

April/May/June 2021  
Vol. 10, Issue 2

# Free minds Connect



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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Hello, Friends!

I love writing that greeting so much, I want to do it again 😊  
Hello, Friends!

As this issue's cover illustrates, friendship helps us sail through the rough seas of life! I can't imagine how rough it has been for you all during the COVID lockdown. So, jump onboard, feel the sweet-smelling wind on your face, and settle back for a smooth voyage through this wonderful *Connect* issue.

Everything about Free Minds comes back to friendship. The whole existence of Free Minds was because of the friendship of Free Minds Co-founder Kelli and Glen McGinnis. Most of you know this story. While Glen was on death row in Texas for a crime he committed at the age of 17, Kelli produced a TV documentary on him, and afterwards they kept writing to each other and reading and discussing books. They built a friendship on a shared love of reading and writing. Then, after Glen was executed, Kelli asked me, her good friend, to help fulfill Glen's wish that other youth in the adult system experience liberation through books. Free Minds was born. Now it is because of all of you and your friendships with each other and the FM staff that Free Minds is a strong community of friends. It truly is an example of one of my favorite sayings: "We all get by with a little help from our friends." In the case of Free Minds, we not only get by, we **thrive** with a lot of help from our friends.

We thrive because we put into practice the qualities of healthy friendships. I'll share my friendship with Kelli to explain what I'm talking about. Kelli and I go waayy back and we're always there for each other. We've helped each other through the inevitable hardships of life (death of loved ones, divorce, sicknesses) and celebrated the beautiful joys (babies, FM milestones, personal accomplishments). We trust and love each other and have each other's backs. We're honest with each other, even when it's something the other person might not want to hear. We share directly when things hurt us and talk about things that are difficult, and we jump for ecstatic joy when the other person experiences good things. It is a rare gift to find such a good friend. I fervently believe it's part of the reason Free Minds has grown and blossomed so well. Just like a saying I just read on a tea bag, "Your vibe attracts your tribe." Thank you all for having such a beautiful vibe!

There are so many treasures in this issue. Our wonderful intern Araba shows how science backs up the power of

friendship. Friendship might not be able to move mountains, but it turns out it really can help you climb them! The writing in this issue is so moving. DK's tribute to his friend John – finding joy in a friend's newfound freedom, even when it means not having that friend in his life anymore – is an amazing image of what true friendship looks like. SJ makes a great point when he writes, "one of the best parts of getting older is that friendships get better." I love this focus on the upside of getting older. 😊

AC's essay reminds us that friendship means being there through both the good and the bad: *"to laugh with their joy"* but also *"to feel their pain."* JL writes, *"My friends have also proved to be my teachers."* Free Minds members are always learning and growing! MS tells us that friends can be *"the answer to loneliness felt. And some walk us back from the edge, when life is taunting you to jump."* But as MV's moving story shows, we often have to take a chance, to trust and believe in the people around us and let them in a bit: *"the more you share and give, the more joy you find and the more space you have in your heart."* Richard teaches us how to rise above small-minded behavior in his job at UPS, asking us, *"if you are only willing to respect people who respect you, then what are you really accomplishing?"* Rafael, who just came home, shares a beautiful tribute to his Uncle Regis. His take on negative social media culture reminds us that true worth comes from inside, not what others say. Lastly, DA's advice is the best kind of advice a friend could give: *"never allow an occurrence in prison to loom larger than your freedom!"* You are too valuable to let anything get in the way of your future. Maybe that future includes a fellowship application or two (hint hint: read on to learn more!). Until next time, keep your mind free and your friendship sailing strong with Free Minds!

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:  
Accountability**

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



## THE CONNECT TEAM

Executive Editor

Tara

### Editors

Julia, Michael

### Contributors

FM Team

### FM Friends

Che, Maya, Dr. Allen, John

### FM Members

GD, SH, TG, AC, AB, AW, LB, DK, SJ, CM, JL, MS, MV, CT, DA, MH, DG, DJ, FG, TT, Rafael, Richard

## THE FREE MINDS TEAM

Tara, Co-founder & Executive Director

Kelli, Co-founder & Book Club Facilitator

Julia, Deputy Director

Allen, Director of Finance & Operations

Keela, Reentry Manager

Melissa, Program Coordinator

Melody, Reentry Coordinator

Neely, Program Associate & Grant Writer

Imanee, Prison Book Club & Poetry Specialist

Tia, Reentry Coach

Janet, Youth Education & Outreach Manager

Jordan, Congressman John Lewis Fellow

Craig, Congressman John Lewis Fellow

Demetria, Reentry Coach

Shannon, Advocacy and Leadership

Development Specialist

Araba and Jessica, Interns

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

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

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

# FREE MINDS HQ

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

*By Imanee*

## Second Look Amendment Act Becomes Law in DC

As of April 2021, the Second Look Amendment Act (also known as IRAA 3.0) is officially DC law! What does this mean? This law means that anyone who was under 25 at the time of their charge and has served at least 15 years of their sentence can petition for resentencing. Note that this law only applies to DC cases, so only cases that went through DC Superior Court. If you think the Second Look Amendment Act applies to you, and you do not already have an attorney, write to the Second Look Project at 400 5th Street NW #300, Washington, DC 20001.

