

August/September/October 2023
Vol. 12, Issue 4

Free minds Connect



**IN
THIS
ISSUE**

GROWTH



**MY SISTER AND ME: GROWING
TOGETHER IN REENTRY**

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Free Minds Evolutionaries,

I hope this issue finds you in a strong growing, learning, and evolving space, which I know is your natural mindset! This issue's theme of Growth couldn't have come at a better time, as we are fresh off of our kickoff event to our 20th year. Can you believe it? Free Minds is turning 20! We held an amazing anniversary celebration on October 19. Long-time friends, family, and supporters all gathered virtually to reflect on Free Minds' impact and honor our friend Clint Smith with our first-ever Glen McGinnis Award, named after the visionary "original Free Mind" who started us on this journey. It's incredible to look back and see how far we've come and of course, how much we've grown. So to every Free Minds member reading this, happy anniversary! I hope you are all celebrating big time because Free Minds' strength is all of our members – your contributions, engagement, ideas exchanged freely with each other, and incredible peer support.

Over the past 20 years, Free Minds has grown both in the size of our community and the scope of our programming, but also in our supporters who are part of the Free Minds movement—the Write Night volunteers, the On The Same Page partners. Our reach is global! We have volunteers from Kenya, South Africa, London, and Namibia. We are looking forward to growing even stronger in the years to come. The future is bright. One of our plans is to develop more transformative community healing events. Read in our Free Minds HQ section about our most recent circle with survivors of harm and Second Look Act recipients. Along with healing, we must stop the harm from happening in the first place, so we will also be expanding our efforts to change unjust laws and policies. Read on page 32 why FM member Jamal joined the Changemakers – a team of Free Minds members bringing real system change. Jamal is a fervent believer in the need for everyone in the community to be part of solutions to end violence and mass incarceration.

Our current Congressman John Lewis Fellow, James, shares with us about financial growth – of his own bank account and his mission to end the racial wealth gap. I learned two new terms just by reading his column (page 25)! Along with organizational growth and program growth, Free Minds members' incredible strength is emotional and personal growth. Member Vance gifts us with his experience coming home after decades away and bumping hard into a wall of differing expectations with his sister (page 6). He shares how their intense love for each other motivates them to have the hard conversations. Vance gives us a roadmap and reminds us that no matter how difficult the relationship strain might be, you can always be the first one to be vulnerable and share feelings to bridge the gap. That's the secret of emotional growth. Thank you, Vance.

Our Advice Man once again pulls out exactly what is needed to bring wisdom and hope. In answering a question about the possibility of a long sentence, he uses a life-affirming metaphor of growing natural plant life (page 10). He lives what we know at Free Minds: stick around FM members and good energy emanates. Check out page 27 to build your negotiation skills for when you find yourself dealing with people who don't have such good energy!

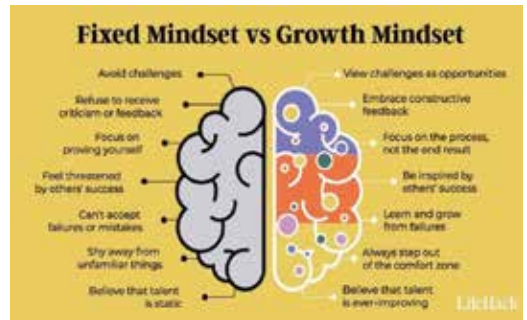
You will want to read Carlos' column over and over again like I did – first to grow my Spanish language skills (thanks Carlos!), then to grow my emotional maturity and self regulation. If more

people practiced his emotional growth the world would be a more caring and peaceful place. When describing how he responded to an infuriating situation he writes, "I grew in thought, feelings and most of all, humility. Being able to see the situation with foresight instead of hindsight." I love Carlos' lyrical language and how he says foresight instead of hindsight. Meg lets us know on page 26 that if you are considering writing a memoir, hindsight is an asset too.

On page 32, Regina brings us new research on how too much screen time for our kids could hinder their social development. Remind your families to unplug sometimes and try writing on paper! Speaking of writing on paper, the poems and essays on growth in this issue are better than any psychology course. Such deep insights and poignant expressions, like DC shares in his poem "If I Haven't Grown" on page 12:

If I haven't grown, I would have thought negative,
but instead as a man I made a rational plan.
Use objectivity and open mindedness to better myself as a man...

I was just talking to our mail delivery woman the other day as she tenderly passed me our packet of envelopes (the favorite part of our day here at Free Minds), and she asked what was in all those letters. I said incredible poetry, honest sharing, profound essays, and most of all GROWTH on everyone's part!



On page 16, DeAngelo shares how his reentry path involved stretching himself past his comfort zone. He truly embodies a growth mindset. I want to leave you with a mental image from the great actor and director Forest Whitaker in the Quote-i-vator section:

"I try to be like a forest: revitalizing and constantly growing."

Here's to continued growth and change in our Free Minds "forest." Thank you all for sharing your growth with us.

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*

Next Issue's Theme: Resilience

The Connect is a bimonthly creative writing magazine 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.



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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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In Loving Memory

To honor our Free Minds members who we have lost, we dedicate every issue of the *Connect* to their memory.

Rest in Power:

Glen, James, Cortez, Derrick, Christian, JohnQuan, Nadar, Andre, Darond, Dontel, Tyree, Antwone, Amari, Kuron, Dwayne, Darnell, Marcus, Wayne, Eric, Sharod, Arthur, Isaiah, DeMario, Mshairi, Tahlil, Donta, Joshua, John, Delonte J., Eddie, Gary, Benny, Michael, David, Navaras, Dewayne, Tyrone, Darius, Aaron, Harold, Anthony, Donald, Bruce, Delonte K., Shawn, Roderick, Antoine, Davon, Jahmeze, Deonte, Stephon, Kavon, Damani, Kelvin, Melvin, Demetric, Jamal, James, Deangelo, Raequan

If you know of other Free Minds members that we've lost who are not on this list, please let us know so we can include them in our memorial.

FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Sofia

Tara and Jordan Travel to Chicago for Panel on Emerging Adults in the Justice System

In July, Tara and Jordan traveled to Chicago for a panel discussion on the release of a new report by the Emerging Adult Justice Project: *Time for Change: A National Scan and Analysis of Hybrid Justice Systems for Emerging Adults*. The report documents and analyzes the existence of hybrid systems (also known as “youthful offender” statutes) across the United States that include special provisions for emerging adults ages 18 - 25; these systems are designed to lessen some of the harm imposed by the adult system and extend some of the rehabilitative opportunities of the juvenile system to support the healthy transition to adulthood. Focusing on seven hybrid systems across the country – including the District of Columbia – the report is a first in examining how different criminal legal jurisdictions address this unique developmental stage in life. Jordan was able to discuss the hybrid system in DC based on his own experiences. His powerful words moved everyone on the panel and opened up a great conversation on mental health and supports needed for emerging adults in the adult legal system.

Community Healing Circle

In August, we held a community healing event alongside the Network for Victim Recovery of DC (NVRDC) and Community Mediation DC. Using a restorative justice framework, the event focused on safe community building and making and sustaining connections. The event began with an important reminder from Lashonia, one of the facilitators, that restorative justice is a practice and way of life – not just a program. Participants (survivors of harm and Free Minds IRAA recipients) utilized the philosophy of restorative justice to participate in a community circle to reflect on past actions, tackle harm and accountability, and discuss ways in which we can work together to provide safe environments for others to address hardships and growth. The event showed how restorative circles are one way to not only heal for ourselves, but also to make space to heal as a community.

Georgetown University Meets Free Minds “On the Same Page”

15 first-year students at Georgetown University came to the Free Minds office in August to help mail out poems written by Free Minds members so they could see the heartfelt feedback the students and other members of the community wrote for them. The students also had the opportunity to hear from Free Minds Poet Ambassador Antoine about the importance of receiving mail while incarcerated. Antoine also shared his own poetry with the students, who were inspired by his story. With the help of these student volunteers, we were able to send out poems with feedback to about 163 Free Minds Members! We loved seeing how poetry from Free Minds members left a lasting impression on the students and helped to build community for these students new to the DC area as well as for our members who are incarcerated far from home.

FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the June/July 2023 Connect Hometown Pride.

AHA: Our latest *Connect* issue is another masterpiece and I'm always thankful to see my own submissions, but being able to enjoy all the submissions on Hometown Pride is special. Seeing others' perspective on what they enjoy most of the place they call home. Many of the submissions reflecting on DC gave me more memories of some spots I went to a lot or enjoyed, but I learned about some of the new places.

Hometown pride is important especially when a lot is changing and the fight for statehood is ongoing in DC. I got to learn a lot more with the interview with Deangelo as many push to make our voices and opinions matter. Glad to see Antoine home, reading some of his past poems and knowing that his old connections got him a nice job doing what he loves to do, so congrats to him.

Learning about DC's history in the process is always good since I love history and learning it about my hometown is essential. So I appreciated the story about Barry Farms and its history, plus I wasn't aware of the many changes over the years. The DC culture column is interesting also so I appreciate hearing about these new events along with seeing all the photos of a lot of new places like MLK Library and others you all show. This is another issue I enjoyed.

DA: As always, the articles were insightful and educational, and I loved the Hometown Pride theme... I loved the DC photos. Having been incarcerated since 1992, seeing photos of the city is always a "wow!" moment, as so much has changed over these three decades I've been gone.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

- Viktor Frankl, survivor of the Holocaust and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*

"Some periods of our growth are so confusing that we don't even recognize that growth is happening. We may feel hostile or angry or weepy and hysterical, or we may feel depressed. It would never occur to us, unless we stumbled on a book or a person who explained to us, that we were in fact in the process of change, of actually becoming larger, spiritually, than we were before."

- Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple* and first Black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

"Say not, 'I have found the truth,' but rather, 'I have found a truth.'"

Say not, 'I have found the path of the soul.' Say rather, 'I have met the soul walking upon my path.' For the soul walks upon all paths.

The soul walks not upon a line, neither does it grow like a reed.

*The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals." - Kahlil Gibran, Lebanese-American author of *The Prophet**

"We cannot grow when we are in shame, and we can't use shame to change ourselves or others."

- Brene Brown, American motivational speaker, professor, and podcast host

"The only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predicate of it. The systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature, and not on its growth and development." - Oscar Wilde, Irish playwright and poet

"Whatever your calling, it's already rooted within you, and those roots can be trampled or tugged at but never removed. They grow stronger only when tended, nurtured, and most important, shared with others."

- Oprah Winfrey, TV show host and media proprietor

"I try to be like a forest: revitalizing and constantly growing."

- Forest Whitaker, Black American actor, producer, and director



Forest Whitaker



FAMILY TIES: RETURNING HOME TO FAMILY MEMBERS: A CANDID CONVERSATION

By Carlos and Jae-lynn

Carlos, our co-facilitator for On the Same Page, and Jae-lynn, our Prison Book Club intern, are joined by Vance, a Free Minds member to talk about his experience recently returning home and reconnecting with his sister. Vance was first incarcerated when he was 17 years old. After 30 years, he has been home for about four months. Here, Vance and Carlos relate to the difficulties of growing apart from loved ones after so many years of incarceration and family expectations of reacclimating into society.

Carlos: How was your relationship with your sister before and after incarceration?

Vance: As far as my sister, that's like my main family member. It's really just me, her, her daughter, and I have a first cousin. Everybody else pretty much passed along. And, you know, it's been challenging because she has my best interest at heart, but we were away from each other so long, she became kind of guarded. We're really getting to know each other over again.

Carlos: What was communication like with your sister while you were incarcerated?

Vance: It was hard because you know at that time, I had a lack of maturity. I was looking at it from one side. I felt she wasn't there how I wanted her to be and not understanding she was on this side by herself until she had her daughter. And her youngest brother, he's in there with all that time, so I never looked at how that was impacting her on this side. I always felt like well, you know what, she's not there for me like she should be and I kind of ran her off. I would stop reaching out so much and just focused on being on the inside. Not trying to impact her with my issues in there. And I think through so many hardships. You know, we lost our mother, brother, aunts, and grandmothers. And she had to deal with all that on this end by herself. And I had to deal with it in there.

Carlos: And you would talk about your sis and not being aware of her challenges and her struggles, right? You were able to see that clear when?

Vance: Growing up, we'd never argue. We'd never cursed at each other. So now that it's been going on so frequently, my niece, her only daughter, we sat down one day and we talked and she explained it to me, like, "You know, my mother's been out here by herself. Dealing with all this by herself. Trying to help you. Help me." So that gave me a chance to really look at it like you know what, I ain't never looked at it like that.

Carlos: We've been through a couple of little things that I find that sometimes for myself are difficult. Like as much as I explain or break it down you don't get it. Do you have moments like that?

Vance: Exactly. That's what our whole thing is about. She makes everything seem like it's so easy. Even with the whole public transportation system. Like "All you have to do is this." "You just go here and go there". And it's like man, do you realize I just did 30 years and it is kind of easy, but the lack of comfort makes it not easy. The bus might be jam-packed. The train might be jam-packed. All that type of stuff like that plays a part. So she doesn't understand that. Like my first month home, she just was like, "You need to learn these things". And at that time, I was at a disagreement. But as time went on, it was like, okay, you know what? I do need to learn, but let me learn gradually. I mean, let me take baby steps. Don't just throw me out there and expect for me to be comfortable with it.

Carlos: I find that to be common, you know, people not

understanding us. But again, it's like, how could they? They could imagine it maybe, right? What it is or what it could be for us, but not really, at the end of the day. Not really knowing exactly the feeling. Recognizing that ya'll don't know each other as adults in the same way you did when you were growing up, how do you meet that challenge? Like, is there something that you do, or wish to do at the least?

Vance: We've been going at it so much to where as though it's, you know, the love is there just because we're siblings, but like, we both have kind of lost patience with each other. So it's like, okay, I guess she's telling me, "Okay, you'll see". And I'm telling her like, "Okay, you know, what you're gonna see". Maybe later down the line, we'll meet up in the middle. And you know, that's a good question. But I mean, because our relationship now is nowhere near what it used to be. And that's kind of hurtful man.

