

June/July 2024
Vol. 13, Issue 3

Free minds Connect



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Ancestors

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AT THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM**

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Greetings Free Minds Family,

As I write to you, I'm feeling the strong spirit of all the ancestors with a loud message of immense pride in you and this issue. I hope you will feel the same as you let the many articles, poems, and essays bring you emotional strength and a deeper connection to your own self and your ancestors!

I was at a graduation recently for a youth summer program and the main speaker used the expression, "I am standing on the shoulders of giants." I've heard this many times and always liked it, but never really looked into its origin and meaning. I did some digging and it's been around a long time, with the most cited source being from Sir Isaac Newton, the scientist credited with formulating the laws of gravity in the year 1675. A popular interpretation of the phrase is "discovering truth by building on previous discoveries," and I think honoring the work of those who came before you.

I believe we all have a strong thread running through us that connects us to those who came before and those who will come after us, even if we don't know exactly who they are or were. Grace shares the spiritual gifts our ancestors who came before handed down to us on page 13. On page 17, Maji creates the Super Dad he wants to be – an energy and legacy that I believe will be passed down for generations.

A really exciting initiative called the 10 Million Names Project is working to recover the names of the estimated 10 million enslaved African Americans from the time period 1500 to 1865. In the US, researching the ancestry of descendants of enslaved individuals is extremely challenging due to the systemic suppression and intentional erasure of enslaved people during the slave trade and beyond. In the context of the carceral system, where a person's name is associated with an ID number, this project seems especially meaningful to honor, recognize, and celebrate each ancestor's individual identity. On page 34, Dalton introduces us to a free family history project housed right here in DC at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. These projects will hopefully help more people connect with their ancestry and legacy. Despite the challenges, DNA testing services and more researchers working on increased access to information are signs of progress.

These kinship networks spanning generations and geographies are vital to maintaining a sense of connection. On page 6, Michele shares her experience being incarcerated as both a mother and a daughter in an interview with Jae-lynn, and how much these connections meant to her. As her mother stepped in to help raise her children in her absence, Michele says, "All of my family stood up immediately when I was not able to come back and be with my kids...you can't put a price on that."

Check out Rebecca's illuminating piece on page 28 with useful tips for crafting a written narrative about your own family (or chosen family) history that I know you will treasure and can pass down. My uncle once put together a history of my grandfather's family, and I find myself drawn to it over and over.

Ana's article shines a light on another type of documentation: oral poetry by displaced Somali bards, who recite poems passed down through time as a strategy for resilience and perseverance in the face of hardships. Somali oral poets have been forced to leave the country in recent years amid civil war and climate catastrophe, and they have brought with them a tradition dating back centuries of reciting poetry aloud and in community. These poetic traditions act as vibrant sources of healing and connection (page 38).

Sofia brings our focus from Somalia to Puerto Rico in her "Around the World" feature (page 41), where she describes her recent trip to the island. From enjoying local cuisine and beaches to exploring the wares of street vendors at an arts festival, Sofia takes us on a journey packed with equal parts learning and relaxation.

As always, this issue features a dynamic collection of writing by our members and friends, all of whom grapple with big questions of ancestry, connection, and groundedness in family. We've reprinted FM healer Edward's column on grief and loss as the journey connecting with our biological and chosen family ancestors can be painful and bring up sharp memories (page 35). This poem "The Voice of My Ancestors," by member RS, brings so much comfort and hope (page 11). As he says, "we are always with you in spades."

You were special from birth
Someone created from earth
As ashes to ashes, from dust to dust
To infinity and beyond, utopia or bust
When in doubt, never worry or be afraid
We are always with you in spades

May the resilience and love of all of the ancestors wrap you in comfort and deeper awareness of yourself and others.

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: Liberation

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



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

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

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FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Sofia

Free Minds Partners with Local Non-Profit Theater Alliance

On June 6, local non-profit Theater Alliance invited Free Minds staff and members to attend their performance of the play "Poetry for the People: The June Jordan Experience." The Theater Alliance held performances of the play throughout the month of June all across different venues in DC. The production used Jordan's own words to bring to life the story of the late poet, musician, playwright, essayist, and social justice activist. Several of the performances also featured post show interactive experiences in collaboration with various DC community groups, including Free Minds. After the June 6 performance, Free Minds Poet Ambassadors shared their own poetry with the audience. The audience then left feedback on poetry written by our members who are still incarcerated. It was a great opportunity to collaborate with another local arts organization and to make connections across freedom movements past and present!

Free Minds Visits FCI Hazelton for Job Fair

Free Minds staff was recently invited to attend a job fair at FCI Hazelton in West Virginia, where we had the opportunity to provide resume and job interview assistance at the medium security men's facility and the women's facility. As a part of the facilities' annual job fair, Free Minds staff assisted men and women incarcerated at those facilities with preparing their resumes, getting ready for job interviews, and conducting mock interviews. It was great meeting with the men and women at each of these facilities and helping them prepare for reentry. We were so impressed with how prepared everyone was, and we know that they are on the road to reentry success! We are deeply grateful to all of the participants for their time and energy.

Free Minds Members Complete Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship

12 Free Minds members who recently returned home took part in a three day apprenticeship offered by the Free Minds reentry team. The apprenticeship offers experiential learning through real-time role plays, with apprentices acquiring essential skills to ace interviews and get those job offers. Apprentices practice interview skills including how to answer the always challenging question of, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" The first day of the apprenticeship took place at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library (the headquarters of the DC public library system) where members took a tour of the library and learned about how to access all of the resources offered there, including computer classes. Members also heard from fellow reentry member Colie, who came home in 2022 and gave some great advice on how to keep one's composure despite obstacles that come your way, be it with family or friends, as well as advice on relationships after incarceration.

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, Roy, Anthony W., Anthony P., David J.

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 January/February/March 2024 Connect Dreams and April/May 2024 Connect Me, Myself, and I.

AW: *Washington Black* is a great read although I'm only on page 69. It's hard to put down.

AHA: I have read most of our latest *Connect* on Dreams and enjoy it a lot. You always get to hear others' views on the theme... After reading Jamilah's piece on her trip to Dubai, my dream is to visit there someday. DA's piece is above mine in the Dream *Connect* so I hope to get the same feeling in my court case... Julia's piece inspired me a lot to not give up on your dream of being a writer.

DP: *Washington Black* stood out to me. It has me constantly reflecting on treating the people around me better. The book was good because it showed a story of two people from different walks in life being able to connect and become true friends. When Wash and Christopher realize Wash's life is in danger, they flee together instead of parting ways. This stood out to me because Christopher could've just left Wash to his fate and continued to live his great life. People these days will quickly abandon you at the sign of trouble so to read this story of togetherness was refreshing.

KQ: I have a few guys in my unit that's members also and we discussed the books you all sent and converse about the pics of the city y'all send in the *Connect*.

AC: I was kind of surprised by seeing one of my poems in the latest *Connect*. Taking into consideration the fact that I wrote that poem a while ago, it leads me to believe that someone was reading through my poems and thought my poem worthy of being featured on the *Connect*. Thank you for reading my poems, thank you for keeping me in mind.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

I was born by myself but carry the spirit and blood of my father, mother, and my ancestors. So I am really never alone. My identity is through that line.



Ziggy Marley

– Ziggy Marley, Jamaican Musician

Learning from the experiences of our ancestors, let us together create knowledge for all that benefits all.

– Kailash Satyarthi, Indian Activist

I am not my self, I am the result of all my ancestors. – Santiago Martínez Delgado, Colombian Painter and Sculptor

We all carry inside us, people who came before us. – Liam Callanan, America Author and Professor

If you look deeply in the palm of your hand, you will see your parents and all generations of your ancestors. All of them are alive in this moment. Each is present in your body. You are the continuation of each of these people.

– Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist Monk, Activist, and Author (*You Are Here*)

The more you know your history the more liberated you are.

– Maya Angelou, American Memoirist and Poet

We honor our ancestors by thriving.

– Dallas Goldtooth, Native American Activist and Performing Artist

FAMILY TIES: MICHELE AND VIVIAN'S STORY: STRENGTH AND CONNECTION

Interview by Jae-lynn

When Michele was incarcerated in 2001, her three children were 13, one, and six months old. At first, fighting her case consumed much of her energy. When she realized she wasn't coming home soon, it hit her that she would not see her children for five years. But Michele was aware of the strong family network supporting her on the outside, and that allowed her to focus on the fight from the inside.

Vivian, Michele's mom, was an integral part of this backbone of support. She took care of Michele's three children as her own, making sure that the kids never missed a visit to their mother and that their relationship remained strong. Michele and Vivian highlight how the dedication of motherhood and grandmotherhood emerged across prison walls.

Michele: I had a mom that was there for me my whole life so I had a family structure. All of my family stood up immediately when I was not able to come back and be with my kids. So I knew my children were in a safe place. You can't put a price on that.

Vivian: We had the children with us every weekend when we went to visit their mother and father in prison. We told the children that they were in college except for the oldest one. She knew. But the two babies, we said, we visit because they're in college. We went first to Michele, and then the following visit we went to see their dad who was also incarcerated far away. Life teaches you that you're not always in control. It has blessings, experiences, heartbreak, pain, and it also has love and beauty.

Michele: I'm blessed with a family. My mom never missed a visit with the kids. My mother nurtured them like she was their mom, but they knew who their mother was. As far as my 13 year old goes, she had her grandmother. She was poured into with so much love. She had her godmothers, she had her aunts, and she was hurt because, of course, her mom was gone. But my mom did a good job in not letting my kids feel neglected, unwanted, or missing anything.

Vivian: We went to church, we did everything as a unit. We ate together, we prayed together, we did everything together. I even took a job in their school so I could be with them.

To Michele, being inside did not terminate her duties as a mother. Connection was incredibly important for her in maintaining a relationship and a role in her children's lives, especially her oldest daughter.

Michele: For my oldest, I wrote her a letter every other night. So she could feel the connection, the parenting. She would know, 'Okay, I have a mom.' Because the streets can swallow you up, but she knows in that mailbox there's a letter. She knows that she has to sit down in her room and write a letter back. She knows that I want to know about her grades. I want to know about everything. That connection is big, because if you act like you can't speak to your children or be a part of their life, it leaves a void for them. It's all about relating, understanding, expressing, and communicating.

Being a woman in prison is already incredibly isolating. Adding motherhood on top of that can be particularly stigmatizing. Michele and Vivian knew that and teamed up to support other women and

mothers experiencing loneliness and lack of community.

Michele: I would tell ladies, just don't vanish. Women are the most forgotten, because it's a taboo inside. Then they get vices. They get addictions to hide the pain. I just advise a lot of women to accept the situation and stop making it taboo.

Vivian: It's more than just coming to see incarcerated women. It's a whole community that you have to put together. Once you drop that ball, it's dropped. You have to wake up the next morning and it's a new life. And you have to make sure each baby is fed. And you have to make sure everything is covered so there's no gaps.

Michele: I worked on a suicide watch unit in prison. I've watched a lot of my friends and women try to [harm themselves]. I would sit up there and try to help and talk to them. There's just a lot of sad stories, women facing a ton of time, and women not knowing how they're even going to cope. Their family won't pick up the phone. Their family won't write back. That's why I say it's a taboo for women. The women's visiting hall is empty. The men's visiting hall is packed. So again, I am blessed to have the family members that I have that made sure they came to see me far and near. I just know so many women that did it by themselves. That's enough to drive women crazy. So, I felt very compelled to work on suicide watch to help.

My mom helped because I would always call her or write her and say, "Mom, send this package to this girl's kids." Or, "Send this package to their mom." So she's always sending something to somebody, because I felt like it was a need, like a woman crying because her child doesn't have a book bag. I would call home or ask one of my sisters or somebody, "Keep calling this number to help my friend out." Remember I told you from the beginning. Connecting.

Michele and Vivian draw us back to the theme of ancestors in regards to mother-daughter relationships and what we can learn from their story and ancestors in general.

Michele: The chaos in my household, we felt it but at the same time we didn't, and it is the sense and the strength of our ancestors that pulls it through. My grandmother was very strong. My grandfather was very strong. My aunts and uncles were very strong. The sense of strength means that you will pull through. So having to know who you are and knowing where you come from is a joy for me. A lot of people are ashamed. I come from the hood. Okay? I come from Brooklyn, New York. The strength to persevere and pull through always gleams through our family. We are all college educated with degrees, high-ranking jobs, and I think the reason for that is because of our strength, and I think that's because we know who we are.

Vivian: I'll just close with this. In our journey through life we will come across many stumbling blocks, misfortune, heartache, and pain. Through it all, keep your faith, hope, love, and pray. I believe God will make all things possible on purpose, with purpose. Those same stumbling blocks become achievements, goals, satisfaction, self-worth, and beauty. New beginnings arrive and you are alive.



JUST LAW: INCARCERATION REDUCTION AMENDMENT ACT *By Prince*

The Second Look Amendment Act is an amendment to the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) of 2016, approved by the D.C Council on December 15, 2020. The act allows for people who were under 25 years old at the time of the offense to have a chance at resentencing. According to neuroscience, the brain does not fully develop until a person is in their mid-to-late twenties. The Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act legislation recognizes this, and provides eligible individuals with an opportunity to petition the court for resentencing if they have served at least 15 years of their sentence. Note that this legislation applies only to people sentenced in DC Superior Court.

Importantly, an individual who intends to file an IRRA motion must:

1. Avoid disciplinary incidents.
2. Partake in programming and academic education opportunities, if available in their institution.
3. Work and, if possible, volunteer.

Factors that the court must consider when an applicant files this motion includes:

1. The history and characteristics of the applicant.
2. Impact of the offense on the victim and the community.
3. The applicant's rehabilitation and growth while incarcerated.
4. The interest of justice.
5. Applicant's remorse and maturity.

6. Applicants must have been imprisoned for 15 years or more.

NOTE: "Nature of the offense" as a factor from the original legislation has been replaced with "history and characteristics of the defendant".

It is worthy to note that IRRA does not guarantee release. An IRRA release is discretionary in nature, meaning it is at the discretion of the court. The applicant files the motion, the prosecutor responds and the court holds a hearing where the judge decides on the merit of the motion. If denied, the applicant can file another motion after a 3 year waiting period and the applicant has 3 chances in total to file an IRRA motion. Attorneys and their teams often need an average of 6 months or longer to prepare an IRRA motion. As a result, the entire process of an IRRA case typically takes more than one year; some cases taking as much as over 2 years.

Individuals who qualify for a second chance under IRRA can write to any of the following, asking for pro bono representation with regards to their IRRA application.

1. The Special Litigation Division of the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia.
2. The Second Look Project.
3. The Justice Policy Institute.

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

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: ANCESTORS

My Grandmother By AC

I would say the relationship that has influenced me most in life was the one I had with my mother's mom, my grandmother. I don't know either if I could call what I learned "lessons" more than I could call them examples to follow. My grandmother taught me to keep my head up high; she taught me to have conviction to see things all the way through; she told me that bad things don't last forever, then taught me how to be optimistic, maybe not for right now, but for the future things yet to come; she taught me to keep love in my heart even when we think there is no room in our heart for such thing; she taught me to be fearless, not the reckless way in which I acted that led me to prison, but fearless in the sense that with time, everything will be alright.

