. You are comfortable in a nice big comfy chair with cushions. And there are NO mosquitos... just the end of the day... the activity and the noise of the day calms and quiets, and the air cools slightly as the sunlight begins to fade.*



*Take a breath in... hold it... and slowly let it flow out. You love the quiet, and the growing darkness. You feel peaceful... Out of the corner of your eye, you see a twinkling light... and now another... and another... All around you, a sparkling lightshow plays out as fireflies dance, illuminated by light that comes from within them. By day, they look like any other ordinary bug. But part of their essence is a special magic that shines at night. A firefly might as well sing... "This little light of mine... I'm gonna let it shine!" Watch the night air sparkle. Breathe in... hold it...and exhale.*



*Think of how much you are like the firefly... To someone who isn't paying attention, you might seem ordinary... but when they pay attention? They will see your creativity... your skills... your heart... and your talents. When you let the light within shine, they will see how absolutely extraordinary and majestic you are! Spread your wings and fly, illuminating the world around you... Breathe in... and exhale... and let your light shine.*



# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

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

Hello Free Minds readers! By now you should have received your copy of *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. This is a book about how a young woman named Starr witnesses her friend be slain at the hands of the police, and how she uses her voice to speak out against police brutality. Here is what some of our members had to say about it:

**1. According to Tupac, THUG LIFE stood for: The Hate U Give Little Infants F\*\*\*\* Everybody. Can you explain what it means? Who is giving the hate? How does this affect everybody? Do you agree?**

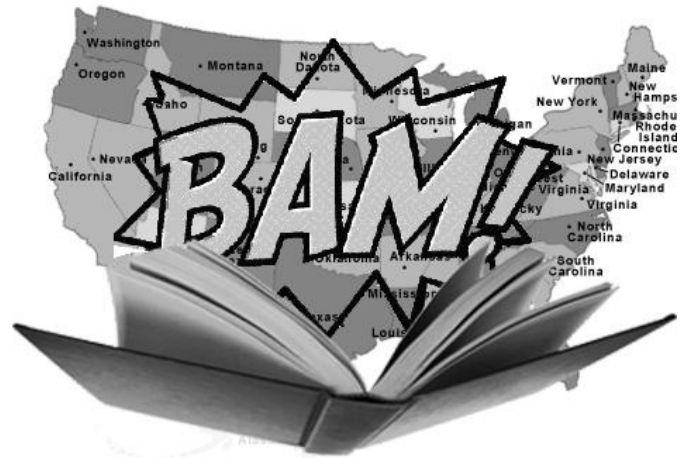
**MH:** As a black infant being born into a hateful world, you are conditioned to reciprocate the hate which could lead ultimately into a chain reaction, which leaves everybody f\*\*\*\*\* at the end of the day.

**AW:** Before THUG LIFE was absorbed into the mainstream elements of the very system it was created to combat, it was a grassroots political movement. The Code of THUG LIFE, in short, was an extension of the Black Panther's Ten-Point Program. Tupac Shakur did not create THUG LIFE, he diagnosed it. How does this affect everybody? For example, when we look at the current opiate/opioid epidemic that now hounds the white communities throughout America, we are witnessing how THUG LIFE affects everybody. For well over 80 years it was just a Black and Brown epidemic. The hate that hate produced. Now it is in a house near you too. Thug Life. For at the end of the day ME IS WE.

**GD:** As witnessed by Tupac, white people are the ones giving or showing hate toward black people by means of slavery, racism, oppression, discrimination, disenfranchisement, poverty, underrepresentation, and so much more. How these elements affect everybody, whether black or white, is because it is society who has to answer for the behaviors of a people who have been told that they are less than human – thus, they then begin to act as such and destroy all in their path. I do agree partly with this notion because I believe that as black people, we make certain words become a part of our everyday make up; meaning, we internalize words and make them living actions. We then pass these behaviors or traits to our children, giving them no hope for a better future because they will always think that they will never amount to nothing. Yet, I do believe that if we can have a collective mindset, we can change our course of direction. Together we stand, divided we fall.

**JL:** It means that what goes around comes back around and affects everybody. Those who are in power and law enforcement are the ones creating and enforcing laws that are racially biased and discriminatory. This is done because of the hate they have for those discriminated against. Everything in life is connected. What affects one will eventually affect us all at some point. So the hate given will one day come back to those giving the hate.