We are thrilled that this law has become a reality! Your FM team on the homefront was a strong part of the efforts to see this bill become law. We believe everyone is continually learning and growing, and true justice requires more laws like this getting passed. The Sentencing Project just released a report on the Second Look laws around the country, which featured DC and our own Melody!

## Calling All Crows OTSP

Free Minds recently teamed up with Calling All Crows, a nonprofit organization that focuses on creating social change and empowering women through music.

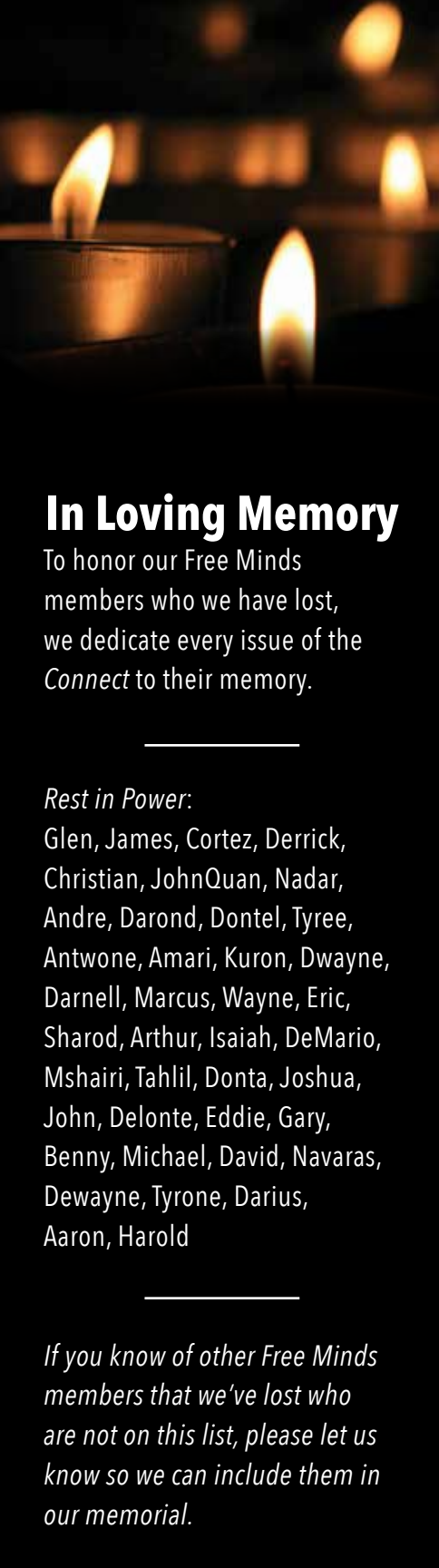
Joined by James and Ontae, two of our amazing Poet Ambassadors, we discussed the importance of music in our lives, social movements such as #DontMuteDC, and the legendary impact of Go-go music. During the outreach event, Ontae shared how music is his form of communication; he shared a song called "Generation Changer: Wounds and Scars," which discusses the renewal of his faith, as well as the challenges in his past. James and Ontae both talked about how music is a form of release, allowing them to be vulnerable and share their experiences of incarceration and growing up in Southeast DC. Volunteers were struck by the raw and powerful lyrics featured in their songs, which shows how that type of musical vulnerability is empowering for everyone involved!



## Award Recognizes Free Minds for Courage!

In May 2021, Free Minds was honored to receive the Juliette Gimon Courage Award from the Global Fund for Children, alongside two other organizations working to advance the rights of young people around the world. The other winners are Youth Safety Awareness Initiative in Kenya, and an organization that cannot be named publicly due to repression in its home country. Youth Safety Awareness Initiative – often known by its original Swahili name, Crime Si Poa – was founded by Peter Ouko while he was on death row for a crime he did not commit. After he was pardoned and released in 2016, he used his experience to support incarcerated young people and to help youth living in difficult circumstances build brighter futures for themselves and their communities. We are honored to be in such good company – and none of this would be possible without all of you and the courage that you display every day!





## In Loving Memory

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

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### *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, Eddie, Gary, Benny, Michael, David, Navaras, Dewayne, Tyrone, Darius, Aaron, Harold

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*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.*

# FELLOWSHIPS FOR THE FORMERLY INCARCERATED

*By Araba*

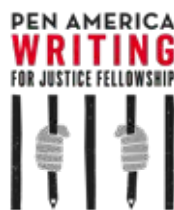
As more advocacy is done around mass incarceration, and as more citizens return home from prison, more members of our society are beginning to value the skills and perspectives that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated folks possess! One way that this value is being demonstrated is in the form of **fellowships**: sometimes up to a full year long, fellowships will often exist as paid positions within an organization where the fellow will work on a creative/artistic project or share their expertise, as well as contribute to the organization's work and/or advocacy efforts.