Carlos: Yeah. Do you think she has certain expectations of you?

Vance: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I think we have expectations toward each other though. That's the thing that's more than anything. I think the biggest mistake I made was putting those expectations on people though. Thinking you know, people were gonna be a certain way. Just like, you know a lot of people say, okay the hard part is over with because you know, you're out now. You survived being in there. And I disagree with that. Because in there you sit. You know, it's routine, everything is repetitive. So it's easy to adjust and fall in line after a while. Now, when you come out here, it's not as repetitive as it is in there. Because now you have real responsibilities. You go through real relationship problems with family, friends, everybody. You know you're in the real world. So now this is the hard part because out here you will experience so many different emotions. But when you get out of here people say "Aw man. It's easy." This is the hard part. I disagree, man. Although there's conflicts that come with reconnecting with loved ones upon returning home, incarceration hasn't spoiled the deep care I have for my sister.

Jae-lynn: What are your hopes for the redevelopment of your relationship with your sister?

Vance: I think my hopes would be for her to just let me grow and get reacclimated at my own pace. You know, not to place those overwhelming expectations on me. To just trust that when I say I'm not going to return back, you have to be able to trust it. Even though it might seem like since I was in there so long that it wouldn't be so much of a problem to go back and get adjusted all over. I just hope she can look back and say, "Okay, well, this is the reason he avoided me" or "he shut down on me because, you know, he was trying to focus on himself and, you know, prove me wrong and prove other people."

Carlos: What is your favorite part in this relationship?

Vance: I think my favorite part is that I can move forward, without holding resentment. Like I told you, I love her to death. So just, no matter how upset I get or how much lack of understanding she might show, you know, I forgive her for that. So, like, you know, prison hasn't ruined me in that aspect. It shows that I still have a heart and I feel good about that.

JUST LAW: SENTENCING MATTERS

By DJ

For some time now we have been discussing the application and reach of the District of Columbia Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA). In this article, we focus now on how the DCYRA can overcome the imposition of a sentencing enhancement penalty (D.C. Code § 4502), which is normally imposed when a defendant commits an offense while armed with a pistol. This understanding was tersely set out by the D.C. Court of Appeals in a case called *Briscoe v. United States*, 181 A.2d 651 (D.C. 2018). This case is being discussed because there was an important message pertaining to DCYRA sentencing prospects. Specifically, the D.C. Court of Appeals acknowledged that the while armed provision of D.C. Code § 4502 can be suspended by the trial court during a sentencing proceeding. In pertinent part, D.C. Code § 22-4502 states as follows:

(a) Any person who commits a crime of violence, or a dangerous crime in the District of Columbia when armed with or having readily available any pistol or other firearm (or imitation thereof) or other dangerous or deadly weapon (including a sawed-off shotgun, shotgun, machine gun, rifle, stun gun, dirk, bowie knife, butcher knife, switchblade knife, razor, blackjack, billy, or metallic or other false knuckles):

(1) May, if such person is convicted for the first time of having so committed a crime of violence, or a dangerous crime in the District of Columbia, be sentenced, in addition to the penalty provided for such crime, to a period of imprisonment which may be up to, and including, 30 years for all offenses except first degree murder while armed, second degree murder while armed, first degree sexual abuse while armed, and first degree child sexual abuse while armed, and shall, if convicted of such offenses while armed with any pistol or firearm, be imprisoned for a mandatory-minimum term of not less than 5 years;

The D.C. Court of Appeals has noted that § 22-4502(a) provides enhanced penalties for any person who commits a crime of violence, or a dangerous crime in the District of Columbia when armed with or having readily available any pistol or other firearm, or imitation thereof, or other dangerous or deadly weapon. As explained by the D.C. Court of Appeals in *Thomas v. United States*, 602 A.2d 647, 650 (D.C. 1992), "while armed" provision of § 22-[4502] 'does not comprise a criminal offense in and of itself'; rather it is an enhancement provision and "its application is dependent upon a conviction of the underlying offense." *Thomas v. United States*, 602 A.2d 647, 650 (D.C. 1992). Given this particular perspective, the D.C. Court Appeals clarified that it is not mandatory for the sentencing judge to impose the § 22-4502 while armed sentencing enhancement under the DCYRA; "For the foregoing reasons, appellant possibly has (and for purposes of our analysis, we can assume he has) the better of the argument regarding whether the trial court erred if it assumed that it was required to sentence him to at least the mandatory-minimum sentence under § 22-4502 (a)(1) for robbery while armed." See *Briscoe v. United States*, 181 A.2d 651 (D.C. Code 2018).

In toto, what this decision means to a DCYRA prospect is that if you do not have any previous convictions for a crime of violence while armed at the time of your sentencing, and, you are under the age of twenty-five (25), your judge does not have to impose the mandatory five (5) year while armed sentencing enhancement during your sentencing as a DCYRA recipient. This is a great decision in that respect because normally an adult defendant would have to do an extra five (5) for committing an offense while armed with a pistol or having it readily available for the usage. Now, the clarification by the D.C. Court of Appeals identifies a point of mercy for sentencing purposes for a DCYRA defendant as it relates to imposing the while armed penalty enhancement. Ask your attorney to motion the court to not impose the harsh while armed enhancement penalty if you are DCYRA eligible during sentencing.

As always, it is my pleasure to open your eyes to new sentencing relief options. Please examine this with your attorney because here we do not offer legal advice; just legal fodder. Until next time, keep your mind free.

NOTICE: THIS DOES NOT CONSTITUTE LEGAL ADVICE! YOU MUST STILL CONSULT YOUR ATTORNEY.

MEMBERS CONNECT: GROWTH

Growth By CD

Growth is a part of achievement. It feels good to acknowledge the sound qualities we have gained. It looks beautiful not only in the eyes of you but others, and what it projects is moral in standard. Continue to learn and maintain family and friends, relatives. Continue to personify in intellectual conversations, learning has no degree, for education is various.

Never Give Up By DC

Allah blesses a baby before they leave their mother's stomach. All alone, a process had been started. That development is made of love, commitment, joy, and even pain. Trust, hope, fear, and excitement about how a new life can change. Not just a parent, but even society. So, in those nine months, growth begins its process. Not just for the blessing of that beautiful child, but also for the mother who is developing now. Her love will become protective as months pass. Her free will glow from pregnancy development. Her mind would wonder for that baby's life that's in her stomach. Her own life she'll put on hold, willing

to sacrifice for the life she holds. Then, after they become one, it's time for that love to be born. A mother will lose her shape and form and sometimes life in order to bring that love and blessing from Allah to her sight. She pushes for dear life in order for that love to have sight and a new life. See, being born is a never give up process. Then once that joy, pain, love, and fear cries after coming through that race and fighting to be alive. They both cry for joy. As that mother and love cuddle for the first time. So when you need motivation to never give up and face the world. Look into momma's resilient eyes and NEVER GIVE UP!!!

Growth By DS

As we grow, we start to realize our potential over time. We all grow physically and age-wise, such as the term growing old, but I wanna talk about the developmental growth of the mind.

I wanna talk about spiritual growth along with the growth of the mind because nowadays it seems our spirits along with our minds are hard to find.

If the mind is left in darkness it cannot grow, of this I'm sure, because I know the mind is responsible for the part of an

individual that feels, perceives, thinks, wills, and believes. The mind also controls the heart, the muscle in our chest that circulates blood but has been misrepresented as a symbol of love or strength. Since the mind is in control of feelings, and also controls the heart it's safe to say they are useless separate or apart.

These words represent some of MY growth over the years, misguided as a youth by my peers. I had a lot of heart and no fears, but my mind was lost because I had yet to grow and my inability to function as a man is what has led me here.

Growth and Life By DAS

Life is full of lessons. You're either going to pass or fail these lessons.

However, remember if you pass, know that there's always room for improvement to master your skills and crafts. And if you fail, then know you can analyze your mistakes, learn from them, correct the errors, and try again until you succeed. This will always be your choice to make.

Imagine, dream big because if you can imagine it now, you can manifest it too. Remember, every great invention started with a thought, and most great inventions always get turned down. However, you shouldn't let this stop you from pushing forward even when it's told to you that it can't be done. Don't stop, because you will make it happen.

Lastly, fight; always fight for what you believe in and what you want in life and out of life because no one will ever fight for you the way that you will fight for you. Never lose hope

nor give up despite the many obstacles that will be put in your path. Know you're going to fail, you're going to feel pain, but that pain you felt today will be the strength you'll feel tomorrow.

And always remember if a person cannot learn how to accept and love you for who you are, then that person isn't deserving of your time nor love.

Always treat people kindly, with respect and dignity regardless of their race, cultural background, and sex, even those who you may feel aren't deserving of it. And trust me, you will run across a lot of these people. However, we're all part of one race, and that's the human race, and every person has the right to be treated as a human being.

Live by these rules and you'll build an amazing legacy. One that will be talked about for all eternity.

MEMBERS CONNECT: GROWTH

Growth By FJ

Growth, it takes help from family, friends, and help from the willing to push home any faith. You always need faith because you got to believe you can do it. Growth feels like you had a heavy rock moved off your chest. It sounds like an opera singing all day long. It looks like you moved every bump off the road.

Growing Through My Faith By JL

Have you ever hated anyone without realizing your hatred for them? Have you ever feared a person or something without knowing you feared them? I have. My past was full of fears and hatred to such high degrees that I literally thought that I was strong when being fearful and loving when being full of hatred. I have grown much since those years and my fears and hatred have subsided greatly from what they used to be in the past. Here's what took place for my personal growth within the 5 areas (Mental, Physical, Social, Spiritual, and Emotional) mentioned in this issue's theme.

I believe that everything within our lives begins with spirit or a creative energy that eventually comes into fruition through our thoughts. This is what makes humanity "children of God." Our thoughts govern our individual and collective conditions. Within a year of my incarceration I had inadvertently revealed to my mother (and myself) through a phone conversation that I hated God. We were both shocked when I snapped and expressed such hatred. Never could anyone have convinced me that I hated God or anyone else. But somehow it just came out! That's when I took note that there were and are certain truths about me that have

to be acknowledged and dealt with. So I began a religious/spiritual path throughout my incarceration. Trying my best to be God-centered broadens my mental and emotional scope and helps me be more empathetic, loving, and understanding towards others. If I view life through carnal eyes, then I see things through goggles of a person abused and neglected when a child. Through spiritual eyes, I see everyone and everything as connected – kindred spirits. I try to treat others as I want to be treated. But I had to first admit why I was angry at God and the world before I could learn to truly love. Once God became a friend and not a foe that's when my heart truly opened to others and I was able to begin growing in the other areas mentioned. The change isn't as easy as it may seem in this writing—knowing, believing, and having faith in God can be a steep process. I believe that staying mindful of God's existence and godly principles helps me and could help others in our collective mental, physical, social, spiritual, and emotional growth.

Peace and love to you all.

Growth By TTB

Growth for me looks like giving love without demanding love in return. I've been put through a lot these past 10 years of my life. Lost my mother in 2018 to cancer; the mother of my 10 year old is keeping him away from me and my family for no explainable reason; many people have come and gone during this 20 year sentence of mine, and yet, many have been faithful to me and have never left my side. All of these people I still love, because I love them for them. Most of all, I am a striving servant of Allah and when man honors man he honors Allah. I am thankful for this time that I have been given because without it, I wouldn't have gotten to know my Self. And to me Self discovery is what true growth looks like.

Growth By SV

The word growth this month is reflective on me and how much I've advanced mentally and physically these 37 years of my incarceration since the age of eighteen.

Frankly speaking, I owe this steady advancement of my growth to the way I was taught as a youth, growing up, and certainly, continuing while in the company of the good men I've been fortunate to have met during my transition of becoming the man I am now while as a kid in the DC Department of Corrections.

Change is everywhere. It is undoubtedly a part of our lives in a lot of ways. The growth that is inevitable when we reach new levels in learning. New avenues in life whenever we cease to be who and what we were yesterday. For the

best version of ourselves today, this process of growth and the years it may have taken of burning your hands on the proverbial stove to learn any one of life's lessons.

Sometimes change though is inevitable like life and death, interchangeable. Nothing about you is the same from one instance to the next. We are all in a state of constant evolution, even on a molecular level. On a philosophical level, I appreciate my growth mentally and physically in my writings. I hope to make a difference somewhere down the line in another person's life.

My experiences may help someone some way, who knows? Changing their own perceptions perhaps for a better one.

SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

Do you have advice for the Advice Man? If so, write in and we may print your advice in the next issue. And if you have a question for the FM Fam, please send it to us. We want to hear from you!

Dear Advice Man:

My sentencing is coming up. I don't know how I'm going to handle it if the judge gives me too much time. How can I prepare myself for the worst-case scenario? It's just so hard having no control over what happens. I need to be able to survive no matter what the judge does. Can you give me some advice, please?

Sincerely,
JH

*JH & FM's family,
I'm blessed to be above ground to hear our community concerns and share in our quest to gain a better perspective on this wonderful thing called life. I believe this communication is something that gets missing in our youth that we need for true growth.*

First, I'd like to emphasize what my friend BM writes later on: the worst case scenario has already come and gone and you have already overcome it! As he says, "Don't give up if it's not the color you want at first. Take your time, let it dry, because it will all come together."

JH and friends, I beg us not to give up, because we are just momentarily dealing with something out of our control. I'm asking all of us to will the good into our lives, like we willed the unfortunate and out of control toward us. The best advice I got at the beginning of my bid was to not let what's out of my control dictate rash responses out of me. Thus, if I am in step with my emotions and we are in check, I will no longer need someone's supervision or control over me.