Of course, there are many more things I learned from my grandmother including my love for literature and education, my respect for strong women, my love for God, etc., but the good thing about me learning from the example she set for me is that as long as her memory remains in my mind, I'll continue to learn.

Amir's Ancestral Curse By DMB

Amir has been blessed with all the tools needed to succeed in life. He is strong, very handsome, and intelligent. He is a teacher, yet he has trouble obtaining enough money to support himself and his family. Amir was told by his dad that his paternal, or father's side of the family, has a curse on them that causes them to be in financial ruins. Unable to manage their money, when Amir gets a job, his paycheck is usually just distributed to others pockets because of gambling debts. So, Amir decides to end this curse by doing the illegal things for money which causes the curse to get worse.

The curse preys on him mismanaging his money. Amir's dad

told him that this curse came from his grandfather, who did not want anything out of life, just to be a couch potato. His grandfather eventually died from poor health. Amir's dad was hoping that the curse would die with him, but it seems like it gets more vigilant. His dad warns him to use his God given tools to survive. This causes Amir to fight against this by getting involved in academics, attending school to get certifications that will enhance his financial goals, putting him in a good place to succeed and gain financial freedom. Amir decided to take control of this curse so his sons will not be affected by this curse. Removing the curse by fighting against it, he recognizes that he must do something about it.

CONNECT ON CORRLINKS *By Aneka*

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. New email requests are responded to once a week. **This email correspondence will be solely for the purpose of exchanging *Connect* related information. We will not respond to emails that are not *Connect* related. All personal correspondence will continue to be through mail.**

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*If you're not already a member, below is a checklist for our eligibility criteria.

- I am a youth charged as an adult from DC and/or an incarcerated young adult from DC, currently between the ages of 18-24
- I am eligible for D.C.'s Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act or Second Look Amendment Act (also known as IRAA 3.0) which allows D.C residents who were under 25 at the time of the offense to petition the court for resentencing after serving 15 years or more. As a DC law, this only applies to individuals sentenced in DC Superior Court.

Do you fit into one of these categories? If you do, please write us back and let us know so that we can send you the form needed to join the Book Club. Our address is 1816 12th Street NW, Washington, DC 20009.



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!

Note: This column contains imagery describing grief and suicidal ideation.

Dear Advice Man,

First, thank you for creating a space in this column where vulnerability is deemed strength. And for your words acting as a safety net to cushion our fall after stepping out on faith.

I went into my April 4th Second Look Act (IRAA) hearing with all indications pointing towards being released, to later on that night in the shower—in a state of shock—where I saw a vision of myself hanging from a noose. Emotionally, my beloved grandmother's death just days earlier was like a double barrel shotgun blast to the chest. And, now, not going home was the barrel placed in my mouth to finish me off. This prompted me to seriously question what my life was worth, and how to derive "purpose" in my life while confined.

And that's when you came to mind, Advice Man, in the form of a Nelson Mandela quote: "In my country first we go to prison, then we get out to become president." To me, this meant not to deem our time in prison insignificant to shaping our destiny.

With that in mind, Advice Man, I view you as a "guide post" in so many FM members' lives. Your guidance & wisdom being the catalyst that rescues, heals, and transforms and is a great contribution to us, our families, and the communities to which we return. I so dearly want that for my life! In your reply, would you be so kind as to show us the way forward, and detail what has worked for you at times when you have been disappointed and had to adjust your expectations?

Sincerely,
MAR

Greetings to all the good Men & Women! My name is Antoine and I am the current Congressman John Lewis Fellow here at Free Minds. Our Advice Man is still in transit! It is an honor to fill in for him and hopefully provide all of you with the knowledge and guidance I so appreciated and needed while serving a life sentence myself.

Let me first say thank you for the kind words and encouragement you've sent out here. Understanding the struggle first-hand, I truly feel honored to assist my brothers and sisters in every way I can. Losing loved ones while incarcerated is indescribably tough to deal with. A very real and helpless feeling that triggers the darkest emotions within us... See, outside of what people think about us, we are people. Yes, we may have perpetrated crimes, still many of us are victims of crime ourselves. We love hard. We hurt even harder. And with few outlets, unfortunately hurt people do hurt people...

I was 21 years old when I was sentenced to life and sent all the way to Texas. At that time my mom was still consumed with addiction. My father (who hadn't been around most of my life) had overcome his addictions and was doing well. He was the only one I could really depend on after getting sentenced. I was six years into a life sentence when my father died. It was as if I'd been hit with a shot of Novacaine. I felt so numb. My grandmother was still around during that time but in limited capacity because of her age and health. She'd actually been the one that gave me the news about my father. For the most part, when he passed, I was officially on my own. I wasn't bitter about the other people who weren't there for me because,

well, one had never really been there. So I thought of ways to better take care of myself. In the years that followed my father's passing, and my mother's endless fight with addiction, I persevered and toughened myself for the realities I faced everyday as a young man scheduled to die in prison. All around me, I watched the results and the effects of endless hardships, confinement, misery, unhealthy food, inhumane conditions, ill treatment, isolation, untreated trauma, institutionalization... Once strong men, many spirits were broken by our helpless circumstances. And as smart and strong as I'm told I am, I was no exception to the heartless walls of the many prison cells I was locked in. In almost 22 years, I didn't see a single visit. I've had more dark days than I can count! Overwhelmed with sadness, many times, I was ready to throw it all in. I was going to die in prison anyhow, so why should I care? Then again, giving up, for me, meant I'd lose. So maybe it was profound pride that I refused to be reduced to what 'they' had planned for us all. So I consciously fought back, strengthening myself for harsh prison life and the variety of crippling blows that were sure to come. To fight old age and the inevitable decline in physical abilities I worked out, with emphasis on balance and posture, which I would need in later years (if I was fortunate). To overcome being reclusive, I walked every chance I got. I read so my mind wouldn't become complacent. I wrote to express feelings and thoughts. To curtail conflict, I had to learn to communicate better on my end. Overall, I knew I had to be as strong as possible for those excruciating years ahead.

I was in a SMU program when I read a very powerful book, Man's Search for Meaning by Dr. Viktor Frankl, where he described his experience as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp in the 1940s. I was in Big Sandy at the time and his circumstances made my own sound not so bad. Most extraordinary was him facing the fact he would likely die there, but never releasing the hope that someone out there needed him to be as strong as ever. In this case it was his wife. Just the thought of seeing her again had been enough to get him up in the morning and face his impossible circumstances with optimism. That encouraged me to find a purpose, which for me has been my daughter. Every time I got stuck in the jam, I thought of her. Every time I thought about acting out, I thought of her. Every time I thought about how much she still may need me, I held on a little longer.

Before I knew it, the IRRA law passed. And I was in a good position to get it. But also during this time, my mom was really losing her battle with drugs. I can vividly remember our last conversation as I was just beginning to start filing my IRRA motion. I pleaded for her to just hold on as I could hear in her voice that she was ready to go. Less than a year before I was released, my mom died. It crushed me. Even to this day, it is a hurt too deep to explain. One of the hardest things to do is mourn while in prison. The hardest thing not to do is act out how internally devastated you truly are. I'd done as much as I could to strengthen myself, but it still hurt beyond words. My anger burned like lava in me. Fortunately, in this time of extreme turmoil, I was very much aware of the heightened intensity of my emotions and me being susceptible to making a terrible decision out of hurt. Instead of allowing it to consume me, I had to embrace the opportunity to control myself, my inner demons, my traumas, and keep pushing, not only for myself, but for the other people who I was still a 'rock' for. I still hurt deeply for my mom. I literally felt like I was in a race home to my grandmother, who would pass only a few months after I was released and while I was still healing from my mom's passing. It is hard. And so are we. Just like rocks. Exactly what we have to be for the next one who needs someone to lean on. So when you ask what is my 'purpose'... It's YOU! That's enough to keep me going!

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Untitled by AC

And I go on sometimes,
with a smile shining the road where I walk,
shining with a light reminiscent of those days
with two suns crashing into one another over pacific
waters,
among clouds of purple and gold.

Yet my heart can't always get past the fact,
that the further and longer I'm kept
from that place in my mind I used to call home,
the darker the light in the blue skies up above,
the colder the warmth that I get from our sun.

But I was brought and raised in a world
that forges our spirit to be nothing but strong.
A world that attempts to silence and drown our goals
and our dreams
amidst the relentless gunfire and the heartbreaking
screams;
yet these attempts only fueled the masses
to be ready for when living at all gets hard and
gets mean.

From pain we learned love, patience, and hope.
We learned that GOD truly does come above all,
that family are the people we should hold on to
the most,
that some days are simple and easy,
but others are merciless, relentless and tough.

We need to keep on moving ahead
with our smiles shining the road we walk on
like that sun over the ocean,
among clouds painted with purple and gold.

Ancestors By RD

If my ancestors only knew
I'd end up in these foreign Lands
They'd never allow ships
to lie anchors in their sands
Now that my destiny is tied
to my own hands
I know for certain
That wasn't God's plan
So, when will we make it out?
Man, Oh Man

The Matriarch by RM

Her smile is the pearly gates
Her moral character is the epitome of faith.
She passed down to me
Every developmental key I need.
If I obey, not stray, but follow
Obediently, I would succeed.

Her keys would sustain me and
Never leave me.
Forgiveness. Morality. Mentality.
God's Love. Charity. United.
Humanity.

These keys are fastened inside of me
Through the first melodies of my
Mother's voice. Encouragements.
Guidance. Laughter.
Source of spiritual relief.

My mother is the living example.
She set inside of herself to teach
and outreach to all of our families...
"The Matriarch" Our Motherland.

Ancestry by JS

Self pride is the key to unlock the greatness inside.
I came from you, you're forever a part of me,
when it's all said and done,
we keep on living,
from the next one of you or me,
they tried to dictate our fate,
but we were too great,
from kings to slaves,
then back to kings,
we have to be mentioned when they speak on the greats,
Michael Jordan and LeBron James,
Jim Brown and Ernie Davis,
Venus and Serena Williams,
Tiger Woods,
Floyd Mayweather and Muhammad Ali,
Barack Obama came through to prove we can be anything.
more than entertaining,
more than public servants,
more than athletes,
through our ancestry, all throughout history,
we are shining stars,
our blood is more than just elite,
it radiates with the essence of a touch from divinity.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

The Voice of My Ancestors

By RS

You were special from birth
Someone created from earth
As ashes to ashes, from dust to dust
To infinity and beyond, utopia or bust
When in doubt, never worry or be afraid
We are always with you in spades
Life can be tough, a lot to learn
Keep going forward
What you advance, you earn
You have the blood of nobility
Honor and praise go with your name
To be well-known and achieve great fame
Never forget where you from
How you got from here to there
You always pull thru
And no matter "que pasa"
"Nunca te olvide para mejorar la raza"

Ancestors

by BG

Thank you for paving the way
for a young guy like me to breathe today.
Because of you, by the grace of God, I am here.
A suffering servant,
ain't no glory in my story.
Still, I flow
like a river streaming by,
a productive tree, bearing fruit as a branch in your tree.
The proof is in the pudding for all to see.
Let my light shine with morals and principles.
Standing ten toes down
in honor of my ancestors.
My generation was expected to die off,
instead we multiplied, having dominion
while replenishing the earth
as it is in heaven,
reaching our descendants
teaching them
as we learned from our ancestors

Ancestors

By AEC

Filled with the blood of my ancestors I push forward
with no fear...
blessed with a resilience passed down... the
impossible persevered
hearts as heavy as the impacts made against all odds
1000 generations worth of scars, I take pride in my suffering
all diamonds were first coal—I'm the greatest
grandson of King – whose gift couldn't be controlled—
more royal than anything –
Ancestors who bled out our future while their past
threatened the present –
reduce the Queens to peasants – but royalty's in her DNA
Again she will rise, filled with the blood of her Ancestors

My Father

by MC

Elbert
Christ-loving
Generous
Compassionate
Reliable

Son of Elby & Ann

Lover of God
Family
Records
Wrestling

Who feels excited about going to Heaven
Happy with his life
Eager to see his sons again

Who needs a new bed
A writing desk
A record player

Who gives his time
His money
His love
His prayers

Who fears heights
Bees
Snakes

Who would like to see his sons free from prison
Haunted places in Chicago
The town of Cundiff, Kentucky
Mount Elbert in Colorado

Resident of Cloverport, Kentucky

REENTRY PROFILE

By Dalton

For this reentry profile, I had the opportunity to speak with Free Minds member Keonte. Despite being one of our younger members at only 21 years old, Keonte has done a lot of thinking about big questions, from his personal values and life goals to the sort of legacy he wants to leave behind for generations to come. Our conversation reveals the importance of groundedness and perspective, and demonstrates the outsize positive impact this young man is already making, and will no doubt continue to make, on those around him.

Dalton: So, Keonte, tell us a bit about yourself. Where are you from? Where do you call home?

Keonte: At first I was going to say DC, but I was raised down in Maryland, in Prince George's and Charles Counties. But DC is always going to be home for me.

Dalton: Can you share a bit about what you're up to these days?

Keonte: Man, pretty much a little bit of everything. I'm working on starting a new organization called We Are the Streets Foundation to promote community activism. But what's on my mind right now is writing a memoir. I want to take what I've experienced and put it on the page, and share it with people. So that's what's on my mind a lot.

Dalton: Speaking of your story, the theme for this Connect is Ancestors, and I'm wondering about what you think about ancestors, family and home. Do you feel a strong connection to these things, in terms of where you're at now and where you're going in the future?

Keonte: That's a good question. One day when I was incarcerated in DC jail, I was reading this book called *African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*. I was reading it, and I was learning a whole lot of things about African American history, and I was really perplexed, so I did some more research. I was learning things about life in Africa and about the cultures and traditions that I had never known before, and I really grew a new open mind to the topic. I read about the Civil Rights Movement and all the great idols associated with those times, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Maya Angelou. The list goes on and on, but that's when I really learned about what these people went through and the struggles for us just to have simple rights that are very much so overlooked nowadays. I resonated with it, and I internalized these people's lessons, and I vowed to continue on their legacy. So, to answer your question, when I think about the people that came before me, even my immediate family, it's like I'm not doing this for me. I'm doing this for them. I'm doing this for my life purpose, yes, but ultimately, for all people in America and the world facing struggles.

Dalton: That's really powerful. What would you say is your

biggest goal in life, and what sort of legacy would you want to leave behind for future generations?

Keonte: I want to be a role model for people. Living in contemporary society, it's not easy to live even a halfway decent life with so many negative influences. I want to leave a legacy that said I carried on the torch and I left it to someone else or to others that were going to carry it on and make things even better for their descendants. I want to instill that same mentality, that things can be a struggle, and we can maybe make some people angry, but that it's all for justice, for moving forward.

Dalton: That reminds me a lot of what Congressman John Lewis said about "good trouble," right? That's a great legacy.

Keonte: Yeah, you want to talk about a role model, an idol, he's the epitome of that. Like he said, it's okay to get into certain trouble, certain conflicts for the right reason, and to know that you're not alone doing that.¹

Dalton: I love that. Now, one final question: what in your life is your proudest accomplishment? We've talked about how you want to be remembered in the future, but what about right now?

