

November/December 2023  
Vol. 12, Issue 5

# Free minds Connect

# Resilience

## IN THIS ISSUE

**MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME  
WITH LOVED ONES**

**PAGE 6**

**FROM WRONGFUL INCARCERATION TO  
DC'S MLK JR LIBRARY**

**PAGE 16**

**DC'S FIRST GO-GO MUSEUM!**

**PAGE 30**

**RESILIENT MINDS THROUGH MEDITATION**

**PAGE 31**

artwork by FM volunteer Cynthia

# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Resilient Reader Leaders,

I hope this issue finds you in good health and uplifted spirits, and entering the new year filled with unending hope, mental strength, and strong feelings of connection knowing you are unique, valued, and integral to our special Free Minds community.

The theme of this issue you might as well just call another word for Free Minds members – because you are resilient in spades! As Ms. Keela shares in her column on page 18, “Resilience is often defined as the mental reservoir of strength that helps people handle stress and hardship.” Every day, we witness firsthand countless examples of members living out Tupac’s famous poem about the rose growing from concrete, and one of my all-time favorite quotes: “They tried to bury us; they didn’t know we were seeds.” In these pages, you will see not only seeds sprouting but blossoming and spreading. Just today, one of our younger members who is home after five years away was welcomed with open arms by at least 10 of his fellow Free Minds members congratulating him on his resilience and offering him their time and talents. Resiliency thrives on social support.

I was in Baltimore recently and visited an exhibit about resilience at the Reginald F. Lewis Maryland Museum for African American History and Culture. The museum used art and historical photos to convey the resilience of Black Americans, and demonstrated the ways that art and storytelling can be an act of resilience as well – to create and build no matter what. I believe that constantly reading and learning in the pursuit of knowledge is also an act of resilience – like our reentry members who have formed a Black History Learning Group.

I’m inspired by all of our reader leaders like you, who demonstrate in these pages the five often cited characteristics of resilience: problem-solving skills, strong social connections, survivor mentality, emotional regulation, and self-compassion. You will read about Buttons’ survivor mentality after being denied IRRAA (page 33). We all know so many of you have faced rejection but never stop believing in yourself and your freedom day! DK writes about the power of social connections on page 8: “I have discovered men here are truly there for each other and that kept us emotionally resilient; giving food if you didn’t have any,

postage to write to your family since our phones and computers were restricted. Seeing the kindness of each man, moving forward, **not permitting the lockdown to bring us down.**” Now, that message needs to be on t-shirts all over the world: “not permitting the lockdown to bring us down.” Throughout history, people have faced adversity and restrictions on their freedom, and until the day those literal and figurative lockdowns cease, we honor the power of those who persevere.

AD demonstrates emotional regulation when he writes, “I’ve educated myself, self-helped myself with my anger impulse, and also widened my thought process, my dreams, and imagination” (page 8). On page 9, BA shares, “There have been many days I asked for his help, to shield me from hate, and to drench me with good health and wealth.” BA’s creative spirit infuses the page with strength! On page 14, FM healer Edward shares the power of self-compassion with Regina. FM member Charles showcases his problem solving skills on the job in the “Real World of Work” interview on page 16.

This *Connect* issue is full of lots of other tips, like building resilience through pilates, or emotional resilience through writing and journaling. But most of all, I keep coming back to the power of social **connection** (get it?). I want to close with these words from DA, who gave us a lyrical tribute to the *Connect*, and each and every one of who makes this possible!

*Though I’m incarcerated, the Free Minds Connect keeps me connected to minds that are free.*

I can’t wait to keep connecting with you and building with you in the new year!

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: Dreams

*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.*



## THE CONNECT TEAM

Executive Editor  
Tara

Managing Editor  
Julia

Contributors  
*FM Team*

*FM Friends*  
Chris, Cynthia, Edward, John

### *FM Members*

AD, AHA, BA, BG, BM, CD, CS, DA, DC, DJ,  
DK, DT, DWS, FJ, JJ, JS, JUH, KM, KR, SV,  
TC, TG, TM, ZF, Buttons, Woodrow, Charles

## THE FREE MINDS TEAM

Tara, Co-founder & Executive Director  
Kelli, Co-founder & Book Club Facilitator, Co-Editor  
Julia, Deputy Director  
Allen, Director of Finance & Operations  
Keela, Senior Reentry Manager  
Melissa, Member Experience Manager  
Araba, Program Specialist  
Craig, Peer Support Specialist  
Neely, Development &  
Communications Specialist  
Shannon, Advocacy & Leadership  
Development Specialist  
Jamilah, Reentry Programming &  
Education Specialist  
Jennifer, Reentry Coach  
Aneka, Prison Book Club Coordinator  
Carlos, Community Outreach Facilitator  
Regina, Program Coordinator  
James, Congressman John Lewis Fellow  
Jordan, Sofia, Program Assistants  
Eyone, Facilitator  
Jae-lynn, Isabel, Melanie, Interns

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!

Free Minds Book Club  
1816 12th St. NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
(202) 758-0829

Copyright© Free Minds Book  
Club & Writing Workshop, 2023

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter from the Editor .....	2
In Loving Memory .....	4
Free Minds HQ.....	4
Free Minds Mailbag .....	5
Quote-i-vator .....	5
Family Ties: Missing Birthdays, Making Up Time,.....	6
and Resilience Inside	
Just Law: The Law Library .....	7
Members <i>Connect</i> : Resilience .....	8-9
Spinning the Track with the Advice Man .....	10
Connect on Corrlinks.....	10
On Peer Support .....	11
Poems by Free Minds Members.....	12-13
Mental Resilience: An Interview with a.....	14
Grief and Trauma Therapist	
Building Bonds Through Books .....	14
Paying It Forward: Food Justice with the.....	15
Latin American Youth Center	
Real World of Work .....	16-17
Reentry Corner with Ms. Keela .....	18
Book Ballot.....	19-20
Writing Prompts .....	21-22
Conversation with Regina .....	23
DC Photos.....	24-25
The Write Way.....	26-27
Spotlight on Published Author .....	27
In the News .....	28-29
DC Culture: DC's New Go-Go Museum .....	30
Building Resilience Through Writing .....	30
Meditation.....	31
Did You Know? The History of Pilates.....	32
Reentry Profile.....	33
What We're Reading .....	34
Conversaciones de Mentes Libres.....	35
Free Minds Conversations	
Books Across the Miles Discussion Questions: .....	36-37
<i>Felon: Poems</i>	
Celebrating Members' Accomplishments .....	37
Around the World: Dublin and Amsterdam .....	38-39
Preview: Next Issue's Theme - Dreams .....	40



# FREE MINDS HQ

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

*By Sofia*

## Free Minds Celebrates 20 Years

On October 19, we held a virtual celebration to commemorate our 20th anniversary! The virtual event centered on the power of community and we were joined by Free Minds members, volunteers, board members, staff, and supporters. The event kicked off with a powerful spoken word performance from Free Minds member and former Congressman John Lewis fellow, Gene. We then shared a montage of photos collected over the past 20 years featuring Free Minds members, staff, and other members of our community. The celebration continued with video clips of members, volunteers, and supporters wishing us a happy anniversary and sharing what Free Minds has meant to them over the years. Board President Jasmine spoke of the impact of Free Minds, followed by Tara and Congressman John Lewis fellow, James, presenting author and Free Minds friend, Clint Smith III, with our inaugural Glen McGinnis Award. Clint facilitated one of our book clubs at the DC jail for two years and has been a New York Times bestselling author numerous times. Clint read excerpts from his new book *Above Ground*, and we were so grateful to honor his support of Free Minds and impact in the world of poetry and reading. Although the celebration was held online, viewers watched from all over the world with watch parties held in Philadelphia, San Francisco, and in our very own Free Minds office. Thank you all for making this a great past 20 years, we could not have done it without you!

## Reentry Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship

During the first week of November, Free Minds members in our Reentry Book Club participated in another one of our Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeships. We had 13 members participate in the apprenticeship, building skills to help advance their careers and personal goals. They gained knowledge on financial literacy, career management, and digital literacy during the program to ensure they have the necessary skills to achieve their reentry aims. On the first day of the program, members received a tour of the Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) Library (the headquarters of the DC Public Library system), led by fellow Free Minds member, Charles. During the tour, participants learned about all of the wonderful resources the library has to offer, including career coaching and peer outreach programs that assist with obtaining IDs and finding medical care, housing, and employment. At the conclusion of the field trip, members applied for library cards so that they can use all of these resources to further assist with achieving their reentry goals.

## Free Minds Members James and Gene Travel to Houston for Youth Justice Conference

Free Minds Congressman John Lewis Fellow, James, and former Congressman John Lewis Fellow, Gene, headed to Houston, Texas in November for a conference called The Five: Opportunities to Establish Equitable Youth Justice Systems, hosted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The conference focused on five areas: 1) sustaining detention reform; 2) expanding diversion and prevention; 3) creating safe spaces for youth and young adults; 4) building community/system partnerships; and 5) addressing safety, guns, and violence. James and Gene had the opportunity to participate in a site visit focused on "Creating Safe Spaces for Youth and Young Adults." They visited the Shrine of the Black Madonna, a cultural center and museum in Houston, centered on African heritage and African American thought, culture, and history. This site visit sparked meaningful conversations about the importance of safe spaces in fostering a sense of belonging for our youth. James and Gene had a wonderful time representing Free Minds at this conference and engaging in powerful conversations with other changemakers seeking to create a better future for youth of all different backgrounds.

## 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 MAILBAG

*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the August/September/October 2023 Connect Growth.*

**DC:** I enjoyed the *Connect*. It's such a motivation for what I'm aiming for in life – positivity!

**TG:** We tend to think we've grown, yet we feel no differences in our bodies. We may catch moments of clarity about how we no longer think or act the same, yet, there too it's hard to single out that teardrop in the rain... We kinda just evolve into new people so gradually we miss the metamorphosis. At least that's my take on growth.

*A special poetic submission for the Mailbag:*

**Thanks Free Minds**

**By DA (Wayne Wayne)**

To my Free Minds family,  
you all do so much for me.

Like when I'm in a state of chaos,  
Your articles, FM Members' poems,  
and those DC photos put me at peace.

Though I'm incarcerated, the Free Minds *Connect*  
keeps me connected to minds that are free.

Those thirty-nine pages in every issue  
keep me connected to things I want  
and need to succeed.

And I just love the "Just Law,"  
as you all let us know the laws aren't just,

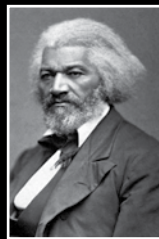
And though we may reside in these cold  
and lonely cells, our Free Minds Family  
lets us know they're here for us.

Know the words expressed by Wayne  
Wayne is like money in the most secure banks,

So from me, Wayne Wayne, and on  
behalf of every Free Minds Member,  
I want to say, "Thanks."

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*"If there is no struggle,  
there is no progress.  
Those who profess to favor  
freedom and yet deprecate  
agitation are men who  
want crops without  
plowing up the ground.  
They want rain without  
thunder and lightning.  
They want the ocean without the awful roar  
of its many waters."*



Frederick Douglass

– Frederick Douglass, famed abolitionist and leader of African American civil rights movement in the 1800s

*"I can accept failure, everyone fails at something. But I can't accept not trying."*

– Michael Jordan, businessman and former basketball star

*"They tried to bury us; they did not know we were seeds."*

– saying attributed to Dinos Christianopoulos, Greek poet and novelist

*"Fall down seven times, stand up eight."*

– Japanese Proverb, author unknown

*"Just keep swimming!"*

– Dory, from the Pixar movie "Finding Nemo"

*"The world can be a challenging place for us women to navigate. We often find ourselves feeling burned out, incapable, and lonely and yet we're still so resilient."*

– Alicia Keys, classically trained, award-winning composer of songs such "Empire State of Mind" featuring Jay-Z, or "You Don't Know My Name"

*"Resilience is the product of agency: knowing that what you do can make a difference."*

– Bessel van der Kolk, Danish psychiatrist and author of *The Body Keeps the Score*

# FAMILY TIES: MISSING BIRTHDAYS, MAKING UP TIME, AND RESILIENCE INSIDE

*By Carlos and Jae-lynn*

*Carlos, our co-facilitator for On the Same Page, and Jae-lynn, our Prison Book Club intern, are partnered up again for this Connect issue's Family Ties column to highlight a Free Minds member who was welcomed home recently after a thirty-year sentence. We are joined by Woodrow who tells us about the unwavering support he received from his parents through the years, what it meant to miss birthdays and to make them up, and how having programs kept him levelheaded on the inside.*

**Woodrow:** My dad's birthday is November the 18th, and I got arrested. I was like three weeks from my 19th birthday. And I didn't come home for 30 years. So every year on his birthday it was kind of like an anniversary. A weird anniversary that made another year that I was incarcerated every time his birthday would roll around. And he was aware of that too over the years.

**Carlos:** How was your bond with your father prior to your incarceration?

**Woodrow:** We were kind of alike, in our mentality and everything like that. He was tough on me when I was young, but I always had a good relationship with him. My work ethic comes from him. Like, right now, he's 75, he's still out working. Everything I know, about how to work and you know, to kind of go out and get a job and do my best, I got it from him.

**Carlos:** That's beautiful. You were saying that you got arrested on the 18th, his birthday, and that weird kind of anniversary thing, right? How did ya'll support each other, lean on each other on that day right there?

**Woodrow:** I talked to him while I was away and talked to him on his birthday. And you know, he'd kind of tell me like, "Hey, man, it's kind of hard to enjoy it, you know, because every time I think about it, like, that's another year you're gone, you're away." And so, like, for 30 years, he had to kind of like, mute his celebration.

That's why, like the birthday that just passed, I finally got him to kind of like go out and, you know, hang out with me [now that I'm home]. He hates going to restaurants and stuff like that.

**Carlos:** So this November 18th that just passed, that was the first birthday you was here with him, right? Because you were released last December, right? So you missed that birthday?