This Connect's theme on Growth JH, is your answer on how you handle and focus on doing the time. Take it from me as I try to do my life sentence. I made my bid livable and continue to keep myself in the best position I can to get out of here one day. I would caution you to not be stagnant or, worse, conform to this abnormal environment called prison. The worst thing you can do is come into these meat-grinders still wanting to cultivate a dysfunctional criminal lifestyle. When it's time to decide anything considering your future, people will know who you truly are by the record you've kept. So, what's the first rule in planting and growing something beautiful and nourishing? It has to be cultivated in fertile soil with lots of sun and water. The funny thing about life I have come to realize about maintaining consistency is that we constantly have to pull weeds and make sure the environment (people) around us give us energy. We constantly have to feed off what is right and good for us. In prison, while we are in a state of feeling helpless we can't allow anyone, including ourselves, to pour negative energy on us. .

JH, you pull things back into your control when you find balance in your life. Those who have won coming up out of these places are those who refuse to promote the wrong path of growth. Don't take that the wrong way either, because I'm not saying to be submissive. There is always recourse for us to take. Here in prison, inmates' rights are sometimes violated. If you ever feel yours were, use the inmate law library under the BOP Program Statement and write it up. When what you got coming, don't come, don't find yourself lashing out. Find the right recourse. I want all of us doing any significant time to know. Prison can be a place where we can take the same righteous, savvy skills, dedication, effort we survived those mean streets with, and gain new beliefs, energy, education, trade, and skills on the way to our new lives. People, this is our foundation block for taking back control of our lives. So, I'm begging my community to please don't let prison chew you up and spit you back out bitter or worse off then you came in.

First, we have to be self-encouraged to change; second, we have to be motivated to pursue education, job skills, and exposure to things outside our environment. For example: finances, health & fitness classes, religion, or beneficial hobbies. Immerse yourself in these types of life-changing endeavors and watch your growth, sense of control, your survival, and future soar high above all the nonsense.

A prime example personal to you would be to spend as much time as you can working in prison and studying the law. It will keep you out of trouble and current on D.C. law, as well as assist you in holding BOP staff accountable. Our young men must take advantage of D.C. laws that give them a right to petition their Court on long sentencing after doing their first 15 years if you were younger than 25 when you caught the case. That law is called IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) and another is called Compassionate Release. The keys to be reconsidered and granted early release is doing your time productively, shot-free, utilizing education programs, and proving to everyone on the record that you are no longer a threat to the community. JH, I promise you this, if you show your team, family, friends, and lawyers this growth, you all will have everything not only to survive this bid together but you will also have the keys and tools to fight, get out early, and stay out. I'll end with this: A serious person on the road to change will give up childish things and take the hard and honest road to success. For those in our shoes, this sacrifice is done by the hour, day, and year in the peaceful haven of growth through education; a step by step process away from the prison politics and nonsense. I believe gaining this type of growth reduces one's likelihood of finding oneself back behind bars and increases your chances of getting a job. This advice comes to you through trials & tribulations, so don't just listen. Apply this advice with the love and sincerity it cost us to give to you. Next, pay it back like your brothers had to add their two cents to help you. - TS

True indeed, preparing for sentencing is just as difficult as any journey into the unknown. In spite of that, there is one thing that you can do to help the judge help you. Express remorse for the crime that you've been convicted of and be sure to put the victim(s) first. Judges aren't moved by a defendant's claim of personal suffering. Leniency is reserved for those defendants who admit their wrongdoings, and who sympathize first with their victims – not themselves. Of course, you want to convey the positive things about yourself. Character witnesses will do this for you. The judge wants to hear about the steps you'll take to become an asset to society rather than a liability. I believe this to be a viable formula for a lenient sentence. Good Luck! – EG

Have and keep strong faith—this is only a test that you will survive, no matter what amount of time the judge gives you. Now, on some “man up” stuff, if you are facing a lot of time and serious issues, be prepared for the judge to hand you a lengthy sentence and expect him to show no sympathy. Their jobs are to uphold the law and make it harder on us, NOT easier. Always keep strong, good, and positive faith. You can do whatever you put your mind to. – IA

The worst case scenario has already come and gone. Believe it or not, you overcame it! You may not have much control when it comes to the Courts or the Judge. However, you have complete control over how you handle or react after what the Courts or the Judge does. Understand no matter the sentence, you'll be granted a second chance regardless. So the real job starts now with working as hard as you can on “YOU,” while you wait on that time to shine again. Don't give up if it's not the color you want at first. Take your time, let it dry, because it will all come together. – Peace, BM

MEMBERS CONNECT: GROWTH

Growth By MS

Hello Free Minders,

It is easy to lose your place in the world, get caught up in the distractions of living. But there is a seed in you that longs to grow. But sometimes the soil is polluted, parched, unforgiving. Inhospitable.... It struggles to find purchase, a reason to live, and grow into what it is meant to be.

Inherently, this seed seeks warmth and light to grow, sustenance to feed itself. So what will you feed it? Compassion, understanding, love, self-worth, etc? What will you do to assure that the seed within you grows, and once it starts to grow what will you do to sustain its growth?

You have to nurture that which is precious; that part of yourself that was wounded. Now it is beautiful, a lasting tribute to the hard work and painful effort put into your growth spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

As you grow, others that have been seeking growth, might see you as the template.

Guard your growth. Grow strong in your intention, and you will grow into the greatness that you are meant to be.

Until Next Mail Call....

Growth By WJ

Growth to me is when you look adversity in the face, feel the cowardice of comfortability, yet dare to stretch your soul with an act of novelty.

With the passage of the IRAA bill, a door of freedom opened for many of us who were incarcerated before our 25th birthday. Once I found out I fit the criteria for possible release, I began wondering what I would do if released. The words my dad spoke to me back in 1995 came to me: “for what reason does God have to let you out if you're only going to come out and do the same thing that took you in there?” Then I recalled the words of Dr. Tony Evans: “God doesn't bless a selfish person. God wants us to be a blessing to someone else while on our way to being blessed.”

It's easy to be released, get a job, and live my life with no thought of the multitude of children heading in the direction of my present place of residence. I had a decision to make: be a part of the sickness or a part of the healing. I chose to be of service.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Untitled (My Desire Is to Inspire)

By AH

My desire is to inspire, uplift, and lead.
To become better mentally and physically.
To achieve and turn my dreams into a reality –
For my family and community, the fatherless
That can't sleep from life traumas and complexities
Needs and deserves stability.
So watch me rise like a phoenix. Never doubt yourself
Even for a second because your potential is limitless.
Your strength comes from within so I know these words are
Resonating. Just be calm and patient – the pain will lessen
In time indeed you'll start to see God's blessing is everlasting
That will replenish the body amid life tragedies and casualties.
As I stared closely I could see the anguish and hurt in his eyes.
That is why I rather speak about my enlightenment
and righteousness
That heals and soothes the wounds that hurt like hell
But still couldn't consume him.
My mother, my father, my sister, my brother
Weary from life's journey, yet still unbroken...

Consistency

By AW

Day after day is the way
Elevation towards a goal continues each day
Yes! It may be hard, and you should pray
Mental toughness you must build
Stay the course and you will prevail
Each and every day, your wealth builds
Consistency today, consistency tomorrow
Is how wealth is built

Growth

By CD

Galas are conducted for those who return.
Round, curvy, plethora of colorations of such beauty I see.
Orchids! A correlation of delicacy.
Women! A mother or daughter, even a grandchild.
Treasures for I'll never vitiate the purity of those
who procreate, we???
Happy, for I've watched your growth from afar.

Growth

By DS

Gaining
Redemption
Overcoming
Wisdom
Testimony
Hope

If I Haven't Grown

By DC

If I haven't grown
maybe being away from my family wouldn't phase me.
I be loyal to a cost, a street, a block.
I feel comfortable being locked behind bar wired gates.
Stuck in a maze married to Da Game
that love isn't the same
as the pain it caused.
'Cause when they turn that key, I'm put behind metal doors.
Living in a bathroom with two bunks and concrete walls
trapped with my mental and all I been through!
Design to break a human, but they call it rehabilitation.
Is it or not?

I realized it is if you know your worth,
grow within yourself,
and put in the work!
It doesn't matter because I'm more than just a number.
If I haven't grown, I would have thought negative,
but instead as a man I made a rational plan.
Use objectivity and open mindedness to better myself as a man...
Those scars that went heart deep because of those streets
and these walls and concrete
I turned into motivation.
That game that I was loyal to
I left that spot vacant!!!

Now I build instead of blame
and take accountability for choices I've made.
Seeking forgiveness, better me is my aim!!!
If I hadn't grown I wouldn't be the same.
See now, I'm humble, gentle and able to feel my emotions
without them taking over my mind or becoming a bad issue.
I've grown from a man child to a man who thinks before
he reacts now.
But if I haven't grown I wouldn't understand
With growth comes change
and with change comes new
Learn to love Allah first then yourself
and you truly learn who loves you...

GROWTH

By JJ

G is for Golden, living your life like it's golden,
pure, spiritual
R is for Resuscitate, to bring back to life the physical
or mental stability
O is for Open sesame, allowing yourself to achieve
a desired goal in life
W is for Whole, completely loving others as well as yourself
T is for Triumph, with hope and faith it is promised indeed
H is for Hero, that became us all when we found Growth

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Growth

By HW

From a boy to a man I've learned so much.
Through all the rain and the pain,
and the lives I've touched.

Even when I was wrong, I always listened
and tried to understand.
I have learned to let go and put it in God's hands.

My maturity is respected by my peers,
I'm not alone because I'm loved, I reflect on
how far I've come over the years.

Learning from one another goes hand in hand,
I've grown to be a man and here I stand.

Growth

By JJJ

I seen growth
From when I was in a detention center
How things used to make me pop off
And do without thinking
Now I learned
Every action don't need a reaction

Uproot

By KW

I've grown in a nation plagued with,
Discriminatory Policies.
To know is to know.
Wondering how the development of,
Racial Disparities
continues within this America.
This America has grown from,
Bold Public Hypocrisy – yes
But
Covertly Racist Ideas remain in,
Discriminatory Policies.
"Hidden Within the 13th",
Job Requirements,
Voter Restrictions,
Education.
To know is to know.
Are we ever going to,
Properly manage the,
Successful Growth in,
THIS AMERICA!
Or are Discriminatory Policies,
Roots impossible to "uproot",
From This America?
To grow is to show.

The Definition of Create

By KR

To conceive in the mind
Compose
To bring about
Produce
To make something new
Out of nothing
Design
To form
Forge
Fashion
Fabricate
To call it to existence
Through imaginative skill
By any means
It is the origin
Of what we humans call
Art
Yes, art
Art is...
The definition of create

Growth

By RT

Go forward
Regret nothing
Overcoming obstacles
Withstanding challenges
Temperament
Hold your tongue

Under Construction

By RS

Under construction, I lay the foundation
Draw out the plans
Adding the blocks, brick by brick
Level by level, a new floor
Every time I learn something new
I add it to my new building
A new room here
A wall over there
When will it be complete?
I'm not sure
But day by day, my future grows
Into a tower of thoughts, plans, ideas
And a life complete and fulfilled
I look down at what was built
And think back on the journey that brought me here
I am grateful and at peace

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Grow

By RT

Monumental moments come and go.
They leave with the wind, and yet still stay forever.
A wise man knows that he knows nothing.
I draw knowledge from every interaction.
Growth is peace,
Whatever crossed my path taught me a lesson.
Or made me feel something.
I just have to pay attention.

Growth

By SL

At the age of 15
When I can practically understand life
Growing up and schooling with my siblings
The changes that I saw
So obvious as time goes on
Which my parents loved so much about education
That time, there was so much joy
That I derived from going to school
Educating myself
Is the beautiful experience I had
Growing up

Growth

By TB

I've changed mentally my mind set
From when I was home
I was livin' from day to day
Just in love with money
Ain't really care about the future
As long as I got bankroll in my pocket
Now, I changed the way I look at life
While I'm still incarcerated
I'm going after my education
Get my diploma and a trade
When I get back in the community
I'm going to go to college
Get a couple of jobs
Work on starting my own business
I'll be a "CEO"
Still hustle on the side
Just not going to be reckless and young
And most of all
Live my life in a positive way
'Dis time, I learned my lesson
Momma was always right
In this life, you either die or end up in jail
I understand now

CONNECT ON CORRLINKS *By Aneka*

Good news FM fam!

Sending in your *Connect* submissions just got easier! If you have access to Corrlinks or Getting Out, you can now send in your submissions and receive writing prompts and other *Connect* related updates via Corrlinks or Getting Out. Members without Corrlinks and Getting Out access can continue to send in *Connect* submissions via mail. **This email correspondence will be solely for the purpose of exchanging *Connect* related information. All personal correspondence will continue to be through mail.**

Free Minds Corrlinks Info:

Corrlinks First Name: Free Minds

Corrlinks Last Name: Connect

Corrlinks Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

Free Minds Getting Out Info:

Getting Out First Name: Connect

Getting Out Last Name: Free Minds

Getting Out Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org



PAYING IT FORWARD: NEGOTIATION WORKS

By Sofia

Melissa R., founder and Executive Director of the organization Negotiation Works, has seen the power in effective negotiation skills from many sides. I sat down to talk to Melissa about her organization and the power of negotiation in growing as individuals and communities over Zoom.

Through teaching law classes, serving as the Legal Director for the Legal Aid Society, and working as a mediator in The Superior Court, she recognized the importance in being able to address situations before they escalate. Melissa saw that negotiation is not just important in court and business meetings, but in being a human, and is a skill everyone should have. This was her inspiration for starting Negotiation Works, an organization that provides negotiation and conflict resolution skills training for DC-area individuals who are rebuilding their lives and starting anew after incarceration, homelessness, abuse, and addiction.

Melissa elaborated on why she started the organization and why the group focuses on marginalized communities saying, "Negotiation courses are in a lot of institutions of higher education and business contexts. But there were no courses for historically marginalized communities. To me, it was so clear that these are skills that people universally find helpful. People who are coming out of homelessness, domestic violence situations, or incarceration, are dealing with so many things: trying to get a place to live, a job, trying to kind of rekindle relationships with family members and friends. I found it important to provide these strategies so that they can engage in those interactions more effectively."