To apply for a fellowship, you will often need to fill out some background information (your name, contact information) and then demonstrate your qualifications for the position in some way. Depending on who is providing funding for the fellowship, that might be through essay questions, a cover letter, and/or poetry/artwork.

Free Minds has our own fellowship, the **Congressman John Lewis Fellowship**, in which a Free Minds member returning home joins Free Minds as a full-time staff member for six months. Our current John Lewis Co-Fellows, Craig and Jordan, do it all: they speak at On the Same Page and advocacy events, help facilitate our weekly Book Club for reentry members, and send report-outs to the Free Minds team about useful events they have attended on our behalf. The application to become a John Lewis Fellow usually pops up twice a year, so keep it in mind when thinking about reentry plans!

Other fellowships to look out for in the future: **PEN America Writing for Justice Fellowship** (for currently and formerly incarcerated folks): Interested

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# FREE MINDS MAILBAG



*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family.*

*Due to delayed mail, we're printing feedback on the "Purpose" issue of the Connect. We look forward to reading your thoughts on the "Renewal" issue!*

**GD :** First and foremost, I loved the Discovering My Purpose piece by Maji. I so deeply resonate with his story and mentality, although I am constantly on lockdown. I find solace in reading and writing and know that my few words may help someone else more than they help myself. Of course, DJ's law info is always helpful and we've outdone ourselves in the poetry area, if I may say so myself. But it's due to Free Minds giving us inspiration and a positive reason to share our perspective through poetry. The photos were fire and I absolutely cannot wait to visit the MLK Memorial Library!

**SH:** The articles I enjoyed, but a couple stood out the most, like Maji's article "Discovering My Purpose" and Jeffrey's "Staying on My Purpose, Even When Obstacles Appear." Maji discovered his when least expected, under the conditions we've been under during the pandemic, but the advice he gave and how well he presented this piece I loved, so I hope all have been able to take a page out of his book and use it. Jeffrey's article is #1 who I see as an inspiration and man on a mission. He knows his purpose and won't be defeated until he reaches it, so his story is different but his journey is to pursue his purpose like all of us. I hope he gets his license and becomes a therapist, and like he said to his aunt, he had to fight to get his degrees so he will continue on not giving up.

**TG:** The cover with the hand holding the compass made me reflect on how we have let technology tell us which way to go and what our purpose is. We no longer depend on the lessons taught to us by our elders to find our way in life or nature to teach us, how to travel by the stars... The "Family Ties" section held an abundance of gems. Norvelle's journey resonated a lot with me. Yes, we need to build and rebuild relationships before and after we get home (prisoners). Life will not hand us keys to the horse corral. We should look at it as an honor to have an opportunity to prove we've changed.

Maji (such a cool name Maaajjjiii it rolls off the tongue) roped that steer in 2.3 seconds where they wrote, "Sometimes all we want is to hear from those on the outside, to distract us from what we're seeing and hearing on the inside" (page 6). What's crazy is that noise we want to be distracted from is the reality we are living (or the voices in our head or the sound of silence 😊). We want our family to paint a new reality that everything's fine when it's not. Maji is so right to write, "Appreciate all of the struggles..." Start being proactive to fill those desires for distractions with the activities of self-enhancement-change.

The poem section is always a blast because I get to immerse myself in various forms of creativity and self-expression. I really enjoyed C.M.'s "meaningful purpose" and J.R.'s purpose... Eyone, another name I could write a square dance song to, shed some light on journalism in the "Write Way! Power of the OP-ED!" I am studying how to put editorial pieces together with hopes of expanding my craft.

"Staying on my purpose even when obstacles appear" by Jeffrey was like punching a cow. I punched a horse one time and got a whoopin' but I guess it's okay to punch a cow. Anyway, I love his statement, "I pulled out my handy extra dose of patience and signed up for the next exam." I was so humbled and inspired. I've posted this article on my class wall for others to gain hope and encouragement.

JM's "Purpose" offers a unique contemplation statement: "Maybe it is the journey itself that is the most dominant feature of the manifestation." He continues to make you do some deep heart searching in the next paragraph with, "When my emotions informed me that I was right, that I was justified in restricting my purpose to myself. I lied. I lied to myself, my purpose, and me." JM got down in that article. I'm still processing 3 months later!



# PAYING IT FORWARD: PEER SUPPORT

*By Imanee*

This winter, Free Minds members in our reentry program launched a new initiative: a 12-week peer support certification program, specifically designed for Free Minds by trainers Edward and Che. Peer Support refers to a process through which people who share common experiences or face similar challenges come together as equals to give and receive help based on the knowledge that comes through shared experience. Our first cohort of peer supporters just graduated from this program in May. We can't wait to see what they will accomplish, and we're seeking funding to make this certification program a permanent part of our work. In the meantime, I caught up with one of the graduates, Jordan, and one of the trainers, Che, to talk more about how they are paying it forward with peer support.

## **JORDAN**

### **1. What do you think is the importance of peer support?**

I think the importance of peer support is to do things to help someone other than yourself, someone closest to you like a friend who you want to see succeed, or a relative who has gone through incarceration and can understand the challenges we face when coming home. We members and a lot of the guys who are a part of Free Minds are now close friends.