**2. Starr says, "I've seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black and all hell breaks loose... I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the**



**loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person and I'm too afraid to speak." Why do you think Starr was afraid? Have you ever been afraid to speak or act?**

**TV:** I think she was afraid to speak up at first because of everything that came with it. The attention her and her family will get, and where she comes from this label (being a snitch). I never been put in a situation like that, but where I'm from and how I was raised (it's labeled snitch'en) and that's not me.

**CJ:** I think Starr was afraid to speak because she thought they will come back and kill her. Yes, I been afraid to speak because I thought the cops will kill me too.

**RB:** I think Starr's fears stem from real life horrors played out on national TV. Systematically we've been brainwashed to believe that those trusted to protect us can, have and will harm us and not be held accountable by laws set forth for every citizen. I've never been afraid to speak out – just discouraged.

**VC:** Starr feared criticism from both sides, but more so from her affluent high school side. She did not wish to be depicted in a bad light, nor stereotyped by her white allies. Have I ever been afraid to speak or act? Quote this: "absolutely!"

**JL:** Starr was afraid to speak out for a couple of reasons. (1) She worried about her and her family's safety against the police; (2) She didn't want her friends at Williamson to know that Khalil, who the media portrayed as a drug dealing thug, was her good friend. Yes, I've been afraid to speak out for fear that I'd make a bad situation worse.

**3. Throughout the book, Starr wrestles with having two identities: she calls them "Garden Heights Starr" (the girl she is at home in her neighborhood) and "Williamson Starr" (the girl she is at her mostly white and affluent high school across town). This is sometimes called "code-switching". Have there been times in your life where**





***you had to code-switch? Do you believe it's just a normal part of life? Or do you feel it's because of racism or other problems in our society? What does it feel like when you do it?***

**DK:** Yes, in high school. I went to a prep school, but I grew up extremely poor. I would go to Goodwill and buy clothes from the money I earned mowing lawns so that I could dress the way the rich kids did, and I had to act a certain way, otherwise I wouldn't be accepted. I always felt so d\*\*\* fake. Back home, I could be myself, and talk with my southern slang.

**RB:** I think we all code-switch at some point and time. For instance, from our personal life to our professional life. In this area I feel it's being responsible and knowing where your priorities lie. Then there's the "elephant in the room" code-switching... racism – where you fear being "you" would ruffle both sides. For example: Momma takes you somewhere where there's going to be a lot of White people and tells you, "Don't act like you ain't got no home training and embarrass me in front these White people." When I do this, I feel a lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem. I don't feel real.

**AW:** "Code-switching" is both a normal part of life that is called for survival in some situations and social intelligence in others. Racism is both the problem and the other problem. In the Black community, social intelligence based on complexion has existed since its incorporation into the collective unconscious when white supremacy became a global force of domination and subjugation. W.E.B. DuBois, in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, spoke of this dual consciousness that Kneegrows (Negroes) have.

**JL:** "Code-switching" is adapting to your surroundings. If at church or a business meeting, one doesn't use the same language as when hanging out with friends or certain family members. In this sense, code-switching is normal. However, when one feels the need to use the "white voice" over the phone to hopefully get a better chance at a job then that's because of the problem of racism in our society. Personally, I can only remember code-switching in the normal sense.

**4. Starr's parents disagree about staying in Garden Heights or moving someplace safer. Do you feel more like Lisa, that your family's safety would be most important; or more like Maverick, that you can and should stay in the community and make it better? If you were in their shoes, what would you do?**

**MH:** I personally would not wanted to give up on my neighborhood. But at the same time, children's safety comes first.

**AC:** My family and I left our whole lives behind in a whole different country in order to come here to the safety and prosperity of the USA. So, enough said.

**CJ:** I feel like Maverick because if somebody don't stand up, it just gone keep happening to others in the community, so I'll stay and make it better.

**RB:** Lisa reminds me of my mother. As long as I can remember, my mom's life focus was and is her children. Every move we made was an

upgrade in living conditions as well as safety. I don't fault Lisa or any mother for wanting the best for her child, you can advocate from a distance. You don't have to be in the skillet to know it's hot.