Negotiation may sound like an intimidating term reserved for business professionals and powerful lawyers, but Melissa emphasized that we all already negotiate in our everyday lives. The work done by Negotiation Works aims to grow the skills that participants in the program already have and take time to reflect on ways in which they can improve important aspects of negotiating such as listening. Negotiation Works treats negotiation as communication and persuasion strategies to work out everyday conflicts and disputes which can be large or small.

When asked how renegotiation can allow individuals to

grow, Melissa said, "These are strategies that we can use when we're trying to advocate on our own behalf. All of us as individuals can grow to be more effective in our interpersonal relationships and in working through daily disputes to get things we need for ourselves and in growing our relationships with others."

If we can all grow as individuals through bettering our negotiation skills, this will have positive impacts on our communities as well. "For example, we all want violence in the neighborhood to be reduced. We may be coming from different places, but if we can at least share it, realize that we share that common goal, that's a way to begin to have a conversation to come up with maybe some ways that we can develop alternatives to violence. Once that begins to grow within a community, then, people can form stronger relationships. Those become the building blocks for a stronger, more stable, and resilient community," Melissa said.

Melissa discussed how one of the biggest challenges their participants, and anyone struggling with their negotiation skills, face is failing to see the other party's perspective. Another challenge that many of Negotiation Works' participants face is breaking unhealthy communication patterns that are often born out of trauma. Melissa said that participants who face this issue may be accustomed to responding to conflict at either extremes of the spectrum: avoidance or escalating the situation too quickly. Her organization helps participants find a happy-medium in their negotiations by having them reflect on what their communication patterns are, where they stem from, and on how they can respond healthily to conflict.

Her advice on negotiating a topic she gets asked a lot about, salary and employment, is similar to her advice on negotiation in any aspect of one's life: practice.

"You want to think about what you want to accomplish, how you want to get there, and what the perspective is of the other party involved. Communication, particularly listening, is also important. It's important to think about these things in advance and prepare. Practice, practice with a with a peer, in the mirror, or however you can so that you are prepared in making your ask," she said.



REAL WORLD OF WORK

By DeAngelo, FM Member

In this issue, our very own Free Minds member, DeAngelo, describes his experience of coming home and enrolling in the DC Department of Corrections LEAD Out Program – a work readiness training program that offers, guidance, supportive services, financial literacy education, substance use disorder (SUD) recovery support and peer advocacy/support. Upon successful completion, LEAD Out also provides participants with a 6-month temporary job placement.

I first met Free Minds when I was on the juvenile block – C4B at CTF. It was 2015. I was awaiting prosecution for four felonies. At first, I wasn't interested in participating at all. I didn't want to read or write. I was 16 years old, and I was still wanting to do whatever I wanted. I was still hardheaded! I didn't even like to read or write. That changed though when I started coming to the book club sessions. I was so young to be incarcerated and I found the book club and reading therapeutic. The first book I remember loving was *Standing at the Scratch Line*, by Guy Johnson. It's about a young Black man from New Orleans named King Tremain who comes home from World War I and fights to create his own family dynasty. And this was during a time when Blacks were regularly being lynched! I just remember that when I read it, I felt like I was right there in the story. That got me started as a reader. Kelli and Free Minds stayed in touch the whole 8 years I was incarcerated. I have grown tremendously in that time. I'm grown. I'm mature.

While I was locked up, I thought a lot about what I would do when I came home. I decided I want to become a barber as well as a personal trainer. As my release got closer, I knew I would need to do something different when I was released just to get stable. I wanted to learn basic work readiness skills so that I could get a quick job and set myself up with transportation, and some savings. Ultimately, I plan to go to barber school. I wasn't sure how to go about getting a basic job when I got home. I heard about the LEAD Out Program through Tara at Free Minds. As soon as I got home, I applied. It was simple to apply. For me, the hardest part was just getting permission to get out of the halfway house to attend the orientations and trainings. Once that was smoothed out though, I was set.

The purpose of the LEAD Out is to help people coming home from jail and prison to prepare for the working world. The team at LEAD Out helped us with resumes, how to interview, mock interviews, and basically just how to handle yourself on the job. I went through four weeks of full-time training, Monday through Friday. They paid us minimum wage. There were 12 people in my class. It was helpful to go through this with other people who were coming home from prison. We were all in the same position. We all were looking for the same skills that would lead us to a job.

At LEAD Out, I learned how to do an interview, including what the skills were most important. I learned how I needed to keep good eye contact with the interviewer. That was a problem for me because I had just come home, and I always had my phone in my hand! I remember the man who was doing the training always told me I needed to stop holding my phone and focus on the interview. I get it and am much better now!

LEAD Out partners with local organizations and companies that offer temporary job placements to their students. The DC government pays the salaries, and the partners provide the jobs. Free Minds is one of these partners. After I finished the training, the staff at LEAD Out placed me at Free Minds for a six-month

position as a Program Assistant. Some of my classmates got jobs at The Hilton Hotel doing maintenance and housekeeping. Another person got a job at a Veterans Affairs hospital. And another got placed cleaning up streets in downtown DC.

I'll be honest. At first, I wasn't sure about the placement. I love Free Minds, but I didn't want to work in an office. I thought it would be boring, and there were things I didn't know how to do. I didn't like that. But I learned how to do those things. Like typing. I didn't want to type at first! But now I can type faster, and I enjoy it! I got the hang of it.

I do a lot of different things as a Program Assistant. I'm responsible for sending out letters out to Free Minds members if they've been out of contact with the organization for more than a year. We want to make sure that people are still interested in engaging with us, before we keep ordering books for them. So, if you fall out of touch with Free Minds, you can expect to get one of these letters checking in with you! I type up members' poems to send back to them. I also write poems of my own to be used at Free Minds outreach events in the community. I assist all around the office, working to support the staff with whatever task they may need assistance with.

Another skill I have developed is how to share my story with people in the community. Free Minds holds events called On the Same Page, which are meant to build connections between people who are/have been incarcerated, and people on the outside. At first, it was hard because I've always been the type of person that if I didn't know you, I didn't share details about my life. But after I saw how some of the other returning members, like Carlos, Craig, Shannon, and James, share their stories of incarceration, I saw how much impact that had on other people. I learned how my own story could help people better understand what we go through being incarcerated for so many years and then coming home and having to adapt to a world that has changed. It felt good to share my story. It brought back memories of how many obstacles I've overcome and how much I've grown!

I've learned a lot of basic office skills through this job. I have learned how to manage my time better. In addition to learning how to type well, I have also gained a lot of computer skills I didn't have before. I know all about how to use Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Calendar, and Zoom. I can create files and documents. These are important skills to know in today's world. What I've enjoyed the most through this job is experiencing the reentry reunions. When Free Minds members are released, we schedule what we call a Reentry Orientation (also called an "R.O.") People come into the office and sometimes they've been locked up for 20 years, 30 years. It reminds me of how lucky I am to be free, and what could happen to me if I were to go back to my former lifestyle. I feel like this has been so helpful to me. It's like it's being placed in front of me for a reason. Every time I see someone come home and tell their story, I'm reminded how easy it would be to fumble and lose everything.

My placement here has allowed me the opportunity to help other people. There have been a few times where people have come in and may be dealing with urgent needs. It may be because they don't have any money, or maybe they're experiencing a mental health crisis. But working here, I've been able to really help some people by sharing information that I have about organizations that have resources, such as free rides, food pantries, etc. When I was in prison, I was pretty anti-social. So, this is new for me, being able to reach out and help someone. I'm better at it now!

I've grown as an employee through this LEAD Out placement. I would highly recommend the LEAD Out program to others coming home. The placement with Free Minds has been a beautiful steppingstone for me. I appreciate all the understanding that the people at LEAD Out and Free Minds have had about the complications of probation, house arrest, etc. If I'd gone straight into the working world, my employer might not have been so understanding and it may have been more difficult to maintain my first job.

I've already made a lot of progress. I am continuing to develop a growth mindset. I want to work. I'm dedicated to working. I'm not 16 anymore. I'm 24 years old. And if things are going to happen, it's going to have to be me making them happen! I'm proud to say that I already got my learners permit, my driver's license, and bought my own car. I am working hard to be responsible and be someone who always pays their own bills. I have bold goals. In five years, I hope I will already have my barber's license. From there I'll save money and then I'll add getting my physical personal training business launched.

All of the skills I've gained are super important for my future plans. Matter of fact, I have a job interview tomorrow. With all I learned at the LEAD Out, and Free Minds, I am confident about this interview. I know what I'm doing. I know I need to dress nice, be on time, and look the interviewer directly in their eyes. I will do all of that and make sure through the way I speak and carry myself that they know that I am energetic, strong, young, dedicated and determined.

EDITOR'S NOTE: DeAngelo crushed his job interview, and just started his new full-time job as a traffic flagger.

To apply for the DC Department of Corrections LEAD Out program: Visit the Ready Center upon your release. It is located at 1901 E Street SE, directly behind the Correctional Treatment Center (CTF). You must be between the ages of 18-50 years old with a release date no more than 6 months prior to application. Participants must have a history of substance use disorder. All participants will be subjected to mandatory toxicology screenings. Residents must be free of drug usage. In many cases, job placements may lead to offers of full-time employment. NOTE: Free Minds is a program partner, but LEAD Out staff choose all temporary job placements.

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Heyy Good People!

Nice to be back in touch and bringing you some inspiration today as together we ruminate on "Growth," which of course will be individual and unique to us all. Although that is the case, there are some very real and universal aspects to growth that we all can relate to, so let's see what's up!

I think that we would all agree that we are all different today than we were 5 years ago. And 5 years ago, we were all different than we were 5 years before that. And, if we decide, these changes can consist of personal and positive growth! Based on this, we can also surmise that change is inevitable and as the saying goes, "the only thing consistent in life is change!" I don't know about y'all, but I consider that dope news because in this process, we can encourage our own personal growth and change, and be on the lookout because chances are, you'll grow in ways you didn't expect.

When considering how to obtain personal growth and better ourselves, the answers might be simpler than we think. Much of who you are comes down to the intentional decisions we make every day and lots of time, we tend to overlook this very important fact, and I will first raise my hand and admit that I am also in this number.

We can all change, grow, and improve (whatever word rings true and motivates you) by consciously choosing our daily, weekly, or even monthly choices, and by directing our habits toward a future of our choosing and to me, that is so awesomely powerful and gives a great sense of encouragement and I hope that it does the same for you!

Knowing your personal values and making choices that align with that is a great first start. Growing as a person may also look like showing self-compassion which can bring so much peace and freedom. We all are deserving of self forgiveness, after all, life can be very taxing and it's a guarantee that we will all mess up, fail, disappoint ourselves and others and make mistakes. No need to compound this with beating ourselves up. Let's analyze, self correct, apologize as necessary, give ourselves grace and move on. Being able to put this into practice and live it out is a true sign of growth.

Whatever change you attempt, please be mindful that growth comes slowly and can expand in all directions, so no need to rush or stifle growth, if we allow it to occur naturally, it will most certainly be beneficial to us and others.

And now onto some resources that I hope will contribute to your personal growth!

Community Assisted Reentry Program

3115 Martin Luther King Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20032
Office Phone: (202) 290-1038



The Community Assisted Reentry Program (CARP) aims to make the transition from correctional institutions back into society less daunting and easier to navigate for returning citizens.

To do so, CARP offers personalized case management through their team of experienced case managers that provide guidance and referral services for clients to obtain housing, job training/readiness, mental health services, addiction treatment and other relevant resources. CARP also has access to a van and driver (on a need-basis) as well as SmartTrip cards to assist clients with transportation needs.

Additionally, CARP also provides FlexFunds which clients can use to buy groceries, clothing, and personal hygiene items, and obtain vital records such as valid identification cards, birth certificates and social security cards.

Until we *Connect* again,
Ms. Keela

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with Neely

I am excited to share with you all that our next Books Across the Miles selection is *Felon: Poems* by Reginald Dwayne Betts. *Felon* explores the effects of incarceration, written by long-time Free Minds friend, Reginald Dwayne Betts. It captures a variety of emotions and experiences, from domestic violence, to drug abuse, to being unhoused, to being unemployed, to drug abuse, to fatherhood, to life post-incarceration. A profound and moving collection, we are curious to hear your thoughts.



1. In "Blood History" (p.3), Betts explores the difference between longing and wanting. What is the difference between these two words for you? Have you ever experienced the difference?

2. Images revolving around the ocean are used throughout the writing in this book, from references to shipwrecks, Jonah and the whale, and prison corridors being as long as the Atlantic. Why do you think Betts used the ocean as a recurring theme? What relationship is there, imaginary or real, between the ocean and prison?

3. "Redacted poetry" is created when a marker is used to black out certain parts of a pre-existing text to create a poem. Betts includes 4 redacted poems he made from legal documents in this collection. How might the original message of the legal documents have changed, and why do you think Betts chose to include this type of poetry?

4. Throughout this collection, Betts explores the way in which the label "felon" has no time limit, following him and others around even after they are back home in the community. Why do you think Betts chooses to emphasize the persisting label of "felon" in his book? If you were going to choose one word to be the title of your poetry book, what would it be?

5. Which poem in this book stood out to you the most, and why?

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: RESILIENCE (VOLUME 12, ISSUE 4)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Resilience**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 13, Issue 1 will be exploring the theme of **Dreams**.

(1)

Nature teaches us that resilience can be collective. For instance, how does an animal as small as an ant survive the devastation of a hurricane? Individually, a single fire ant would drown in the flood waters, but clusters of 100,000 fire ants are capable of creating water-repellent life boats that can float for weeks on end without drowning the ants. In what ways have your relationships and your community made you more resilient?

(2)

An acrostic poem is a poem in which certain letters of each line spells out a word, name, or phrase when read vertically.

Write an acrostic poem for Resiliency and what it means to you.

R _____

E _____

S _____

I _____

L _____

I _____

E _____

N _____

T _____

(3)

Think about all of the times in your life you have demonstrated resilience. Fill in the blanks below to create a poem.