### **2. Do you think that receiving support from your peers differs from receiving support from adults? Do you think receiving support from your peers is better than support from an adult?**

For people like us, where we come from, the type of support we received [from peers] was something negative. When you surround yourself with people who actually want to see you in a better space, I feel like that's all you can ask for. It makes it more sweet to know that it's somebody like a close friend who has experienced similar things that you have.

### **3. What is some peer support that you wish you could have gotten when you were younger?**

A lot of advice from a lot of the guys. I even try to take some life skills from some of the guys and apply it to my own life. I think that's the most helpful part. All the advice I received when I was younger was educational advice. It was never advice about life skills. I think a lot of the guys give you the right type of advice.

### **4. Why type of life skills advice did they share with you?**

How to prepare yourself for certain things. Like when I was in school, it never really prepared me for college, they would just tell me about it, telling me that it would be difficult. They never prepared me for an employment opportunity or internship, whereas a guy from Free Minds may have already done that internship or certain employment opportunities, and he had the opportunity to share that with me.

### **5. Now that you're a CJL Fellow, you're able to be a peer supporter to other members in Free Minds. How do you want to best help them?**

I think continuing to be a model of change. My story moves people. I was 16 when I was incarcerated. I was in high school, but I got caught up in negative influences. The judge saw that I was going to school, and took a chance on me. I was given a plea agreement and released on probation as long as I attended college. Now I'm a sophomore in college, studying business. I use my story and some of the life experiences that I've been through in my young lifetime already. I use them to apply to what some of the younger guys have gone through and even what some of the older guys went through, because they didn't have the chance to experience their teenage years, but I did.

**6. What would you say to teenage Jordan?**

I haven't heard this question in a while! I would congratulate myself. I would tell myself that I have come a long way. This is really the beginning.

**7. Do you have any future plans that you want to pursue to help the community?**

I have definitely been motivated to start a nonprofit because of Free Minds. I'm not sure if it would be similar to what Free Minds is doing, but I will say that I love this type of work. That's the current problem I sit with today – deciding between pursuing my career in business or sticking with reform and advocacy. Right now, with Free Minds, I do a lot of community outreach and education, speaking to different groups of people and getting involved in coalitions and advocacy campaigns. I had a school assignment where I had to talk about a current problem, and that's what I described. It will be easy to do both, or turn the business around to something focused around reform. It's not too many programs that stick with youth in the city. I feel like some programs abandon the youth. I think we need better structure.

**CHE**

**1. Tell me about yourself. How did you get started with peer support training?**

In 2013, I was stabbed 13 times at a local nightclub in the DMV area. I was medevaced to PG Hospital. From then, my mentor and business partner Dr. R, was doing a study based on Black men being injured in DC and PG County. So when my name came across his desk, the first thing that stood out to him was, my name is "Che" after Che Guevara from Cuba.

Dr. R reached out to me and asked me to be a part of his study, where he would follow me over [a period of] three years. So me and Dr. R cultivated a relationship and he asked me to come speak to his class. He is a professor at the University of Maryland. He was actually chair of the department and he was teaching a class called "The New Jim Crow." He asked me to come talk to his class. There were about 110-115 students. I basically just articulated my story. Once the class was over, maybe 60 students stayed after and they wanted to pick my brain like a small Q&A.

At that particular moment, I've never done any type of public speaking but it became very infectious knowing that I had a voice. I never knew that I had a voice, that people would be interested in my story. So once that happened, I had other opportunities to speak across the country at different universities, telling my story about how me and Dr. R met, I was stabbed multiple times, etc. So next thing you know, I'm on NPR, I did the Kojo Nnamdi show, I'm doing all these big time interviews, speaking at different universities.

So then, I was hired at Prince George County Hospital as a credible messenger. The credible messenger work is basically the bridge between social services and the urban community. They are responsible for cultivating the relationships between the two. Because we are credible and we've been through the life experiences that the guys have been through or are going through, we can relate. It's all about the relationship and relating to that targeted individual.

Dr. R hired me and I was a credible messenger at PG Hospital. My job was to go into the rooms and talk to young men who had been violently injured, and the ultimate outcome was we wanted to sign them up to our program so they can get help or social service needs. Our main target is to have them enrolled in some time of trauma-informed care, because we believe that's why gun violence is so high in America. People are walking around with a lot of trauma in their hearts, in their souls. So that was the main objective.

I did that for about two years. I started to see that the guys were open to a mentor or a buddy, just to help them grieve and go through the process of being violently injured. So then I came up with the concept of creating a peer support group. At the peer support group at the hospital, I invited our therapist, Edward, to come in and give the spin on trauma-informed care. We did it in a nonacademic way. I saw that the guys were genuinely interested in learning about themselves and the mental health system.