**Woodrow:** Right.

**Carlos:** How was that? What was his experience on this birthday?

**Woodrow:** Well, yeah, his thing was he doesn't go out of restaurants. You know, his thing for his birthday is like get him a good meal, a home-cooked meal, stay around the house, and you know, enjoy family. So I had to try to figure out something that would, like, jolt him or get him to, you know, really enjoy it. I told him, "Man, remember, we missed 30 of them. So we got to try to get out right here and you know, celebrate a few of them. Because you know what it's like to not have one of the people that you really want around on your birthday." Like, he said, the thing that he wanted the most, you know, for 30 years, he couldn't get it on his birthday. So, this year, I got all my siblings together, all of his children, and everything, all of us surprised him on his birthday and we kind of got him to come out of that shell. So that was a special birthday for him right there, one that I'm sure he'll always remember.

**Carlos:** Yeah. And this was also your first Thanksgiving with him.

**Woodrow:** Right. Yeah, all of these firsts, you know what I'm saying. I had opportunities to kind of, you know, leave the country and go up. But I was like nah, I'm not going to do that because I want to kind of celebrate all of these firsts with him and my mom, and some of my family members to make sure that I let them know I appreciate them. You know what I'm saying? So I'm not just gonna go running off out of town or whatever right. I'll get there eventually. But I did want to, like I said, celebrate all these firsts. You got Christmas, and all these things running around. And so for the first few, I want to make sure I get the full enjoyment of that.

**Carlos:** The theme for this magazine for this issue is resilience, right? And it's one of my favorite words that you and I, like, we're forced to live by that, you know what I'm saying? And most people don't understand that while we were incarcerated, we weren't the only ones that were locked up. Like your father went through that, doing the time with you as well.

**Woodrow:** One of my biggest regrets about getting myself in trouble and all of that was the consequences of it was more than just what would happen to me. I kind of took not only my dad, but my mom, and everybody else through it with me. That's the thing that kind of hurt me the most because you never want to intentionally hurt your loved ones. So as far as my dad was concerned, it's tough when you see your dad who you're used to being tough – never seen him cry, never seen him show really that type of emotion, you know what I'm saying – until I was away all that time and I could hear it in his voice you know, that hurt him. So that's why I'm conscious now of the things I do and you know, the positions I put myself in.

**Carlos:** How would you describe his resilience?

**Woodrow:** Listen, nobody is surprised at the fact that he's 75 and he's out working right now. He worked yesterday. Like he's landscaping every day. And he wouldn't have it any other way. I can never call my father and be like, man, you know I don't feel like going to work today or anything. Matter of fact, if I called him the first thing he's gonna do is ask me, hey, what you doing, you not working? So, like, he don't have no understanding with regards to, you know, not working hard and not doing what you're supposed to do, taking care of your family, so on and so forth... And if he was here, he'd tell you that's what it's about for him now that I'm home is to kind of see me live out the second chapter and do the right thing.

**Carlos:** That's right, as you should. And how would you describe resilience?

**Woodrow:** When you're away, people ask you "What it's like?", "How could you do it?", "How'd you manage it?" And I used to be like, well you know, you have no choice. Like what're you gonna do, you gonna lay down and die? Like you have to do it, you have to find what I call a program, right? You find a program that you do every day, regardless of what place you're at, or if we locked down or whatever. Okay, we locked down, then I got this thing that I do to get through the day. If we're not locked down, then I go here, and I do this and it's you know, that repetition to that. And that's how you get through it. You don't get sidetracked by the other things, you know what I'm saying? The things that you know weigh you down mentally. Stick to your program, and there's one that you can find I bet in some of the worst dungeons, but you have to know you can find a program even there.

*continued on page 25*



# JUST LAW: THE LAW LIBRARY

By DJ

Have you ever wondered about why prisons and correctional institutions must have law libraries? Or, why do prisoners get to go to the law library and work on cases? Better yet, how about this, why must the prisons and correctional institutions have law clerks to help incarcerated people? Below, we discuss some answers as to these questions.

Prior to 1969, courts in the United States were hesitant to interfere with how correctional institutions managed incarcerated people's access to the courts. This was true even if the correctional institutional policies and regulations directly impeded and discouraged them from exercising their rights to seek review in the judiciary (whether relating to criminal matters or civil matters). An incarcerated person's rights to access to the courts derives from the Privileges and Immunities Clause of Article IV, the First Amendment right to petition, and the Due Process and Equal Protection rights accorded by the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments. *Christopher v. Harbury*, 536 U.S. 403, 415 n.12, 122 S. Ct. 2179, 153 L. Ed. 2d 413 (2002).

A couple of vital U.S. Supreme Court cases ignited a trend away from such hesitancy by courts to get involved with the way correctional institutions managed their affairs as it pertained to incarcerated people's access to the courts. At issue in the first case, *Johnson v. Avery*, 339 U.S. 489 (1969), was the constitutionality of a Tennessee prison regulation which provided: "No inmate will advise, assist or otherwise contract to aid another, either with or without a fee, to prepare Writs or other legal matters." Johnson was placed in solitary confinement for violation of this rule. After recognizing the right of inmates to unimpaired access to the courts, the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated the rule as conflicting with this "paramount federal constitutional [right]." 393 U.S. at 486, 89 S. Ct. 747, 21 L. Ed. 2d 718. The next very important case, *Bounds v. Smith*, 430 U.S. at 828 (1977), the Court held: That the fundamental constitutional right of access to the courts requires prison authorities to assist inmates in the preparation and filing of meaningful legal papers by providing prisoners with adequate law libraries or adequate assistance from persons trained in the law. This is how we came up with the term "jailhouse lawyer."

Many prisoners do not know this; they are not aware that prisoners fought for law library rights when such rights were abridged by their jailers. The law library is not to be taken for granted. Prisoners went directly to solitary confinement for fighting for the right for prisoners to use the law library for various reasons. Some reasons related to doing the following: 1) researching criminal cases for legal resolution; 2) researching civil cases to ask a judge to decide whether or not it was correct for jailers to deny medical treatments or visitation; and 3) researching case law and other legal materials to determine if a prison's policies violated the constitution or other governing law.

As this place is so special, one should always treat it as such and remember its rich history and how it came to be. There are so many cases relating to prisoners' rights. Treasure the cases from the court's legal battlefield because there is always someone in a cell yearning for the next best jailhouse lawyer! Until next time, keep your mind free!

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

# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: RESILIENCE

## Resilience By EJ

My family and the life I want are the most important things that keep me grounded, and knowing what I came from and what I desire to have keeps me hungry to get more and more.

As I said before, family is most important to me because the love that my family shows, even when there were only a few that were there for me as a child growing from nothing to have something, a happy, successful life. Going through these years, my family, and some friends showed me love and dedication, even though it was only five friends I had, the love was important.

They showed up when I needed it the most. The mail, visits, phone calls, messages, and their help with a job when I came home. My fiancé and our kids are the biggest inspiration to me. They all keep me motivated to own my own company, so we can live a happy life with no struggles and a lot of love and dedication for more. My daughter wrote me and thanked me for buying her and her brother a dog for their birthday and thanked me for loving her mom and hoping we get married, and loves me like a dad. If that doesn't inspire somebody, I don't know what will. All I really

need and want is this for myself but their love and support gave me a lot of energy to make me keep going.

The fight for freedom is real. It's an everyday process to stay focused and keep learning new things to succeed in life. I learned it's all about if you really want it, it's out there for you, and it's a lot of people and resources to help you and keep you on the right path. Fighting for freedom is meaningful, mentally, emotionally, and physically. Always keep going, and never give up. Make a goal and do it. Stay positive and stay focused. A lot of the time the hard work doesn't pay off sometimes. I had to learn the hard way and ended up in prison. Now I know better and know my life is picking up. I got my first love back with our kids and I get my mind back and a career/company to move forward with.

Listen, you can learn from people's mistakes so you won't have to end up like I did, and your life won't be short or you won't miss out on life. Live life peacefully and comfortable, happy.

Free your mind....!

---

## The Kindness of Each Man By DK

During our recent lockdown, I have discovered men here are truly there for each other and that kept us emotionally resilient; giving food if you didn't have any, postage to write to your family since our phones and computers were restricted. Seeing the kindness of each man, moving forward, not permitting the lockdown to bring us down. We recognized the lockdown would not last forever. It caused me personally to express more compassion and allowed me to be more calm, when I would typically be experiencing anxiety. I experienced self-worth and peace by supporting others. That is slightly new for me. In a way the lockdown was a blessing for me; I learned that when we are supportive of each other, we live to see another day.

---

## Resilience Letter By CS

Dear Mom,

I want to thank you because you showed me and taught me to never give up on myself or my dreams. Even when you didn't have no help raising us, you never gave up or threw in the towel. You kept fighting for us to have a better life. You instilled that in me, so I thank you from my heart. I will never give up.

---

## Resilience By AD

The challenges I face day in and day out are life changing situations due to the fact that I'm in a cage in a jungle. My objective is to become a powerful activist for the youth and people that are in here that have changed and are looking for a chance to show their worth to their loved ones and the world. When people that are in here sit and have a conversation with me about life after jail, they automatically say that I need to be out of here. I'm going to make an impact on lives. I've educated myself, self-helped myself with my anger impulse, and also widened my thought process, my dreams, and imagination. For short, I truly freed my mind from the contraptions that were put there from

generational damage. I was a product of my environment. But, now I am elevated; I am a true Black King! No rewrite is needed because my past is what made me into the King I am today. The decisions and mistakes I've made led me to become the man I am today. Failure is the best teacher we have, time is what made me reflect on my life decisions to understand what and where I messed up in life. So therefore defying the odds in my story is to keep on pushing no matter the hand you were dealt or your backstory. Give what you can to help as long as it's in your power to give and show the lost the way to free themselves from the limitations that was put on them.

# MEMBERS CONNECT: RESILIENCE

## Resilience Essay By JS

I think being Resilient and being hard are two different things. Being hard is forming a strong exterior to deflect the attacks that adversaries, seen and unseen, throw at you. A wall can be resilient to efforts to move against it by being hard, but someone who is resilient in my opinion doesn't have to be hard. They may move and turn with life's trials and tribulations, but never give up despite the twists and turns they take, whether they show it or not. A hard man or woman will naturally begin to show signs of wearing down until they adapt the characteristic of being resilient and fortify themselves for the next wave of problems that life always undoubtedly has waiting for all of us. If a hard person isn't resilient then they will break, but if a resilient person isn't hard they can still persevere and achieve all that their potential in life has for them to achieve.

---

## Resilience By DWS

Chains, whips and massive slave ships is the so-called history of my people. Ancient Egyptians structures. Pyramids, monoliths and more are being copied all over the world. Resilience.

400 plus years and counting. Emancipation Proclamation wasn't much help. Segregation, unlawful killing of a brown man. Don't talk to me about equality. We are not equal. Don't talk to me about pain and suffering. Because no one could ever understand how it feels to be in the body of a Black Man. What is resilience? John Lewis, Mr. Floyd's daughter. I'm resilient. We're resilient.

Cowboy hats, boots and whips. Traded in for uniform bandits, toting guns with clips. Having the authority to kill a minority. Don't talk to me about equality. Equality is being able to walk freely. Without having to worry about being

killed based on the color of your skin. But yet, I still have resilience. I am resilient. We are resilient.

Willie Lynch ideology resonates throughout the laws of the land. Cotton fields traded in for brick factories with bars. Being Black in white America where we're all guilty as charged. No equal representation causing mass incarceration of the black man. Politicians will tell you. That this had always been America's secret plan. What do you think we don't know? Well you should go read *The New Jim Crow*.

Or better yet, "laughs," go read *The World Almanac*, read about the crime statistics, you just may have a heart attack. Tell me I'm lying. Tell me what I say can't be true. Now you know what resilience means to me. So tell me what does it mean to you.

---

## Untitled By BA

Black skies and the look in those eyes. Stay away from me. My energy is not free. That bad energy is draining me. It's draining me. I can't see, my mind hurts, I can't take it no more. Just as my mind is on the run, the sun laid down and dark moments awakened. The space in my head became available to the things I read. In which time gave me the ability, in which time in what created here, destined to be free in the mind body and soul, destined to encounter the cold minds, destined to meet fire, destined to be, destined to enter the sea, destined to ask why and to tell you why. Destined to not live life a lie, black skies and the look in those eyes.

One is destined to encounter dark moments and challenging times, but everything will be based on you, everything will be about you being true in honoring you. Never making an excuse, to blame someone else. A true story was told about everyone's life. The encounters that many became faced with, life and death. Joy and happiness, the hate that lived on his breath, the look in his eyes, dark moments that turned into sunny days. Allowing the shadows to fade away, because of how I got on my knees and prayed. I asked God for help, and he gave it to me, the strength of my mind became stronger as time passed on.

No one knew that God would give me a second chance to dance, so here I go. Nice and slow, stepping under the black skies, while looking directly in the devil's eyes. Cries of conquering times, and feeding the space in your mind, it was always God's gift and his design.

There have been many days I asked for his help, to shield me from hate, and to drench me with good health and wealth. At one time, my mind had struggled with being conquered by demons. Meaning being faced with encountering people who looked down on you, or showed disinterest when my voice left my chest. When I spoke from my mind, as when I told you how my heart felt. So many years I've yearned to speak from my chest and tell you and them how I feel. Or tell you how it smelled! But I've now became awoke, so I spoke about what life did to me and how it showed me wealth and gave my story good health,

So, we have finally overcome those desperate times, and walked over those distasteful minds, just as we've danced under the sun. Life has now begun.

We won.

# 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:

I suffered a lot of abuse at the hands of family and those who should have been caring for me and protecting me. Instead, I was molested, I was physically abused. These same people are still in my life. I understand the power of forgiveness and I know that will bring me peace. But how do I get there? I feel confused about what to do and I need concrete steps that I can take to turn this pain into something positive. Can you help?