Keonte: I think my greatest intrinsic achievement is that I found myself. I found out who I really am, and I grew to love myself. I used to think everyone has to look at me like I'm this cool person. Everyone has to like me. But now, I don't really care about it at all; I live for me, genuinely. So that's my biggest achievement, just finding out who I am and living in that space. And I think this shows up in my other achievements. I did a couple semesters with Georgetown when I was incarcerated with a 4.0, got my GED as valedictorian, passed all my tests on the first try. And I think that's all correlated with my greatest achievement, because I wouldn't have done any of those things had I not really made that paradigm shift.

Dalton: That's all really incredible, and I think really shows your commitment both to yourself and to bettering the world around you. Is there any final message you'd like to leave Connect readers with?

Keonte: I definitely want to say to find yourself first. Find out who you really are. Do some soul searching and introspection, because you've got to know yourself to know where you're going. And it's okay if you're still trying to figure it out, because everyone finds themselves at different points of life, but you're not going to feel fulfilled in what you're doing if you're not in touch with that. All the rest falls into place.

¹ "Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and redeem the soul of America." – Congressman John Lewis

EXPLORING THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF ANCESTORS

By Grace

Ancestors represent more than just familial lineage for some, because they hold onto the collective memory and experiences of those who came before us. This connection adds to a sense of continuity and belonging. Many spiritual traditions view ancestors as protectors, guides, and intermediaries between the earthly realm and the spiritual world.

In many Indigenous (or native) cultures, there is an emphasis on honoring one's ancestors. In African spirituality, there is the concept of "Ubuntu", which reflects a deep respect for ancestors, recognizing their ongoing influence in the lives of the living. Rituals, offerings, and prayers are common practices to honor and seek guidance from ancestors. The people who hold these beliefs create great altars honoring their ancestors. This tradition continued in many African-American homes. Many altars contain photos and obituaries of the deceased, adorned with candles and decor. The belief is that ancestors reside in a spiritual dimension (wherever their beliefs lead them), watching over their descendants and influencing their fortunes.

In Native American traditions, ancestors are often the center of spiritual practices. The Lakota, for example, honor their ancestors through ceremonies like the Sun Dance and Vision Quests, seeking to connect with the spiritual wisdom and strength of their ancestors. For the Lakota, the past is always present, informing and shaping the future. Mexican people, who originate from the indigenous group, the Aztecs, celebrate the Day Of The Dead. On this day it is said that the souls of the deceased walk with the living. There are ofrendas, or altars with offerings, created to honor one's ancestors, to strengthen their connection.

In Chinese culture, ancestors are also honored. The Qingming Festival, or Tomb Sweeping Day, is a time when families gather to clean the graves of their ancestors, offer food, and burn incense. This ritual not only honors the deceased but also reinforces familial bonds and cultural identity. Similarly, in Japanese Shintoism, ancestors are honored through practices such as the Obon festival, where it is believed that the spirits of ancestors return to the world of the living, similar to the Day of The Dead in Mexico. During this time, families perform rituals and dances, light lanterns, and offer food to welcome and honor these spirits.



An ofrenda or altar with offerings to honor the ancestors.

The Catholic tradition of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, involves prayers for the souls of the departed, reflecting a spiritual connection with those who have passed on. They also have feasts!

In America, there is a growing interest in genealogical research and ancestral healing. This movement seeks to address and heal inherited traumas and patterns that are believed to affect the descendants of people in America. For example, descendants such as African-Americans and Indigenous-Americans. Through practices like ancestral meditations, individuals aim to reconcile with their families' past and transform their present.

The spiritual engagement with ancestors can foster a sense of humility and gratitude, acknowledging that our lives are built on the sacrifices and achievements of those who came before us. It can help cultivate a deeper understanding of our own identity and place in the world. By exploring our ancestral roots, we may gain insights into our cultural heritage, personal values, and spiritual beliefs. This perspective encourages a sense of responsibility and stewardship towards the world and its inhabitants. For many people, connecting with ancestors can be an invitation to honor the past, live mindfully in the present, and consciously shape the future, reminding us that our actions today will shape the legacy we leave for future generations, as we are part of an unbroken chain of life.

TECH TALK: A GLOSSARY OF TECH TERMS

By Emily

Hi everyone! It's Emily, the Free Minds Digital Literacy Trainer, back with this issue's tech column. The Free Minds team thought that it might be helpful to define some key tech terms for you all that you will most likely encounter. If you see a bolded word in the definition, it is defined elsewhere in the article. I know this is a ton of terms so please don't feel discouraged if it is overwhelming! This is meant to serve as a guide and reference if you need it, not something you need to memorize. There won't be a quiz ;)

Without further ado, here is a glossary of tech-related terms. When I use the term *device*, I mean phone, computer, or tablet. If there is something you want to know about that is not on this list, please write in and let us know.

Bluetooth: Bluetooth is essentially anything in the tech world that does not need to be plugged in with a wire or cable to connect with another device. It is technology that allows devices to connect without wires. For example, you can connect bluetooth headphones to your phone or computer and use them without any wires. Your headphones and your phone will communicate as long as they are connected via bluetooth. However, you still have to stay within range (around 30 feet) from the device.

The Cloud: The cloud is a way to store and access data/information over the internet instead of on an external device. This is convenient because if you save something to the cloud, you can access it on any device as long as you log in.

Cookies: A cookie is a file that a web server sends to your computer and stores your information. For example, Google uses cookies to store your password so that you do not need to enter it every time you log in. This can be very convenient. However, other websites can also use cookies to remember information about you and send you targeted ads or push specific content onto your computer. When you go on a website, it will often ask if you accept all cookies before it lets you see the content. There are sometimes other options to accept only partial cookies. It is up to you whether you are okay sharing your information with that website.

Data: Data can mean a lot of different things. In this context, I am referring to how your phone connects to the internet. When you are not connected to **wifi**, you can still use the internet through your phone's data. There are little bars on the top of your phone – those show how strong your connection is. Depending on your phone plan, you will get a certain amount of data per month to use with your phone.

Desktop: This term can refer to two different things – a desktop computer and the desktop on your computer. A desktop computer is the kind of computer that you have most likely seen in the BOP. It is large, and sometimes the monitor (screen) is separate from the actual computer itself. This is as opposed to a laptop, that is smaller, portable, and has everything in one. The desktop on your computer refers to the page that is the background when you turn on the computer. This is where you can save files and then easily be able to see and access them.

Laptop: A laptop is a transportable computer. You can use it anywhere, but in order to use the internet you will need to connect to **wifi**.

Download: Downloading a file or application refers to how users get something from the internet and store it on their computer. For example, you might download the Facebook app on your phone so that you can access it there and don't need to open a web browser to find it. You can also download documents or videos so that you have them on your device. It makes things more easily accessible.

Upload: Upload is the opposite of download – it is when you are copying something from your computer and putting it on the internet. For example, many employers will ask you to upload your resume when you apply for a job online. When you do this, you will still have your resume on your computer as well.

Email: Email is a way to communicate with people over the internet. You can send messages, pictures, and videos. Email is often used for more formal or professional communications. Most employers communicate via email. Also, if you buy things online you will often get an email with the receipt, ticket, information, etc.

Inbox: Your inbox is where all of your incoming **emails** will live. You will be able to see who sent you the email and the subject of the email (what it is about). You can then click on it in order to read the email.

Hyperlink: A hyperlink is when a **URL** is within text. For example, you might be reading an email and it says "Please see the document [here](#)." You can click on the underlined portion and it will take you to the document. Often when you see type that is blue and underlined, it means that it has been hyperlinked and you can click on it.

Online: The term online refers to using the internet. If you are using the internet, you are online!

Phishing: Phishing is essentially any kind of internet scam. It happens when a bad actor impersonates a company in an attempt to steal your information. For example, you might get an **email** from appl.com about your iPhone and think that it is legitimate. However, the official Apple **URL** is apple.com and that email might be trying to steal your information. Always look closely at who your emails are coming from before you click on them.

Search Engine: A search engine allows you to search the internet for information. The most famous search engine is Google. You can type a word or phrase in, and Google will show you websites that contain that word or phrase.

Spam: Spam is the equivalent of junk mail on the internet. Just like companies get your address and send you unwanted physical mail, companies will also send you unwanted **emails**. Your email server will try to filter these out for you into a folder called spam. However, you will still probably get some in your **inbox**. It is best practice to delete these as they come so that they don't clutter your inbox.

URL: A URL is the web address that takes you to a specific website on the internet. It is a unique string of letters, numbers, and symbols. It often starts with www. or https://. The ending of a URL can give you information about a website. For example, anyone can make a website that ends in .com. A URL that ends in .edu is only for educational institutions, .gov is for governmental institutions, and .org is often used for nonprofit or charitable organizations, though anyone can use it. The URL for the Free Minds website is <https://freemindsbookclub.org>.

Wifi: Wifi is how you connect to the internet without using cables or cords. Many places like restaurants and public buildings like libraries have free wifi that you can use. To get wifi in your home, you have to set it up through an internet service provider and pay a monthly fee.

Window: A window in tech terms is similar to an actual window! It means the screen that you are looking at currently on your computer. So, if you have your email up that is in one window. You might have a different window that has a document you are working on or a video you are watching.

Zoom: Zoom is a video conferencing platform where users can log on and have video meetings. This enables people who are not in the same place to video chat for fun or professionally for meetings. Other common video conferencing platforms include *Google Meet*, *Microsoft Teams*, and *Webex*. We currently hold our reentry book club on Zoom!

REAL WORLD OF WORK

By Jennifer

When Free Minds member Joe came home in December after 30 years away, his first (and most important!) job was being the Father of the Bride! His daughter had moved her wedding date a few times to make sure he could weigh in on wedding planning decisions and walk her down the aisle wearing a terrific tuxedo. After celebrating his daughter and new son-in-law in a beautiful ceremony and reception, Joe was hired as a bus cleaner for a company that subcontracts with WMATA to clean the metro buses. I met Joe at Boeymongers, a deli/sandwich shop, on his lunch break so he could share his insights – and a few of his delicious wedge fries.

What's your favorite part of cleaning the metrobuses?

My favorite part of this job is the people I work with. My coworkers help keep me on the right track. The three of us clean each bus at the same time. I always clean the middle section of the bus. My coworker does the back, and our supervisor takes the front. While we're cleaning each bus, we discuss family, home life, the news, and lots of other topics, which keeps the job interesting. We have a close bond, which happened so quickly!

With the recent excessive heat conditions, the "real feel" temperatures in DC have been over 100 degrees. How do you manage to work in this weather?

Sometimes the buses feel hot, but we can turn on the air conditioning while we're cleaning them, so we stay cool. Also, we have a fridge in the breakroom where we keep watermelon and cantaloupe, along with lots of water.

Are there other hard parts of the job?

There isn't really anything hard about it. The job is easy for me because I like to clean. I just wish it was more than 25 hours/week. I'd have to say that, actually, the hardest part of the job is when there's vomit on the seats or when people use the bus like a bathroom, but that doesn't happen too often and we have special products that make the cleanup easier.

What have you learned on the job?

Since I'm a clean person, I have been VERY surprised to learn about the dirty conditions people leave the buses in after they ride them. Before I started cleaning the buses and while I was just a passenger, I didn't notice how dirty they were, but now I see! I'm a person who likes to clean, so it's been great to learn that my cleaning skills and tendencies are employable!

For the most part, I always got along with people that I worked with in prison, but it's been great to really connect and work well as a team with my bus cleaning coworkers who have not been to prison. It's nice to know that I can work with lots of different people!

What advice would you give to those preparing for reentry?

When you come out here, you have to really want to work and get a position in society. Opportunities are not just given to you. When you run into times that are hard, you have to give yourself a chance. Since I've been home, things haven't been easy for me, but I just smile when I think about being around friends and family I haven't seen in 30 years.

VOTING RIGHTS FOR DC RESIDENTS

Dear Free Minds Family,

You may be incarcerated, but you're never forgotten! And your voices are still incredibly powerful and can impact our communities in so many positive ways. Voting is one of them. Our elected officials play a vital role in our city's safety. That includes their stance on laws that directly impact us out here in society, as well as us still on the inside. Which candidate ends up in what seat really does matter and so does your vote! Many of you have previously received information from Free Minds on how to register to vote; this is just a reminder that if you have any issues with identification, like knowing at least the last four digits of your Social Security Number (SSN) in the case you may need it to vote, I encourage sending a request to your Counselor or Case Manager before the polls even open! Nothing should stand in the way of your right to vote. Even still, remembering your SSN by heart is a good thing, as you'll need it for everything!

Eligible D.C. residents who are incarcerated can vote, even if they are held outside the District. The District of Columbia Board of Elections is required to provide D.C. residents incarcerated in the custody of the D.C. Department of Corrections and the Federal Bureau of Prisons with voter registration materials.

People who are incarcerated and who have a disability that makes it hard to vote, please email jpenuel@dcboe.org or call collect at (202) 800-6190 to request accommodation.

Our Voices Matter!

Sincerely,
Antoine and Your Free Minds Family!

THE LEGACY I WANT: SUPERDAD

By Maji, Free Minds Friend

After almost 18 years of being incarcerated, I've had people walk in and out of my life. I can assure you that I learned not to act negatively towards anyone who simply didn't want to deal with me and my situation of being locked up. You know people on the outside can communicate with us and feel a sense of them also being locked down. So I understand. But today what I have to tell people out there is that nothing hits home worse than when your child finally gives up on you. One morning a few days after Thanksgiving, I turned my tablet on to see that my daughter had made herself an account for us to be able to text each other. You know I was more than elated because me and my daughter hadn't spoken in over 2 years. As many times as I tried to reach out to her, just know that she wasn't going for it. Now since I'm able to reach out to her a little faster, I thought this would finally be the moment when we could build back up our father-daughter relationship. But boy was I wrong!

You don't need to hear it from me, I'll share with you what her text message was to me as she wrote:

"For a long time I was mad at you that I had to grow up without a dad. It's so much you should've been there for, so much you should've done for me that unfortunately you weren't able to do. And because of that it's a lot of pain and suffering I had to experience growing up... You were my first heartbreak... Now here I am 18 in college learning to forgive you... not for you but for me. I haven't talked to you in so long because I just couldn't bring myself to forgive you. So this is me saying that I forgive you... I forgive you for every father-daughter dance I wasn't able to experience as a little girl. For all the arguments I've heard you had with my mom. This is me forgiving you for the lack of teachings, love and protection me and my sister should've experienced in our childhood... I'm forgiving you for your absence... This is me forgiving you for all the times you told me you were coming home, selling me false hope... With that forgiveness, I love you and I appreciate the gesture for a relationship with you but it's NOT one I would like to have with you..."

That was the first and last text message I received from my daughter. I wasn't able to send any messages back because apparently she took it upon herself to block me from sending anything to her. The anger that rose in my chest that morning was something I never felt before. It was as if I was given the "Worst Dad in History" award and there was nothing I could do to contest that. I mean my anger forced me to stay in the cell for the day because I knew if I came out that I would've made myself unapproachable to the point I would've transgressed toward anyone who even looked at me weird. To save myself from catching an infraction, I made the better judgment of isolating myself from the general population. The best thing I could do at this time was just lie down in my bunk and try to level out my thoughts so that my anger could subside. From there I found myself falling asleep.