So I came up with the idea: "Let's certify guys or give guys the tools that they would need to go into the community and affect other people that might be going through a very tough time." When we think about gun violence, we think about the survivor. We never really think about the caregivers, the ones who take care of the individuals once they are hit. What ended up happening is, we had a group of ten guys, and we did the peer support training. Some guys stuck with us for two years straight because they were so interested in how to become a better person and how to help their friends become better people.

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# SPINNING THE TRACK WITH D.A.

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

Dear DA,

I'm really a laid back person. I stay out of the way and I'm really just trying to come home. But the only time I get into trouble is when someone treats me with disrespect. We're locked down because of this pandemic and I might ask for the smallest thing: some paper towels to clean up a mess, from someone whose job is to make this place run smoothly. And this one person will act like I've asked for something so unreasonable. He talks to me like I'm not even a human being. It's all I can do not to react. Honestly, I'm afraid I'm gonna snap. I can't get in any more trouble. I want to go home. But in the moment, sometimes I forget all that. What can I do?

Sincerely,  
CT

Hey CT,

*First thing you can do is pretty simple; never allow an occurrence in prison to loom larger than your freedom. Getting the shackles off is always the ultimate goal, so never allow anyone or anything to jeopardize that. I totally understand how frustration can sometimes cloud the vision, but we have to make an extra effort to catch ourselves, or our decision-making suffers as a result. In prison, challenges will always exist, but learning to manage the problems and handle them in a productive way? That's the key. The fact that you're naturally a laid back person already weighs in favor of you successfully navigating around issues, but a different perspective might help provide a sort of "cooling system" when dealing with certain matters.*

*I'm with you: disrespect is intolerable, especially if you pride yourself on being a respectful person. But as your brother behind the wall, I know that we can sometimes mischaracterize a situation, which causes us to approach it from the wrong angle. This only gets us into unnecessary trouble. A different outlook produces a more productive approach. A person not willing to provide a service or who refuses to assist isn't necessarily being disrespectful; they're ill-mannered, inconsiderate, and unwilling to help. It isn't a direct insult to you, but more of a reflection of who they are as an individual. Don't allow their miserable state to be a cause of discomfort for you.*

*Granted, incarceration is already tough, but the pandemic has placed a certain emphasis on the imbalance of it all. The people in position, whether in the form of CO's or unit orderlies, abuse their limited powers and use our inferior position (cell confinement) against us. Their behavior is extremely irritating, but never give them the satisfaction of seeing you react to their repressive tactics. You can't control the way they treat you, but you can control the way you respond. In prison, nasty attitudes are plenty, but noble replies are few. Take pride in being a part of the minority and destroy that negative energy with a positive, progressive attitude that'll keep you on the only path there is: the road to freedom. Your family, your friends, and everything you love is on the other side of that gate. Put it all on a scale and see which way it tips. You'll easily see what's more important. Please, stay focused my friend.*

*I wish you all the best and have no doubt that you'll succeed. Take care and stay safe.*

Your FM brother,  
DA



# JUST LAW: THE YOUTH REHABILITATION ACT IN WASHINGTON DC

*By DJ, Free Minds Member*

The Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA) in Washington DC gives the court greater latitude when imposing a sentence on a person who was under the age of 24 at the time the crime was committed. The law sets out at least two vital benefits to a sentence that is imposed under the law. Number one, in cases in which there is a mandatory minimum prison sentence, the law permits the court to dish out a sentence that is below the mandatory minimum! Next, the law permits the court to "set aside" a conviction (that is, to seal it from public view) upon successful completion of the sentence. Check out DC Code section 24-901 to 906.

The law was enacted in 1985. In 2018, the law was amended to apply to all crimes with the exception of first- and second-degree murder; first and second degree sexual abuse; and first degree child sexual abuse. The biggest goal of this law was to distinguish youth offenders from more mature, experienced offenders and to provide an opportunity for a deserving youth offender to start over with his or her criminal record expunged.

The process for relief unfolds in two manners. At the outset, the sentencing judge will have to agree at the sentencing to sentence you in accordance with the YRA. In doing so, the sentencing judge must weigh a multitude of factors, like age, nature of the offense, compliance with supervision, and rehabilitation. The

final decision must be in writing. The second step to this process connects with the judge deciding if the conviction should be set aside after you complete your sentence. Setting aside your conviction does not obliterate all records about the conviction. It just allows you to say in the public arena that you were not convicted of an offense. In other words, the records are hidden from the public for observation. If you ever got in trouble again and had to be sentenced, the new judge would know of the prior conviction and use it against you at the new sentencing proceeding.

Finally, even when the conviction is set aside, the arrest will remain on your record. So it is still your responsibility to file a motion in court to seal your arrest record connected with the case. Check out DC Code section 16-803. For sealing this arrest, you may be able to get help from the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia, Community Defender Division, and their address is 1442 Pennsylvania Avenue, S.E. 2nd floor, Washington DC 20003, and their phone number is 202-824-2801. As a reminder, it is your attorney's duty to seek sentencing under this law if you qualify. If your attorney fails to do this, you still can file a motion with the Court asking to have your conviction set aside under this section.

Hope this info was useful. Until next time, keep your mind free.