Sincerely,  
DT

*Our usual team of Advice Men are on lockdown, so FM member BM stepped up to fill in for this issue. The other Advice Men will be back soon. Thank you, BM, and for everyone dealing with lockdowns, stay strong!*

Greetings DT,  
First I'd like to say thanks for sharing, and thanks for allowing me to share. I feel honored to hopefully be able to help give you some helpful encouraging words or maybe some useful direction. I truly commend you for finding the strength to not only dig deep enough to share your battles, but to also seek and ask for help. Whether you know it or not, it takes a very

*strong individual to not deflect the light, but shine it upon themselves for others to see and inspect.*

*You're truly one brave soul, and I admire that. One of the things I'll stress is to take your own time, and move at your own pace. Take this time to learn what it's like to be selfish with yourself, For yourself. The best way to experience and achieve the power of forgiveness and peace is to make it start and end with you. Understand that your happiness solely depends on you. It's alright to not have all the answers, or to not know it all. Again, take your time and allow healing to work for you without forcing it in any way. I think it's very important to continue to do wellness checks in the simplest of ways. Like this here is a form of a wellness check. You'll know when it's right to move forward with others in and around your life, by the things your innermost self speaks to you. I always feel if we listen close and careful enough, we'll always be guided in the right direction along the correct path. You're amazing and worthy of all the peace and happiness you're seeking. Remember, you owe it to yourself; and as long as you focus on you first, and all else, second, you got it, My Brother. Stay focused and remember it all starts with you and ends with You!!*

Peace and Blessings,  
BM

## 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](mailto: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](mailto:connect@freemindsbookclub.org)



# ON PEER SUPPORT

By Craig

Free Minds fam,

My name is Craig and I have the honor of being Free Minds' Peer Support Specialist. What does that mean and what is the Peer Support program at Free Minds? Well I'm glad you asked because it's the hallmark of what Free Minds is all about, and helps to create our strong caring network. Peer supporters go through a 12-week training facilitated by Trauma Specialist Edward and Che and co-facilitated by Shannon, Free Minds' Advocacy & Leadership Development Specialist, and myself. This training helps you identify with traumas you didn't even know you had, and gives you the skills to provide emotional support. People who complete the program become Peer Supporters, and are paired with fellow Free Minds members to support them in their transition home.

When you come home you are going to be faced with many different challenges, and most likely your Peer Supporter will have faced them too, and can be a source of real help as you go through it. The best way I can share what it is all about is to give you a common scenario that our members face coming home, and the role a Peer Supporter can play in that.

Let's say you are reconnecting with your family being on the outside and your sister says you can stay at her place until you can get back on your feet. You've been gone for 20 years and are craving some peace and quiet to adjust to the overwhelm that the outside world is, but she's got kids and they are not quiet! 🤫 In fact, they want to be with you all the time - asking you to play and thinking you are their best entertainment (well after video games of course 😊), and you are feeling stressed so you don't have it in you to be super fun all the time. Then you are trying to find a job and you are being denied either because of your record or you don't have the skills and training they need. You are going on tons of interviews and job fairs, but no one's calling you back and you are getting really frustrated and so is your sister. She can't understand why you can't get a job and tells you there are tons of jobs out there, why aren't you landing one? She doesn't understand what you are dealing with because she hasn't had to deal with a background check or not having much on your resume. In fact, she doesn't know anyone who's been incarcerated except you, so doesn't know about the 40,000 collateral consequences you face. Then she sees you getting nice shoes, clothes that maybe your friends bought you, or you finally have some temporary work and she's thinking you have a lot of cash coming and wondering why you aren't contributing more to paying her bills. Once again, she doesn't know the back story.

You finally get a full-time job and a place to stay, but you're overloaded with expenses and bills and she sees you have a car now and thinks you are doing well and can help her out since she helped you. She doesn't know that it takes

all you have just to take care of yourself, and you can't be responsible for the whole family. Or the family thinks you got a free apartment from a program for returning citizens (that's not happening a lot), but you still have to pay rent. Then you are feeling pressure to keep up with your friends who have been home longer and have a car, job, apartment, etc. So all this is boiling up and this is where your peer supporter comes in. He tells you don't look at what everyone else has, and don't rush it. You've been away a long time and it's going to take time to achieve all the goals you have. Give yourself a lot of time and room to adjust. It will come. Run your own race, don't look at social media and feel like you have to keep up. This pressure never leads to a good outcome. Your peer supporter can sit down for lunch or dinner, pull up to your house, sit on the porch with you, meet you where you are at. They can talk to your family members and explain your situation in a way that will be heard in a totally different way than coming from you. I've done this a lot of times and it can open a family member's eyes so they see you in a whole different perspective. One guy, when I talked to his mother, I opened her eyes. She was trying to throw him under the bus. Frustrated by him. Tired of him being in the house. Wanted him to get his life back and be out of the house. I gave her a different perspective.

If you're wondering how long does having a peer supporter last - it's all voluntary. Sometimes members need a lot right when they first get home. Majority of the time, it's as simple as a conversation. Things can be hard, especially once you start working. Now you're dealing with coworkers and transportation, and potential stressors there. You move from one set of challenges to another. Your peer supporter is still there. You have been through something that will never go away and with certain trauma triggers, a peer supporter will know how to identify them and cope with them.

Hearing challenges that others are going through reminds me how truly blessed I am.

Supporting someone emotionally after a long prison sentence involves patience, empathy, and understanding. Being a good listener, avoiding judgment, and helping them reintegrate into daily life by offering assistance with practical matters like finding housing or employment. Encourage positive activities and provide a supportive environment to help rebuild their life.

The reason why I do it is because I understand we've been through a lot and at the end of the day, nobody understands us better than us. When I came home, I saw that we didn't have a lot of people that understood us. We understand each other. We have to share and vent with each other because we have the same trauma. That's why we have to stay connected, because we don't know everything that someone else might be going through.

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Don't Give Up

By ZF

In hard times, don't give up, keep powering on  
You were a winner the day you were Born.  
Don't let them see you give up, you've already been through too much.  
Remember the ones you're doing it for  
and the days you always wanted more.  
It's not going to be easy, but in the end it'll be worth it.  
Show them what success looks like.  
Don't give up, you're gonna win the fight.  
Give it all you got, go with all your might.  
Take it one day at a time, no need to rush.  
All the work is going to pay off, just have to trust.  
Have faith in yourself, you gotta know that you can do it  
Any goals you have gotta get up and pursue it.  
Make a plan and stick with it. Be focused and don't forget

## Resilience

By JJ

Resilience, once upon a time  
the temptations was not easy to resist  
Capture in this it had to be accepted  
which was a different job for many and still is today.  
Decision had to get made.  
Whether a good important achievement  
a goal was really something I wanted and that was the freedom.  
A hard lesson met ever might all night  
There's this was a reminder to nevertheless fault myself  
for making disappointments.  
No one has not made at least one bad mistake in life.  
Whether trusting someone or bad choices.  
Growth, I couldn't let up on hope.  
A history to turn things around at a particular time and place.  
A life into a higher position to achieve victory.

Whatever you do, Just Don't Quit!!

## I Am Resilient

By FJ

When faced with a challenge, I can adapt and make it  
through it right.  
When I want to give up, I know how to ignore the wrong and  
do right.  
When things are hard, I stay focused and fight harder to  
make it through.  
I am resilient because I know better.  
I am strong because I never give up.  
I can withstand anything because I'm a fighter.  
When I stay focused I make it. That's why I am resilient!

## Mental Elasticity

By SV

RESILIENCE  
is what I believe I've endured  
throughout the course of the 36 years of my incarceration.  
To be able to maintain my mental 'Elasticity'  
without it being stretched to the point of being broken,  
mentally as well as physically.  
Of course, I owe this attribute to family and friends  
who've helped maintain the strength that was needed in  
dire situations.  
I can't say it enough how blessed-ful and fortunate I've been  
to have that!  
So, for me to be resilient  
is to be equipped with the ultimate strength  
that is to endure and to overcome.

## Courage

By KR

The strength to venture  
Is not always with me.

The ability to withstand  
I sometimes lack.

Having the might to resist  
Opposition is often times needed.

Firm determination to achieve  
One's end goal is usually desired.

To persist and have the  
Unwillingness to admit defeat  
Takes tenacity.

Endurance through the mental  
Stress calls for fortitude.

To face danger or extreme  
Difficulty often makes me  
Weary.

But if I'm brave and have  
Courage I can face all these  
Things and be made stronger.

So today as I walk I  
Ask for courage.

Give me courage, God  
And with my faith!  
Will overcome.

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## When I Thought I Lost Hope

By DC

You ever had a Love that was locked away?  
Caged in like behind gates, alive but buried away,  
Miles away you have to travel and wait almost 10 hours to  
see their smile.  
Then that joy can get snatched away by a CO yelling  
"End of visit"  
and that Love giving you a kiss to end y'all date.  
It's like snatching hearts apart to watch each other walk away.  
But our Love is our Resilience  
because even through being buried alive,  
when I thought I lost hope,  
you help keep that alive.  
I have over a thousand pictures and a million memories of  
what's ahead for me.  
See you stayed down through 15 years and plenty nights of tears.  
Through our struggle, our bond grew stronger and is built to last.  
That's why no matter what I'm gonna stand for us  
'cause our love is more than worth the task.  
When I thought I lost hope,  
I found the A to my B and we were made to last.  
Your Love is Resilience for me!!!

## Never Give Up

By CS

The fight has only begun, go hard for what you want-desire.  
Never give up.  
Everything is within your reach so strive  
Fight, put in that time, be resilient  
vigilant to achieve your goals  
But Never Give Up.

## Mom's Resilience

By AHA

Mom, you are resilient. Whenever times got hard you  
showed me  
How to navigate your problems and make the best for us all.  
You always faced things as they came, never letting it break  
your spirit  
or stop progress. I always told you that you're the strongest  
woman I know.  
So now I know the word that best describes you,  
Resilient.

## Someone Who is Resilient

By DK

Momma Here, Daddy Gone

Daddy gone,  
Momma unaccompanied at home.  
She formerly smoked from the devil's pipe, drank from the  
bottle of sin,  
In quest of companionship, on the lookout for love, just  
seeking a friend.  
Years she tolerated this emotional abandonment from my Dad,  
Finally, enough is enough, she gave all that she had.  
In 1998 she left when she encountered a guy named Joe,  
He spent time with her, embraced her, offered her all the  
love he could show.  
Although, the devil crept back in, instigated her to stay in  
the bottle of sin,  
So she cut my Dad extremely bad, then back she went, on a  
drinking binge.  
I discovered her next to a payphone, crying,  
I advanced toward the car, snatched the blade from her, she  
was thinking of dying.  
My Dad and I had her committed for her personal  
psychological health,  
Eager she could leave behind all of her hurt on the shelf.  
It took her some time, nevertheless in July 2000, she put  
the bottle of sin away,  
Subsequently the smell or vision of it, turns her stomach to  
this very day.  
Her and my Dad before his recent death became best  
friends, more so than ever,  
People can bounce back, people who show effort, can always  
get better!

## Still I Speak

By BG

In the year 2001, when I turned 21 I was first told I was resilient  
I sensed the definition was positive although unsure what  
it meant  
Now it's 2023, now I'm 43  
Look from where I've come to see what I've become  
See Pac spoke about the rose that grew from concrete  
Although I'm silent from the gutter...  
Although I have 18 years straight, almost in prison  
Through "Lyrical Kites" by BG  
From the gutter...still I speak  
For the growth of us in the ghetto'z  
It's you I'll never let go  
So if I'm resilient I am resilient  
It matters to me we grow and we let grow  
No matter if after these 12 more years to do in prison  
If I am not  
Let go

# MENTAL RESILIENCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH A GRIEF AND TRAUMA THERAPIST

Interview by Regina

*Edward is a Free Minds friend and a licensed grief and trauma psychotherapist. Edward works regularly with Free Minds staff and members. Regina caught up with him recently over the phone to talk about resilience.*

**Regina:** How do you describe mental resilience?

**Edward:** When human beings have the capacity to find the right combination of coping skills, self care practices, support from internal resources, and internal motivation to continue moving forward in life to overcome challenges they may face.

**Regina:** What are some strategies to improve mental resilience?

**Edward:** Positive affirmations, monitoring self-talk, talking to self in a way that is supportive, and not being judgemental to self. Making sure the voice in your head is your friend and not your foe.

**Regina:** Why is mental resilience key in maintaining mental health?

**Edward:** Because when we are resilient we can bounce back more quickly and more easily when life throws challenges our way. Those that are more resilient are better able to manage their mental health. When being alone, a person with mental resilience can take immediate action

to address their mental state in days whereas a person without mental resilience can take weeks or months to address their mental state.

**Regina:** How can someone practice mental resilience while in solitary confinement?

**Edward:** Someone that has access to books, pencil and paper to write so that their mind can escape the torture of being confined in a small space. Having access to these things makes them better able to support their mental resilience. A person without access to these things would have to keep themselves occupied in a positive space. For example, talk to themselves in a positive light, exercise, and set attainable goals to make it through the day. Improving physical resilience can have an impact on a person's mental resilience while confined in a small space alone.

**Regina:** What is the difference between mental and emotional resilience?

**Edward:** There is no difference. They are two sides of the same coin. Emotions dictate how we feel and what we need to focus on. When we have good emotional intelligence it means that we are recognizing our feelings. People with good emotional intelligence are able to deal with their mental health, while those with bad emotional intelligence tend to neglect their mental health.

## Building Bonds Through Books

### Free books about parental incarceration for you, and your child

Building Bonds Through Books is excited to offer parents/guardians/caregivers and their children the opportunity to receive **a free children's book** that speaks about **parental incarceration/separation**, and we're also giving some extra resources to help. These books can be a tool for anyone struggling to explain incarceration to their child or, can be used as a bonding tool. We will deliver hard copies of these books and resources directly to you and/or your child.

You may pick any **one** of the books below for us to mail to you and/or your child(ren):



"Kofi's Mom"  
by Richard Dyches  
(Grade Level: Pre-K-K)



"Rocko's Guitar"  
by Dr. Geoffrey Johnson  
(Grade Level: Pre-K-2)



"Visiting Day"  
by Jacqueline Woodson  
(Grade Level: K-3)



"Ruby on the Outside"  
by Nora Raleigh Baskin  
(Grade Level: 4+)



"\*\*You Weren't with Me"  
by Chandra Ghosh Ippen  
(Grade Level: Pre-K-6)

\*English and Spanish versions

Or scan this QR to fill out a request form!



We will be asking for guardian consent before sending your child their book, so please make sure to include this information!