You know it's crazy how your thoughts can seep into your dreams. With my daughter on my mind, I started dreaming about events that might've occurred in her life from her point of view. Like a movie, I watched her first as a little girl sitting in her room alone playing house with her dolls. Talking to herself she played with what appeared to be a mommy doll and a child doll. She had the child doll asking the mommy doll, "Where's Daddy?" My daughter had the mommy doll yelling at the child doll by saying, "Don't you ask me about your father, I take care of you." This only shows she must've experienced that scenario in real life. The dreams moved on to her being a little older and watching as her mom was being physically beaten by a boyfriend. The look on her face

wasn't one of fear though but of anger and she gave the same facial expression I make whenever I'm mad at something. Then the dream began to get more dark as a series of events began flashing, showing my daughter in a different incident that called for a FATHER to be there for her. I was overwhelmed with so many different emotions that I jumped up out of my sleep in total distress. I sat up and began to shed tears for knowing strongly now how my daughter might've felt growing up without her father around. That emotion carries with me and I started to seriously regret most of the decisions I made that eventually landed me in prison.

Being a loving FATHER is all I ever dreamed to be. If I could tell my daughter what type of dad I would've been to her and could still be, it would go something like this. I am the type of dad who would first and foremost protect my daughter from the ills of the world. I would be frontline every time as a shield to prevent danger ever coming towards her way. To the world, I might show traits of being a man of strength and valor, innate with the warrior spirit inside of me, a leader to many, especially those of the next generation. But at home, my daughter would experience a gentle soul that expresses unconditional love in every way. One who wouldn't mind sitting in her room spending time doing what she as a girl likes to do: painting nails, doing hair, participating in girl talk et cetera, et cetera.

I know there will be moments when my daughter will make mistakes in life but instead of yelling at her, I would actually allow it to be a teaching moment for her. Teach her the advantages she can endure when she's making the right decisions. Like the game of chess, I teach my daughter on how to be strategic in her thinking and always finding a way to stay ten moves ahead when dealing with the outside world.

I would show my daughter how a woman is supposed to be loved. Letting her see her dad be consistent with one woman and not being out there fooling around with many women. Be the example of what type of man she should want in her life. Tell her things that I see from a man's perspective so she won't be duped when another man tries to play with her emotions. Basically give her the game and all that comes with it.

I want to be good to my daughter. I go to sleep at night dreaming about the day I really can reconnect with her. I think about it all the time. I feel like it won't be as exciting as I have it in my mind but I know my presence will finally make a difference in their lives. I want to one day have my daughter look to me as her hero.

Of course we all have many dreams that we hope would one day turn into reality. I sit in this cell and stare at these prison walls like a projector. I would watch to see how it would look if all my dreams unfolded. I know those who have been incarcerated at length and have come home would tell me to not set my expectations so high once it's my turn to gain freedom. They just don't want me to suffer disappointments after disappointments when things don't go my way. But I want my people to understand that even when someone tells me "NO", I look at it as just not right now. I can't take a "NO" at this point, especially chasing after a dream of mine. Because one of my biggest dreams is to one day have my daughter become so proud of me that she would tap the person standing next to her and point towards me to tell them, "Hey, that's my DAD!"

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

What's good, good men! Coming through to give you your props for keeping on keeping on. That reminds me of the spirit of our ancestors and when we think of our ancestors, we think of strength, courage, resilience and bravery and so much more. They literally sacrificed blood, sweat, tears and their precious lives for us, their future family members, I want to pay them homage with some dope words:

- A Amazingly strong and broken, simultaneously soldiering on and that's not aimlessly
- N Necessarily enduring the struggle for us, our fate their fate that door they shut
- C Courage beyond explanation, staring down death on every occasion
- E Excelling the expectations of millions of hateful naysayers
- S Saying a resounding NO to defeat, choosing rather to be beat
- T Tiptoeing around incessant lies, praying one more day to survive
- O Optimistic to a fault, looking for every opportunity to revolt
- R Resolute that though their fates may be sealed, determining to choose freedom still
- S Struck down but not destroyed, their ancestors' DNA forcing them on

Now as always, here are some resources to add to your stash of support once you're back in DC!

Toni Thomas Associates/HOPE Project Training Academy
101 Xenia St SW, Washington, DC 20032
202-499-8863
<https://hopeprojectacademy.com>

From their website:

H.O.P.E. Project Training Academy offers training programs in select industries (CDL, Security, IT) that offer hard-working individuals the opportunity to build careers that support their self-sufficiency. To ensure access to our life-changing programs, we work with individuals to make access to the training affordable, and we partner with government agencies, private and non-profit businesses, and community organizations.



Our TRAINING PROGRAMS range from courses offering industry-standard certifications, to engaging professional development sessions. We also offer SERVICES to individuals and businesses that help ensure their success. We connect H.O.P.E. Project Training Academy students and graduates with employment and continuing education opportunities, and they are not treated as mere alumni. Our graduates become part of a family that prides itself on its ability to continue to mentor, train, and engage its members.

Until we Connect again!

– Ms. Keela

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with Neely

Thank you to everyone who sent in their vote for our next Books Across the Miles selection! The next book will be *Creatures of Passage* by Morowa Yejidé. Nephthys Kinwell is a taxi driver of sorts in DC, grappling with the death of her twin brother, Osiris. Unknown to her, her estranged great-nephew Dash is dealing with his own traumas that have drawn himself to the same river where Osiris' body was thrown after his murder. At this river, Dash meets a mysterious figure he calls "River Man," which will end up impacting Nephthys' life in ways she never expected. We are eager to hear your thoughts about this book.



Note: This book deals with child sexual abuse. We encourage readers to prioritize their own mental health if they are not comfortable reading about this subject matter.

1. Yejidé writes about how people living in Anacostia were faced with the "unconquerable presence" of both damnation and glory. Where is a place that you think both damnation and glory are present, and in what way?

2. What words/phrases throughout the book did you notice that made things seem more fantasy than real-life? Did you like this? Why or why not?

3. Nephthys' niece (and Dash's mother) Amber Kinwell has dark dreams that tend to come true (often of how people die). The local newspaperman interviews Amber every month for his column "The Lottery." If such a column existed, would you read it? Why or why not? Do you know anyone who has ever had a dream/vision that came true? Do you believe this happens?

4. After Osiris dies, his rage explodes and he goes on a rampage torturing and killing other souls. Each time he does so, it feeds his anger and creates an even greater desire for revenge. What do you think Yejidé's message is about revenge?

5. How do you think we as families and a community can do better at listening to and believing children who report abuse?

**NEXT ISSUE’S THEME:
LIBERATION (VOLUME 13, ISSUE 4)**

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Liberation**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 13, Issue 5 will be exploring the theme of **Community**.

(1)

Imagine a future where society has embraced a more humane and compassionate approach to dealing with crime. Describe what this future looks like, how it was achieved, and what liberation means in this new context.

(2)

Picture yourself 20 years in the future, living in a world where significant positive changes have occurred. Write a letter to your past self, describing the journey toward this new world and the personal and societal changes that made liberation possible.

(3)

Write a letter to a loved one explaining how you find moments of liberation even in challenging circumstances.
Share the small things that bring you hope and keep you going.

(4)

Write a poem that captures the essence of liberation. It could be about a moment, a feeling, or a hope you have for the future.

(5)

Imagine a world where everyone has the freedom to pursue their passions without any constraints.
Describe a day in the life of someone living in this world and how it impacts their sense of liberation.

*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 (**Liberation** and **Community**) 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*

PAYING IT FORWARD: STORYCORPS – A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION HELPS AMERICANS LISTEN, LEARN, AND PASS IT ON

By Kelli

Have you ever interviewed your grandmother or your grandfather? It's a common assignment in elementary and middle school. The teacher sends you off to ask questions of an elder in the family and then write a paper about what you've learned. But how many of us still do this when it's not going to count towards a final grade?

If the team of nearly 100 employees working for the nonprofit organization StoryCorps have their way, interviewing loved ones, elders, and even strangers will become a global movement. They believe these are conversations that will remind us of how we are all connected. StoryCorps was founded by journalist David Isay in 2003, when he set up a booth in New York City's Grand Central Terminal. Passersby were invited to come in with a partner and simply interview them about their life. The 40-minute conversations were recorded. A very small portion, about 1%, were broadcast on National Public Radio. Mostly though, these recordings were for the people who made them and for future generations. One copy of the recording went to the individuals, and the other was archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

The organization's mission is **"to help us believe in each other by illuminating the humanity and possibility in us all – one story at a time."**

Nearly every possible combination of interviewees that one can imagine has participated in StoryCorps. For example: brother/sister; coworkers; teacher/student; parent/child; best friends; boss/employee; perpetrator of crime/victim of crime; accident rescuer/accident survivor; camp counselor/child camper; spouses; and the list goes on. According to Daniel, who has been running StoryCorps booths in the southern United States for more than 10 years, by far the most popular pairings are individuals who come in with an older relative. Interviewers ask their elders what they remember from the generations before them, and what wisdom they've gained and want to pass down.

"As a historian, the question I'm always seeking to answer is 'how did we get here?' If you know the history of your family you not only know how you came to be, but you also learn how miraculous it is," Daniel says.

He shares the following story as an example:

Daniel's great grandfather Emilio and his great grandmother Isabel were Puerto Ricans who owned a piece of land on the island. When Emilio died in the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, his widow, Isabel, was just 18 years old with four young children. She was also illiterate. When Emilio's relatives showed up, they asked Isabel to sign a document that would have released the land to them. The story of what happened next has been passed down through the generations. A lawyer advised Isabel not to sign the document. If she had though, she and her children likely would have been destined for abject poverty. The chances that several generations later, Daniel and his brother would attend and graduate from college seem slim to none. In fact, Daniel believes that the family line could have been interrupted and he may not have been born at all!

Daniel believes that documenting the stories of our ancestors is especially important for marginalized groups.

"When you talk with your ancestors, you learn how your people survived stuff that you really weren't supposed to survive!"

He points to the lack of first-person narratives of enslaved people as an



The StoryCorps traveling recording studio

example, noting that many Black and brown people's stories haven't traditionally been widely shared or recorded. "As marginalized people, we have stories of survival – how we made it. There can be a risk in telling our stories, and it can be hard, but it's necessary," he says.

At its heart, StoryCorps is an oral history project that aims to preserve important stories for future generations. StoryCorps encourages participants to imagine this as the opportunity to have one last conversation with someone that you love or that has played a role in your life. What would you say to them? What would you ask them? How often have you thought of a loved one who has already passed on and wished you could ask them one more question about their life? You can learn from this regret by interviewing your ancestors who are still here. In doing so, you just might help your great, great, great, grandchild of the future get to know the man you call "Grandpa" today.

Over more than 20 years, StoryCorps has expanded their organization. In addition to the booth in Grand Central, the group converted an Airstream trailer into a traveling recording studio that has been on numerous cross-country tours, stopping in cities and towns across America so that individuals and their loved ones can record their stories. In 2015, the StoryCorps mobile app was launched. The app guides users through recording and uploading an interview from anywhere!

StoryCorps' special projects include: the Griot Initiative which is the largest collection of African American stories collected in history; OutLoud, an initiative to collect the stories of LGBT people in America; and the Justice Project, an initiative that began in 2017 to preserve and amplify the stories of people who have been directly impacted by mass incarceration. More than 325,000 interviews have already been collected from people all over the United States. The archived recordings at the Library of Congress represent the largest single collection of human voices ever gathered! Two Free Minds members participated in this project, and their interviews are among this incredible archive!

If you are interested in interviewing one of your elders, you don't have to wait until you are released. Check out Rebecca's column in *The Write Way* on page 28 for guidelines on how you might conduct a family interview over the phone or by mail and put it down in written form. When you get home, consider recording an audio story with one of your ancestors with StoryCorps so it will be preserved as a part of our collective national history.

As StoryCorps founder, David Isay, has said: "These are conversations that will remind us of what's really important. Every life, every single life, matters equally and infinitely."

DC PHOTOS *By Antoine*

As requested by our readers



O Street Market



14th and Hamilton Recreation Center

DC PHOTOS *By Antoine*

As requested by our readers



Howard University advertisement on Georgia Avenue



Hook Hall, a bar on the corner of Georgia Ave. and Morten St. NW best known for its large communal tables, pop-up events, games, and a garden area with cozy seating off-season.

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!

CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES

Por Carlos

Saludos a toda la familia de Mentes Libres. Como siempre, rezo para que al leer este breve artículo se encuentre con la mejor salud, tanto mental como física. Que no importa dónde estén, tu mente es libre y nadie puede quitarte esa libertad.

Para los que no me conocen, mi nombre es Carlos. Fui liberado bajo IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) y deportado de regreso a mi país en 2020 después de cumplir 25 años de prisión. Tengo el privilegio de seguir conectado con ustedes por medio de mis escritos. En este artículo, nuestro tema es "Antepasados." Con mucha alegría entrevisté a mi bella esposa, Deedy. Ella es nativa de Panamá y creció en Estados Unidos desde los 6 años. Hace unos tres meses, encontré interés en conocer sus antecedentes y se registró en una página web que hacía pruebas de ADN (23andme.com) para contarle más sobre ella y sus raíces. La entrevisté y esto es lo que se compartió en la conversación con ella.

Carlos: Gracias por estar aquí con nosotros y compartir tu experiencia. Cuéntanos primero: ¿Qué te hizo querer aprender más sobre tu ascendencia?

Deedy: Siempre sentí la necesidad de conectarme con mis raíces y ya sabía que había mucho detrás de esto. Antes de hacerme la prueba de ADN, ya sabía que por parte de mi padre tengo Colombiana, Jaimicana y Brasileña. Y por parte de mi familia materna descubrí que había Alemán. El padre de mi abuelo era un soldado Alemán. Siempre me había preguntado por qué mi abuelo tenía cabello rubio y ojos azules y eso para mí era extraño mientras crecía porque no se parecía al resto de nosotros. Siempre he tenido interés en querer conectarme con el lugar donde empiezan mis raíces, tanto para mí como para mis hijos. Mi familia en Estados Unidos no es tan unida y desde que salí de Panamá a una edad temprana, mi comunicación con la familia allí no ha sido tan buena. Aquellos familiares con los que he sido cercano han hablado de tener una reunión familiar durante muchos años, pero la vida siempre nos mantiene ocupados, no lo hemos logrado. Entonces estaba pensando que tal vez, al hacerlo animaría a mis hermanos a hacerlo también. Y a cambio, acercarnos más.

Carlos: Una vez que recibiste el paquete de prueba de ADN, ¿qué pensaste y qué esperabas?