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

*Free minds* Connect | April/May/June 2021

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## To Whom it May Concern, Dance Dear Friend By AC

My good, dear, old friend;  
Look at how far we have come,  
At the life we've experienced,  
At the things we have built  
And the ones we've destroyed.

You have been by my side for some time.  
For this, I thank you and you know I love you,  
Though, I'm not sure if that counts for much anymore.  
I know that you're doing great things with your life,  
And knowing you are alright, makes me feel happy and proud.

Me? I don't know.  
Look at the person I am;  
Is it completely different from the man that I was before?  
This is who my mistakes, my decisions have made me become.

It's funny, really,  
How after walking on this road for so long,  
On this road that both of us already know,  
It can sometimes turn lonely and cold.

I still keep on stumbling over rocks  
And they keep breaking my heart.

They have transformed me into nothing more  
Than a disillusioned, delusional king,  
A raggedy vagabond, a beggar for love with no throne,  
Battling, searching, and praying  
For a path that could lead me back home;  
And though that place, that time, and that chance  
Might already, forever, be gone.

I will do my absolute best to help my dreams stay alive.  
And then, for as long as I am  
Allowed to wake up day by day  
To witness a beautiful, lovely moon dance her worries away  
In the arms of her kind, caring sun.  
I promise I will dream on.

*About the poem: "Should all acquaintances be forgotten and never brought to mind?" I don't think so. This poem is for good friends. Sometimes we are lucky to have special people come into our lives. But it's up to us to figure out how fortunate we really are to have them by our sides. It's up to us to recognize them and how much real value (not money) they bring to our existence. Many times, due to geographic challenges, lack of time, too much pride, or too much resentment, we are blinded to the beauty of these people. This poem is to bring back to mind the awesomeness of a good friend, and to highlight the strength that they lend us, which helps us gain strength of our own. Enjoy!*

*P.S. Yes, the moon and the sun are also long, long time friends*

## 3 Questions to a True Friend By AB

If I go to jail, does our friendship end or begin?  
(Where does loyalty end? If I go in?)

I have no limits on my loyalty as you can see...  
(So, what are the limits on loyalty between you and I?)

Can self-loyalty ever be compromised because of you,  
or maybe others? I hope not!

Love only you as life treats you, is what "loyalty" is to me...  
So self-loyalty will never be compromised because of others!

So ask 3 questions to a true friend to see will they be loyal to you  
through thick and thin!

## Friends to the End By AW

Truth and love  
Far beyond  
Right and wrong  
Is my idea of  
Friendship in a nutshell

## A Friend Indeed By LB

Friendship is built on truth that never bleeds  
From the heart we love that friend indeed  
Those who are blessed to have one friend should sing  
Because many people go through life  
Without ever knowing what a friend really means  
They impact your life in ways that you and them can only see  
The love of a friend is a friend indeed

## True Friends By CM

When boxing, you have 12 rounds  
Living the street life all you hear is gun sounds  
When it comes to loyalty it has limitless bounds  
Sometimes loyalty can be sold for a couple of pounds  
Or have your family watch you lowered into the ground  
If you've witnessed that  
Loyalty has to have an end  
For most it will never end  
Self-loyalty comes from within  
Can't be compromised even when it's  
Me against ten

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## John My Friend

By DK

Today was a bittersweet occasion,  
Helped me for a moment to reduce my constant raging.  
John, you are now free... at home... at last,  
This past year, gone, it escaped us so fast.  
I know you left a truly changed man,  
I watched you every day... making your reentry plans.  
I already miss you and the jokes that we played,  
Hopefully once I'm released, we'll catch up... one of these days.  
We butted heads, and fussed sometimes; I caused you a bit  
of tribulation,  
As you left I heard as you said 'goodbye & take care'...  
true jubilation.  
When you left me here today, I regret that I left so  
much unspoken,  
You are such a great friend, a mentor, I'm kind of heartbroken.  
It's rare to find a true friend like you in a place like this,  
Damn it John, you're one friend I will surely miss.  
So by the time you read this, you'll be settled, back on your feet,  
And the stigma you'll face, well it's something I know  
you can beat.  
You're highly educated... A Penn State grad,  
So many qualities you shared, reminds me of my dad.  
So I know I will surely hear from you soon,  
As corny as it sounds, I'll think of you each time I look  
at the moon.  
So John, I love you my dear friend, but please don't return,  
Because this freedom you were granted, is something  
you definitely earned.

## Old Friend

By SJ

I was just thinking about how one of the best parts of getting  
older is that friendships get better.  
  
You feel more comfortable just being yourself and a lot more  
open about life's circumstances.  
  
We listen to each other's stories and also share each other's  
worries, and dreams.  
  
We lift each other up and cheer each other on.  
  
It seems like every time we get together a look or a laugh is all I  
need to remind me how we got to be friends in the first place.  
  
Now I know why we'll still be friends even further down the road,  
because I'm so thankful to have you for an old friend!



Artwork by FG

# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey, Friends!