If you are interested, please write your request to:

Building Bonds through Books  
ATTN: Emily, George Washington University  
Phillips Hall, Office 409  
801 22nd St. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20052

#### Information Required in Request Letter:

If you are requesting a book for yourself, please include:

Mailing Address  
Title of the Book

If you are also requesting a book for your child, please include:

Child's name and age (optional)  
Title of Book  
\*Child's guardian's contact information (phone number/email address)  
\*Child's guardian's mailing address

# PAYING IT FORWARD: FOOD JUSTICE WITH THE LATIN AMERICAN YOUTH CENTER

*By Sofia*

The Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) provides a myriad of services to empower and serve youth in Washington, DC. Based in the Columbia Heights neighborhood, with services also being provided in Silver Spring, Maryland, the organization offers a variety of services including STI and HIV testing, therapy, arts programs, housing services, GED and college readiness courses, food bags, aid for young parents, and much more.

Chris H., the Food and Nutrition Specialist within the Food and Nutrition Program at LAYC, describes the organization as unique since "youth can get the services they need as well as participate in enriching arts and educational programs to prepare them for the future."

I sat down with Chris, who is a recent Environmental Science graduate of American University, to discuss how the Food Nutrition program is a testament to the resilience of the communities LAYC serves, and the role that food justice plays in building more equitable communities.

The Food and Nutrition program at LAYC focuses on four pillars of food security: availability, access, utilization, and stability. To tackle these pillars, the program maintains a food pantry to give clients food. While access to food is important and much of the community that LAYC serves is lacking in that area, their programming does not stop at getting just that need met, and ensures that the community also gains valuable knowledge on nutrition. A large part of their programming is their food and nutrition education classes, and Chris focuses on the educational part of food justice and food security, teaching inside and outside the building to youth ages 14-24, all year long.

The classes that Chris teaches include cooking lessons, and Chris makes sure to cook a plethora of food from different cultures and skill levels, emphasizing overall nutrition and kitchen skills learned from making a particular dish. He also covers topics like basic nutrition, how to grocery shop, how to make quick meals, and reading nutrition labels. The learning does not stop at these individual level skills, however, and Chris also makes sure to teach his students about food systems, food justice, climate justice, and harmful food advertisements.

"Education is an important tool we use as a program to build better relationships with food and culture as well as teaching youth how to cook, how to make affordable and healthy

choices when buying food, and how to be autonomous in their everyday choices," Chris explained.

LAYC largely serves marginalized youth who may be unhoused, unaccompanied minors, previously incarcerated, young or single parents, and are typically Black and/or Latinx. Chris explained that these circumstances might hinder a youth's access to food. The food education aspect of their program seeks to make food accessible for youth in these circumstances, making food accessible to those who might have many mouths to feed, need quick and simple meals to fit within busy schedules, and those might not have a working kitchen in their home. They also provide nutritious food, including fresh produce, to Black and brown populations that historically face more health problems like diabetes and heart disease. Their aim is to focus on nutritious food that gives room for youth to make good choices for their body and health.

LAYC's impact doesn't stop there, and Chris has seen a noticeable impact in the students he teaches. "Since a lot of my classes consist of cohorts, I can track their progress. At every first class I hand out a 'quiz' that tests students' food literacy, their knowledge on how to read measurements in the kitchen, how to read nutrition labels and other kitchen skills. The test also gauges their interest and opinions on things like cooking at home, caring about where food comes from, how food makes their body feel, and how familiar they are with food justice. During the very last class, I give the test again to see what has changed. There's always an improvement in food literacy questions and there is always a positive change in attitude towards cooking at home, food justice, and how food affects their bodies," he said.

One of Chris's biggest passions is food justice. Within this framework, he believes that everyone should have access to nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and consistent food and have the autonomy and skills to know where it comes from and how to prepare it. His teaching utilizes this framework, and he emphasizes that a goal within food justice is the ability for communities to become self-reliant and build on the resilience they already have shown.

"When communities understand where food comes from, how to grow food, how to prepare it and how to make nutritious choices for their bodies free of outside influences, communities can become self-reliant and create strong local food systems," Chris said.

# REAL WORLD OF WORK: A CONVERSATION WITH FM MEMBER CHARLES

By Kelli

To be resilient is to be able to withstand or recover from very difficult conditions. I can't think of conditions any more difficult than those experienced by FM member, Charles. At the age of 20, Charles and several other young men were charged and convicted of the brutal attack and murder of a 49-year-old woman in Northeast DC. Charles served 36 and a half years for a crime that he did not do. Despite his innocence, Charles was sentenced to 35 years to life. Throughout his sentence, he refused to take the option of parole because he knew he would never be willing to admit to a crime he did not commit. He and his co-defendants (also Free Minds members) are models of resilience. The story of their case, which was taken all the way to the Supreme Court, has been featured in the Netflix Series, *The Confession Tapes: 8th and H*, a New America podcast called *The Alley: DC's 8th and H Street Case*, a Washington Post story from reporter Joe Heim ("They served decades in prison for a crime they say they didn't commit"), and Thomas Dybdahl's recently published book, *When Innocence Is Not Enough*.

Charles is a leader in our reentry community, who helps to co-facilitate our weekly "Build Up" book club sessions when he's not working. For this month's issue, I met up with Charles in a quiet basement lobby of the Martin Luther King DC Public Library, where he has now worked for two years.

**KELLI:** First, can you tell me what job you thought about or dreamed about when you were locked up? What was your dream job?

**CHARLES:** To tell you the truth, during those years, I didn't even think about getting out with the amount of time I'd been given. Who thinks about getting out? Even at that young age, I never thought I would get out. So, I never dreamed of a particular job. Instead, I just focused on the jobs I got in prison.

At one prison, I took a business class and became computer literate. One day, I went into the business office in UNICOR and told the supervisor there that I wanted to work with him as a procurement officer. That's the person who does all of the ordering of supplies. I told him why I thought I could do the job. I guess he liked what I said because he hired me. I dealt with hundreds of government contracts. We had a team of two people, but when the other guy left, they didn't need to hire anyone, because I was the one who knew how to do it. I'm kind of proud of that.

I went to another prison and became an upholsterer. I became very good at upholstering. I ended up becoming the right-hand man to the plant manager. Even the CO's that worked there had to listen to what I said, because I was the one who knew what I was talking about! They respected what I knew.

At the next place they transferred me, I started out in the kitchen and wound up working in the officers dining room, cooking for the officers, the executive staff and for the warden. I even cooked a meal for the Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons when he visited. He liked my meal. I was the highest paid person in the kitchen. I think I was pretty good.

**KELLI:** Why do you think you were so successful in those jobs?

**CHARLES:** Well, I think it's the way I go about doing the jobs I do. I always looked at it as mastering skills. If I'm going to do something, I want to be the best at it. That's what I hang my hat on. If I get a job, I'm going to learn it and I'm going to master it. I'm going to move my way up!

**KELLI:** Can you tell me about how you got your current job?

**CHARLES:** As soon as I got home, I went to this program that taught us how to write our resumes and market ourselves to employers. They connected us to employers that were willing to give a second chance to someone with a criminal record. I got a job with a company called Community Bridge. At first, I got placed cleaning hotels during the pandemic. Some months later, my boss said he needed somebody to go to their biggest client, which was the DC Public Library, and he chose me. I was so happy because it is a fulltime job with full benefits! I took that position and am a contract worker on the library's facilities management team.

**KELLI:** What exactly do you do?

**CHARLES:** We do everything. We move furniture, clean up messes, and prepare and set up for all the events at the library. We do everything to maintain the look and function of the facility both inside and outside for the public to use and enjoy. And like I said, I like to master everything that I do. So, I really see myself here as a problem solver. Solving problems is easy for me, but you'd be surprised how many people out here don't have that skill. I had to program the walkie talkies for everyone that works in maintenance because the supervisors—people that have been here for years—didn't know how to do it. I'm the guy everyone goes to when they have a problem or need something fixed. They all just say, "Ask Charles, he'll be able to fix it" (laughs).

**KELLI:** It seems like there is so much going on here. Is it a good place to work?

**CHARLES:** It's a great place to work. Everybody that comes out of prison in DC should come to the MLK Library because everything they need is here. You can come here and take a computer literacy course. They'll teach you how to send and receive emails, teach you about all basic computer skills that we lack when we get home. Even though there are computers in prison now, they're so limited as to what you can do. They'll teach you Microsoft Word, Excel, every basic program. And guess what? It's all free! Get your Social Security card, your ID. They'll give you referrals for other resources and services. They even have culinary training in the café. And they send those people off to good jobs. *[Editor's Note: If you're not returning to the DC area when you get home, check out what programs your local library may have to offer!]*

**KELLI:** Can you tell me what's going on down on this floor? What are all of these different glassed-in rooms?

**CHARLES:** (Points to across the lobby) That's a sound studio right there. You can learn audio tech and they've got a music studio. You can learn how to do a podcast and then use the studio here for free to record and broadcast it. There's a room over there where you can research your ancestors. They got professional genealogy staff. Anyone can go in; give them a few names and they'll research your ancestry! In this room you can learn pottery in a studio with a kiln. Over here, you can learn to sew. They've got sewing machines you can use for free. I mean it's just so much you can come in here and learn. Anything you want! This is a very good place to work. You meet interesting people from all over the world.

They are always having authors come to talk about their books. I'll set up for them and a lot of times, if I can, I'll stay and listen. I just went to one. The writer's parents were victims of the Holocaust during World War II. It was powerful!

This is a free space where everyone is represented. We don't turn away people who have nowhere else to go. Mayor Muriel Bowser has directed us to allow everyone to be here as long as they're being respectful. So much happens here. You know that yourself, because I saw you back in May here for the Leonardo DaVinci exhibit.

**KELLI:** That was awesome! They had a display of 12 drawings – the actual drawings, notes and diagrams of ideas and inventions by Leonardo DaVinci from 1478 to 1519. We got to see his drawings that were more than 500 years old! Did you know DaVinci was left-handed and wrote backwards? Isn't that crazy?

**CHARLES:** Yes, I loved that exhibit! It's all your culture in one building.

Right over there? That's a ballet center. People come in and dance, do yoga. They have story time for all different ages, so if you're a

parent, you can always find activities for your children here. It's a hub of activity and there is something for everyone. I always thought Martin Luther King was just for Blacks, but he's not. He represented everybody. We kinda get it twisted, but he was for everybody! And this space is named for him. That's what this library is.

**KELLI:** You said you never dreamed of a job because you didn't think you'd be free. But now you are free. Do you have a dream job now?

**CHARLES:** I do. I'd like to be a procurement manager. I want to use those skills I built and developed with UNICOR at an even higher level in a job where I can have total financial security. To be honest, I think fear is holding me back just a little bit at this point. Sometimes I worry my skills won't be good enough and I have a fear of failing. But I know myself. If you put me in a job and give me half a chance, I'm gonna excel. I always want to be on top. I want to be the one running things. I'm the one who is going to learn everything there is to know. I will get there!

**KELLI:** As you know, this issue of the Connect is on the theme of resilience. With that in mind, what advice do you have for Free Minds members preparing to enter or reenter the world of work?

**CHARLES:** I would tell people coming home they need to develop a tough skin. They can't get discouraged when they get turned down. We just had a job fair here. But some companies don't hire people with a record. They'll say they do, but there's a lot of men and women that get discouraged. People need to know how to present themselves. A lot of guys get upset and angry. Because a lot of them had jobs inside, but it's different. The people that want to change and reinvent themselves are going to have better luck. Just know you might be treated in a way you don't feel like you should be treated. You have to just let that roll off. That's being resilient. A lot of times, they're testing you. And if you get an attitude, you're not going to get the job or you're not going to keep the job.

Sometimes you got to start with a job that isn't really your dream job. The ugly jobs. Work your way up. You can't think you're going to come out here and make \$70,000 a year right off the bat. You gotta start somewhere and stay with it and be serious about reinventing yourself. Learn to deal with people being over you, having authority. It's difficult and that's understandable. We're used to the way CO's and police have been talking to us. But don't always think everything is personal. Be patient with people. Getting angry doesn't help you. Employers will reward you when they see how you carry yourself. Someone might say their way is right, but you know you are right. You got to suck it up because you need that job. That's being resilient. Change is hard and it's incremental, one step at a time.

Have a plan. List the things you want to do, starting with small goals. Meet those goals and then make bigger goals and keep going. You just have to be patient. People out here can't even wait at a traffic light! I will sit there and people will go around me looking at me all crazy. But I'm gonna be patient. I'm not going to get a ticket and go to jail again! I'll sit at that light (laughs).

Resilience. Everybody doesn't have it. Too many people still have a foot back in the streets even when they come home. You gotta be strong and not bend. You gotta walk right. Be trustworthy. And sometimes you gotta start from the ground up. Get all that old stuff out of you. Wash it off! Change everything, your whole way of thinking. When you change your perception, that change will change you.

*Thank you, Charles, for sharing your experience and wisdom with the Free Minds Family. We look forward to watching you continue your ascent, setting and achieving goals one by one, all the way up to securing that dream job as a procurement officer!*

# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey Fam! Peace and Blessings to you!

Good to be coming through again and very grateful for this month's theme because one of the first things that came to mind when I thought about resilience was the human spirit and how it has the capacity to endure so many hardships but still press through. When I looked up the word resilience, this is what I found: "The process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress." The only word I would change in the description is "well." Though one learns to adapt to life's challenges, one is not always adapting well, so I would change that to: "The process of adapting in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress." Just being able to adapt is good enough in my book. So we know that resilience is an *innate human capacity* that can be learned and developed in anyone. All people have the ability to develop the skills that will put them on the path to resilience.

Resilience is also a process or a journey that may begin in our early childhood, but continues throughout our lives. Our lives are consistently evolving narratives, and so is the pathway to resilience and is unique and for each one of us. In my research for this article I found that when it comes to resilience, research has pointed to three main psychosocial factors that may affect a person's level of resilience. They state that because these factors are controllable to some degree, people might be able to increase their resilience by developing them. They are:

## Active Coping

When we experience a traumatic event, it has a psychological effect. Being able to control our emotional reactions to our problems is key to recovering from trauma. Active coping is a stress-management strategy that involves a person engaging with the traumatic event or stressful circumstance to move past it instead of avoiding it and passively allowing it to influence one's life negatively.