Deedy: Mi primera preocupación fue hacerlo correctamente, porque estaba asombrada de cómo una simple prueba de saliva me diría tanto sobre mí. Sé que la tecnología ha avanzado mucho, pero todavía me costaba aceptar que se pudiera recopilar tanta información mediante pruebas de este tipo. Entonces quería asegurarme de haberlo hecho correctamente. Me pareció interesante que tuvieran todos estos paquetes diferentes, así que, en otras palabras, en cuanto uno más quisiera saber, los diferentes paquetes responderían ese tipo de preguntas como las raíces, a qué países está vinculado uno, los paquetes premium responden preguntas como, ¿por qué hay diabetes en su familia y de qué lado de su familia viene? Incluso puedes averiguar sobre la densidad ósea promedio en tu familia, cosas así. Lo que me interesó aún más, ya que hay afecciones médicas que son hereditarias en mi familia, como presión arterial alta y cáncer de tiroides. Para mí, la cuestión es que cuanto más aprendo sobre todo esto, mejor puedo abordar estos problemas. Entonces, cuanto más información brindes, más información podrán rastrear y quería compartir esto con mis hijos y el resto de mi familia.

Carlos: Así que pasaron cinco semanas y los resultados finalmente volvieron. ¿Qué se dijo y te sorprendió?

Deedy: Cuando los resultados aparecieron a través de una aplicación, me quedé muy sorprendido. Si no recuerdo mal, el 73-80% decía que era nigeriano, el resto italiano, alemán, colombiano, brasileño y por último panameño. Esperaba que dijera más Panameño que cualquier otra cosa, así que tuve que leerlo una y otra vez. Pude conectarme con aquellos familiares que han sido registrados en el sistema 23andme. Tenían nombres,

fotografías, todo completo. Me quedé atrapado en algunas fotografías, tratando de encontrar el parecido de la familia que ahora conocía. ¿Se parecen a mí, se parecen a alguien más de la familia? Y vi tantas caras con muchas similitudes con mi familia. ¡Yo estaba emocionado! Incluso me emocioné al pensar en mi abuelo porque veía el lado Alemán de la familia. Me conecte con algunos y les mencioné que podríamos estar relacionados. ¡Yo estaba emocionado!

Carlos: Como Mujer Latina, y después de recibir toda esa información, ¿cómo te sientes ahora? ¿Cuáles son tus pensamientos?

Deedy: Mi pensamiento inmediato es una Leyenda. Poder unir mis raíces, las de mi familia y mis padres, ahora cuenta una historia más completa. Cuando le conté la información a mi familia, se sorprendieron e incluso comenzaron a contarnos historias de nuestros abuelos y bisabuelos. Los ha motivado a buscar más información. Sé que si hacen las pruebas de ADN surgirá aún más información que nos dirá más.

Carlos: Es sorprendente escuchar todo esto y no puedo evitar pensar en cosas como el comercio de esclavos en aquellos días. ¿Has pensado en eso?

Deedy: Sí, incluso hablamos de eso con mi familia y mi padre dijo que sabía que tenía raíces africanas pero que no sabía exactamente dónde. Su bisabuelo emigró de África a Jamaica pero nunca supo dónde. Siempre se había preguntado y había querido preguntarle a su abuelo si había esclavitud en nuestras raíces. Definitivamente investigaremos más para saber más, queremos saber más. Ha cambiado la mirada de todo, justo el otro día cuando estaba con la familia, estaba viendo a mi hermana bailar música latina y comencé a ver esas raíces Africanas. Incluso, hasta en la música (música Latina: Salsa/Merengue/Bachata) empecé a ver las raíces Africanas. Es sorprendente para mí cuántas similitudes veo ahora con mis raíces Africanas.

Carlos: Dos últimas preguntas, ¿Qué consejo le darías a quienes lean esto para animar a otros a hacer lo mismo? ¿Y qué piensas de Mentes Libres?

Deedy: Creo que es importante comprender a nosotros mismos, nuestras costumbres, nuestra cultura, incluso cosas como nuestros rasgos faciales. Creo que todas estas cosas conforman quién eres por completo. Puedes completar esos espacios en blanco en nuestra historia. El legado que dejes atrás será más detallado y te permitirá comprender mejor el mundo a medida que empieces a verlo de manera diferente. Creo que es una oportunidad para decirles a todos "esto es lo quien soy." Creo que todo el proceso fue curativo para mí. Me siento completo.

Mentes Libres, obviamente estoy conectado a través de ti, pero he tenido el placer de participar en un par de sesiones (Write Night) y me encanta cómo brinda la oportunidad de ayudar a aquellos que regresan a la comunidad a ser exitosos en su reingreso. Me encanta eso y estoy conectado con eso. Mentes Libres provee una plataforma para aquellos que regresan para cambiar su historia, no solo para ellos mismos, sino para toda la comunidad. Ofrece una mejor imagen de cómo es un ciudadano que regresa. La sociedad da por perdidos a aquellos que regresan a casa después de la cárcel. Todo el mundo comete errores en la vida, creo en las segundas oportunidades y, en algunos casos, en las terceras oportunidades. Creo que Free Minds te brinda la oportunidad de ser dueño de quién eres y al mismo tiempo representar quién eres hoy. Provee un mejor viaje de cambio y al mismo tiempo se convierte en defensor del cambio, superando la ignorancia que tiene la sociedad sobre los ciudadanos que regresan. Veo Free Minds como un movimiento y lo apoyo completamente.

Carlos: Esto es increíble, muchas gracias por compartir esto con la familia de Mentes Libres. Todo esto me hace pensar en cuánto se eliminarían de nuestro mundo, cosas como el racismo, si todos descubriéramos cosas como esta. Me hace pensar en cómo estamos todos conectados.

FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

By Carlos

Greetings Free Minds family. As always, I pray that upon reading this short piece you are found with the best of health, both mentally and physically. That no matter where you are at, your mind is free and no one can ever take that away from you but you.

For those that do not know me, my name is Carlos. I was released under IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) and deported back to my country in 2020 after serving 25 years in prison. I have the privilege of still being Connected with you all through my writing. In this Issue, our theme is "Ancestors". With a lot of joy, I interviewed my beautiful wife, Deedy. She is a Panamanian native that grew in the United States since the age of 6. About three months ago, she found an interest in learning about her background and registered on a website that did DNA tests (23andme.com) to tell her more about her and her roots. I interviewed her and this is what she shared.

Carlos: Thank you for being here with us and sharing your experience. Tell us first, what made you want to learn more about your ancestry?

Deedy: I always felt the need to connect to my roots and I had already known that there was so much behind it already. Prior to me doing the DNA test, I already knew that on my father's side I am Colombian, Jamaican, and Brazilian. And on my mother's side of the family I found out that I am German. My grandfather's father was a German soldier. I had always wondered why my grandfather had blond hair and blue eyes and that to me was odd growing up because he did not look like the rest of us. I have always had an interest in wanting to connect to where all of the roots spread to, for myself as well as for my kids. My family in the States are not as close and since I left Panama at an early age, my communication with the family there has not been so great. Those family members that I have been close to have talked about having a family reunion for many years, but life is always keeping us busy so we have not gotten around to it. So I was thinking that maybe me doing it would encourage my siblings to do it as well. And in return draw us closer.

Carlos: Once you got the DNA test kit, what were your thoughts and what were you expecting?

Deedy: My first concern was to do it correctly, because I was just amazed on how a simple saliva test would tell me so much about me. I know that technology has advanced so much, but I still had a hard time accepting that so much information could be gathered by such testing. So I wanted to make sure that I did it correctly. I found it interesting that they had all of these different packages, so in other words, the more that you wanted to find out, the different packages would answer those kinds of question like roots and what countries one is tied to. The more premium kits answered questions like, why do you have diabetes in your family and what side of your family does it come from. You can even find out about the average bone density in your family, things like that. Which interested me even more as there are medical conditions that run in my family like high blood pressure, thyroid cancer. The thing to me was that, the more I learn about all of this, the better I can address these issues. So the more information that you give, the more information they are able to track down and I wanted to share this with my kids.

Carlos: So five weeks went by and the results finally came back. What were the results and were you surprised?

Deedy: When the results did come back through an App and I was super surprised. If I remember correctly, 73-80% said that I was Nigerian, the rest were Italian, German, Colombian, Brazilian and lastly Panamanian. I was expecting it to say more Panamanian than anything else, so I had to read it over and over again. I was able to connect with those family members that have been registered in the 23 and me system. They had names, pictures,

the whole 9. I was stuck on some pictures, trying to find the resemblance of the family that I was now in knowledge of. Do they look like me, do they look like someone else in the family? And I saw so many faces with many similarities to my family. I was excited! I even got emotional when thinking about my grandfather because I saw the German side of the family. I reached out to some and mentioned that we could be related. I was excited!

Carlos: As a Latina woman, and after receiving all of that information, how do you feel now? What are your thoughts?

Deedy: My immediate thought is Legacy. To be able to bridge together the roots of me, my family, my parents, now tells a more complete story. When I relayed the information to my family they were surprised and even started to tell us stories of our grandparents and great grandparents. It has motivated them to seek out more information. I know that if they do the DNA testing even more information will come forth that will tell us more.

Carlos: It's amazing to hear all of this, and I can't help but think about the slave trade back in those days. Have you thought about that?

Deedy: Yes, we even talked about that with my family and my father said that he knew that he had African roots but just did not know exactly where. His great grandfather migrated from Africa to Jamaica but never knew where. He had always wondered and had wanted to ask his grandfather if there was slavery in our roots. We will definitely do more research to find out more, we want to find out more. It has changed how I look at everything, just the other day when I was with the family, I was watching my sister dance to Spanish music and I started to see those African roots. Even the music (Spanish music- Salsa/Merengue/Bachata) itself is tied to African roots. It is so amazing to me how many similarities I now see with my African roots.

Carlos: Two last questions, What advice would you give to those reading this to encourage them to do the same? And what are your thoughts about Free Minds?

Deedy: I think that understanding ourselves, our ways, our culture, even things like our facial features is important. I believe all of these things make up who you are completely. You get to fill in those blanks in our story. The legacy that you leave behind will be more detailed and it allows you to understand the world better as you begin to see it differently. I think it is an opportunity to tell everyone, "this is who I am." I believe the entire process was healing for me. I feel whole.

Free Minds, obviously I am connected to it through you, but I have had the pleasure of sitting in a couple of the sessions (Write Night) and I love how it provides an opportunity to help those that are returning back to the community to be successful in their reentry. I love that and I am connected to that. Free Minds provides a platform for those that are returning to change their story, not only for themselves, but to the entire community. It paints a better picture of what a returning citizen looks like. Society writes off those that come back home after prison. Everyone makes mistakes in life, I believe in second chances and in some cases, third chances. I think Free Minds allows the chance to own who you were while representing who you are today. It provides a better journey of change while becoming advocates of change, overcoming the ignorance that society has on returning citizens. I look at Free Minds as a movement and completely support it.

Carlos: This is amazing, thank you so much for sharing this with the Free Minds family. All of this makes me think of how much things like racism would be eliminated from our world if we all found out things like this. It makes me think about how we are all connected.



THE WRITE WAY: FAMILY HISTORY

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

By Rebecca

Growing up, I loved hearing my parents and relatives tell stories about their lives. But it wasn't until I became an adult that I started intentionally asking to hear these stories. Maybe it's just me, but as a kid I didn't consciously connect to the fact that my parents and relatives had lives long before I came on the scene. Once I got older and that reality sank in, I made it a practice to ask family members about different details and experiences in their lives. While the tradition of passing down family stories in speech is well-established, there is great value in recording such stories on the page as well. A written record of family stories and life details is an excellent way to preserve family history and create something that can be a gift to your family today and for generations to come. Here are some tips for how to create a written collection of your family history. You can also reach out to chosen family and friends as well!

1. Ask biological or chosen family members and/or friends to send you stories about their lives. One option is to ask about a specific story you've heard them tell before. Another option is to send some questions for them to answer. Broader questions can help spark multiple memories. Here are a few ideas for questions to ask: Where did you grow up and what was it like growing up there? What did you like to do for fun as a kid? What were your parents like? Who were your childhood friends and what were they like? What is a favorite memory from your childhood? (Source: StoryCorps, 2022; Velez, 2021)
2. Ask them to share memories and stories about a relative who has passed away (Source: FamilySearch, 2018). For example, you could ask a parent and any aunts or uncles about a grandparent who has passed away. You can also ask a friend if they've lost anyone close to them. What do they remember most about that person? What is a special memory they have of them? What is something that person taught them? How did that person dress, speak, etc? The more details the better.
3. Ask family members how your family came to be in the areas where they live. Stories behind the physical movement of family can provide an interesting window into the historical context of previous generations, including what obstacles they were facing and what they were trying to achieve. You can ask chosen family and friends the same questions to better understand their history and where they come from.
4. Your life stories are important too so take time to record your own history! You can make a timeline of your life and include significant events and turning points, like starting school, moving, welcoming a new sibling, and more (Source: FamilySearch, 2018). From there, start writing out the stories of your experiences. You can also write down the stories that you like to tell others about your life.
5. Because personal property can be taken or get lost in the process of moving units or facilities, identify someone you can send your collection of written history to, like a friend or family member, and mail it to them for safe keeping. You can write out copies of the stories if you want to keep a set with you as well.

One thing to keep in mind is that learning about your friends and family history can be fun, but it can also be painful, depending on the things they have experienced. On the positive side, learning about their challenging experiences can lead to greater empathy and understanding.

If you do decide to create a written collection of your friends and family history, please let us know how it goes!

CONVERSATION WITH JAE

Free Minds fam! Some of you may know me from letters or some articles I've written for past Connects, but now I'm so excited to be officially introducing myself. My name is Jae and I am the Reentry Book Club Intern. A little bit about me is that I am in the last stretch of getting my Master's in Anthropology at a Northern Virginia university and my research interest is around the ways that media impacts public perceptions of the U.S. prison system and how it in turn works within people's subconscious to uphold the carceral system in our society. I think I relate to a lot of people my age who began to see the harms and injustice in our criminal legal system from a young age when Trayvon Martin was murdered. I was just an eighth grader at that time but myself and other Black and Brown children were forced to think about our identities critically in the scope of American history and the legacy of slavery and institutional racism. When it was time to apply to college I knew that a huge part of my education would be for the purpose of understanding our nation's history and its role in our current inequalities and struggles.

While getting my bachelor's degree I delved deeper into different sources of knowledge to learn more including sociology, criminal justice, anthropology, and African American history. Learning about Kalief Browder's story on Rikers Island was incredibly moving for my abolitionist views today. Visiting Camden, New Jersey to witness the effects of environmental racism, mass incarceration, and community activism was also especially radicalizing for me as a young scholar. For the last few years, I've dedicated a lot of my studies and critical thinking around these ideas of abolition, restorative justice, radical empathy, and racial healing.

It was almost a year ago when I discovered Free Minds and realized the incredibly impactful work being done by this team to support incarcerated people through the literary arts. I knew that I wanted to be a part of a mission that promotes transformation of the legal system, alongside people most impacted not just for people impacted, and enmeshed in restorative and trauma-informed values. I was so excited to be welcomed to the team and received like a family member in all ways. The letters, poetry, and narratives that I've come across over the last few months in the Free Minds office remind me time and time again of why I am so passionate about the work. I've learned so much about so many things from you all including creative writing, the impact of harsh sentencing, and activism and I owe a great deal of appreciation to you all for the knowledge that I've built up here.