I am not addressing you guys as friends just because of this month's theme. I consider y'all as friends, and I hope that's reciprocal! So, I was thinking of what to write on this month's theme and I got a simple revelation: "Keela, just write about what friendship has looked like in your own life!" That should have been a no-brainer, but I always try to be extra fancy when writing these articles, because I never want to bore you guys LOL!

As we all know, friendships are a major part of the human experience. Throughout our lives, we will all experience some fairly good and lasting ones and unfortunately, some not so good ones. Sometimes it seems as if the not so good ones really tend to put a damper on what could potentially be some pretty good future ones. I guess what I am trying to say is: when we have a negative experience – or in some cases, a detrimental experience – with someone who we consider a friend, it can really cause us to put our guard up when meeting new potential friends.

Naturally, the end of a friendship provokes a whirlwind of emotions like confusion, anger, and sadness. Before you can move on after a friendship ends, you need time to process the situation. Like romantic breakups, friendship breakups can be messy. You might be wondering where everything went wrong and what you could have done to change things. Sorting out your emotions is the first step to healing. Also, remember that it's okay to grieve the loss of a friendship. While it might seem silly to mourn the loss of a friend, grieving is often an effective way to move past a difficult breakup so that you can properly heal, let your guard down, and maintain trust to accept new friendships.

My best friend and I met in 7th grade at Elliott Jr. High. Nowadays it's called middle school, but back in the day (and I know I am showing my age LOL), it was called Jr. High. We used to hang out in a group of five, but for some reason, she and I clicked very naturally. She was being raised by her grandparents and loved spending time at my house because my mom was always very nurturing to her.

Our friendship remained solid throughout junior high, high school, and college. When I had my first child, of course she became his godmother. When she got pregnant with her first child, I was there at the birth. We helped each other through heartaches and breakups,

crazy bosses and stubborn children, sicknesses and grief. Our friendship was never tested, until...

When I had my first grandchild, she wanted to be the godmother. She and my granddaughter's mother formed a natural bond. At first, it was a beautiful arrangement all around. My best friend had two beautiful daughters, but unfortunately due to some complications, she was unable to have more children and she always wanted to have more than two kids.

My granddaughter began to fill a void for her and she fell head over heels in love with her. Heck I couldn't blame her; my granddaughter was the best kid ever! My friend picked her up every chance she got and spent tons of money on her (my best friend got that bag and I don't, LOL). So as you can imagine, this beautiful arrangement began to disintegrate. I was starting to feel replaced by my best friend in my granddaughter's heart. My granddaughter would talk about my friend nonstop to me, it was a very unusual situation. I did not know how to handle it.

Well one day, when my granddaughter was about two, things came to a head when my best friend and I got into a huge argument. I was so frustrated because she did not see my point, which was: this is my first grandchild, my son's daughter. I have a right to be envious of the fact that you are spending more time with her than me. You talk about her incessantly to me as if she isn't my grandchild, you have the means to spoil her and I don't, and I feel left out of what should be a very joyous time for me.

Her point was that she was only trying to help (we were having some struggles at the time and she had major resources) and that I was being selfish. It was a very heated exchange, and it did not end well. After a few weeks of not talking to each other and her not spending time with my granddaughter, I called her and we reconciled.

However, things were not the same as before. Over the years, we had a few more blowups about the same issue until she wanted to completely end the friendship. I humbled myself, apologized, and asked her to reconsider. I did not want to throw away twenty plus years of friendship, although this was a very delicate situation for

*continued on page 31*



# CONVERSATION WITH JORDAN

## THE IMPACT OF FRIENDSHIP

My name is Jordan, and I am the Co-Congressman John Lewis Fellow at Free Minds. I am also in college, currently pushing to obtain my Bachelor of Science degree in Management, Entrepreneurship, and Business Administration.

Since becoming a member of Free Minds, I have done a lot of work advocating for causes and legislation for individuals who have been through the criminal legal system. As I write this, I'm sitting in my bedroom looking out the window and seeing the sunshine; it makes me think about one of the people that I have been doing this line of work with over the past few years, my fallen friend and brother, Josh.

The impact of friendship is something that varies by person; some may say that they do not need friends. Others may say that their friends are like family to them. But almost everyone will tell you that at Free Minds, the friendships you create are everlasting. The same could be said for me, when I met my late friend and brother Joshua through Free Minds.

When Josh and I interacted for the first time, I instantly knew how intelligent he was. You never can tell what type of person you are about to meet,

but fresh home from prison, Josh had a goal to reach as many people as he could in hopes that the right people would hear his message. His ideology on trauma and willingness to create change was contagious, and after continuous outreach events and council hearings together, me and Josh grew to be the perfect team of advocates.

Outside of work, Josh would give me advice on how to approach different situations as well as what he would do in those situations. After work, he would sometimes drive me home, and in the process, he would always tell me to be safe and stay smart; like a big brother would.

When Josh departed this world, it was obvious that I had lost a friend, but nobody understood that I lost a brother more than anything. Part of that loss still sits with me to this day, because not only do I no longer have someone to seek advice from, but I also no longer have that brother figure in my life who guided me the right way. Based on our conversations, I can say that Josh left me with the ability to create change, which I love to do, and in the process, I have guided myself to be more mature than ever before.