When faced with a challenge, I _____

When I want to give up, I _____

When things are hard, I _____

I am resilient because _____

I am strong because _____

I can withstand anything because _____

When _____, I am resilient!

(4)

Think about someone you know who is resilient. What do you admire or appreciate about them?
Write a letter or a poem to that person to celebrate their resilience.

(5)

Resilience is about staying strong and not giving up. Write a poem that encourages your peers to be resilient in the face of obstacles!

Did you receive the **Hispanic Heritage Month** postcard? If so, how many of the countries did you guess correctly?

Answer Key: 1. México 2. Guatemala 3. El Salvador 4. Honduras 5. Nicaragua 6. Costa Rica 7. Panama 8. Cuba 9. Dominican Republic
10. Puerto Rico 11. Columbia 12. Venezuela 13. Ecuador 14. Peru 15. Bolivia 16. Paraguay 17. Uruguay 18. Chile 19. Argentina

Friendly Reminder: Your Free Minds Family would like to thank you all for your continuous participation and contributions for the Connect magazine that you all enjoy receiving so much. As much as we would like to include every submission that we receive, space limitations and mail delays prevent us from doing so. However, know that all of your submissions will be shown to our dedicated volunteers and you will receive comments on your poetry, which we will mail back to you. We encourage you to mail in your submissions for the upcoming Connect issues (**Resilience and Dreams**) as soon as you receive the current Connect so that you have a better chance at being included in the next issue.

– Your Free Minds Family



CONVERSATION WITH ANEKA

Hey FM fam! My name is Aneka and I am the Prison Book Club Coordinator with Free Minds. Some of you may have read articles that I've written in the past but I'm sure I'm mostly known for the DC Photos haha. If you can't tell from the locations I photograph, I am a born and raised Washingtonian! What I love most about photographing DC is seeing how much it's changed over the years. Even in the span of the few years that I've been home, I've seen several restaurants come and go. Apartment buildings popping up left and right. It's so much to take in and experience in such a small city! Talk about GROWTH!

For those of you who don't already know, I started off as a member of Free Minds years ago when I was incarcerated as a juvenile. Exactly one year ago today on September 6th, (I literally realized my anniversary was today while writing this column!) I started working with Free Minds. When I came home on home confinement, the first job the halfway house got me was for a commercial cleaning company that specialized in cleaning active construction sites. Within a week of starting that job, the halfway house offered me the opportunity to get a second job as

the head baker at a cafe. As someone who wanted any excuse to not be stuck in the house, I jumped at the chance to have more time outside. Once released from home confinement, I took on random jobs like a supervisor at Starbucks, a receptionist at another nonprofit, and an Amazon warehouse worker. Eventually, I got tired of working jobs that didn't align with my purpose and desires in life. Plus I was tired of having physically draining jobs haha.

After experiencing youth incarceration firsthand, I knew I wanted to do what I could to prevent other teens from experiencing the same thing. I re-enrolled in college and made the bold decision to reach out to Free Minds to see if they were hiring and the rest is history. I am currently a Psychology major with a minor in Family and Human Development. I have been dragging out getting my degree for years but I'm determined to stick it out this time around. Eventually I plan to start an art therapy program for at-risk youth in DC. I hope that I will be able to impact their lives how Free Minds impacted mine before it's too late.

DC PHOTOS *By Sofia*



Safeway on Georgia Avenue



Zion Hill Baptist Church



Rainbow over the Kennedy Center on the Potomac River



Columbia Heights

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!



FINANCIAL GROWTH

By James

When I heard the term “financial growth,” I asked myself, what exactly does that consist of? Basically, to me it means being responsible with one's finances. When I was incarcerated, I took this seriously for multiple reasons. I knew that upon my release I needed to be prepared for the unexpected. I heard numerous stories from guys who went home before me about how when they were released, how tight it was concerning money, and how they did not get the financial assistance they thought they would receive. So what I did was start to save aggressively and put my money somewhere it could grow while I was incarcerated.

Now I was serving a life sentence, so I didn't know when I would get out, but I knew I would get out one day. I would save money every month and put it in a D.R.I.P. (dividend reinvestment plan). Basically what this is, is a company or stock that pays a dividend quarterly just for being a shareholder. And instead of receiving the dividend, they reinvest back into the company, which gives you more shares and your checks get bigger every quarter.

So let's talk about how to set up a DRIP. Now if you have some support in the streets it'll be fairly easy. All you have to do is search online for dividend paying stocks and have your friend on the outside send you the list either by mail or email. Once you have the

list, you have to do your research and figure out what stock you're comfortable owning and the yield that's paid annually. For example, I invested in a real estate investment trust (REIT) company and the annual yield was 10%. So once you narrow down which company you want to invest in, you'll need to open a brokerage account. This can be done online so you'll need someone on the outside to do this for you. If you don't have anyone on the outside to do it, you can write to the company and let them know you'd like to invest in them, and they will send you the necessary paperwork to fill out. Then you will send a Form 24 with the funds you want to invest out of your account.

So I started out with like 150 shares, and when I was released I had 195 just sitting in the stock, which I liquidated upon my release because I needed the money. But the moral of the story is be prepared and start saving for the unexpected. Be smart with your finances because that can be the difference maker upon how successful your transition will be upon release. And I know not everyone will have funds to do things like this, but everyone's situation is different, and we need to act accordingly. For years, I didn't have any support financially, so I worked in UNICOR and cut hair. I did what I had to do. There are plenty of jobs on the inside! GOOD LUCK and let the savings begin.



THE WRITE WAY: TACKLING THE MEMOIR

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

By Meg

There are a variety of ways to tell your story in writing. You might find yourself considering what others have done, recounting autobiographies and memoirs you've encountered in the past. A memoir is no easy feat, and if you're thinking about taking the leap, the following tips might help you get started!

First and foremost, it's important to distinguish between the different types of autobiographical writing. For instance, an autobiography and a memoir are two pieces of writing that seem identical, but have differences that might help you pinpoint what story you're trying to tell. Usually, autobiographies span the writer's whole life, while memoirs have a more focused timeline, containing only select events. If your goal is to retell one particular time in your life, a memoir might be the right choice for you. It leaves you space to demonstrate not only what happened in such an influential moment, but why it matters.

I scoured several resources for tips on writing memoirs in order to present you with the most prevalent advice to remember when planning and writing your memoir. Almost every resource stresses the importance of focus,

truth, and relationships with your reader. And through it all, remember to use your journey to showcase how you've grown.

Let's talk about focus first. Memoirs have a more narrowed focus than autobiographies, so as you're planning, make sure you're keeping yourself on track with the specific story you're telling. It's easy to veer off in different directions as they come to you, but remember to draw the main point back toward your selected story as often as possible. One way to do this is to plan out your book's structure in advance, so you have guidelines to follow as you go. If you're the type of person who needs a step-by-step path while writing, a more detailed outline can help you remain centered and mitigate any feelings of being overwhelmed as you take on the task before you.

Another tip you'll often see when starting a memoir is to make sure you're being honest. This ties into the next point of ensuring you're building a relationship with your audience. Honesty resonates with people in a way nothing else will. Not only are you being genuine for anyone who might read your memoir down the

line, but you're honoring yourself and your experiences by telling your story without edits or embellishments. This will help you narrow down your themes too. A theme is the central message of your story, and being truthful in your depiction of events will aid you in most effectively communicating your themes and takeaways. Why are you writing a memoir? What do you want your readers to walk away with? The more truth you tell, the more effective your overall narrative, and the more your message is likely to stick with your readers.

Moreover, as you write, you'll want to ensure you're building a relationship with your audience. The first step of this process is figuring out who you're writing for. Are you writing for people with similar experiences? Are you hoping to reach a specific group of people? Once you've figured out the purpose of your memoir and who you're writing for, you can approach the task of allowing your reader into your story. If you've ever heard the advice "show, don't tell," then you're already halfway there. Details that go beyond simply narrating events enable the reader to access your perspective, feel what you feel, and therefore come away with a clearer picture of your themes. The more trust you've fostered through your honest portrayal of events and the more you allow them to truly glimpse your story, the better your relationship with your audience will be.

In books, regardless of whether they're fiction or nonfiction, the main character or subject must go through a journey of personal growth. The end point must showcase how they've changed from Point A to Point B as a result of their endeavors. In your memoir, you're not just retelling these points, but you're showing your audience how you've been affected, how you've changed, and what you've learned. While you're writing, you'll want to find ways to weave in points of reflection without necessarily breaking the narrative's natural progression. Again, the advice of "show, don't tell" comes in handy here. You're not grabbing the reader by the shoulders and saying "this is what I did, and this is how I changed," you're embedding moments of acknowledgement and introspection into your writing, something subtle that the reader can pick up on as they read and come away with at the end.

All of these tips – focus, honesty, audience engagement, and growth – are interwoven with each other, so you'll often find yourself accomplishing multiple tasks in one go. Tell the truth, and you'll build a solid relationship with your readers. Monitor your focus, and you'll be better able to track your progress and emotional growth as you retell events. Writing a memoir can be a valuable outlet for reflection and self-discovery, and it can prove to be a meaningful experience for your readers too, as they find themselves learning and growing right alongside you.

Special thanks to The Write Life's "How to Write a Memoir: 7 Ways to Tell a Powerful Story" by Brooke Warner, MasterClass's "How to Start Writing a Memoir: 10 Tips for Starting Your Memoir," and Reedsy's "How to Write a Memoir: Turn Your Personal Story Into a Successful Book."

SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHED AUTHOR

Many of our Free Minds members have published books and we'd like to celebrate their accomplishments! If you have published a book, please send us the title and a short description that we can print in an upcoming issue of the Connect. All books must be available in paperback on Amazon.com. Free Minds will not list books that include explicit sexual material, gratuitous violence, or discrimination against any group of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or disability.

Buttons Last Day of Incarceration by Lewis Collins

Description provided by the author: *This memoir documents the author's final days of incarceration, not knowing whether or not he would be released under the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA), a DC law that provides an opportunity for resentencing for individuals who were under 25 at the time of the crime, and have served at least 15 years.*



BOOK BALLOT

Alright Free Minds readers, get your voting pens ready because it is time to choose the next Books Across the Miles book! Please write to us with your 1st and 2nd choices from the list below. Also, if you have a book in mind you'd like to see on the next ballot, please let us know!

1		<p><i>Washington Black</i> by Esi Edugyan [Historical Fiction]</p> <p>Eleven-year-old George Washington Black is enslaved on a Barbados sugar plantation, and is initially terrified when he is chosen to be the manservant of the plantation master's brother. To his surprise, however, the eccentric Christopher Wilde turns out to be a naturalist, explorer, inventor, and abolitionist. When a man is killed and a bounty is placed on Wash's head, they abandon everything and flee together. Over the course of their travels, what brings Wash and Christopher together will tear them apart, propelling Wash ever farther across the globe in search of his true self. Spanning the Caribbean to the frozen Far North, London to Morocco, <i>Washington Black</i> is a story of self-invention and betrayal, of love and redemption, and of a world destroyed and made whole again.</p>
2		<p><i>The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates</i> by Wes Moore [Biography/Autobiography]</p> <p>In December 2000, the <i>Baltimore Sun</i> ran a small piece about Wes Moore, a local student who had just received a Rhodes Scholarship. The same paper also ran a series of articles about four young men who had allegedly killed a police officer in a botched armed robbery. The police were still hunting for two of the suspects, one who was named Wes Moore. After following the story of the robbery, the manhunt, and the trial to its conclusion, Wes wrote a letter to the other Wes, now a convicted murderer serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole. Over dozens of letters and prison visits, Wes discovered that the other Wes had had a life not unlike his own: Both had had difficult childhoods, both were fatherless; they'd hung out on similar corners with similar crews, and both had run into trouble with the police. At each stage of their young lives they had come across similar moments of decision, yet their choices would lead them to different destinies. Told in alternating narratives, <i>The Other Wes Moore</i> tells the story of a generation of boys trying to find their way in a hostile world.</p>
3		<p><i>Sing, Unburied, Sing</i> by Jesmyn Ward [Fiction]</p> <p>Jojo is thirteen years old and trying to understand what it means to be a man. He doesn't lack in fathers to study, chief among them his Black grandfather, Pop. But there are other men who complicate his understanding: his absent White father, Michael, who is being released from prison; his absent White grandfather, Big Joseph, who won't acknowledge his existence; and the memories of his dead uncle, Given, who died as a teenager. His mother, Leonie, is an inconsistent presence in his and his sister's lives. She wants to be a better mother but can't put her children above her own needs, especially her drug use. When the children's father is released from prison, Leonie packs her kids and a friend into her car and drives north to the heart of Mississippi and Parchman Farm, the State Penitentiary. At Parchman, there is another thirteen-year-old boy, the ghost of a dead inmate who carries all of the ugly history of the South with him in his wandering. He too has something to teach Jojo about fathers and sons, about legacies, about violence, about love.</p>

4		<p><i>Solito</i> by Javier Zamora [Memoir]</p> <p>Nine-year-old Javier Zamora's <i>adventure</i> is a three-thousand-mile journey from his small town in El Salvador to the U.S. border. He will leave behind his beloved aunt and grandparents to reunite with a mother who left four years ago and a father he barely remembers. Traveling alone amid a group of strangers and a "coyote" hired to lead them to safety, Javier expects his trip to last two short weeks. He cannot foresee the perilous boat trips, relentless desert treks, pointed guns, arrests and deceptions that await him; nor can he know that those two weeks will expand into two life-altering months alongside fellow migrants who will come to encircle him like an unexpected family. <i>Solito</i> is Javier Zamora's story, but it's also the story of millions of others who had no choice but to leave home.</p>
5		<p><i>Creatures of Passage</i> by Morowa Yejidé [Fiction]</p> <p>Nephthys Kinwell is a taxi driver of sorts in Washington, DC, ferrying passengers in a 1967 Plymouth Belvedere with a ghost in the trunk. Endless rides and alcohol help her manage her grief over the death of her twin brother, Osiris, who was murdered and dumped in the Anacostia River. Unknown to Nephthys, her estranged great-nephew, ten-year-old Dash, is finding himself drawn to the banks of that very same river. It is there that Dash – reeling from having witnessed an act of molestation at his school, but still questioning what and who he saw--has charmed conversations with a mysterious figure he calls the "River Man." When Dash arrives unexpectedly at Nephthys's door bearing a cryptic note about his unusual conversations with the River Man, Nephthys must face what frightens her most.</p>
6		<p><i>IQ</i> by Joe Ide [Fiction]</p> <p>In East Long Beach, the police are struggling to keep up with the neighborhood's high crime rate. IQ, a loner and high school dropout, has taken it upon himself to help solve cases the police won't touch. He takes any client that can pay, whether through a set of tires or homemade casserole. Tasked to save a rap mogul whose life is in danger, he discovers a vengeful ex-wife, a vicious dog, and an unstable hitman. The deeper he digs, the more dangerous the case becomes.</p>

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Here are a few of our members' many accomplishments since our last issue!