## Cognitive Flexibility

We know that this life is full of unforeseen challenges and stressors, and having a rigid mindset doesn't allow for adaptation and hinders resilience. It is essential that we adjust to life's inevitable changes as they come and bend to new perspectives. Cognitive flexibility is the ability to take on new perspectives and store the information on dealing with stressors gained through life experience. Then, when faced with a new challenge, we can process it with different perspectives and contexts to offset any potential harm

## Social Support

Taking on life's challenges by ourselves can be very overwhelming. Research has shown that a person's social environment significantly impacts their level of resilience. Social support refers to the help and comfort one receives from their social network. This can include family, friends (Free Minds) coworkers, and others they talk to and interact with to de-stress. The larger a person's network and the more meaningful the relationships are, the more support a person receives, and therefore the better they may lessen their reaction to trauma.

(Source: "On Resilience," [thehumancondition.com](http://thehumancondition.com))

In closing I would like to say that when I think about resilience, I think about you, Free Minds members who have endured untold unfair treatment, difficult childhoods, the loss of many family and friends at young ages and all throughout life, overly harsh prison sentences and inhumane conditions inside of prison. I witness how after all of these circumstances, you still thrive in prison, poems, essays, books, taking a million classes and certification programs to improve your lives, both in prison as well as your return home. I continue to be amazed at Free Minds members returning home. I can honestly say that they hit the ground running, seriously standing on business to close the gap and make up for lost time, taking classes, obtaining sustainable employment, purchasing homes, starting a family, and being an example to people who have never even been incarcerated before. So when I think of resilience, I think of you and your peers who have returned to the community.

Now on to some awesome resources that you can take advantage of when you're back in the community:

The New & Improved READY Center!  
3640, Martin Luther King Jr, Avenue  
Washington DC 20020  
202-760-6790



The READY Center just opened a new state of the art location, a site completely dedicated to supporting returning citizens with programs and services which include the following: Streamlined Access to ID and vital documents, housing assistance, access to public benefits, employment skills training, training, mental health intervention, financial literacy, substance abuse assistance, case management and legal, food and clothing resources.

Until we *Connect* again,  
Ms. Keela

# BOOK BALLOT

It is not too late 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><b><i>Washington Black</i> by Esi Edugyan [Historical Fiction]</b></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><b><i>The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates</i> by Wes Moore [Biography/Autobiography]</b></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><b><i>Sing, Unburied, Sing</i> by Jesmyn Ward [Fiction]</b></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	 The book cover for 'Solito' by Javier Zamora features a stylized illustration of a person in a purple shirt and dark pants, carrying a large backpack. The person is walking towards the right. The title 'Solito' is at the top in a large, bold, black font. Below the illustration, the author's name 'JAVIER ZAMORA' is written in a smaller, black font. There is a small circular seal on the right side of the cover.	<p><b><i>Solito</i> by Javier Zamora [Memoir]</b></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	 The book cover for 'Creatures of Passage' by Morowa Yejidé has a dark, atmospheric background with a blue and white misty or smoky effect. The title 'CREATURES OF PASSAGE' is written in a large, white, serif font. Above the title, the author's name 'MOROWA YEJIDÉ' is visible in a smaller font.	<p><b><i>Creatures of Passage</i> by Morowa Yejidé [Fiction]</b></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	 The book cover for 'IQ' by Joe Ide features a large, bold, white 'IQ' at the top. Below it, the author's name 'JOE IDE' is written in a large, colorful, blocky font. The background is dark with some abstract, colorful patterns.	<p><b><i>IQ</i> by Joe Ide [Fiction]</b></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>

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

## **NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: DREAMS (VOLUME 13, ISSUE 1)**

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Dreams**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 13, Issue 2 will be exploring the theme of **Me, Myself, and I**.

### **(1)**

Dreams are defined as a series of thoughts, images, and sensations occurring in a person's mind during sleep.

What was your most memorable dream and why does this dream stand out to you? If you don't dream or don't remember your dreams, share a dream you would like to have. Be as detailed as possible!

### **(2)**

Dreams are also defined as a cherished aspiration, ambition, or ideal. Write a motivational speech to yourself to inspire you to accomplish one of your most cherished dreams.

### (3)

If you could have any dream come true, what would that dream be? Write a poem describing in detail the dream you selected and how your life would change if the dream were to come true.

### (4)

Have you ever felt like a dream was trying to tell you something or send you an important message?  
What was the dream? What message did you come away with?

*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 (**Dreams and Me, Myself, and I**) 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 REGINA

Hey there, my name is Regina. First things first, I am a proud Free Minds Member! I became acquainted with Free Minds while serving a short sentence at the Correctional Treatment Facility (CTF) as part of the Women's Book Club. I am currently the Program Coordinator/Wellness Engagement Coordinator here at Free Minds. I'm one to tell you my road to redemption has not been easy and has taken nothing but resilience to get me where I am today.

I have had my fair share of setbacks and comebacks. I have been able to obtain my Associate's Degree in Business Technology, Bachelor's Degree in Computer Information Systems, and Master's Degree in Business Administration Management all while working and being a full-time single mom of three. My Master's Degree was the most challenging because I did it online and got arrested towards the end. I had to take a 6 month hiatus because I was incarcerated. However, when I was released I immediately picked right back up where I left off and managed to graduate with a 3.9 GPA. This required a lot of discipline, drive,

and momentum. There were many times I felt like giving up but once I start something it is impossible for me not to see it all the way through to the end.

My transition home was not easy. I had a very hard time finding employment that I enjoyed doing. To be honest, I really didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew I needed to be employed where my knowledge and skills would be an asset to the company that employed me. My resilience and strong work ethic landed me in a career field I never expected to be in but have grown tremendously engulfed in. I love the organization both who and what it represents. I love the environment which is very pleasant and upbeat. Most of all, I love the work that I do which is helping other people that I can identify with take that huge step at moving forward and giving themselves a second chance to be great! Life happens and we all make mistakes but it's how you pick yourself up, learn from your mistakes, and press forward that counts the most!

# DC PHOTOS *By Sofia*

*As requested by our readers*



DC's Botanic Garden



An empanada stand at the H Street festival. Empanadas are baked or fried pastries filled with meats, cheese, and/or vegetables that are popular across Latin America.

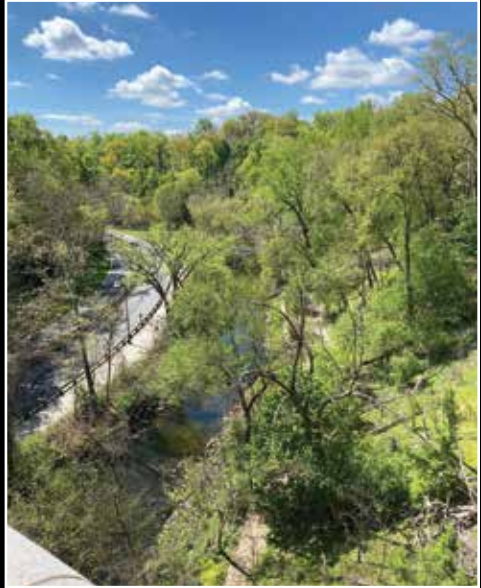
Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos?  
Write us at 1816 12th St NW, Washington, DC 20009 and let us know what you'd like to see!

# DC PHOTOS *By Sofia*

*As requested by our readers*



Rowhouse in DC's NoMa neighborhood



Rock Creek Park

*continued from page 6*

## FAMILY TIES

Education wise, when I got to Lee County, I was working in the school building, teaching classes at night, helping with GED, and started getting a little more involved. The principal let me have a classroom at night with guys who wanted their GED. Then he opened it up to some more kind of leadership classes and anything I could think of that was positive and that people wanted to join.

**Carlos:** Did you share all that with your father? Like, what you were doing.

**Woodrow:** I did.

**Carlos:** What'd he say?

**Woodrow:** His thing was you know, whatever it took for me to like not get in trouble inside. So if it was positive, or working in UNICOR or whatever, you know, he was all for it.

**Jae-lynn:** I know we've mostly been talking about your relationship with your dad. But what about other family members? Was there any other relationships that you kind of had to maintain resilience in maintaining those relationships while you are in?

**Woodrow:** Oh, yeah, like my mom. My relationship with my mother is even closer. All of that stuff I went through in all of those different places, I couldn't have made it out of there without her. You know, I just don't think I could have made it out of there without her. Because sometimes people, they let you down, they go through what they go through. I don't know if I could have done what my mother did. I'm talking about without a break. I don't know if I could have done that for somebody. You know, I want to believe that I'm a good enough person where I could help somebody that I loved in trouble

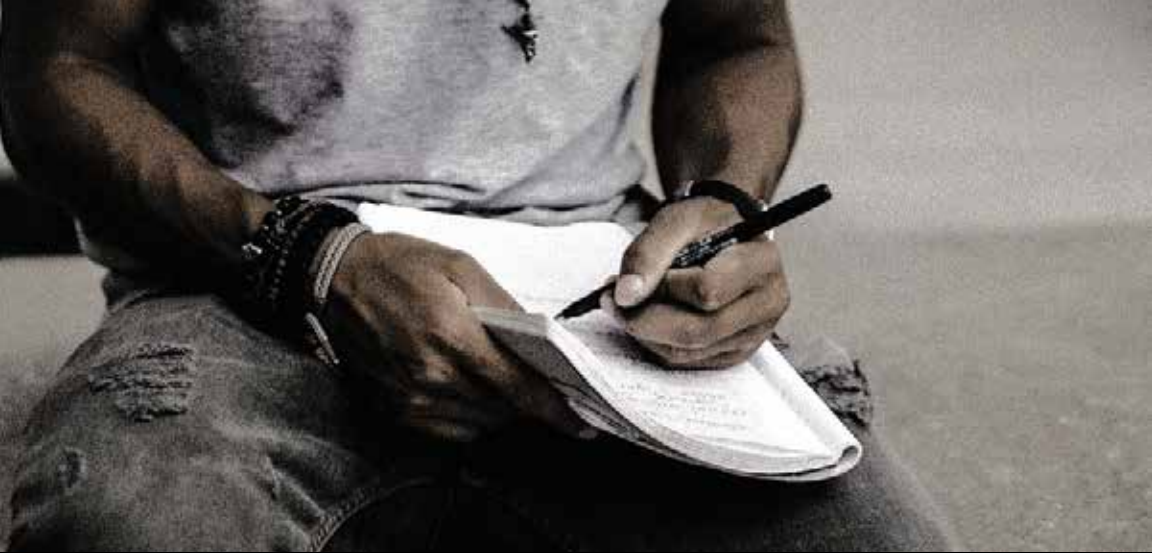
like that without no let down. There was never a time where I called her and she didn't answer the phone. Like I'm talking about nothing. Like I'm talking about absolutely nothing. And I'm sure she had to be angry that I was away and I had gotten myself in trouble, but she never showed me that. She just was like, "Hey, I'm gonna be here for you. And whatever you need, let me know." I'm not going to ever forget that; no matter what it takes, I'm gonna be there for her from here on in.

**Carlos:** That's that unconditional love, right? True meaning of it.

**Jae-lynn:** Beautiful. Woodrow, did you want to say anything closing out? Or any final points on resilience or family members?

**Woodrow:** I was fortunate to have somebody like that, like my mom, like my dad, you know, when people were in my life, right? At different times people move in and out of your life sometimes when you're away that long, whether that be significant others or family or whatever, right. So I was fortunate in that way. And I used to be reminded of it when I was away, because you had people that didn't have anyone. So I remember them, you know what I'm saying. Imagine how much tougher it would have been if I didn't have anybody. So that's a whole other kind of resiliency right there.

I tell my parents every day that I wouldn't be here without them. I tell them all the time. So no matter what we'll be here for whichever or whatever, and we're gonna remember what it was like to not have each other. You know I get emotional even thinking about it because, like I said, I remember the guys that didn't have anybody and how they had to go through their time. So to have somebody who cares about you like that... But, you know, I was very fortunate and I thank God for that and I let them know that as much as possible.



# THE WRITE WAY: TIPS ON JOURNALING

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

*By Isabel*

Expressing our thoughts, feelings, and emotions is an important aspect of maintaining resilience. Having a support system and someone you can go to to just talk about life is beneficial for our mental health. However, there are times when our minds are so filled with thoughts that we find it hard to express that, or to share with others. This is where an effective writing tool comes in handy – journaling. Putting exactly what is going through our minds on paper, and writing freely can help us determine exactly what it is that we are feeling. There are no limitations on what one can write, just write anything that goes through your mind.

As a person who believes in the power of journaling and the relief it can bring, I am going to share with you five journaling tips that have helped me with journaling, and can help you if you are just starting, or are looking for ways to get creative with your journaling. Toward the end of the article, I will share a few prompts to help you get started!

## **1. Come up with a prompt or use one of our writing prompts**

Writing is hard. The great aspect of journaling is that you can write anything, and it doesn't have a certain format. Oftentimes, I find that using a prompt helps as it serves as a guide for my writing. Maybe there are some questions about yourself you've been wanting to think about further. If so, start with that question. You don't always have to utilize a prompt when journaling; you can also write freely, but prompts are helpful.

## **2. Don't think, just write**

Keep in mind that you are not writing an essay or getting your journal published in a magazine; it doesn't have to be perfect. Simply let everything out on the paper and don't worry about typos or if your writing makes sense, just write what you are feeling at the moment, your surroundings, or anything that happened in the day. Make the journal yours, and try to make journaling a safe outlet for you.

### 3. Be Consistent

Being consistent is important when journaling. The more consistent you are, the more you will get out of journaling. Studies show that journaling significantly improves mental health, and for those who suffer from mental illness, there has been a significant decrease in anxiety and depression. This wasn't a one-day exercise that led to immediate results, but a month-after-month process. Journaling can be a positive, life-changing habit, and it only takes a few minutes out of your day.

### 4. Time yourself

Timing yourself when journaling can help you stay focused and encourage you to write something. When timing yourself, you can start with 5 minutes, and if you feel you have more to write, add another 5 or 10 minutes. It is ultimately your preference on how long you would like to journal, but setting a timer can motivate you to write something each day.