**VC:** I take Lisa's side. For the simple fact I believe family safety should trump everything. Now I fully understand and respect Maverick wanting to make his community better, but where's the psychological sense in having your family reside on dangerous grounds when you have healthier options? Residing on high risk soil under the pretense of staying in order to work toward making it better is not what keeping it real is, or keeping it 100, however you want to put it. If I were in their shoes what would I do? I'm relocating, stepping out of my comfort zone and networking, meeting a more diverse breed of ppl, so that I can bounce ideas to make the community better off of them. Showing others that you can physically move away and yet still maintain and fulfill your overall objectives.

**5. The ending of the book, and what happens with King and the police at the grocery store, has been controversial. What do you think of the ending? Did you like it? Why or why not? If you didn't like it, how would you have written the ending if you were the author?**

**TV:** No! I didn't like the end. No matter what, I'm not snitching period. After King set the store on fire with the kids in there, it's time for Maverick to kill him or get him killed, plus Starr will never be safe with King alive.

**DK:** Yes, I liked the ending. It's how civilized citizens of a community are supposed to respond. To me it's only snitching if you tell on someone for something that has absolutely nothing to do with you. Burn my store down with my daughter in it, yes, you're going to jail. Snitching is only thought of mostly by anyone with a gangster mindset, and loves the lifestyle, they don't believe in the justice system (someone of this disbelief is, although, justified because of how the justice system unfairly prosecutes minorities). In the end, they must ask their selves this, what if their child was raped and murdered, would it be snitching?

**GD:** First, I cannot see why the ending of the book has been controversial. It shows something about their sense of community. For so long we are told not to snitch, as well as hold up people in the hood as idols when in fact all we do by this is destroy ourselves. King did nothing good for the community, all he did like so many of us is capitalize off of the blood, pain, and sweat of the common person. In that situation, not snitching would only have meant the death of the Carter family. Somehow it is cool to promote criminal lifestyles and bad to promote bettering our communities and have a collective mindset for a better future. Until we can get rid of this type of thinking, we can never fix the communities from which we come.

**AA:** I mean I like the book, the whole book, I wouldn't have told on King if I was the father due to what I know about the criminal justice system and it's not really being about rehabilitation but money hungry ways (The New Jim Crow). No, I wouldn't have done that to King, but overall it was a good book. It's real life.



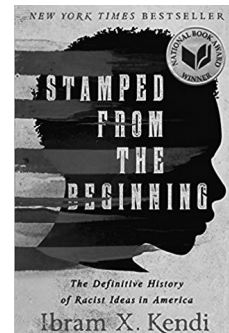
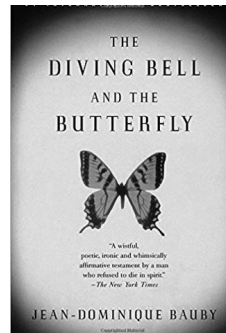


## WHAT WE'RE READING

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."

- **Tara: *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by Jean-Dominique Bauby**

This is a memoir about what the author, Jean-Dominique Bauby, went through after experiencing a severe stroke in 1995. The stroke left him paralyzed everywhere except his left eyelid. The medical community calls this "locked-in syndrome" because of the way he was locked in his own body. He managed to dictate this book letter by letter through a series of winks. Despite the sadness of what he's been through and what he's lost, the author holds onto joy and doesn't give in to loneliness or despair.

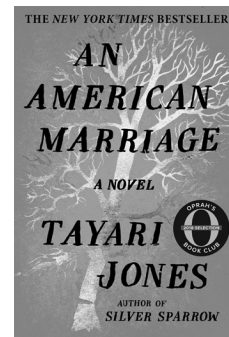
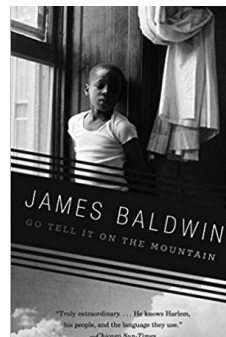


- **Julia: *Pride* by Ibi Zoboi**

This was a fun novel about a young Afro-Latina woman named Zuri growing up in Bushwick, a neighborhood in New York that is rapidly gentrifying. The story begins when a wealthy family moves into the neighborhood and Zuri meets one of the rich boys, Darcy. This is a modern retelling of the classic novel, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. It's a love story about class, gentrification, and cultural identity. I found this book to be really endearing, with great characters. I would definitely recommend this book!