Originally, interning with the Prison Book Club was where I found myself learning all of these things. I recently had the pleasure of starting a new role with the reentry team. While I loved engaging in close proximity with all of your poetry and letters, I am super excited to be learning and growing in a new way with this organization. Last week, I attended my first Build Up session where over 120 members check in virtually on video to give updates on their personal lives and provide support and community for one another. It was truly inspiring and heartwarming to be in that space and see how you all come out mentoring, sharing resources, and uplifting one another years after returning home. It's a privilege to be doing this work alongside all of Free Minds' members so once again I am grateful to engage with each and every one of you inside and out. Without you all, this work would be meaningless. I'll leave you with my favorite all-time quote that embodies how I feel all social justice work must be situated. It goes:

If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. – Lila Watson, Indigenous Australian visual artist, activist, and scholar

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.

Martyr for Change: And Other Stories About Democracy Behind Bars

Description provided by the author: Ty is wasting away his life in prison when his sister convinces him that exercising his new right to vote while incarcerated is worth doing...AND to convince all his homies to do the same. But some of the other guys aren't so sold on it, and then drama ensues.

Read this suspenseful urban tale, as well as other essays and poems on what civic life means for people behind the wall.



IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend



DEEP DIVE: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

A.I. stands for artificial intelligence, and nowadays, you can't have a conversation about the future of work, entertainment, academics or really anything else without it coming up. So what is this technological advancement, and how will it affect the future?

At a very basic level, artificial intelligence means machines that are built to learn and adapt to the knowledge gained. Artificial intelligence, similar to humans, are able to perceive their environment and then use their continuing accumulation of knowledge to inform the actions it takes to achieve certain goals.

Take, for example, a self-driving car. It is built with the basic mechanics of an automobile so it can turn on, move with a motor, slow down and speed up, etc. In a normal car, the rest of the job would fall to a human that would decide the route to get to the store, or determine when to turn on the windshield wipers, or slow down because someone up ahead had slammed on the brakes.

A car with partial or full artificial intelligence is built with a computer inside of it that is able to make some or all of those decisions. Did water hit the sensors on the windshield? Wipers go on. Are we on a highway where the speed limit is 70? Speed up. Its mapping system of all local roads would tell it there's a huge traffic jam a driver would have no clue about; so the car finds another, faster path to the store.

The concept of AI is hardly a new one, and like most technology, we saw artificial intelligence envisioned in fiction well before it was a reality. As far back as the 1927 film *Metropolis*, widely considered a masterpiece of science fiction, there were robots that could accumulate knowledge and act accordingly. Other famous films that foresaw the rise of AI include *Terminator 2*, *Wall-E*, *Blade Runner*, and *Ex Machina*.

In the 1950s, Alan Turing was one of the early scientists who began to work on artificial intelligence as a theoretical reality. His "imitation game" was used to test how close a machine could come to emulating the behavior of a human being. Interest in the value and development of AI would boom and bust for decades until the 2010s, when there began to be a surge in investment in building software and programs – such as a neural network – that could enable machines to continuously learn and be trained.

Autonomous and self-driving cars are one very sophisticated form of AI, as we mentioned. But it also presents in more subtle ways, like the search results Google pulls up for you, or the videos that YouTube recommends when you open it.

Many households have a human speech device from Amazon called "Alexa" that is often wired into your speakers or television, and reacts

to your requests: "play some of my favorite songs," or "find a movie to watch that you would think I will like." The device answers to those requests is informed by its extremely intricate neural network, through which it is trained on your personal history with music or movies and also a growing knowledge of what songs and movies are available.

One newer lane of AI is taking shape right now called generative tools – ChatGPT is probably the most famous – the idea being that these machines or programs can go beyond a simple response to more proactive and "intelligent" design of things. So where Alexa can pick a song for you and even play it, you could instruct a generative tool to "write me a love song about a woman named Stella who has long hair, makes me laugh, and I want to spend the rest of my life with." Depending on the power of the generative tool, you might get lyrics to such a song written for you, or it could even go further and arrange the music and voice the lyrics in the accent and tone of your choosing.

It is no coincidence that in many of the films and TV shows where artificial intelligence features prominently, there is an implication that the technology is not a good thing. The AI robot in *Terminator 2* can shapeshift into any human and uses that ability to surreptitiously kill. *Wall-E* is one of the last intelligent robots on Earth after centuries of such developments have made the planet a dystopian wasteland.

These storylines reflect the biggest concern that some people have with artificial intelligence: that it could lead to machines becoming dangerously uncontrollable by human beings, or that their abilities could lead to unforeseen negative consequences. For example, self-driving tractor trailer trucks might be safer overall and could make companies more profitable, but there are close to 4 million people employed as truck drivers in the United States. What do they do now? Additionally, many generative AI tools such as ChatGPT have been trained on books, art, and other copyrighted materials without the consent of the artists or authors, leading to concerns that these tools may infringe upon the rights of creators. On the other hand, there is tremendous potential for AI to help solve the world's many problems, for example in the realm of diagnostic medicine and treatment.

Earlier this year, the US Department of Labor, under the Biden-Harris Administration, issued a set of principles aiming to guide AI development and use while ensuring worker protection and empowerment. It remains to be seen how the use of AI will impact the workforce.

However, another concern is the impact on the environment. It may seem strange to think about technology such as AI having a physical presence and impact on our world, but these forms of technology are powered by data centers that require massive amounts of resources to operate. The energy and water consumption could exacerbate shortages for people around the world. A recent report from the Climate Action Against Disinformation coalition found that the data centers needed to keep up with AI could cause an 80% increase in planet-heating emissions, further worsening the climate crisis.

The future of artificial intelligence is being built as we speak. And as this burst of AI devices and uses emerge, the conversation about how we keep its use ethical and safe will be critical.

WORLD

Three major wars continue to roil in the world. Ukraine has managed to defy early expectations and maintain both defensive and offensive actions against the Russians, who invaded its neighboring nation in

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

February of 2022. In Africa, a civil war in Sudan has claimed more than 15,000 lives and forced the displacement of millions of citizens. The conflict in the Middle East also continues, where Israel's siege on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip continues, with high collateral damage to civilians. A rocket attack on Israel from within Lebanon, and Israel's high-profile assassination of a Hamas leader inside of Iran, have renewed concerns about this war becoming regional or even global.

While there has been no military conflict in Venezuela, it would be safe to consider that South American nation a potential next powder keg on the world stage. Nicolas Maduro, who succeeded the late, charismatic socialist leader Hugo Chavez in 2013, is widely believed to have stolen the election held this year in which voters in the country came out in droves to reject the bad economic path the nation had been following. Millions of Venezuelans have fled increasingly grim economic conditions in the country, which relies heavily on the oil and gas industry for revenue.

Even after barring his main political rival, María Corina Machado, from the election, monitors believe that Maduro was soundly defeated by Edmundo González Urrutia in the voting. But the government announced what many feel are falsified vote results showing Maduro as winner, and that has led to weeks of continuous protests in the streets that are starting to be met with a military and police presence and arrests of opposition leaders.

NATION

In the time since we last reported on national news, the presidential race has been completely turned on its head. While a ton has happened, here are the three massive turning points that have shaken things up:

1. In the first of two planned debates between Donald Trump and Joe Biden (pictured at right), President Biden turned in the worst performance in the history of presidential debates, which date back to the 1960 contest between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. Biden appeared frail and at times confused, which did nothing to help the public perception that at his advanced age he was challenged to serve as president while also campaigning for a second term.
2. At a campaign rally in Beaver, Pennsylvania, a gunman gained access to a rooftop and nearly assassinated former President Trump (pictured at right) while he was speaking. Rally attendee Corey Comperatore was killed by the shooter. The following week, Trump announced his vice presidential candidate J.D. Vance at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, and the ticket appeared to have strong momentum coming out of that week.
3. After mounting pressure from inside his own party, Biden announced in July that he would not be seeking a second term and that he was endorsing his vice president, Kamala Harris (pictured at right), to be the nominee. While the Democratic convention has not happened yet as we go to press, Harris has all but clinched the nomination and has chosen Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz as her running mate.



Trump and Harris have yet to agree on any debates, but regardless, we are about to see the most compressed race for president in American history, with only a little more than three months for voters to decide on a candidate.

SPORTS

As we write the 2024 Summer Olympic games are headed into their final few days. America is dominating the overall medal count, and is neck and neck with China for most golds earned. A few standout performances from this year's games:

Simone Biles cemented herself as the greatest gymnast of all time, winning team and individual gold medals after a disappointing 2020 games where she had to withdraw early in the competition.



Katie Ledecky reminded everyone that she is perhaps the greatest American swimmer of all time, continuing to absolutely crush her competitors in both the 800 meter and 1500 meter races.



French swimming phenom Léon Marchand dominated the men's side, becoming the fourth swimmer in Olympic history to win four individual gold medals at a single Games.



American sprinter Noah Lyles, reportedly while dealing with COVID symptoms, still managed to eke out the title of World's Fastest Man, winning the 100 meter race by five-thousandths of a second.



Swedish pole vaulter Mondo Duplantis, who competes for Louisiana State University as a college athlete, set the world record with a staggering vault of 20 feet, 6 inches!



Our last news update came as the NHL and NBA finals had just gotten underway. The Florida Panthers beat out the Edmonton Oilers for the Stanley Cup in an epic series where Florida went up 3-0 and then promptly gave three games away before icing the Oilers at home. In the NBA, the Boston Celtics team led by Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown had been knocking on the door for a few years and finally broke through, besting Luka Doncic and the Dallas Mavericks for the Larry O'Brien Trophy.



DC CULTURE: GOOD HOPE CARRYOUT

By Grace

Hi, I'm Grace, a native Washingtonian. When deciding what to review for my DC Culture piece, I was drawn to the idea of a historical restaurant review. I could have easily chosen well-known spots like Ben's Chili Bowl, Florida Avenue Grill, or Old Ebbitt Grill. However, I wanted to highlight a piece of local culture. So, I decided to review a classic DC carryout.

As a child growing up in DC, I cherished the rare treat of getting Chinese takeout or "carryout." My family often ordered from Eddie Leonard's Carryout on Bladensburg Rd NE in the Trinidad area. The experience was memorable and deeply ingrained in DC's predominantly Black communities. This cultural thread led me to review Good Hope Carryout on Marion Barry Ave SE, formerly known as Good Hope Road (It will forever be Good Hope to me).

Good Hope Carryout has been a staple in the Anacostia neighborhood for decades, serving as a go-to spot for residents seeking comforting, straightforward takeout. The restaurant is known for its classic American and Chinese takeout. Even as the neighborhood changes and shifts, Good Hope Carryout is still open.

The restaurant embraces the essence of a typical DC carryout: No seating, a small waiting area and a colorful but somehow faded menu board displaying a wide variety of offerings. The decor is minimal, focusing more on efficiency than aesthetics, but it filled me with nostalgia somehow.

The atmosphere may not be the most welcoming, but the food and convenience keeps the community coming back.

The carryout is known for its fried chicken, but you can also find seafood, burgers, lo mein, orange chicken, and fried rice. I ordered the classic order of 4 wings (fried hard) and fries with salt and pepper, with mumbo sauce on the side, and a half and half (iced tea mixed with lemonade). Although the chicken was a bit small, they were very generous with the fries. The half and half tasted just as I remembered. All in all, everything was good.

The service at Good Hope Carryout is efficient and straightforward. The customer service might not be the warmest, but that's not the focus at DC carryouts. The food's taste and quick delivery are what matter most. This might be a cultural aspect as well. All in all, Good Hope Carryout offers a satisfying, straightforward dining experience that is deeply rooted in the DC community. The food is flavorful and



Good Hope Carryout



affordable. The service is quick, and the restaurant's historical significance adds to its charm. It's a must-visit for those looking to experience a piece of local DC culinary history.

However, it's important to address the issue of access to healthy foods in the area, contributing to the popularity of carryouts in lower-income communities living in a food desert. Anacostia is considered a food desert, this means that the population has low access to supermarkets or large grocery stores. There are nearly 10 carryouts within a one-mile radius of Good Hope Carryout, but only one grocery store that is 1.2 mile away. Many people opt for carryout because it is more accessible and affordable than buying groceries to cook at home.

Despite this unfortunate fact, Good Hope Carryout is a cultural landmark in Anacostia, serving as a gathering spot for locals and a vital part of the community's fabric for generations. Its longstanding presence testifies to its importance in the community. Providing a taste of Anacostia's rich history and culture through comforting, delicious food, Good Hope Carryout is an essential experience for both locals and visitors. Don't miss out on their fried chicken (Fried hard!!)

MEDITATION: ROOTS *By Kelli*

In this issue, our meditation is going to focus upon, guess what? Ancestors! Whether we know a lot about them or not, our ancestors have paved a path for us. They have contributed to the culture that we were born into. They embody a multitude of experiences, traits, personalities, and wisdom – all of which contribute to who we are in this world. Our ancestors are in our DNA, literally. We can build upon all that was good in them. We can summon their strength and we can learn from their mistakes. Meditating upon them is to focus upon where and from whom we come.

Let's begin as we always do... by settling into a comfortable position. Ask a friend to read the meditation aloud to you first and then you can swap and read it for them. Or, you can read through it yourself a couple of times, then put the magazine down and just get quiet, and calm, thinking upon what you've read.

Once you are comfortable, take a deep breath in... pause... and exhale. Repeat these deep breaths three or four times and then let your breath fall into its own natural rhythm...

Now let's start with a full body scan. Begin by focusing upon the crown of your head, moving your attention slowly and intentionally through to each part of your body. Notice any areas of tension. When you find them, breathe into those areas, until they relax along with the rest of your body.

Move to your face... your neck... your shoulders... your chest... your back... your arms... your hands... your belly... your pelvis... your backside... your thighs... your shins and calves, and now your feet... all the way to the ends of your toes. As you reach your toes, take a deep breath in, imagining it traveling to every part of you, filling you up. Then let it go.

Now, imagine yourself standing in the present, with each of your parents beneath you, holding you up. Beneath each of them are their two parents (your grandparents)... and so on, and so on. You can visualize it like an upside-down family tree. Instead of branches, you are looking at yourself, standing atop a strong and intricate system of roots.

Your ancestors are all of those in your family who walked before you on this earth. Let's start with those who came immediately

before you – your parents. Bring them to your mind and consider who they are and what they have experienced... You may or may not be close to your mother and your father. And that's okay. Either way, you can think of them and hold them in your heart... thanking them for bringing you into the world.

Now go further back, to the generation that birthed them, your grandparents... Bring all of them to your mind... those that are alive and those that have passed on. You may know them well... maybe they even raised you. Or maybe you just know of them, from hearing stories about them and their lives. Maybe you know nothing about them except that they are a part of your ancestral line. As you think of your grandparents, consider the challenges that they faced... all that they did to blaze a trail for you to walk. Imagine that they are rooting you on today, supporting you and giving you strength to move forward...