- ★ MS was accepted into college and released a new book
- ★ CW and HS graduated from the DC Peace Academy
- ★ JG's essay was accepted for publication in a literary magazine
- ★ RC, DEJ, TH, AJ, GO, and AUW graduated from the Lead Out Program
- ★ AC ran his first successful poetry event
- ★ LV, AH, and DD got accepted into the Pivot Program
- ★ DS and RM passed their driver's test and received their driver's licenses
- ★ JW, GH, MW graduated from LET'S WORK
- ★ RB was accepted into the Community Journalism Program
- ★ CS and AW were accepted into the ONSSE Pathways Program
- ★ EJ started college

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

DC CULTURE: A WEEKEND AT THE BROCCOLI CITY FESTIVAL

By Sofia

On July 15th and 16th, folks from all around Washington, D.C., Virginia, Maryland (also known as the DMV), and other parts of the country flocked to RFK Stadium Festival Grounds for the annual Broccoli City Festival. The annual gathering is a Black owned social enterprise, and a uniquely-DC music festival in that it celebrates Black culture and its DC roots while also attracting big names in the music industry. This year's headliners were Lil Uzi Vert, Jazmine Sullivan, and Brent Faiyaz; every year the festival features local and national rappers, R&B singers, and Go-Go bands. Other notable performers included the City Girls, Kodak Black, Ice Spice, Keke Palmer, and Mariah the Scientist.



I was lucky to find myself in attendance this year for the first time ever, and despite the ups and downs of the festival, it did not disappoint. Like most July days in DC, the earth was scorching the weekend of the festival and the air was muggy, but that didn't stop me or the roughly 30,000 other attendees from enjoying the festivities. As my friends and I arrived on day one of the festival, the entrance was crowded with folks waiting to pick up their tickets and we later found out that people waited in lines for hours to get their wristbands (that they needed to enter the festival, showing they had bought tickets). Because of the heat, some people even passed out. Luckily, my friend and I had our wristbands shipped to us ahead of time.

Once we made it past the gates, we were amazed by the beautiful Black and brown faces we saw dancing and basking in the joyous festival atmosphere, a true testament to DC's unique diversity and Chocolate City legacy. The attendees were dressed to the nines, showing off their own personal styles and swag. We found some shade and listened from a distance to the percussive sounds of Go-Go band TCB on the smaller stage. Eventually we made our way to the main stage where Rema, a Nigerian singer and rapper was playing his set. On our trek to the main stage, we walked through local vendors, mostly Black-owned, selling festival merch and other goods. The festival also had an "Impact Village" that featured local community organizations like the Hip Hop Caucus, DC Vote, Bread for the City, and more. After dancing among the main stage crowd to the sounds of Rema, my friend and I decided to cool off with some smoothie bowls being sold by a local DC smoothie restaurant that had a stand at the festival. We made sure to stay refreshed and hydrated as folks among the crowd at the main stage were passing out what seemed like almost every 30 minutes or so due to the extreme heat. As the day went on, we enjoyed the music of R&B singer Chloe, and rappers Ice Spice and City Girls. Unfortunately, the slight chaos of the day persisted and day one was cut short by looming thunderstorms. Luckily, all day one attendees were later issued a refund for the day.

The obstacles of day one did not stop myself and other attendees from enjoying day two of the festival. As my friend

and I arrived on day two, we noticed a less chaotic scene at the entrance and quickly made our way to the local food vendors, deciding on the famous crispy chicken sandwiches being sold by a DC favorite – Roaming Rooster. After devouring our sandwiches, we saw a dark cloud against the backdrop of Coco Jones's smooth R&B performance echoing from the main stage. We ran to the nearest tent we could find as the rain started to roll in. As a downpour ensued, we could just barely catch a glimpse of the giant screen behind Jones's performance and she didn't miss a beat, even ironically adding SWV's song "Rain" to her repertoire. Eventually the rain stopped and the sun came out almost as if to join us for Asake's performance. Asake is a Nigerian singer and songwriter and his performance was lively and energetic; he even jumped off the stage and went past the barricades to join the crowd dancing in front of the stage. Later in the day, we met up with a friend of mine who came all the way from New York to enjoy the festival, swaying together to the soulful melodies of R&B singer Mariah the Scientist. We also watched powerful rap performances by Glorilla and Kodak Black. The festival ended with arguably the biggest name at the festival: Brent Faiyaz. Faiyaz is an R&B singer originally from the DMV (he was raised in Columbia, MD) who has gained large mainstream success. Faiyaz's performance attracted the largest crowd I had seen at the festival and his laidback, yet catchy and sometimes upbeat songs were echoed by his DMV fanbase in the crowd who sang along to every word. He also brought another DMV artist, rapper Tre'Amani who performed earlier in the evening at the smaller stage, on stage with him.

After his performance, the crowd cleared and I couldn't help but reflect on how this festival is such a wonderful merging of local DC culture and music that has found national – often worldwide – success. In a lot of ways, this represents what DC is. A place that people travel to from far and wide, visiting sites of national historic significance, but that also holds significance and local beauty for the communities that particularly Black folks have spent generations growing. Growing something beautiful and rhythmic of their own.

MEDITATION *By Kelli*

Autumn is my absolute favorite time of year. If you've been reading the *Connect* for a while now, you may know this! Even though January is technically the start of the year I have always associated September and back-to-school with fresh new beginnings and growth. Remember how you would come back to school in the fall, and the kids you hadn't seen over the summer were taller? Maybe they had new braces? Or longer hair? Or they were just somehow different? That first day of school was the chance to witness real growth. I remember in 8th grade, a kid named John, who was about four and a half feet tall on the last day of 7th grade, showed up at school taller than all the other boys. He was almost unrecognizable. He even carried himself differently. And believe me when I say, everyone noticed! Especially Mr. Andrews, our gym teacher and coach of our low/no talent boys basketball team!

My back-to-school days are over, as are my days of growing taller (I may even be shrinking!) and yet this time of year still makes me excited about growth. Fall reminds me of taking new classes, meeting new people, signing up for new opportunities. And as old - let's say "seasoned" - as I get, I *never* stop striving to grow and change. Every single day, I hope to learn something new, improve a skill I already have, and become better, wiser, and deeper in my experience of this life. So, with that in mind, and with the air getting crisper and cooler outside, let's meditate on the idea of growth...

You know the drill. If you can, have a buddy take turns with you. One reads, while the other meditates. Then switch. Otherwise, you can read through the script once or twice and then just close your eyes and sit with the feelings you experienced.

Let's begin with an awareness of our physical body...

Breathe in deeply... Notice the oxygen as it travels through your nose and fills your lungs... hold the breath... and then exhale, letting the air rush out through your mouth. Take several more of these deep, cleansing breaths...

When you feel ready, shift your focus to your body... specifically to the bones in your body... from the bones in each one of your toes... through the bones of your feet, and up both of your legs...

These bones that started as nothing, have formed, and then

lengthened and grown to create a strong frame that carries your body... from the tips of your fingers, your hands, and your arms... The bones of your hips, and your spine, your neck and all the way up to your skull... All of these bones have grown to their full potential according to the DNA blueprint for your physical being... Breathe in appreciation for your body, and for its strength, its growth, ...and all its potential.

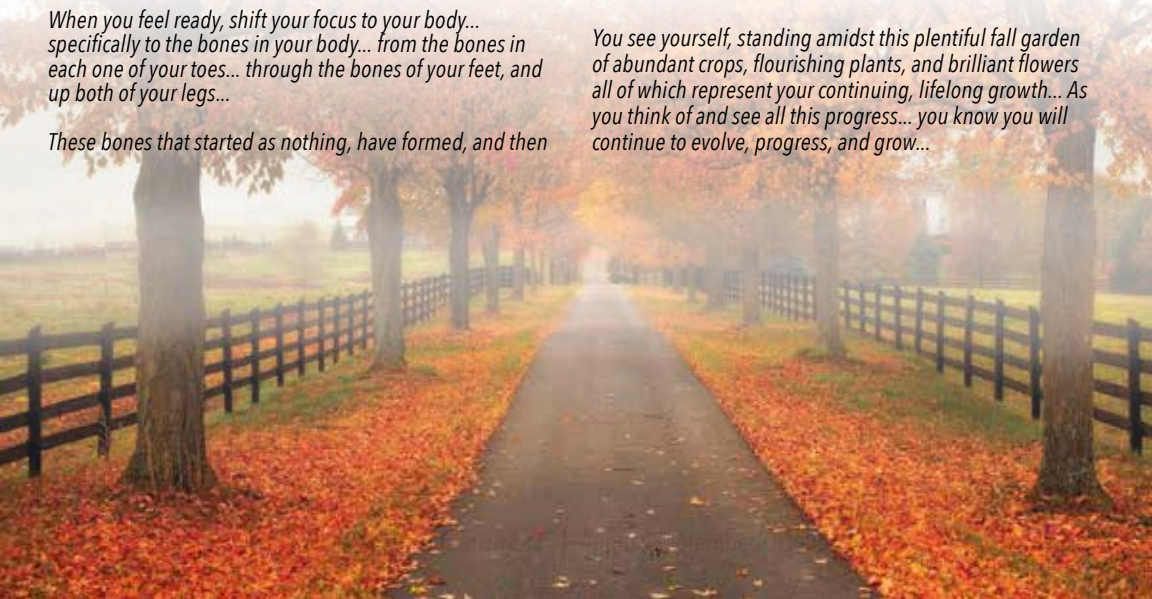
You may no longer be growing physically, but growth still occurs, every hour of every day. This is true in the natural world as well. Fall is the time of bountiful harvest... As you meditate on this... picture yourself standing in a fall garden on a farm... look around you... at the sturdy cornstalks, the hardy vines that twist and turn to produce brilliant orange pumpkins and enormous deep green and yellow squash... all of it ringed by beds of beautiful autumn flowers - auburn chrysanthemums, golden sunflowers, and red zinnias... sprouting up and reaching skyward...

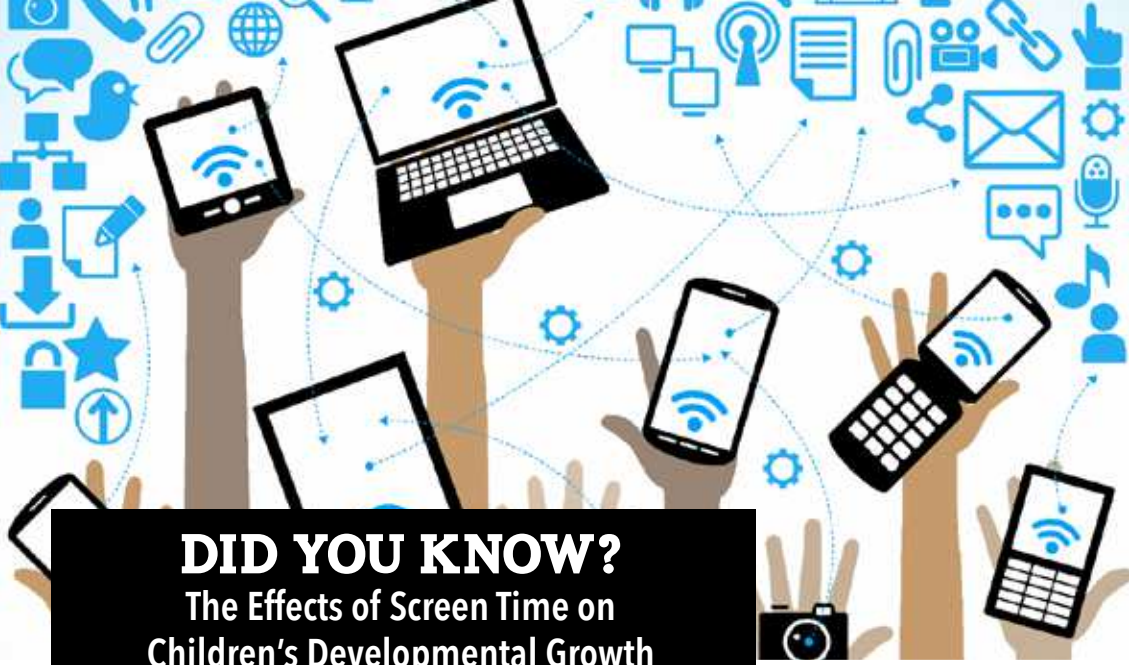
Think of how this same colorful growth is occurring inside of you. As you continue to seek knowledge, and answers to questions, as you endeavor to grow into an ever-changing and better version of yourself...

*You grow through the love and empathy that you show to others...
You grow in the genuine connections you make with them...
You grow in the gratitude you express...
You grow as you become more certain of who you are...
You grow as you embrace and stay true to the values that matter most to you...
You grow as you take care of your body and mind...
You grow in the better solutions you seek...
You grow in the fears you face and in every one of the moments you push yourself beyond your comfort zone...
You grow in the peace you create...*

In all these moments, you are growing, maturing, and nourishing the wonderful being that is you.