- **Imanee, FM Intern: *Stamped From the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi**

This is a riveting book that focuses on the history of racist ideas, so if you love history – this book is perfect for you. Kendi breaks down the entire complicated structure behind systematic racism, stating that racism was created to justify the unjust economic pillaging of native Africans, versus it being a social system created on foundations of prejudice thought, although it does encompass the two. This book opened my eyes by taking me down a long road of African American history – which began before slavery – and it will open the reader's eyes to a rich, amazing past as well.



- **SN, Free Minds Member: *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin**

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* was one of my favorite books written by Mr. Baldwin. I love *The Fire Next Time*. Mr. Baldwin to me was a very serious Black man and human being who wasn't taken as serious as he should have been because he was gay. I can honestly say I love him because of his flaming, unapologetic love of those of my kind who was not even born when he (and others like him) began to stand and fight for us. Knowing how dark the days would be for us in spite of all the surface progress. Without a struggle, there can be no progress.

- **Jasmine, FM Board Member: *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones**

Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage* is the talk of all book clubs and is getting lots of awards. The book is about a man who is falsely arrested on his one year wedding anniversary. He is convicted and the book is about how they manage marriage while he is wrongfully imprisoned. I first read the book from his perspective, but now I want to read it again centering his wife. There are multiple sides to every story, even in this story that is so common. Both husband and wife deserve peace, but peace comes with learning tough truths about ourselves.

## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ON THE SAME PAGE

Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop is a community that is connected through books and creative writing. We believe that sharing our experiences in life through reading and writing puts us, as the expression says, "on the same page," literally and figuratively. Reading and writing together helps us get through difficult times, overcome adversity, learn about ourselves, and share accomplishments and joy. For our next issue, we're asking, how can we use reading and writing to communicate and connect? Can you recall a time when you felt like you truly understood an author, or when you felt like that author was writing about you and your experiences even if you'd never met them? Have you ever read a book, story, poem, or article that made you change your perspective on something?

Through books and writing, we believe that everybody and anybody, no matter the distance between them, can meet on the same page. That's why we named our community outreach project to DC schools and community groups "On the Same Page: Free Minds Poetry in the Classroom and Community." You've probably gotten feedback on your poetry from people who met you on the same page. For the next issue, think about the power of the page to connect us, and the ways we can build bridges between people and communities. This is a big topic, but we know you're up to the challenge!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



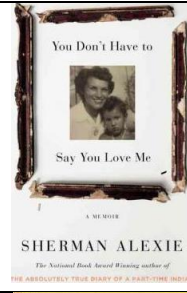
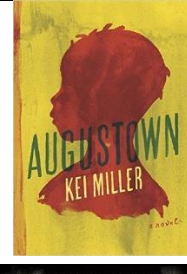
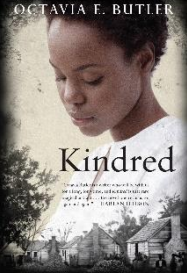
Give us a call when you get out: (202) 758-0829



Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Book Ballot!

Your vote matters! It's time to choose the next Books Across the Miles book. Please mark your 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> choices on the list below and send your vote back to us. If you have recommendations for the next ballot, let us know!