### 5. Be kind to yourself

While journaling can be relieving and can take emotional or mental burdens off our shoulders, it can also be heavy. When we journal, we are digging deep and trying to figure out what it is we are feeling. As humans, we are complex, and deal with many different circumstances that can take a toll on our mental health. When journaling, remember to be gentle and compassionate with yourself. It is not an easy process at times to write about our emotions/ thoughts, but it is better for them to be on paper, rather than being left inside.

Don't forget journaling is meant to be rewarding at the end of the day. Whether you are writing about your emotions, a positive or negative experience, make it yours, and remember it doesn't have to be perfect. Good luck and never stop writing!

Prompts:

1. What are some tough experiences you have had in the past? How did you navigate through this experience? How did this experience shape you into the person you are today?
2. What brings you peace?
3. What are some lessons you have learned in your life? How can you utilize them to build resilience?

## 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.

### **Humbled To The Dust: Still I Rise by Bobby Bostic**

**Description provided by the author:** The life story of a troubled 16-year-old who was sentenced to die in prison for a robbery mission that resulted in him being given 241 years in prison. Read how this manchild turned his life around and turned lemons into lemonade. From gangs to religion, a lost soul found God. From ninth grade dropout to college graduate, it was education that helped free Bobby Bostic after his mother died at 42 years old from cancer three years into his prison sentence.



# IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

## DEEP DIVE: PALESTINE, ISRAEL, HAMAS, AND THE SIEGE ON GAZA

It is not possible to fit into one or two pages the centuries of history and the battles fought over the land that today is made up of Palestine and Israel. We will attempt to provide a bit of historical context and then explain what has happened in the latest conflict involving these two peoples. *(For anyone who wants to learn more, please write to Free Minds to request a book on this subject!)*

At the end of World War I, the British controlled the area then entirely known as Palestine. At the time it was a majority Muslim, minority Jewish territory. Over the next two decades, as persecution of Jewish people in Europe intensified, culminating in the German-led Nazi Holocaust in the 1940s, a steady flow of Jews fled to Palestine in search of a safe place to live.

At the end of World War II, the United Nations voted to split Palestine into two states, an Arab one and a Jewish one. Jewish leaders accepted the plan, but the Arab side rejected it. By 1948, the British gave up and withdrew, and David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people.

That action triggered an attack on the new state of Israel by surrounding Arab states, and by the end of that war, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had been expelled from the newly established Israel. In the end, Israel controlled the land that was proposed for a Jewish state, plus a large share of the other territory that was Palestine.

Today, what is known to be Palestine is a small and complicated map that includes two unconnected areas called the West Bank and Gaza. The West Bank, the larger of the two areas, has also been winnowed down in size by Israeli settlers who have steadily encroached on Palestinian territory in actions that most of the global community has viewed as a violation of international law.

In 2006, the Gazan Palestinians held elections and voted into power a group called Hamas, which to that point had been a resistance movement since 1988. Hamas' charter calls for an elimination of the state of Israel to be replaced with an Islamic Palestinian state. After Hamas' rise to power, Israel placed Gaza under a blockade, meaning people and goods cannot freely enter or leave the territory. Since 2006, Hamas' military wing has engaged in five wars with Israel, including the one going on today. And Israeli leadership has been firm that this will be the last: its intention is to wipe Hamas out entirely.

The most recent war between Hamas and Israel began on October 7 of this year, when Hamas fighters invaded southern Israel by air, sea and land while also firing a barrage of thousands of rockets at Israel. More than 1,200 Israelis were murdered in the attacks, and more than 200 people were taken hostage by Hamas and brought back into Gaza.

In response to the October 7 attacks, Israel quickly began a campaign of airstrikes and bombing that leveled the north of Gaza in advance of a ground invasion. That offensive has continued towards the south of the area as Israel seeks to force Hamas fighters out of hiding.

Israel has also imposed a "total blockade" on Gaza, prohibiting the entry of food, water, medicine, fuel, and electricity.

While much of the world held sympathy with Israel in the wake of the attack on its civilians, and many international leaders accepted its leadership's goal of wiping out Hamas, there has been tremendous international pressure on the country to stop its aggressive and destructive advancement into Gaza. According to the Gaza Health Ministry, which is overseen by Hamas, more than 18,000 people among a population of just over 2 million have been killed by Israeli forces since the siege began, including thousands of children. According to the United Nations (UN), half the people in Gaza are currently starving and nine out of ten do not eat every day. The region's health system is collapsing and nearly everyone in Gaza has been displaced by the ongoing offensive. On December 8, the US vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire.

## WORLD

The world heads into 2024 with another international war still raging in Europe, and a slew of insular conflicts raging in Africa. The International Institute for Strategic Studies documented 183 different regional conflicts in the world this year.

It has been nearly two years since Russia invaded Ukraine, touching off a war that has seen well over half a million deaths and casualties already. The fighting in the nation of 40 million has reached something of a stalemate, which is largely seen as being in the favor of Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin. Russia has the larger army and the larger economy, which makes it more able to deal with a prolonged conflict.

Many were hopeful that 2023 would be a year that democracy and freedom started to grow in Sudan, a nation wracked by strife and war for decades, and whose longtime dictator Omar Bashir was ousted by a military coup in 2019. Instead, a plan for a two-year path away from military rule and towards civilian leadership fell by the wayside and a war between two powerful militias has displaced millions of Sudanese people.

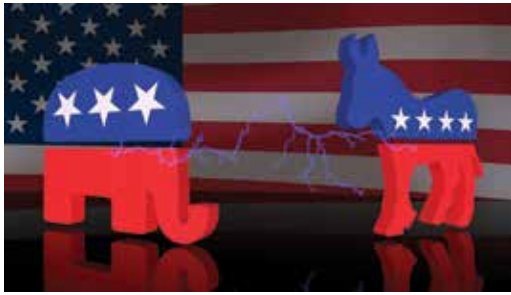
Thousands of miles to the west in Africa, a large group of neighboring countries are living under leadership brought on by recent coup actions: Niger, Burkina Faso, Gabon and Mali.

One interesting world fact as 2023 comes to a close: India is estimated to be the world's most populous nation, projected to reach a total of 1.4 billion people this year. The United Nations began conducting population estimates in 1950, and every year since, China has topped the list. But decades of social restrictions on the size of families – for a long time, China only permitted parents to have one child – have put China on a path to seeing its population drop below 1 billion by around the year 2070.

## NATION

If the current trends in polling hold up, voters will be choosing between the same two major-party candidates for president in 2024

# IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*



that we did in 2020: Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

The Republican National Committee has hosted four debates, and has plans for three more in January of 2024. The first votes to be cast in the race will take place on January 15 when the Iowa caucus begins.

But despite millions spent and hours of debate by a handful of Republican hopefuls, Donald Trump continues to hold a massive lead in all of the polls. Five Thirty Eight, a website that averages out a lot of different polls, puts Trump at 60% in the Republican race with his two closest opponents, Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley, both getting less than 20% support.

One or both of those candidates will surely stick around for several months, if for no other reason than the fact that Trump is facing dozens of indictments stemming from a variety of incidents, including the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6.

On the Democratic side of the race, it is difficult to see a path for anyone but Joe Biden to secure the nomination at this point. He does have some nominal competition, including one congressman from Minnesota. But nobody with enough name recognition to seriously challenge a sitting president has entered the race, and it would be difficult to do so now and actually get onto the ballot in all 50 states.

One wrinkle in the race: Robert Kennedy, Jr., who originally intended to run against Biden in the primary, is now running for president as an independent candidate. Cornel West, a former Harvard professor and progressive activist, will also run as an independent. Neither man has a chance to win, but the votes they draw—which could have gone to Biden or Trump – could tip the election one way or another.

## SPORTS

The college football season ended, as it so often does, with a controversy about who should have a chance at the national title. Hopefully, the plan for a 12-team playoff next year will end the insanity.

When the dust settled on the 2023 regular season, there were two teams that had clearly punched their ticket to the four-team playoff that begins on New Year's Day: Michigan, which won the Big Ten,

and Washington, which won the Pac-12. Both went undefeated in two of the toughest conferences in the sport.

Florida State, which dominated a slightly weaker Atlantic Coast Conference, also made it through the year without a loss. But with just two weeks left in the season, the team lost its sensational quarterback to a season-ending leg injury. The team managed to win its last two games behind stout defensive efforts. But when it came time for the tournament committee to decide on the final four, it passed on Florida State and took Texas and Alabama, both elite programs that had one loss apiece during the year.

After the decision had been made, Florida State's coach, Mike Norvell, said: "I am disgusted and infuriated with the committee's decision today to have what was earned on the field taken away because a small group of people decided they knew better than the results of the games. What is the point of playing games?"

On the pro football level, the NFL is headed into the final four weeks of the regular season as we type this up. There are a few serious contenders for the Super Bowl, including the Dallas Cowboys, the Baltimore Ravens and the Miami Dolphins.

And of course, you can never count out the Kansas City Chiefs with Patrick Mahomes at quarterback.

But there is one team they are all clearly chasing, and that is the San Francisco 49ers, who are loaded with talent on both sides of the ball. The 9ers hit a rough patch in the early fall when the squad was hit with a slate of injuries, losing three in a row. Since then, they have rolled up five straight wins, none of them close and all against potential playoff teams. It is going to be very hard for anyone to beat them if guys like Trent Williams, Christian McCaffery and Deebo Samuel can all stay healthy and on the field.

Since we last did a news update, the Texas Rangers won their first ever World Series, edging out the Arizona Diamondbacks in a thrilling seven-game series. And in the WNBA, the Las Vegas Aces led by A'ja Wilson cruised through the playoffs and beat the New York Liberty in the championship round.



From the top:  
Patrick Mahomes,  
Deebo Samuel, and  
A'ja Wilson

# DC CULTURE: DC'S NEW GO-GO MUSEUM

*By Araba*

Many Washingtonians are deeply familiar with the DC-specific genre of funk music called "go-go" music. The genre came to its height from the late 1970s through the early 2000s, when large venues such as Anacostia Park and Wilmer's Park hosted huge go-go concerts late into the night. Popularized by musician Chuck Brown and bands such as Rare Essence and Trouble Funk, go-go music is most often characterized by specific rhythms played on bass, snare and conga drums. Musicologists have traced the instrumentalism and rhythms of go-go music to rhythms found in traditional West African music. To the end, go-go musicians rely heavily on live instruments and call-and-response to continuously engage their crowds.

In 2019, a movement called #DontMuteDC began when a new DC resident in the Shaw neighborhood complained to authorities about the loud go-go music that plays from a speaker in front of the MetroPCS store at the corner of 7th Street and Florida Avenue NW. Native Washingtonians protested vehemently, asserting that the music was simply a part of the city's culture. Some Washingtonians started what is now a yearly festival called "Moechella" (a mesh of the D.C. slang word "moe" and the popular music festival held in California called "Coachella") in the same neighborhood to dance along to contemporary go-go bands.

The MetroPCS incident was viewed by many as a larger issue with gentrification in the district, or the gradual pushing out of the native residents (and their culture) for the purpose of city beautification and redevelopment. Go-go venues, specifically, were targeted by law enforcement in the 2000s for their alleged likelihood of inciting violence. Police began cracking down on disorderly conduct violations and various public venues stopped allowing the rental of their space for go-go dances. Musicians did their best to keep the peace on their own – one popular go-go group, the Junkyard Band, had a no-fighting policy at their shows to ensure that the energy was high but that audiences respected the spirit of their performance.



A rendering of the Go-Go Museum by To Be Done Studio.

More recently, there have been movements to memorialize the place of go-go music in the city. In 2020, go-go was named the official music of Washington, DC. Fifteen years ago, longtime DC activist Ronald Moten announced plans to open a go-go museum that would commemorate the history and culture of go-go in DC. Then, just this year, Moten received a grant from the city to lead the construction of a go-go museum. The museum, which will open in February 2024, will not have much space for physical artifacts, but it will contain important history, event space for go-go musicians, a cafe with Caribbean and African-American foods (with signature mambo sauces), and a small recording studio. Admission to the museum will be free and open to the public.

Do you have any memories of attending go-go events, especially at its height over 20 years ago? Do you remember any specific go-go performances, or what the crowds were like? If you had a chance to contribute to the go-go museum, what information or artifacts would you include? Write us back and let us know – we love hearing from you!

## BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH WRITING

*By Eyone, Free Minds Facilitator*

I write as a means of self-expression and to share my unique narrative. This passion for writing has become a part of who I am. Previously, my writing served as a crucial mode of communication in an environment where conventional lines of communication were often disrupted by those in power, as a method of control. Through writing, I give voice to my experiences and those shared by individuals from similar backgrounds. My stories, preserved in written form, endure, preserving our collective narrative. Writing has been an enlightening journey for me. It has opened windows to worlds I've never physically visited, offering insights into diverse cultures and perspectives. I've gained wisdom from educators and intellectuals I've never personally encountered. Writing has empowered me to recognize the value of my voice – both for personal expression and as a representative voice during times when I was unaware of its significance.

# MEDITATION *By Kelli*

Storms have long been used as a metaphor for difficult and trying times in our lives, and for good reason. If you've ever been outside during a hailstorm with no place to find cover, then you know how miserable and punishing it can feel. Hailstones in DC can get big! It can feel like standing out in the wide open while people throw rocks at you. And let's be honest, some days, that's exactly what life feels like. For this meditation, we are going to envision weathering a hailstorm.

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.

Imagine you are walking down a quiet street in DC. There are few trees and nobody around outside. Your mind is wandering as you walk, feeling fine and carefree. But then you feel something tap your shoulder. You look up, and as you do, you hear the sudden barrage of tiny stones pelting the concrete. Where there once was calm, in an instant, it feels like you are being attacked. You feel the hailstones raining down upon your body and sense they're growing larger... An icy stone the size of a ping-pong ball slams into your forehead. Ouch! You throw your hands up over your head to shield yourself, desperately looking for shelter. But there is none. Wind gusts carry the hailstones, and they rain down harder and harder against your body... You stand still, protecting your body with your arms as best you can, in acceptance. In this moment, you understand. All you can do is weather the storm.

Then, as quickly as it began, the hail tapers and then stops. And this is where our meditation truly begins...