You see yourself, standing amidst this plentiful fall garden of abundant crops, flourishing plants, and brilliant flowers all of which represent your continuing, lifelong growth... As you think of and see all this progress... you know you will continue to evolve, progress, and grow...





DID YOU KNOW?

The Effects of Screen Time on Children's Developmental Growth

By Regina

There's not a child today who doesn't know how to work a smartphone, laptop, or tablet. From as early as 3 years old, children are learning at a rapid pace how to operate these devices since everything is practically virtual and digitized. Nearly half of all children 8 and under have a smart device and spend an average of about 2.25 hours a day on digital screens according to Common Sense Media (Health Matters, 2018).

A study from the National Institute of Health (NIH) found that children who spent more than two hours a day on screen-time activities scored lower on language and thinking tests. "Some children with more than seven hours a day of screen time experienced thinning of the brain's cortex, the area of the brain related to critical thinking and reasoning" (Health Matters, 2018).

According to Henry Ford Health, screen use has exploded over the past decade not only outside of school but also as an often required educational tool. Between homework, social media, video games, and YouTube videos many kids spend up to six or seven hours a day in front of a screen. Mobile devices make it even harder to control screen time amongst children because it draws them in and becomes their norm and they want to do more of it (2018).

The disadvantages of screen time and digital technology are that it slows language development among younger children, stifles creative thinking, and interferes with social skills development (Henry Ford Health, 2018). The Academy of Pediatrics says that too much screen time can also be

linked to obesity, irregular sleep, behavioral problems, and impaired academic performance (Mayo Clinic Health Systems, 2021). Some advantages of screen time and digital technology are that it acts as a tool for communicating with friends and family and encourages learning by allowing children to learn new information in engaging ways (Henry Ford Health, 2018).

Health Matters recommends the following screen time usage for children in the following age groups: 18 months and younger parents should avoid screen media other than video chatting, 18-24 months parents should choose high-quality programming and watch it with the child to help them understand what they are seeing, 2-5 years parents should limit screen time usage to one hour per day of high-quality programs co-viewed by parents to help them understand what they are seeing and how to apply it to the world, 6-12 years parents should place consistent limits on screen time and the types of media being viewed, 12 years and older parents should designate media-free times together and media-free locations at home (2018).

Smart devices have become the norm. Screens aren't inherently bad and they are here to stay, therefore we must learn to live with them and use them effectively (UCSF, 2022). How we choose to allow our children to use them is primarily up to us. Screen addiction has become very common among children. The only way to reduce the problem is to place limitations on screen time and replace it with more physical and interactive activities.

REENTRY PROFILE: MAKING CHANGE

Interview by Meg

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with member Jamal and talk about why he joined the Free Minds "Changemakers" team, which is a group of members working to change the criminal legal system through the passage of laws and changing the narrative around incarceration and violence. Jamal engages with the community to bring change. His work stresses the importance of interactions with everyone in the community, creating spaces for growth and addressing the need for prolonged, tangible guidance to foster positive change.

Meg: Why are you a Changemaker?

Jamal: For so long, people who've held a title with a similar meaning haven't lived up to it. There's been a generational decline, in which people put Band-Aids on wounds that require surgery. As Changemakers, we're breaking the monotony of simply talking to bring about solutions and tangible change for all. We have to move past the luxury of a reactionary approach to one that includes and uses the experiences of real people. We're focusing on inclusion, rather than an approach that operates externally.

Meg: What has been the best project you've done so far?

Jamal: The title Changemaker is so broad that all things are included in the passion it represents. I can't pick out just one thing we've done so far. Being a Changemaker embodies the true purpose of altruism. We are working to change policies and laws that harm people.

Our goal is to illustrate to youth that there are different ways of living. We're showing them there's more to life; we're providing an alternative to the actions they think they have to take part in to be noticed. We show them the world is more than this, and that they are noticed.

Meg: What have you experienced with other Changemakers, and how has this influenced the rest of your life?

Jamal: The experience so far has been very hands-on. I've met people who've learned how to be leaders. There's so much diversity, and we learn from each other.

The work I've done has had an impact on my family. They see what I'm engaged in and the work I'm doing. They see me being a positive influence, creating networks and embracing the Changemaker mindset at home. We're showing the world how to live in ways besides survival and struggle.

Meg: How have you interacted with the community?

Jamal: I participate in speaking engagements. I advocate for the importance of perspective, of paradigm shifts over space and time. I've found what drives and gives confidence, and I work to redefine how they think of and support the community. I try to carry with me what I call PEO: positive energy overall.

Meg: What's your biggest takeaway so far? What have you learned as you've grown?

Jamal: As a people, the majority needs to get more engaged. There needs to be more of a concerted effort to tackle issues outside of politics. The focus needs to be on contributing, not reacting. We need to turn to those with experience – at-risk youth, those in criminal justice reform, etc. – in order to collectively bring about tangible change. A group of individuals dedicated to bringing change and being engaged in the day-to-day goings-on of our community is incredibly important. We need repetitive, thorough efforts. Visits to schools should be often, following up on teachings, hearing what the youth are saying, and creating ways to let them express themselves. It's vital they have access to current, updated awareness and information.

The people who want new reactionary laws don't have experiences in these things first-hand. We need to educate from all sides, solving issues through perspective, emphasizing deterrents not punishments. When the community speaks, we need to ensure the words are being heard. Collaboration is essential, especially between those with different skills and experiences. Our purpose is, to sum it up into three words, engagement, perseverance, and synergy.



WHAT WE'RE READING

with Neely

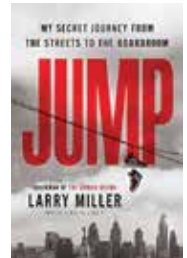
Have you recently read a book that left an impression on you, good or bad? We want to hear about it!

Send us your thoughts (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next

"What We're Reading."

- **Julia:** *How Much of These Hills is Gold* by C Pam Zhang

I read *How Much of These Hills Is Gold* by C Pam Zhang, a historical fiction novel set during the gold rush (the period in American history around the 1840s-1850s when hundreds of thousands of people, including immigrants, flocked to California believing they could find gold in the hills). This novel follows Lucy and Sam, two Chinese American children who are struggling to survive in the Californian desert after the loss of their parents, who found gold in America before having it stolen from them. As the children of immigrants, Lucy and Sam are constantly denied ownership of the land where they grew up, and any wealth their family may have discovered. This book is very sad, so it wasn't exactly a fun read, but I thought it was really interesting to read about this time period and ideas of belonging and connection to a place, even when people and society at large tell you that you don't belong there.



- **Jennifer:** *The Nurse's Secret* by Amanda Skenandore

Based on my mom's recommendation, I read *The Nurse's Secret* by Amanda Skenandore. We both like historical fiction so it was interesting to read about our home state of New York in the 1880's. Una, the main character, is orphaned and survives by pickpocketing tourists in Grand Central Station and other busy parts of town. But when she was accused of a crime she didn't commit, Una conned her way into a new nurse training program at Bellevue hospital at a time when doctors didn't believe in washing their hands, ambulances were horse-drawn carriages, and wards were lit by candlelight. This book is a clever mystery with a satisfying ending!

- **Tara:** *I Can't Make This Up: Life Lessons* by Kevin Hart

I just finished reading Kevin Hart's *I Can't Make This Up: Life Lessons* and I give it 10 stars! I've been a huge Kevin Hart fan, and after reading this I'm even more of a superfan. I found myself laughing hysterically and being really touched emotionally. He writes about his life growing up and how he dealt with a lot of tough experiences and disappointments, but never gave up. He shared how important it is to believe in oneself. The life lessons are fresh and interesting and not the same ones you hear all the time.

- **Free Minds Reentry Book Club "The Build Up":** *Jump: My Secret Journey From the Streets to the Boardroom* by Larry Miller and Laila Lacy

One of the most successful Black businessmen in the country, who has led Nike's Jordan Brand from a \$200M sneaker company to a \$4B global apparel juggernaut, tells the remarkable story of his rise from gangland violence to the pinnacles of international business.

CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES/ FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

Por/By Carlos

"Conversaciones de Mentes Libres" es una sección regular de la revista Connect, donde ofrecemos un artículo escrito en español y luego lo traducimos al inglés. Como sabrán, en 2019 lanzamos Mentes Libres, un club de lectura en español en la Cárcel de DC. Free Minds trabaja para trascender todos los desafíos hacia la verdadera conexión humana y la autoexpresión creativa, ¡incluyendo las barreras de los idiomas! Si hablas español y te gustaría contribuir a esta columna, ¡escríbenos y déjanos saber! Y si no hablas español pero te gustaría aprender, puedes solicitar para poder obtener un libro y comenzar tu aventura de aprendizaje de este idioma.

"Conversations of Mentes Libres" (Free Minds Conversations) is a regular feature of the Connect magazine, where we offer an article written in Spanish, and then translate it into English. As you may know, in 2019, we launched Mentes Libres (Free Minds), a book club in Spanish at the DC Jail. Free Minds works to transcend all challenges to true human connection and creative self-expression—including language barriers! If you speak Spanish and would like to contribute to this column, write and let us know! And if you don't speak Spanish but would like to learn, you can request a book and start your language learning adventure (that's "aventura" in Spanish!)

Crecimiento

Primero y antes de todo, quiero dar un fuerte saludo a toda la familia de Mentes Libres. Es mi profundo deseo que se encuentren fuertes de salud mental, emocional y física. Siempre es un privilegio poder saludarlos por estos medios y los pueda encontrar por lo menos, mentalmente libres.

En nuestra presente edición de nuestra revista "Connect", hablamos de un tema que todos podemos relacionar de una manera u otra, "Crecimiento" (que también se puede decir: Aumento o desarrollo).

Para explicar cómo me conecto con esta palabra, primero les tengo que decir un poco de mi pasado. Para los que no me conocen, fui encarcelado a una joven edad. ¡Crecí en prisión! Después de 25 años, tengo la bendición de tener esta libertad. Pero no ha sido nada fácil. Ajustarme ha venido con muchos obstáculos. Como les dije, crecí en prisión. Lugar donde el respeto es mandatorio en los que conviven en esos lugares. Ustedes bien saben que el no hacerlo viene con consecuencias. Hoy día vivo en mi país natal después de haber sido deportado. Lugar donde el respeto casi no existe. Los taxistas, los buseros, hasta los mismos policías le faltan el respeto a todos.

El otro día estuve en el supermercado, estaba lleno y había gente por todo lado. Ya listo para pagar por mis compras e irme, me puse en línea. Estaba escuchando música mientras esperaba cuando de repente se metió un señor de mi misma edad enfrente de mí, diciéndome que él ya estaba allí y que solo fue a traer algo que se le olvidó. No les voy a mentir, me puse furioso porque yo bien sabía que él no estaba aquí cuando llegué. El simplemente se quería meter para poder salir más rápido. Bueno, al no darle una respuesta, me repetió lo mismo pero con un tono más agresivo.

En esos lugares donde crecí, esta situación terminará más fea. Esos lugares me enseñaron a reaccionar agresión con agresión. Pero he crecido de esa manera. Las cosas no tienen que ser así. Puede controlar como verdaderamente me sentía. Y aunque sentía esa furia. Aunque sentía que la sangre se me calentaba, y mis ojos se me enrojecen. Me quité los audífonos y le dije, "señor pase con gusto". En ese momento pude recordar lo que vale la pena y lo que no. Que mi manera de ver las cosas ha cambiado. Y que aquél sistema que me quiso enseñar otras cosas que eran erróneas para vivir en una libertad social, falló!. Crecí! Yo lo superé, y desarrollé en todo nivel para poder ver dentro de mí y seguir en paz sin cometer ningún error que perjudique esta bella libertad. Crecí en pensamiento, sentimientos y más que todo, humildad. Poder ver la situación con previsión en vez de una retrospectiva.

Esta palabra puede incluir tantas cosas. Crecimiento mental, emocional, físico al igual como social. Crecimiento en estatus o de estado espiritual. El crecimiento en educación. Eres el mismo quien eras hace 5/10 años? ¿Verdad que no? Todos crecemos. Hay cosas o personas que nos han ayudado de una manera u otra para poder crecer. O pudiera ser una cosa tan sencilla como un libro que nos ayudó. Para mí, fue esa misma situación que me tuvo atrapado por tantos años. Siempre quería tener mi libertad. Practiqué ser diferente en todas situaciones que podía. No quería ser el mismo que cuando entré en mi juventud. Para mí, el querer ser diferente en cualquier manera es querer crecer, desarrollarse. El deseo de crecer nunca cambia, siempre queremos ser algo más. Siempre queremos más. La cosa es utilizar este deseo natural para poder ser una versión mejor de nuestro ser.

Growth

First and foremost, I want to give a big shout out to the entire Mentes Libres family. It is my deepest wish that this finds you strong in mental, emotional and physical health. It is always a privilege to be able to greet you through these means and find you, at least, mentally free.

In our current edition of our *Connect* magazine, we talk about a topic that we can all relate to in one way or another, "Growth" (which can also be said: Increase or development).

To explain how I connect with this word, I first have to tell you a little about my background. For those who don't know me, I was imprisoned at a young age. I grew up in prison! After 25 years, I am blessed to have my freedom. But it hasn't been easy at all. Adjusting has come with many obstacles. Like I told you, I grew up in prison. A place where respect is mandatory for those who live in those places. You all know well that not doing so comes with consequences. Today I live in my native country after having been deported. A place where respect almost does not exist. The taxi drivers, the bus drivers, even the police themselves, disrespect everyone. The other day I was in the supermarket, it was full and there were people everywhere. Ready to pay for my purchases and leave, I got in line. I was listening to music while waiting when suddenly a man the same age as me was in front of me, telling me that he was already there and that he only went to get something that he had forgotten. I'm not going to lie to you, I was furious because I knew he wasn't there when I arrived. He simply wanted to get in so he could get out faster. Well, when I didn't give him an answer, he repeated the same thing to me but with a more aggressive tone.