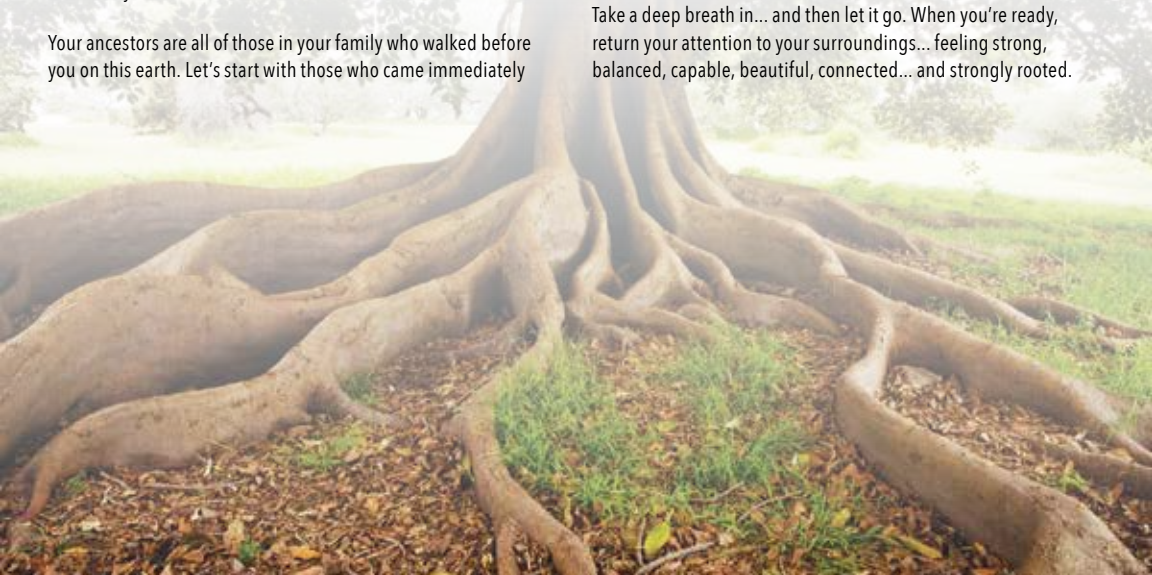
Now consider the long lines of your people that came before them... Imagine the wisdom that each generation passed on to their children... Understand that these ancestors too, have helped to form you. They have given you many pieces of your culture, connected you to a heritage, and given you some of your favorite parts of your identity.

Consider what they did, what they thought, what they survived, what they learned, and what they dreamed...

Picture yourself now, in the present. See all these lines, these strong roots. All of these roots lead to you... You, who are still growing and thriving.

Hold the many generations of your ancestors in your heart. Thank them for their strength. Forgive them for their mistakes. Thank them for passing down their lessons learned and their wisdom. Celebrate their achievements and success. Appreciate their creativity and the rich heritage and culture that they wove. Acknowledge their hard work. And feel gratitude...

Take a deep breath in... and then let it go. When you're ready, return your attention to your surroundings... feeling strong, balanced, capable, beautiful, connected... and strongly rooted.



DID YOU KNOW?

Grassroots Genealogy

By Dalton

At the newest Smithsonian Institution museum in DC, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (opened in 2016), there is a small but thriving research center helping to connect everyday people with their family ties. The Robert Frederick Smith Explore Your Family History Center aims to provide museum goers with the resources and knowledge they need to learn about their family histories, especially when those histories are hard to trace.

This branch of research, called genealogy, can be complicated for Black families in the United States because the country's legacy of enslavement often means that precise records of births, marriages, and deaths are not always easy to come by. Without such records, most people are only able to follow their family trees back for a handful of generations, relying mainly on stories passed down orally.

The Smith Center aims to help people work through this challenge by organizing surviving documents and providing trained experts for people to consult while studying their own family history. These resources allow people to confirm details of their ancestors' lives and uncover new information, gradually reconstructing the narrative of their own familial history. For many, this knowledge of details of their ancestors' lives provides a powerful sense of connection and community.

The twenty-first century has seen an increase in interest in charting family histories, and the television series *Finding Your Roots*, hosted by African American literary scholar Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has put a spotlight on Black family stories. In the show, Gates, with the help of professional genealogists, helps famous people with Black ancestry explore their family trees. Guests on the show have included Congressman John Lewis, actors Samuel L. Jackson and Angela Bassett, writers Shonda Rhimes and Ava DuVernay, and musician Pharrell Williams. *Finding Your Roots* is often credited with inspiring people to pursue their own histories, a task made far easier in recent years.

Until fairly recently, the only way to verify one's family tree would be to go into libraries and archives searching for things like birth certificates, marriage certificates, and other formal documentation of relational ties. These archives are typically held by state, county, or city authorities, with limited opening hours and little funding. Often, the records

would not be clearly cataloged, so searching for a certain individual or even an entire family name could be like looking for a needle in a haystack. In addition to these logistical challenges, documents could, over time, have become damaged, been lost, or, in some cases like people who were enslaved, never have been recorded in the first place. All of this tended to make in-depth genealogical research too challenging for an average person to carry out.

But now, many of these records are digitized, and more are being added to the web every day. Instead of flicking through files for hours on end, it is possible to search for a particular name or date, and have a result almost instantly. Having these barriers removed has opened up genealogy to the broader public, and the Smith Center was established to help guide people through the process.

At the Smith Center, anyone can register for a free genealogy session, where a professional historian walks the group through the basics of this sort of research, from how to effectively search massive amounts of data online to find what you're looking for to how to keep track of what you do and do not know yet. Because the Center is housed within the National Museum of African American History and Culture, there are also information sessions on navigating the sorts of records that may contain information about enslaved ancestors, such as records of sale, enslaved peoples' wills, which often name close family members, and Freedmen's Bureau censuses. While not everyone is able to follow their families back through the period of enslavement, the Smith Center endeavors to do all it can to provide this type of support.

Whether or not they are able to discover specific records, the Robert Frederick Smith Explore Your Family History Center encourages large-scale public engagement with historical research, and gives people the tools and knowledge to successfully do this work themselves. After centuries of genealogy belonging to "the experts," it is now more possible than ever for this work to come from the grassroots, allowing people to connect with their ancestors on a deeper level than could happen in the past.

FIRST, WE FORGET AND THEN WE REMEMBER: HEALING FROM GRIEF AND LOSS

*By Edward, Grief & Trauma Psychotherapist
Reprinted from Connect Vol. 9, Issue 1: "Remembrance"*

In April 2002, just three months after my 30th birthday, my mother died unexpectedly from a week-long battle with pneumonia. For the past seventeen years, I have been on a journey to make sense and to find the meaning of both my mother's life and her death. What is grief? How does losing a loved one affect us emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually? How do we recover from the pain, sadness, and anger that is often associated with the death of a loved one? How do we remember those who were near and dear to us after they have passed away? These are a few of the questions that I would like to address here and I would also like to share some practical tools that you can use if you are struggling with making sense of grief and loss in your own life.

I believe that grief is the price we pay for deeply and wholeheartedly loving the people in our lives. When we lose someone we love, grief visits us and sometimes turns our world upside down and we are often never the same after beginning our grief journey. As I reflect on my own grief journey, it occurs to me that I am a fundamentally different person since the day my mother died. When she died some part of me died also and I have not been the same since. As a therapist who specializes in supporting people through grief and loss here's how I like to think of it: we take a journey into grief and that journey is uniquely our own. My grief journey may not look, feel or sound like yours but what we all have in common is the sense of bewilderment, pain, sadness and sometimes even despair that surfaces along the way. Feelings and emotions that we have buried arise and demand our attention which can be frightening and confusing for many of us – especially if we are not used to feeling and expressing deeply held emotions. Sometimes it can even feel as if we are walking through a maze that we must find our way out of... on our own.

Grief has been traditionally thought of as occurring in stages and phases and this idea suggests that we heal in a straightforward fashion, but nothing could be further from the truth. We do not heal from grief in stages that occur one after the other; instead, we travel around and around in a circle and we experience seasons of grief. There are seasons of sadness, of anger, of mourning, of pain, of letting go, of holding on, of laughter, of feeling lost, of feeling strong, of isolating ourselves, of asking for help from others, of forgetting and of remembering.

Currently, many grief experts focus on helping people realize the importance of remembering the love we shared with our departed loved ones rather than forgetting. When faced with the overwhelming pain of loss many of us work hard to forget the person who has passed away. This response makes sense and is understandable, but it is not always the most helpful or healthy

way to work through the pain of grief and loss. Instead, imagine if we decided that it is ok to cherish and celebrate the memory of our deceased loved ones. In other words, what if we actively sought to remember the love we shared with them, the laughter, the happy moments, the important life events and the lasting love we shared. To remember means more than just to call a memory to the forefront of our minds. It can also mean to reassemble and to rearrange the fractured pieces of a thing and to make it whole and useful again – like a quiltmaker does when they weave together pieces of cloth to make a blanket.

Therefore, if you are on a journey of healing from the pain of grief and loss I encourage you to use the practice of remembering as a tool that can help you remain in contact with your loved one and to keep your relationship with that person alive. Our relationship with our departed loved ones continues after their death and it shifts, grows and evolves as we do. We remember them at every holiday, on their birthday, on the anniversary of their death and on the major milestone events that we experience like the birth of our first child, the day of our wedding, etc.

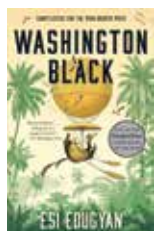
Here are a few practical ideas that you can use to remember and celebrate the life of the people in your life who have passed away:

- Collage – you can weave together pictures, drawings, images you've cut out from a magazine and words that express what the person meant to you and that uplift and inspire you to remember that person's unique qualities, values and characteristics and glue them onto a poster board, a larger piece of paper, a piece of cardboard or any other materials that are available to you.
- Journaling – you can write about your grief and the feelings that come to the surface when it comes to your mind. This can create a space for you to uncover feelings and emotions that you may not be aware of in your everyday life because you can't verbally express them.
- Drawing/painting/creative writing – you can draw pictures in ink or pencil that visually represent your feelings, or you can write fictional stories about your memories. When we allow ourselves to be creative, we engage our "right brain" functions and this part of our brain allows us to process emotions non-verbally.

Telling stories about your loved one – storytelling is the oldest form of remembrance that we have created as human beings and it is universally practiced as a method of transferring knowledge from one person to another and from one generation to the next. But, more importantly, it is also HEALING! As we tell our story it heals us, and it encourages others to gain the courage to tell theirs.

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club



Washington Black by Esi Edugyan

with Neely



Thank you to everyone who has shared their thoughts about our previous Books Across the Miles selection, *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan. This novel follows the story of George Washington Black as he escapes slavery on a Barbados sugar plantation and travels from Canada, to England, to Morocco in search of what it means to truly be free. Here is what some of you had to say:

1. Wash wanted to capture everything about Bridgetown in his memory so he could draw it later. If you could capture a place you've been, or a memory you hold, forever, what would it be?

PF: Of course, it won't be a memory of prison. But there are so many places I want to remember, in the past, and in the future. I don't think there is only one place I want to remember, because I want to remember all places I visited, or lived in. I already have projects for after prison. I dream big! I want to be a spiritual travel journalist/writer/photographer. And I want to start with Shikoku Henro, a Japanese pilgrimage (88 Buddhist temples on a 700-miles trail). I have about 15 years to prepare for that, and I believe in my project. As the author Paulo Coelho said, "Impossible is just an opinion."

AHA: Mine would be my Columbia Heights area neighborhood before the subway system was built, and the new developments that have emerged since Columbia Heights station was built. The way it has changed over time, the memories and vision I remembered is what I would want to capture and hold fond memories of.

2. A book's "setting" refers to the time, place, and environment where a story takes place. What impact do you think Esi Edugyan's choice of settings had on this story?

AHA: It had a lot of impact in order to show how she wanted the story to reflect on the times of slavery in the Caribbean, putting the setting in context with her vision that overall made the story good since the setting is what makes the story what it is.

PF: The fact that the book's setting was in different parts of the world makes me feel better that it is a book of adventure. It also gives me the desire to travel.

3. The perspective of Wash is written by Edugyan, who is a female author. Do you think this impacted the way his narrative was told? Do you think it might have been any different if Wash was written from a male perspective?

PF: It's difficult to say because every author has his/her own style, not necessarily related to their sex. A woman can write adventure books,

and a man can write a book with a lot of sensibility. It's just about the personality of the writer.

AHA: As a writer, I don't think the perspective of Wash would have been different if it came from a male perspective since I think capturing the story you want doesn't matter due to experience or maybe dealing with someone you wanted to create a character from.

4. What do you think happened at the end of the book?

PF: Wash seems to be at the end of his trip. It's not clear if he will continue move forward in the water, and drown, committing self harm. It's difficult to believe that because he likes what he accomplished, even if he can put his name on it as a former slave and a Black man.

AHA: The mystery of it is unknowing for me, since one would think he was dreaming or stepping into some type of storm. In this case, he could've been injured or killed.

5. Edugyan shared in an interview that, "I didn't want these abolitionists to be viewed as the great white saviors. It's not just black and white." What do you think of, when you think of abolitionists? Did this book challenge or support the way you view them? If you were unfamiliar with the word before, what does it mean to you now?

PF: The idea of abolitionists is good itself if the reasons are good. It's like everything people do, it depends on the purpose. Titch is sometimes hard with Wash. He uses him, but he also helps him to improve Wash's abilities. He recognized Wash's talents. Abolitionists are most of the time people who have no economical interests in slavery. So it can be easy for them to want to end slavery. Sometimes the purpose is only political.

AHA: I think of those who didn't like what they were witnessing being done toward another human being and wanted to change it one way or the other. This book didn't challenge my view but supported my view within the character played by the master's brother.

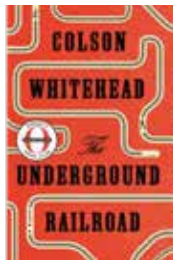
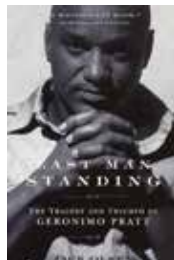
WHAT WE'RE READING

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."

- **ER: *Last Man Standing: The Tragedy and Triumph of Geronimo Pratt* by Jack Olsen**

I recently read *Last Man Standing: The Tragedy and Triumph of Geronimo Pratt* by Jack Olsen. Being a justice-impacted individual, this book resonated with me on an intimate level. This is a true underdog story of perseverance. *Last Man Standing* speaks truth to power and exposes an injustice perpetrated by the omnipotent governmental machine comprised of police and prosecutorial powers (aided by agent provocateurs); the court system; the prison industrial complex; and the parole board. Highlighted throughout this book is the importance of a support team. No one can face such insurmountable odds alone. In light of that, I came away with a newfound degree of respect for Johnnie Cochran. I believe that anyone in tune with the heartbeat of the human struggle will find inspiration in *Last Man Standing*.



- **Emily: *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead**

I recently finished *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. The novel is about Cora, a young enslaved woman, who is an outcast amongst her community on the plantation and eventually joins another enslaved person on his escape. The book follows Cora as she navigates her journey using the underground railroad, which in this novel the author depicts as an actual railroad with trains and stations. I want to give a much needed trigger warning for the book's brutal and bloody depictions of slavery. While these scenes were extremely difficult to read, I found Whitehead's storytelling and his ability to weave in the dark history of the antebellum period in the United States to be captivating.