*Take a deep breath in through your nose, smelling that unmistakable earthy scent of the street after a storm... and exhale through your mouth.*

*Take another deep breath in... hold it... and let it go.*

*The pavement is littered with beautiful, white pebbles. You*

*look up and the sky is clearing. The wind has ceased. The street is quiet again. Breathe in this calm... and exhale...*

*Think about all that you have survived... Think about all the times you have experienced storms and yet you did not bend... And even if you did bend, you did not break. You bounced back... because you are resilient...*

*The hailstorm came quickly and without warning. Just like some trials in our life seem to come out of nowhere...*

*There are times when we experience agitation and frustration in the body, much like the strong, gusty winds and chaos of a heavy hailstorm. Reflect upon a moment or time when you have felt that intensity in your body – that tension, that tightness...*

*The hailstorm came because the atmospheric conditions were absolutely aligned for it to happen... It was not within our control. Just like many life conditions are not within our control.*

*You stood strong though, and the storm dissipated... You weathered the storm...*

*Focus on your breath... and the calm strength you can feel in your body now. Breathe in... and exhale... noticing your chest rising, and then falling.*

*You use your hands to wipe the moisture from your face. Run your fingers through your hair and feel hail fall free from your head.*

*Take a deep breath in... and let it go. You are fine. You are safe. You have weathered this storm. You are strong... You are resilient. This storm has passed...*

*The next time a storm comes, you will remember this moment. You will remember to breathe. Because you know you can, and you will weather the storm...*



# CLASSICAL PILATES MAT EXERCISES



## DID YOU KNOW? The History of Pilates

*By Aneka*

Did you know that the exercise form Pilates originated in prison? If not, let me give you a brief history of how cats inspired this interesting strength training exercise. Imprisoned mainly for being German in Britain during World War I, Joseph Pilates wondered: Why do the cats in this P.O.W. camp seem so healthy but the prisoners are getting weaker and weaker? To help pass the time, Pilates would watch the island's scrawny cats chase mice and birds, marveling at their energy and agility—a striking contrast to the physical and emotional state of his fellow internees (a person who is confined as a prisoner, especially for political or military reasons.). He studied the cats' movements and concluded that frequent stretching gave them their lively and energetic spirit. Pilates then began devising a series of exercises to stretch human muscles. He's even rumored to have tinkered with the camp's hospital beds to build crude workout equipment. Happy with the results in his own body, he began teaching the regimen to the camps' prisoners. When the Great Influenza reached the island, supposedly none of Pilates' trainees got sick. They were, according to the legend, in better shape at the end of the war than when it began.

There are 6 principles to pilates. These 6 principles are:

### 1. CONCENTRATION

Concentration is the first pilates principle, and it's essential for achieving peak results. To perform pilates exercises correctly, you must focus your mind on the movements and your body's response to them. This helps you engage your muscles fully and develop greater awareness of your body.

### 2. CONTROL

Control refers to conscious, deliberate muscular control. In pilates, you must move with control and intention to ensure you're targeting the correct muscles and avoiding injury.

Practicing control also helps develop strength and endurance.

### 3. CENTRE

The Centre principle refers to the concept of the "powerhouse" of your body, your core – which includes your abdominals, lower back, hips and buttocks. In pilates, you must focus on activating the core to provide a stable base for movement and to improve posture.

### 4. BREATH

Breath plays a crucial role in your pilates practice. Proper breathing helps to oxygenate your muscles, regulate your heart rate, and release tension. Synchronizing your breath with your movements increases the effectiveness of the exercises.

### 5. PRECISION

Precision refers to the attention to detail required for proper execution of the exercises. Each movement in pilates has a specific purpose, and you must perform it with precision to achieve the desired results. Practicing precision also helps to improve overall body awareness and control.

### 6. FLOW

Flow is the final principle of pilates, and it refers to the smooth and fluid movements characteristic of the practice. In pilates, we strive for a continuous flow of movement, linking one exercise to the next with precision and control to develop coordination and grace.

If you'd like to give pilates a try, follow the chart above. 3-5 reps per exercise is all you need to feel the effects of pilates.

# REENTRY PROFILE

*Interview by Carlos*

Sitting down with an old friend to catch up is one thing, but having the blessing of doing it in freedom, is another. I had the joy of doing just this with Lewis (AKA Buttons) over Zoom. The last time I saw him, he was running around the yard in Lee County. Almost 20 years later, I get to talk about Resilience with Buttons. He was incarcerated at the age of 22 and served nearly 29 years in prison. Buttons was released in March of this year, after his IRAA petition was initially denied. Here are some of the things that were said.

*Note: IRAA stands for Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act: a DC law that provides an opportunity for resentencing after 15 years of incarceration for young adults convicted in DC Superior Court.*

**Carlos:** What does resilience mean to you?

**Buttons:** Resilience, to me, means to be firm and resolute in whatever you desire to accomplish or achieve. Not allowing yourself to be deterred from that mission or goal regardless of any setbacks or anything that is being thrown your way. To push through and move forward.

**Carlos:** Well said, Brother, and it is a definition that you are living out today. But before we get into the now, let's step back a little to talk about one of those setbacks because you were denied your first IRAA. What was that feeling like? What was going through your mind? How did resilience play a part at that moment of denial?

**Buttons:** I knew I was the perfect candidate for IRAA because of how I conducted and carried myself throughout the years away from my loved ones. I'm proud to say that I transformed myself while I was away. Due to some technicalities and a few monkey wrenches that were thrown in the mix, the prosecution attacked the certificates of the programs that I took, and basically said that they were not legit. Most of my certificates came from programs that were ran by other men like myself. The Recreation Department even sponsored my favorite one that I ran, which was called "Think Before You Move," a program that uses the game of chess in combination with life. It is based on one of our own homies' real life story. He came back home and started a program with the youth (check out the movie called "Life of a King").

I was denied my first IRAA because the government didn't view these certifications as legitimate. Of course, I was upset but I believe in the higher power that be and it was still going to make a way for me. A friend of ours reached out to me and said: "Buttons, do me a favor. Start documenting your last days [in prison]." I said, "you know I just got denied, right?" I said that with a smile while he told me, "Man, that

doesn't mean nothing!" The next day I had a legal call with my legal team at the Public Defender Service. They did all of the footwork to prove that the certificates were legit. My first hearing had been in September. I got back in front of the judge and was released in March.

**Carlos:** So what was going through your mind between September and March?

**Buttons:** What my friend did not know was that I was already documenting my last days. I just knew that I was going home. I stayed firm, I stayed the course, I did not get sidetracked nor got caught up in my surroundings'. *(You can read about his book, Buttons Last Days of Incarceration, in the Growth issue of the Connect.)*

Everything else at that point was going downhill for me. I made it through the hard part. I continue doing my thing, working out and staying focused. I felt like nothing could stop this, not even the prosecutor. I had a good support team to keep me focused as well, my pops being the main one.

**Carlos:** Let me push forward a little to post-incarceration, because you are living the definition of Resilience that you gave in the beginning. You hit the ground running and nothing is stopping you now. Tell me what you are up to now?

**Buttons:** We used our energy in the wrong and negative way when we were young and before our incarceration. So, I still have the same mindset of entrepreneurship but now I refocus it on doing positive things. So I lined myself up, pre-release, for things that I wanted to do. Becoming a successful author, fitness instructor and more, including mentoring the youth. Pops said that, had I not went to prison, I would have been a millionaire by now. *(Buttons' father was sitting with us listening to the interview.)*

**Carlos:** Last question for you Buttons. All of your challenges, all of struggles, your ups and downs, everything that chiseled you to be the person that you are—how much of your past has helped you today in relation to resilience?

**Buttons:** I took my path and learned from it. Knowing what not to do and what to hold on to. Because even though I did wrong in the past, it has helped me to be a better human being. That's what I did. Became a better man.

**Carlos:** Thank you Buttons for allowing me to sit with you and more important, for others to know how your resilience gave you strength. Your story gives all of us encouragement.

# 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."

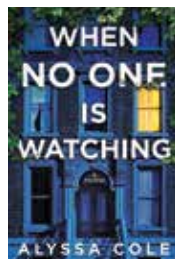
- **AHA: *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam**

This is a young adult novel based on the perspective of a young teen incarcerated while innocent. Yusef Salaam is one of the exonerated Central Park Five wrongfully convicted as a teen in 1989 in New York. This book is powerful. It's won many awards and has been spoken about by Jason Reynolds and other young adult novelists. It is told in verse, and is both urgent and familiar, but also a portrayal of a young man as an artist and poet speaking on how the system, racism, and diversity plays a role. A vital story for readers.



- **Julia: *Minor Detail* by Adania Shibli**

*Minor Detail* is by Palestinian author Adania Shibli, and translated into English by Elisabeth Jaquette. This short novel follows two events. The first part of the book is set in 1949, a year after the war that Israelis know as the War of Independence, and Palestinians know as the Nakba, in which the Israeli army displaced approximately 750,000 Palestinians and seized their land. The book begins with an Israeli soldier who encounters a young Bedouin woman in the desert and commits an act of horrific violence. Then, in the present day, a Palestinian woman living in the occupied West Bank reads about this act in 1949 and becomes determined to learn more about the plight of the young Bedouin woman. This book was a short but powerful account of life under occupation, navigating visible and invisible borders, and the significance of these "minor details" of history.



- **Aneka: *When No One is Watching* by Alyssa Cole**

I really enjoyed reading this book. It's a gentrification thriller that takes place in Brooklyn, New York. The novel follows a character named Sydney, who has lived in Brooklyn her entire life. She's watched as her neighborhood has changed over the years, including her disappearing neighbors as more and more "For Sale" signs pop up. As a way of holding on to her community, she begins to look more into its history. As she does, she starts to realize that her neighbors might not have moved to the suburbs after all. This book was filled with twists and turns with a satisfying ending!

- **Tara: *The Invisible Ache: Black Men Identifying Their Pain and Reclaiming Their Power* by Courtney B. Vance and Dr. Robin L. Smith**

After losing both his father and godson to suicide, actor Courtney B. Vance noticed that mainstream conversations on mental health continuously left Black men out of the picture. He addresses this in his book, which covers topics including grief, relationships, identity, and race. This book serves as a guide for Black men to address their anxieties and stressors while pursuing mental well-being. The combination of Courtney B. Vance's personal sharing about his response to his family upbringing and societal pressures as a Black man and his journey with therapy, and Dr Robin Smith's practical advice on healing was a really strong one for me. I saw them being interviewed by Gayle King on CBS and one of Free Minds former reentry coaches recommended it, and I'm so glad she did.

# 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 de 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!)

Primeramente, un saludo a toda mi familia de Mentes Libres. Espero que al leer esto, se encuentren con la mejor salud, fuerte, mental y físicamente. Siempre es un privilegio estar con ustedes por medio este modo. Para los que no me conocen, me llamo Carlos. Después de haber hecho 25 años en prisión, obtengo mi libertad por medio de IRAA, fui deportado a mi país natal, Honduras, y he estado disfrutando mi libertad por casi 4 años.

Es por esto que me relaciono en tantas maneras con el tema de este mes, Resiliencia, es el proceso y resultado de adaptarse exitosamente a experiencias de vida difíciles o desafiantes, especialmente a través de la flexibilidad mental, emocional y conductual y el ajuste a las demandas externas e internas.

Puedo contarles cualquier parte de mi vida y verán en cuántas maneras sobrepase diferentes dificultades, sea mi niñez, mi adolescencia, mi adultez o esta presente parte en libertad. Aunque tengo que decir que en mi niñez, no tuve la madurez para saber que en la manera que estaba tratando de sobrevivir, me llevaría a perder mi libertad y pasar 25 años en prisión. Nací en Honduras, un país de pobreza que forzó a mis padres y abuelos a llevarnos con ellos a Estados Unidos. Al llegar a un país nuevo, mis retos eran tratar de ser aceptado. No puedo decir que sobrepase esta fase con éxito, porque como dije, me llevó a perder mi libertad. Aun así, tuve una parte difícil en mi vida. Fui sentenciado a 30 años a vida a la edad de 19 años y mandado a prisión. Fue el momento que me despertó rudamente la realidad. Lorton fue la primera prisión donde me mandaron. Aunque el que nunca ha estado allí, ha escuchado lo duro que es sobrevivir esa prisión. Fui mandado a diferentes prisiones en todos esos años, sin ninguna otra opción, tuve que adaptarme y educarme de muchas maneras.

Sobreviví todo esos años por mi resiliencia. Mi fuerza mental y emocional. Le doy gracias a Dios por haberme dado resiliencia en esos momentos. Y aunque no lo crean, todos esos años me prepararon para el momento más difícil de mi vida, mi libertad! Se que se preguntan, porque este es el momento más difícil? Me explico:

Cuando el juez dijo que era un hombre libre, me enfrenté con la realidad de ser deportado a mi país natal. Un país que deje a la edad de 8 años. Lo único que sabía era lo que todos hablaban. La pobreza, la corrupción y el crimen. No les voy a mentir, pensé que al llegar lo sobreviviría en estas calles. Triste que todo esto sí era verdad. Llegue a Honduras en Abril del 2020, en medio de una pandemia que agregaba aún más dificultades. No tenía otra opción, pero tener paciencia y resiliencia! Prisión me entreno a tener paciencia con las cosas que no están bajo mi control. Todo estaba cerrado. No podía sacar mi identificación, no podía salir porque el país estaba bajo un toque de queda y uno solo podía salir el día designado (dependía del último número de la identificación). Al levantar todas las restricciones de la pandemia, tuve que aprender a donde ir y a donde no, porque como les dije, todo lo que si había escuchado de este país, si era cierto. Solo para decirles cuánto... dos años después de llegar a este país, el Presidente seleccionado fue extraditado a Estados Unidos bajo cargos de narcotráfico.

No tenía trabajo y ni podía salir a buscar uno por el toque de queda. Casi 8 meses encerrado en mi apartamento. Ya pueden ver en qué maneras me ayudó todos esos años? Aunque me sentía desesperado por salir, aunque me sentía atrapado, todos esos años de tener resiliencia me ayudó a tener paciencia. Me enfoque en disfrutar la bendición de ser libre en el espacio que tenía. Cosas como poder comer lo que quería, ver en la televisión lo que yo quería, y aunque no podía salir, tomaba esos días que me tocaban salir para hacer mis compras en los supermercados como mis paseos y me sentía libre. Poco a poco aprendí a sobrevivir en Honduras.