	<p><b>Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds</b> [Fiction]</p> <p>When Will's brother is murdered, he steps onto a seventh-floor elevator with a gun tucked in to his jeans and plans to seek revenge once he reaches the bottom. As he begins going down, the elevator stops on each floor and at each stop someone connected to his brother gets on and gives Will a piece to a bigger story than the one he thought he knew. Told in short, poetic verses, this story explores the impact of teenage gun violence.</p>
	<p><b>Heavy by Kiese Laymon</b> [Nonfiction - Memoir]</p> <p>In this memoir, Laymon writes about growing up black in Jackson, Mississippi and his experiences with sexual violence, the complex relationship with his mother, his battle with anorexia and obesity, and gambling. In doing so, he explores secrets and lies he had spent a lifetime avoiding, ultimately leading him to the questioning of the moral collapse of our nation. Appearing disinterested in fully addressing and healing from the past, how can our nation seek to achieve true progress?</p>
	<p><b>You Don't Have to Say You Love Me by Sherman Alexie</b> [Nonfiction - Memoir]</p> <p>In this memoir about family, love, and loss, Alexie responds to his mother's death the only way he knows how: by writing. In this series of poems and essays, Alexie reflects on growing up poor on an Indian reservation and being one of four children raised by alcoholic parents. Realizing he could only achieve a better life by leaving her, this is an exploration of his complex relationship with a mother who was selflessly kind to strangers, but incapable of showing affection to her children, and how he came to forgive that.</p>
	<p><b>Augustown by Kei Miller</b> [Fiction]</p> <p>Set in 1980's Jamaica, this novel explores the country's complex relationship with history, race, class, violence, and myth. When a teacher cuts off Kaia's locks—a violation of his family's Rastafari beliefs—his great-aunt is furious and the result impacts the entire community. Throughout the story, she recalls memories from her youth, including the legend of a flying preacherman and his ties to the history of Jamaican oppression and resistance.</p>
	<p><b>Kindred by Octavia Butler</b> [Fiction]</p> <p>This novel is a combination of slave memoir, fantasy, and historical fiction. After celebrating her 26th birthday in 1976 California, Dana, an African American woman, is suddenly taken back in time into antebellum Maryland. After saving a drowning white boy, she is transported back to present day. She continues to be transported back and forth and has numerous encounters with the same boy before realizing that she has been given the task to protect this young slaveholder until he is able to father her own great-grandmother.</p>
	<p><b>Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl</b> [Nonfiction]</p> <p>Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's memoir has riveted generations of readers with its descriptions of life in Nazi death camps and its lessons for spiritual survival. Between 1942 and 1945 Frankl labored in four different concentration camps, while his parents, brother, and pregnant wife perished. Based on his own experiences, Frankl argues that we cannot avoid suffering but we can choose how to cope with it, find meaning in it, and move forward with renewed purpose.</p>

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Next Issue's Theme: **On the Same Page** (Volume 8, Issue 4)

We believe that sharing our experiences in life through reading and writing puts us, as the expression says, "on the same page," literally and figuratively. Reading and writing together helps us get through difficult times, overcome adversity, learn about ourselves, and share accomplishments and joy. For our next issue, we're asking, how can we use reading and writing to communicate and connect? Can you recall a time when you felt like you truly understood an author, or when you felt like that author was writing about you and your experiences even if you'd never met them? What about when people you didn't know read your writing and really understood you? Have you ever read a book, story, poem, or article that made you change your perspective on something? Through books and writing, we believe that everybody and anybody, no matter the distance between them, can meet on the same page. For the next issue, think about the power of the page to connect us, and the ways we can build bridges between people and communities.

And a preview of Volume 8, Issue 5: We want to make sure people have time to write in with their submissions, so here's a heads up for the next-next issue! We'll be writing about **Forgiveness**, what it means to forgive ourselves and others, or to be forgiven.

#### **A Thousand Lives** by \_\_\_\_\_

"A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies."  
– George R.R. Martin, author of *Game of Thrones*  
Have you ever read a book, poem, or story and felt like you understood what the character and author went through? Almost like you could see what they saw, live what they lived? What lives have you lived as a reader? Which was your favorite? What life changed you?

#### **On the Same Page** by \_\_\_\_\_

*Write a poem about how you feel when you read and write. It might look something like this:*

When I read \_\_\_\_\_

The words tell me \_\_\_\_\_

On the page, I've met \_\_\_\_\_

On the page, I've been \_\_\_\_\_

On the page, I've felt \_\_\_\_\_

I read to \_\_\_\_\_

When I read, I feel \_\_\_\_\_

When I read, I know \_\_\_\_\_

When I meet you on the page \_\_\_\_\_

When I write \_\_\_\_\_

My words express \_\_\_\_\_

I want you to understand \_\_\_\_\_

Hear me out \_\_\_\_\_

My pen \_\_\_\_\_

I write to tell you \_\_\_\_\_

When I write, I feel \_\_\_\_\_

When I write, you know \_\_\_\_\_

When you meet me on the page \_\_\_\_\_