- **Julia: *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* by Tiya Miles**

I just started reading a nonfiction book called *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* by Tiya Miles. In the 1800s, an enslaved woman named Rose filled a cloth bag with a few precious items and gave it to her daughter, Ashley, shortly before she was sold. Rose told Ashley that the sack was filled with her love. Decades later, Ashley's granddaughter Ruth embroidered this story, as it had been passed down to her, on the bag itself. In *All That She Carried*, the author uses the story of the bag and what information she was able to find about Rose, Ashley, and Ruth to explore the experiences and perspectives of Black women through American history. In thinking about this theme of Ancestors, I have been thinking a lot about Rose and what the author calls her powerful act of "radical imagining" as she looked ahead to her daughter's future. Although I haven't finished this book yet, I would recommend it to anyone interested in history.

- **Antoine, Free Minds Reentry Book Club "The Build Up": *Lucky Me: A Memoir of Changing the Odds* by Rich Paul**

I recently had the pleasure of reading Rich Paul's book *Lucky Me: A Memoir of Changing the Odds*. It is more than an insightful and vivid look into his life growing up in merciless Northeast Ohio and the risk-taking path that led the ambitious young Rich to cross that of a still-wet-behind-the-ears LeBron James, who would describe Rich as one of the most understanding and non-judgemental persons he had ever met. Under the guidance of a respected and business savvy father, while learning quickly from the many challenges he faced daily in the cold streets of Cleveland, Ohio, young Rich was cultivated into the superstar NBA agent and sports brand he is today. Endowed with unwavering integrity and a profound understanding of self-worth, Rich Paul always had a knack for bringing out the very best in all those around him. This is without a doubt a must-read!

- **Neely: *What We Fed to the Manticore* by Talia Lakshmi Kolluri**

This is a collection of short stories, with each story taking place from the perspective of a different animal located in ecosystems around the world. The collection explores themes on environmentalism, identity, belonging, and grief. The animals narrating the stories are often sad, confused, and fearful. Initially, I was longing to read from a character that was happy and positive, but as I continued reading through the stories, I started to realize that Kolluri more than likely wrote her characters this way for a reason. The animals throughout the stories are dealing with hunger and loss of their homes due to human impact and climate change, why would they be joyful characters? Kolluri does a really good job capturing real human emotions, told through the experience of animals. It definitely leaves room for thought and reflection.



‘A TINY BRIGHT STAR ON A DARK NIGHT’S SKY’: THE HEALING POWER OF SOMALI INDIGENOUS ORAL POETRY

By Ana

The poets’ initials have been changed for their privacy.

Two things made a strong impression on the first European ethnographers* to explore Somalia in the 19th century: first, that the Somali people lived in an exceptionally harsh environment plagued by droughts, pestilence, predatory beasts, and inter-clan conflicts; and second, that Somalia is a ‘nation of bards’ whose oral poetry plays a central role in helping its people cope with these hardships. Nearly two centuries later, both observations appear to hold true. Since the time of those first ethnographic accounts, Somalia has experienced a succession of catastrophic events – from a violent civil war and disastrous foreign intervention to widespread famine and drought – which, combined, have caused the loss of countless lives and forced hundreds of thousands of Somalis to leave their country and become refugees around the world.

However, the capacity of the Somali people to create and use oral poetry as a means of coping, healing, and recovery seems to have also endured, with oral verses continuing to provide effective psychological support in processing hardships and acting as a source of hope and strength. In this article, we will explore how Somali refugees in Kenya use their indigenous art of oral poetry to promote emotional wellbeing in the face of adverse living conditions.

Out of nearly 7 million Somali people that are currently



displaced due to a violent civil war in their home country, over 230,000 reside in Dadaab Refugee Complex in Kenya. Being established in 1991, Dadaab is today regarded as one of the largest and one of the longest continuously occupied refugee camps in the world. Due to steady decrease in humanitarian funding, Dadaab Refugee Complex has over the past thirty years experienced severe reductions of basic provisions such as food, water, shelter, and sanitation, as well as a significant shrinking of the mental health support sector. In addition, Dadaab refugees live in a condition of restricted movement where, under the Kenyan law, they are not permitted to leave the fenced perimeter of the camp. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising

that Somali refugees in Dadaab turn to their indigenous therapeutic tool of oral poetry to cope with material and psychological adversity.

Within Somali culture, poetry had since time immemorial represented one of the most important tools for promoting psychological health and emotional wellbeing. Throughout history, Somali people have used oral poetry to express and heal emotional pain associated with inter-clan conflicts, colonial brutalities, dictatorial regimes and, more recently, the catastrophic civil war. Somali therapeutic oral poetry can broadly be divided into two main categories: elegiac poetry (baroor) and 'advice poetry' (talo iyo waano). Elegiac poetry typically consists of verses that express mourning, grief, melancholy, and sorrow, thus taking the shape of a lament. These verses are most commonly composed privately, for personal consumption, as a form of self-therapy. It is very common for Somali people – even if they are not regarded as established poets – to compose such verses as a way of coping with their own emotional pain. Advice poetry, on the other hand, is a type of verse that offers guidance and recommendations to the listeners, whether an individual, a group, or a larger audience. This type of verse has a prescriptive nature and is most commonly composed by established poets. Within traditional Somali settings, it is a common practice for the family members or friends of a suffering person to commission advice poetry from an established poet and invite the bard to administer poetic treatment to the patient.

Relying on these indigenous healing practices, Somali refugees in Dadaab are actively engaged in creating and listening to oral poetry as a way of coping with adversity. In line with tradition, emotional pain and sorrow are often expressed using baroor verse. The below poem, for example, expresses pain associated with the situation of restricted movement:

*When I estimate the situation and evaluate this place
[Dadaab Camps]
I see that it does not have any good
It is like a prison that is open at the roof
At night there is cold that causes fever and sickness
During the day there is extreme heat, with sweat I wet
my clothes
And if I think to myself: "seek a shade under acacia tree,
or any good tree with leaves"
I see myself stuck in a jail that is locked.
– AB*

While expressing lament and sorrow, the above verses also use a therapeutic tool of metaphor to verbalize

internal anguish. The metaphor of 'prison' and 'jail' is used to express the feeling of entrapment related to restricted movement. The healing power of metaphors relies on their capacity to articulate and verbalize emotional pain that is otherwise difficult to describe.

Another widespread form of therapeutic poetry in Dadaab is 'advice poetry' which often invites listeners to engage in constructive emotions or activities. The below verses, for example, advise the audience to maintain hope despite the protracted situation of adversity:

*Even in the darkest of nights
You can see some tiny bright stars, if you try hard
The hope is always there, if you look deep inside yourself,
If you let it blossom, if you protect it from dark clouds and
dust storms.
[...]
Oh, my people, walking with the thirst in your mouth, and
the hunger on your teeth
Trust the hope that blossoms in your heart
The hope that makes your walk steadily, despite the
heavy load
Trust the hope, a tiny bright star on a dark night's sky
– CD*

The above verses seek to maintain the feeling of hopefulness despite the situation of prolonged exile where many refugees are affected by despair and gloom. The therapeutic power of hope is well documented in the psychoanalytic literature, where it is demonstrated that hope promotes emotional healing and recovery in the context of devastating events and traumatic experiences. Another theme within 'advice poetry' in Dadaab focuses on inviting the listeners to remember Somalia and rebuild their home country, as illustrated by the below verses:

*[...]
Think of Somalia, your beautiful country
Mend its injured wings, pray for its healing
Stop the war of brother-against-brother
Encourage its unity, protect its peace
[...]
Silence the talk of guns and bombs,
Listen to the song of a morning bird
Who sings of innocence and hope
Draft the constitution and the national laws
Clean your heart from animosities
Rebuild Somalia, your beautiful country
[...]
– DE*

Advice poetry focusing on Somalia performs several therapeutic functions. Firstly, it promotes peace and

stability in Somalia so that refugees may safely return home and end their prolonged exile. Second, it seeks to maintain a sense of Somali identity in a context where prolonged exile risks to erode not only the collective but also the individual sense of self. And third, it promotes dignity by suggesting that refugees are indeed needed for the important task of rebuilding Somalia.

Yet another category of 'advice poetry' in Dadaab focuses on advising the listeners to build a good character and strengthen their personal values and virtues:

*Come on! You don't have to cry, you don't have to run
You don't have to hide, you don't have to die, do what you can.
Remember the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you
Make the interest of the many prevail before the interest of one*

[...]

*We are coming from far and we are going for a journey
Invest heavy in today as tomorrow never comes
Appreciate the sacrifices and contribution of others in your life*

*I was directed by my grandmother to the East, so I might have the power of the bear
Or I might have the wisdom of the hare, or I might receive the blessings of the night
Take the advice of your elders, you have nothing to lose*

[...]

-EF

Poetry offering guidance related to values and virtues performs a multi-layered function, acting not only as a source of pragmatic guidance, but also as a form of therapeutic counseling that facilitates psychological coping with the sense of powerlessness associated with protracted exile. These verses can promote agency and encourage refugees to shift their attention away from difficult circumstances beyond their control towards smaller goals that are attainable. The literature on trauma healing emphasizes the importance of setting small viable goals as part of the therapeutic process that supports survivors in reclaiming a sense of control which is often shattered by traumatic experiences.

As we have seen, the Somali poets in Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya have been offering poetic therapy to the Somali refugees for the past three decades in the context of extreme material and emotional hardship. Their therapeutic poems are promoting hope and dignity, as well as helping the listeners to articulate difficult emotions and shift their attention towards viable, achievable goals, thus maintaining a sense of agency. To use an expression of a Somali poet, we can say that Somali oral poetry in Dadaab represents a tiny bright star on a dark night's sky, protecting emotional wellbeing of the refugees, in the face of adversity.

*An ethnographer is a person who studies and documents the culture of a specific group or society

Writing Prompt: Try writing your own "advice poem" for yourself or someone you know to guide them through hardship. Or try writing a "baroor" (lament) poem. Let us know what you think of this poetry practice!

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ AD completed his Rising Organizers Fellowship program.
- ★ MK won the ACM Father of the Year Award for Incarcerated Fathers.
- ★ AH, DDB, LEC, LV graduated from the Georgetown Pivot Program.
- ★ Six Free Minds members completed youth development training with our partners at Life Pieces To Masterpieces.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!



AROUND THE WORLD: PUERTO RICO

By Sofia

This past May, I had the pleasure of traveling to the beautiful island of Puerto Rico with six of my good friends for five days. Puerto Rico is a US territory located in the Caribbean Sea between the Dominican Republic and the Virgin Islands. For this issue, I'll be taking you along as I recount my Puerto Rican adventures that already have me yearning for another island destination!

Shortly after we landed on our first day and got settled into our rental located in the capital, San Juan, we made our way to Condado Beach which was a 20 minute walk from us. Condado is a beach community in San Juan that is popular with tourists, lined with hotels. After spending hours at the beach, we headed to dinner where I tried a mainstay in Puerto Rican cuisine, mofongo. Mofongo is made of fried green plantains mashed by hand together with crispy pork skin and fresh garlic. It has a starchy flavor and is typically served under meat and sauce. My mofongo was topped with shrimp and a red sauce that was bursting with flavor. After our dinner, we decided to visit the famous bar, La Factoria, in Old San Juan. La Factoria is famous and was actually partially where the

music video for the Latin worldwide hit, Despacito by Luis Fonsi featuring Daddy Yankee, was filmed.

For our second day, we immersed ourselves in the history of Old San Juan through a free guided walking tour of the neighborhood. It is the most visited place in Puerto Rico. After colonization, it was first built up by the Spanish in the 16th Century and maintains much of that historical colonial look with European style buildings, fortresses, and cobblestone streets. Old San Juan is marked by very colorful and vibrant buildings, and our tour guide shared with us that building owners who want to paint their buildings must get the color approved by the city government!

Our day continued with some time spent at a beach recommended by our Uber driver (Uber is a ride sharing app where you can request a ride from your smartphone) called Playa La Posita de Piñones. This beach was located in a less busy area called Loiza on the north east coast of Puerto Rico. One of its distinctive characteristics is that a long breakwater hinders strong Atlantic Ocean waves from crashing intensely on the shore. "La Posita" translates to the



pool/the puddle and the waters at this beach are calm and still. After swimming and relaxing, we trekked about 25 minutes down the road where we stopped at a local seafood restaurant for dinner. Loiza is known for its large Afro-Puerto Rican population and rich Black history.

On our third day, we headed to Isla Verde Beach. This beach was stunning with beautiful clear blue water. Myself and two other friends in the group decided to spice up our relaxing beach day by going jet skiing! Jet skiing is a water sport that involves traveling across water on a jet ski, a small, self-propelled vehicle that resembles a scooter. I hopped on the back as my friend whipped us around the ocean at top speed. I wouldn't recommend being as adventurous as we were if it's your first time on a jet ski, because we did end up falling off! We were able to safely get back on and it made for some good laughs after. We spent the rest of the day swimming in the ocean, soaking up the sun, and even enjoying some passionfruit sorbet served in coconuts and pineapples.



The next day, we went snorkeling at a small beach and got to see sea turtles and lots of colorful fish. Our snorkeling guide informed us of an arts festival that was happening over the weekend called Santurce Es Ley. Santurce was the area of San Juan that our rental was located in and is known for its young artsy atmosphere. We spent the night enjoying the festival which featured vendors selling art, jewelry, and clothes along the street, as well as live music performances, food, and drinks. Our most adventurous day began bright and early the next day. We met up with a local tour group at a hotel in San Juan where we caught a bus taking us to the El Yunque National Rainforest. After an hour bus ride, we arrived at the only national tropical rainforest in the U.S. forest system which is located in northeastern Puerto Rico. The rainforest is 29,000 acres featuring breathtaking mountain views, beautiful clear rivers, and recreational activities.

We began our day at the rainforest with a 25-30 minute hike where we crossed a river and trekked through muddy terrain. To get to the main trail we had to climb up a steep, muddy hill which had all

Isla Verde Beach and a Coconut Isla Verde

of us caked in mud! After hiking, we made it to an area with gorgeous waterfalls that had recreational activities that other tour groups were enjoying as well. First, we all went down a natural water slide located right next to a waterfall. We then had the option of cliff jumping off what was about a 20 foot cliff, which I mustered up the courage to do with three other friends in my group. We then jumped off a smaller cliff and had the option of swinging off a rope swing and landing in the river, which I also took advantage of. After all of this hiking, climbing, falling (lol), and swimming, we were all exhausted, but had to hike the same 25-30 minute trail back!

After the hike, the bus took us to a small Puerto Rican restaurant on the side of the road on our journey back to San Juan. By the time we got back to San Juan, our whole group was exhausted, sore, and even a little bruised. We ended our trip by walking around Old San Juan at night. Our trip was jam packed and full of memories that I'm glad I had the opportunity to share with the FM fam! I'm already daydreaming of future island destinations, which you all will hopefully get to read about in later issues.



Old San Juan



View of some El Yunque Mountains

FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: LIBERATION

By Julia

In this next issue, we're tackling a big theme: ***Liberation***. According to the dictionary, "liberation" refers to the act of liberating (freeing) or the state of being liberated (free), or to a movement seeking equal rights and status for a group of people. Recently, I've been thinking a lot about "collective liberation," or the idea that we must all work together in solidarity to free all oppressed peoples from all forms of oppression. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Or, as the civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer said, "Nobody's free until everybody's free." What does liberation mean to you, both in the personal and collective sense?

We look forward to hearing from you!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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