In those places where I grew up, this situation will end up uglier. Those places taught me to react to aggression with aggression. But I've grown up that way. Things don't have to be this way. I was able to control how I truly felt. And although I felt that fury. Although I felt my blood getting hot, and my eyes getting red. I took off my headphones and said, "Sir, please go ahead." In that moment I was able to remember what was worth it and what was not. That my way of seeing things had changed. And that the system that wanted to teach me other things that were all wrong to live in social liberty, failed! I grew up! I overcame it, and developed at every level to be able to see within myself and continue in peace without making any mistakes that could harm this beautiful freedom. I grew in thought, feelings and most of all, humility. Being able to see the situation with foresight instead of hindsight.

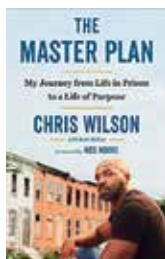
This word can include so many things. Mental, emotional, physical as well as social growth. Growth in status or a spiritual state. Growth in education. Are you the same as who you were 5/10 years ago? No, right? We all grow. There are things or people that have helped us in one way or another to grow. Or it could be something as simple as a book that helped us. For me, it was that same situation that had me trapped for so many years. I always wanted to have my freedom. I practiced being different in every situation I could. I didn't want to be the same as when I entered at a young age. For me, wanting to be different in any way is wanting to "grow". The desire to grow never changes, we always want to be something more. We always want more. The thing is to use this natural desire to be a better version of ourselves.

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

The Master Plan: My Journey from Life in Prison to a Life of Purpose

with Neely



We have continued to receive responses for our previous BAM book, *The Master Plan: My Journey from Life in Prison to a Life of Purpose* by Chris Wilson. In his memoir, Wilson shares the path he took through a violent childhood and through incarceration to create a "Master Plan" of everything he wanted to accomplish with his life. Thank you to everyone who has shared their feedback, here is what some of you had to say:

1. How do you think Chris' life, and the lives of many children, would be different if the crack epidemic hadn't happened? Did this personally impact you or people in your life?

RT: Without the crack epidemic, most families in my community would be whole. We lost a whole generation, well two really, because of the effects it had on the children. My mother almost lost her life trying to survive through the crack epidemic.

FJ: It would be a lot different because a lot of people might still be alive and people wouldn't be separated by greed and hate. Yeah, it impacts me because I was raised up in that epidemic with all of the hate and destruction going on.

GM: The crack epidemic robbed me of arguably one of the most critical things a child needs in his or her developing years: a positive role model. Imagine in your formative years growing up in a household and community where crack is the main focus. In my household I was exposed to the lows a human will go to feed their addiction; in the community I was exposed to the lows humans will go to exploit + capitalize off our fellow man's addiction; and, now I am exposed to the lost souls who are caught up in mass incarceration because of the "Law and Order" and "War on Drug" policies of the very people who fueled the crack epidemic and their addiction to keep this class/caste system that underpins capitalist democracy. Thus, if those are the examples the under-privileged has to choose from you can draw your own conclusion to Q #1.

RB: I think many children would have had active, participating, loving/caring parents who would have been able to provide stability for their children and deterred them from a life of crime. The crack epidemic personally impacted me; I grew up in an environment where it was all around, the effect that the epidemic had on the community became

normalized, which made it easier for me to participate in.

JJ: Whoever discovered crack didn't think it would probably be a big thing, but then reality came. Although DC has weaknesses, it shelters strength. It's hard to say.

2. When Chris was sentenced to life, his mother sat quietly, staring straight ahead with a blank look on her face. She didn't cry. Why do you think she didn't cry or react? Do you think she cared? Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't feel like you could express your feelings for whatever reason?

RB: I do believe his mother cared. I just think she was dealing with so many things in her own life that she just felt numb. I have felt like I couldn't express my emotions and it stemmed from me unconsciously hardening my heart, in order to be able to survive my reality. I became aware of it when my grandmother died and I was unable to cry or mourn her.

FJ: I think she didn't cry because it was unexpected to get your life standing around like that over anything. She cried on the inside. First, I did experience that. I've been in prison right at 17 years and they tried to get my mother to testify on me, and when they asked her to come testify on me she had a heart attack and was brain dead and two weeks later I told my brother to take her off it.

GM: Low expectations are the parent of low results! Though Chris' mother was trying to raise him right earlier, anyone familiar with that type of environment knows there's a undertow of low expectations that usually carry the Chris's, his mother, etc... out to sea so far they can't usually swim back. Chris just so happens to be an exceptional swimmer.

RT: I think Chris' mother couldn't react because she didn't know how she was losing one of the last things she cared about. But I also think she had a delusion that everything was fine in their lives so it was impossible for that to be happening. Some parents are so caught up in what they are

going through they don't understand that the children go through it with them.

3. Chris says that rock bottom isn't a place: "You can always go lower. Rock bottom is a decision. It's the moment you decide to stop falling and take control of your life." Do you agree? Why or why not?

GM: I agree. Actually before reading his interpretation of "rock bottom," I too viewed it as a place. But his interpretation made me understand why since getting arrested, possible death penalty, etc... my life from 2002 until now has been going "not ideally", to put it kindly. It was because I hit rock bottom and believed my life couldn't get worse so I lost the perspective to see it has been getting worse the entire time. But now (today) that I've agreed to find my calling and endgame, I can say "the moment you decide to stop falling and take control of your life" is rock bottom.

RT: Yes, I agree. There have been times that I thought I hit rock bottom and I worked to do better, but then something (like being convicted) happens, and I realized I chose what rock bottom was, and didn't fully believe it before and now I have to decide if this is rock bottom for me, or just another hiccup. If I choose wrong, I'll be back.

JJ: Chris is correct and it's because loving the remembrance of the good things keeps you up.

RB: You sure can always go lower. I've been experiencing this over these past 6 years trying to obtain my freedom through IRAA and having several missteps that make my chances that much harder. And everytime I encounter one of these missteps, I think I've hit rock bottom. But, it gets worse as I'm still here. I've realized that I had to make a choice that this was it and I wasn't going to do NOTHING! Not even the "minor" things like using someone's phone.

FJ: Yes, I agree because I've been there and know I would have went lower. I know what lower is because I have seen people that didn't have the smallest things.

4. While Chris was incarcerated in Maryland, the Governor took away the option for parole for Maryland prisoners serving life sentences. How do people continue to find hope or purpose when the legal system doesn't seem to offer opportunities for release?

FJ: Think positive and pray and stay around positive people. And always know things going to get better only if you believe.

JJ: By understanding incarceration is a temporary replacement to changes.

RT: Knowledge like Chris said. I believe there is truth in every story even if it's labeled fiction. Reading about people who persevere, whether it's against aliens and vampires or

the government, it can give you hope and courage to keep working on yourself.

GM: I'm serving life plus 40 with no possibility of parole now and until reading this book, I was clueless as to how to constructively do this time. Yet, in the back of my mind or depths of my soul, I always know there is something I am supposed to be doing but not seeing, grasping, comprehending it, etc. Now I know I am to find my calling and fulfill it wherever that takes me. That's my endgame!

RB: This is a hard one, and everyone can't find this hope. But I think it boils down to a person's confidence, perception of self and their abilities, and education. Because when a person has these things, I've seen them be more apt to find hope in a future and to be able to lock in on it. Whereas people who don't view themselves highly or don't have these abilities usually just accept their fate, as they feel this is what was expected of them and their lives anyways.

5. Chris' Grandma said, "God don't like the ugly." What do you think she meant by this? Do/did your grandparents or other important people in your life have any sayings? What have you learned from them?

GM: Currently, I view God as a creative force or intelligence like how Joseph Murphy describes him in the power of your subconscious mind. Thus, ultimately I think it is a saying to make you realize certain thoughts/actions of yours are not in harmony with that entity and there could be consequences.

RB: My grandmother used to always tell me that "whatever happens in the dark will come to the light." And I used to always just brush it off, but it is so true. And I think it stems from the fact that "God don't like ugly," so ugly will reveal itself and you'll be punished. It took me a long time to understand this.

FJ: God didn't like the ugly because wrong is never right and right always wins. I learned to always do good no matter what I go through

RT: When people do bad, they are punished. People who don't have bad intentions are blessed. My favorite saying is "Everything ain't for everybody." This saying keeps me from getting mixed up with the wrong people. It keeps me from being disappointed when things don't work my way and keeps me from being a hater, and being able to celebrate those who succeed.

JJ: His Grandma was converted over to God...Something ugly became of Chris' incarceration...I was given a mercy from God, such to makeup and upkeep of his life and change before it was too late.



AROUND THE WORLD: IRELAND, THE NETHERLANDS, FRANCE, AND UK *By Aneka*

Hey FM fam! I'm back again with new adventures from around the world! In the last *Connect* issue: Hometown Pride, I shared with you all about my trip to Taipei, Taiwan, and Bali, Indonesia in March. This past June for my birthday, I decided to go on a solo backpacking adventure around Europe! Backpacking is a form of low-cost, independent travel, which often includes staying in inexpensive lodgings and carrying all necessary possessions in a backpack. For this trip, I stayed in hostels instead of hotels. A hostel is a lower-priced inn of sorts that offers basic, shared accommodations. Typically, a hostel features a large room with separate beds, a shared bathroom, and a communal kitchen. Some hostels have private rooms, but the lower-cost ones generally offer bunk beds. Every hostel that I stayed in had about 6-8 beds per room. Hostels originated in Europe, but they've

grown in popularity and now you can find them all over the world. So naturally I took the saying, "When in Rome..." to heart while planning this trip. Both of these experiences were new for me. I've never stayed in a hostel before and I've never traveled with only a backpack. At minimum I like to have at least 3 or 4 pieces of luggage because I'm always scared I'm going to need something and not have it haha. But for my birthday I decided to test myself and attempt to survive off of the bare minimum. It honestly wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Traveling light allowed me to be more flexible and spontaneous with my adventures. Staying in hostels saved me money which allowed me to hop around Europe vs staying in one country the whole time.

All in all, I visited 4 different countries in a little less than 2 weeks. I started my trip in Dublin, Ireland, flew to Amsterdam, Netherlands, flew to London, England, took a train to Paris, France, and then took a flight back to Dublin. Each leg of my journey was filled with crazy new experiences! What started as a solo backpacking trip turned into having/making friends in every country I visited! In Dublin, the capital city of Ireland, I made cocktails at the Jameson Distillery, visited the prestigious Trinity University, and took a stroll in the largest park in the country – Phoenix Park – while eating Irish Brown Bread ice



My hostel in Amsterdam. It's bare bones but very affordable, and you meet really interesting people.

cream from Murphy's Ice Cream shop! Yes, there was actual bread in the ice cream, and it was surprisingly delicious! The caramelized bread blended with the ice cream definitely satisfied that sweet/savory taste that I love so much. In Amsterdam (the capital of the Netherlands) I visited at least 5 museums! There's literally a museum on almost every corner (not exaggerating). Friends of mine just so happened to be in Amsterdam for the Beyonce concert, so I was able to have some company while I explored this otherworldly country. If I had to describe Amsterdam in one word, I would describe it as mindblowing. This extremely walkable and scenic country is filled with house-lined canals and your every desire. One of the coolest sights I saw would have to be The Dancing Houses. The photo doesn't do the kookiness of the houses justice. They were all different shapes and slanted. It's a wonder how they've survived since the 17th and 18th centuries. The culture in Amsterdam is completely topsy turvy from what I'm used to in America. Things that are considered illegal or frowned upon in America are legal and acceptable in Amsterdam! That of course made the entire visit a learning experience.

I spent my actual birthday in London, the capital of England. Ironically, one of my closest friends just so happened to be performing in London the day after my birthday. We spent my birthday together at this



From top to bottom, left to right: Arc de Triomphe; Eiffel Tower; Popeyes; Avenue D'Iéna, named after the Battle of Iéna fought by Napoleon I of France and Frederick William III of Prussia.

low-key winery and grabbed dinner at a restaurant that surprised me with one of my favorite desserts: cheesecake with a strawberry on top! The next day we visited all of the big tourist attractions: Big Ben, The London Eye, Buckingham Palace, etc. before her performance. The following day I headed off to Paris for Fashion Week. A friend I made while visiting Bali happens to be a model in Paris, and he got me a pass to a Paris Fashion Week show. With just my luck (and horrible Paris traffic), I was late to the show and missed the entire thing! Although I missed the show, I was still able to see a few of the models in the lobby posing for photos surrounded by flashing cameras. I've always heard that Paris looks and feels a lot like DC. The rumors are 100% true! If you didn't know, Pierre Charles L'Enfant (who L'Enfant Plaza is named after) designed DC's layout in 1791 to look like Paris. It seems like he decided to just copy and paste Paris into DC because the similarities were uncanny haha. I only had enough time to visit the Arc de Triomphe monument but I was still able to see the Eiffel Tower off in the distance. It always startles me when I see American fast food chains in other countries, so I included a photo of Popeyes so you all can be in shock with me haha. After Paris, I headed back to Dublin for my flight back home to DC. This birthday trip was truly an experience that I will never forget. I can't wait to be able to share more international experiences with you all.



From top to bottom, left to right: London Bridge train station; Big Ben clock tower; Buckingham Palace; The London Eye ferris wheel

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: RESILIENCE

For our next issue, we're diving into the idea of *resilience* or the capacity to withstand or recover from pressure, stress, or harm. When I think of resilience, one of the things that comes to my mind is a rubber band with its elasticity – its great capacity to bend and stretch under pressure without breaking. Do you think being resilient is the same as being hard? Why or why not? What do each of these words mean to you? Do you think resilience is an innate quality (something you're born with), or something you can build up over time? If you have built up your resilience, how have you done so? How do you think a person can practice resilience? What about a community or a whole group of people? Tell us a story about a time when you were faced with adversity, but you demonstrated resilience in how you responded. Bonus challenge: tell the story with a beginning, middle, and ending!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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