La resiliencia me ayudó a mantenerme conectado con la comunidad que había dejado atrás. Es por esa comunidad la razón por la que puedo estar aquí con ustedes hoy. Trabajo felizmente por Free Minds, tratando de contribuir al mejoramiento de la comunidad desde Honduras. Hablando acerca de todos mis pasados, para que la gente que no sabe, nos entienda. Digo "nos", porque sé que no soy el único que pasó o pasará por estas dificultades. La resiliencia fue el regalo más grande que Dios me pudo dar. Así que siempre fuerte mi gente, cabeza arriba y nunca darse por vencido. Siempre recuerden que en la vida, todo es posible cuando nada es seguro!

Firstly, greetings to all my Free Minds family. I hope that as you read this, you find yourself in the best of health, strong, mentally and physically. It is always a privilege to be with you through this mode. For those who don't know me, my name is Carlos. After having spent 25 years in prison, I obtained my freedom through IRAA. I was deported to my home country, Honduras and have been enjoying my freedom for almost 4 years.

This is why I relate in so many ways to this month's theme, Resilience. Resilience is the process and result of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.

I can tell you any part of my life and you will see in how many ways I have overcome different difficulties, be it my childhood, my adolescence, my adult youth or my present state, freedom. Although I have to say that in my childhood, I did not have the maturity to know that the way I was trying to survive would lead to me losing my freedom and spending 25 years in prison. I was born in Honduras, a country of poverty that forced my parents and grandparents to take us with them to the United States. Upon arriving in a new country, my challenges were trying to be accepted. I can't say that I got through this phase successfully, because as I said, it led me to lose my freedom. Still, it was a difficult part of my life. I was sentenced to 30 years to life at the age of 19 and sent to prison. It was the moment that I was rudely awakened to reality. Lorton was the first prison where they sent me. Although anyone who has never been there has heard how hard it was to survive that prison. I was sent to different prisons in all those years, with no other option, I had to adapt and educate myself in many ways.

I survived all those years because of my resilience. My mental and emotional strength. I thank God for giving me resilience in those moments. And believe it or not, all those years prepared me for the most difficult moment of my life, my freedom! I know you're wondering, why is this the most difficult moment? I explain:

When the judge said I was a free man, I was faced with the reality of being deported to my home country. A country that I left at the age of 8. The only thing I knew was what everyone was talking about: Poverty, corruption and crime. I'm not going to lie to you, I thought that when I arrived I wouldn't survive on these streets. Sad that all of this was true. I arrived in Honduras in April 2020, in the middle of a pandemic that added even more difficulties. I had no choice but to be patient and resilient! Prison trained me to be patient with things that are not under my control. Everything was closed. I couldn't get my ID, I couldn't leave because the country was under a curfew and one could only leave on the designated day (it depended on the last number of the ID). When all the pandemic restrictions were lifted, I had to learn where to go and where not to, because as I told you, everything I had heard about this country was true. Just to tell you how much... two years after arriving in this country, the former President was extradited to the United States on drug trafficking charges.

I didn't have a job and couldn't even go out to look for one because of the curfew. Almost 8 months locked in my apartment. Can you see how all those years helped me? Even though I felt desperate to get out, even though I felt trapped, all those years of being resilient helped me to have patience. I focused on enjoying the blessing of being free in the space I had. Things like being able to eat what I wanted, watch what I wanted on television, and although I couldn't go out, I took those days when I had to go out to do my shopping in the supermarkets as my getaways and I felt free. Little by little I learned to survive in Honduras.

Resilience helped me stay connected to the community I had left behind. It is because of that community that I am able to be here with you today. I happily work for Free Minds, trying to contribute to the improvement of my community all the way from Honduras. Talking about everything about my past, so that people who don't know understand us. I say "us", because I know that I am not the only one who went through or will go through these difficulties. Resilience was the greatest gift God could have given me. So always be strong my people, heads up and never give up. Always remember that in life, everything is possible when nothing is certain!

# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

*The Free Minds long-distance book club*

## *Felon: Poems* by Reginald Dwayne Betts

with Neely



I want to give a big "Thank you!" to everyone who has so far shared their responses for our latest Books Across the Miles selection, *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. If you weren't able to send your reflections in time for this issue, we would still love to hear what you have to say! In the meantime, here are a few thoughts that some of you had to share:

**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?**

**FJ:** Yeah, as a young kid my father wasn't there as other kids' fathers were. But it wasn't a lot of fathers around growing up for kids around me. There were ghosts... We wanted a father around, but dealt with what we had, us kids and the wrong older people.

**DC:** Longing to me is to hope for something with the intent that it's beautiful, positive, or helpful. While wanting something is not something you need, it's a decision or choice. I experience the difference daily. I longed for a child and family of my own for years. Smiling and I want my freedom. Inshallah. So I make proper choices.

**DK:** Longing, to me, is a strong desire for something out of my current reach. (I long for my liberty outside of prison to physically be with my family.) That's an absolute necessity for me. Wanting, to me, is a desire for something that's not actually a need. (I want to have additional freedom in prison, but I don't require it.)

**CS:** The difference between the two; one has a much more intense feeling to one's soul. "Longing," basically you desire it.

**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?**

**DC:** I believe Betts used the ocean as a recurring theme for many reasons. With shipwrecks, I feel he was showing circumstance and Jonah and the Whale for perseverance. Then the corridors being as long as the Atlantic. I believe he's talking about the view from afar being neverending. I feel it's a metaphor, a form of art imaginary, but an actual feeling.

**CS:** I think that he used those two relations to each other because they have non-stopping paths, meaning the ocean has no limits, and prison has none as well because they kept building them. They're both limitless.

**DK:** For the reason that the ocean is constantly changing. You can have tranquil waters one minute and then high tides and rip currents afterward. The association to the ocean and prison to me is real. Things can be so peaceful, to complete turmoil, as it was during the last week of November at my facility; it was complete disorder with hunger strikes and an Interim Warden walking around threatening and cursing everybody at the top of his lungs at times, and this is a Low. It was simply surreal.

**FJ:** I think he used that because the ocean is full of a lot of things, good and bad. It's a long walk down them corridors of silence, and that includes the relationship part too. It's a real long walk by yourself.

**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?**

**CS:** By doing this, it gives the poem a strong platform because it catches the eye because we all know what it looks like, a legal document. By making it into a poem gives it more character.

**DK:** It's possible they could have been transformed by conveying even more detrimental circumstances than it already conveyed. I would have had to read the un-redacted part to give an accurate answer. I think he chose to include this type of poetry because expurgating parts and leaving others opens the eyes to different viewpoints. It's incredible how he could seek out the words to create the poems (expurgating a document to generate a poem). It's something I am going to attempt.

**FJ:** That shows you true life with no meaning gone and that shows the real racism the poor Black people go through in the government system.

**DC:** Basically to me, Betts used the redacted poetry to show that the system is made to hurt and not be understanding. He reversed the narrative by showing that if redacted his way, he can tell a story of how the justice system looks at people.

**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?**

**FJ:** Felon sticks with you because that's the first thing that shows up when somebody pulls your record. It's a long term life of no! My word would be Loyalty!

**DC:** He might have kept persisting with the label felon because once you become one, society identifies you as that and not who you actually are. My one word would be "Loyalty."

**CS:** Betts chose that title to give the readers an inside scoop of ex-felon's minds on how visioned they can be with their words. My word would be "Relentless."

**DK:** Because each poem appears to deal with a 'felony action' in some sorts. "Broken" due to the nature of most of my poetries.

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

**CS:** The poem that stood out to me most was "Going Back After Mim." He takes us through all the struggles at points in our lives that we have went to or through things that we have experienced, felt, saw, or done. It's like seeing yourself through those words.

**DK:** "Temptation of the Rope" as I have had more than a few friends of whom were gay and they terminated their lives. They were open about their sexuality and others tormented them.

**FJ:** All of them stick out to me because that's what's still going on to this day. We don't need to see color, we are humans, equal.

**DC:** My attention got captured by "For a Bail Denied" because it made me reflect on being a teenager in that same type of situation.

**KM:** My favorite poem was "Blood History" in which he illustrated and expressed such a profound insight on how the effects of an absent father could play a central role on the development of a child. A deeply embedded psychological response. It resonated with me not just at the personal level, but also because it's an area that I mentor young men, as well as older, on frequently here at the facility. The poem was written as saying, "If you have no father, you can't hear straight." I believe he is talking about hearing with your heart, not just with your ears, which brings a deeper form of understanding, and applying to one's life. Notice the letters "e-a-r" (ear) are in hear and heart. Not a coincidence. It's very spiritual, they all have an intricate connection to each other, and can only be activated and healthy through the relationship with the father that initially sets one up to interpret correctly.

## CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ CD's poem was accepted for publication in the Mend literary magazine
- ★ DJ got his flagger certification
- ★ JUH completed his carpentry course and was selected for the Peer Recovery Coach Program (a training program in Maryland facilities)
- ★ TC got off parole
- ★ TG's article was published in Prison Health News
- ★ TM passed his learner's permit test

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!



## AROUND THE WORLD: DUBLIN AND AMSTERDAM *By Aneka*

Don't worry, you're not seeing double! It's Aneka here again, back from another adventure from Around The World! This time around, I visited Dublin, Ireland and Amsterdam, Netherlands and let me tell you, this trip left me SPEECHLESS. I don't even know where to start! Do I start with the joys of being mystified by the illusions in the Upside Down Museum in Amsterdam? Or, do I start with the tale of how I narrowly escaped the destruction of the riots in Dublin? Either way buckle up FM fam, this European adventure is going to blow your mind!

During my visit to Dublin in June, I made a new friend and promised to visit them again soon. Now I'm not one to break a promise, so I hopped on a flight back to Dublin in November just in time for the holidays. This trip started off pretty normal. My friend and I hung out at my hostel and I visited EPIC: The Irish Emigration Museum. The museum was so cool! It was filled with so much history that I never knew. Did you know that from 1841 to World War II, some estimates conclude that 4.5 million Irish came to the United States? What's even more interesting is that the famous and multi-talented Rihanna is of Irish descent thanks to her father Ronald Fenty who is an Irish descendent.

After spending a couple of days in Dublin, my friend and I hopped on our Ryanair flight to Amsterdam. This time around we stayed in a hotel by the water instead of a hostel in the city center. After settling in, my friend told me that we were going to get on swings before



EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum gives you a passport to collect stamps in each exhibit.

heading to the quirky Upside Down Museum. To my surprise, the swings turned out to be the HIGHEST swings in all of Europe! I was not only shocked but terrified while looking up at the swings from the ground below. Despite my fear, I gathered up the little courage I had deep down and rode the elevator up 21 floors to the observation deck where the swings were located. The swings overlooked the city and I was even able to spot the Centraal Station with AMSTERDAM painted across the roof. After riding the swings, we made our way to Centraal Station to take the train to the Upside Down Museum across the city.



A'DAM LOOKOUT is an observation deck with a panoramic view of Amsterdam and Europe's highest swing!



The Upside Down Museum in Amsterdam

The Upside Down Museum was so much fun! There were a total of 25 rooms filled with different illusions to make you appear upside down in your photos. My favorite room had to be the ball pit room. This room was a giant swimming pool filled with small white balls, colorful floaties, and even had a poolside stage with a microphone surrounded by colorful neon lights. The room I felt the most creative in would have to be the Barbie closet themed room. The closet was Barbie pink and had so many clothes, shoes, and accessories to play dress up with. I even made a funny video of myself coming in and out of the dressing

room with different hats on each time. I would rate this museum a 10/10. The Upside Down Museum is definitely a museum that I would visit over and over again.

Before heading back to Dublin, I made sure to walk around and enjoy the scenic homes lining the canals. I always feel like I'm in a fairytale when I walk the streets of Amsterdam, especially now that the streets are lined with Christmas lights and decorations. I often dream of living in Amsterdam and can picture myself starting my day with casual walks around the city. Once we got back to Dublin, it was pretty late so I called it a night and went to sleep after I settled in my hostel. The next day I had planned to visit Galway, a city 2 hours west of Dublin in the countryside, but I changed my mind at the last minute and stayed in Dublin instead.

The next day started off pretty normal. I got up and spent the day working on my homework (I'm taking college classes) in the hostel's bar area. For dinner, my friend suggested that I try a Dublin "spice bag." They said, "You can't visit Dublin without trying a spice bag." A spice bag (or spicebag, spicy bag, spice box or spicy box) is a fast food dish, popular in most of Ireland and inspired by Chinese cuisine. The dish is most commonly sold in Chinese takeaways in Ireland. Typically, a spice bag consists of deep-fried salt and chili chips (fries), salt and chili chicken (usually shredded, occasionally balls/wings), red and green peppers, sliced chili peppers, fried onions, and a variety of spices. We went to a popular location minutes from my hostel in Dublin's city center. Imagine my surprise when a riot broke out in Dublin, minutes from where we were eating! We immediately made our way back to my hostel and luckily we left when we did. The riot spread throughout the city and ended up right in front of the restaurant we were having dinner at! Never in a million years would I expect to be in the center of a riot in a country 3,379 miles from home.

Needless to say, this trip takes the cake for being the most memorable trip I've taken so far in my life! From riding the highest swing in Europe to narrowly escaping a riot in Dublin, I don't know what will be able to top that. All I do know is that I will continue to travel and explore the world while enjoying every adventure that awaits me. I can't wait to update you all on my next experience from Around The World!

Until next time, take care.

# FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

1816 12th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20009

---

## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: DREAMS

*By Julia*

---

I've heard a saying that in order to build a new future, first we have to imagine it. I think another way to think about it, is that *dreaming* something new, something different, something bold is a powerful step towards turning that dream into a reality. So for the next issue, we want to focus on all your boldest, bravest dreams for yourself, for your future, for your community or for the world. Dream big! These can be literal dreams that came to you in your sleep, or ideas, possibilities, and hopes that you've dreamed up with your waking mind. Write a poem or tell us a story transporting us to a new world, or a new life in the future. Have any of your dreams ever come true, or are you taking steps right now to make that happen? Tell us about it!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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