# A FRIENDSHIP THAT CHANGED THE COURSE OF MY LIFE

*Interview with Maya, Editor-in-Chief of Truthout*  
By Michael

*Truthout is a nonprofit news organization dedicated to providing independent reporting and commentary on a diverse range of social justice issues.*

**Michael:** Can you talk about a pen pal friendship that changed your life?

**Maya:** I started writing to Steven in I think 2006. Before I started writing with him, I had an idea of myself as a person who was mostly against incarceration in a loose, abstract sense. I knew people who'd been incarcerated, but I didn't know about the experience very deeply.

I think it's very easy for those of us on the outside who aren't deeply connected to the system – at least not yet – to distance ourselves and only think about it in certain moments. But when I started corresponding with Steven, I started thinking about it all the time. I was hearing this really deep account from him of what was happening on death row, how it was affecting him, and what it's like to be conscious of the fact that he was about to be executed by the state in a couple of years.

Steven and I actually had quite a bit in common. He read *Punk Planet Magazine* before he was incarcerated, which was the magazine I wrote for at the time. We liked similar music; he was an activist while he was incarcerated, and he was a writer. He put together a zine and he was very motivated to change the system. But he was also sentenced to die.

We corresponded, and then he was executed. My friend was executed, was murdered by the state of Texas. After that, I felt like I couldn't just put this aside. This couldn't just be this tiny part of my life that was separated from everything else I was doing in the day to day. I had to actually take some kind of action and make this one of the main focuses of my life, because it was so unjust and I felt like most people I knew were not conscious of what was going on – or not letting themselves be conscious.

Developing that friendship with Steven made it impossible for me to ignore this injustice. I wish more people could develop friendships like that, because it really did change the course of my life.

**Michael:** How did that friendship lead to your current role as Editor-in-Chief of *Truthout*?

ee Minds  
I hope all is well or I  
Me start off by saying  
crazy here, they got  
saying that because  
decided to out source  
stupid rules on the  
your kids do a dr  
copy and send b  
if they think you  
even longer to get  
got to ~~develop~~ a  
the "First Ste  
and with th  
your releas  
They say  
is that d

PG. 1  
4-15-21  
DEAR CLARIS

**Maya:** Once I started writing about prisons in a more intensive way, I felt like that needed to be the focus of my writing. I applied for and got a job at *Truthout*. At first, I was mostly writing about war and militarism – but of course all of that is very connected to incarceration. At the time, the U.S. was basically turning Iraq into an occupied state: imprisoning people, torturing people. So I was writing about that, and I was also writing about incarceration.

I participated in unionizing *Truthout*, and then was (wildly) appointed to this management role that I'm in now, which is a whole other story. When that happened, I decided I wanted to make *Truthout* a place where we can publish real and important writing about incarceration, including writing by people who are incarcerated. Because that's something that I just wasn't seeing being done in the broader media, including in independent and progressive media. They weren't really covering the subject, especially at the time, in 2009. Also, around that time, my sister was incarcerated and was in and out of jail and prison, so it became a much more personal issue for me as well.

**Michael:** You've previously said, "Letter writing is a crucial organizing and community-building tool – a tool of resistance. Letter writing is not charity; it's mutual aid." Can you expand on that?

**Maya:** One of the things I didn't realize when I was starting to be a pen pal to folks on the inside is that it's not the same as being a pen pal with someone in Australia or somewhere like that, where they're in some other country and you write to them about things you're experiencing. In my experience, having pen pals who are in prison is partly about getting this information from the inside, which was not being communicated in any other way, and then – if people wanted me to – communicating that to the broader world out here.

One of the reasons why that's so important is that we have these activist movements out here that are advocating for incarcerated folks, but so often the movements are disconnected from people inside – because things are so isolated, but also because activists can sometimes get wrapped up in the politics of what they're doing and don't necessarily maintain that constant connection with people who they think they're advocating for. I feel like sometimes that results in things happening that aren't representative of what incarcerated people want.

Also, I think just the fact that you're breaking through this isolation is a political action. Because the point of prison is to isolate people and cut them off from the world – erase them and make it as if they don't exist. By reaching out, you're counteracting and challenging that.

One of the reasons I said "it's not charity" is because a

meaningful pen pal relationship means you as the person on the outside are also being vulnerable. It's not just about reaching out and saying, "Hey, is there anything you need?" or asking questions; it's also about sharing some of yourself – a truly human relationship. When people do reach out, I think it's important for that to be a part of it – not just to say, "Okay, I'm doing this out of the goodness of my heart as a generous thing to do." But instead really making yourself vulnerable in a certain way.

**Michael:** You've had pen pal friendships end in real pain, but you've also had some end in real triumph and beauty. Can you talk about that full spectrum?

**Maya:** I've had pen pal relationships in which the person got out of prison and it was this big celebration – and then a few months later, they were right back inside, because that's the kind of system it is. It's a cycle, and many people are targeted right when they get out, while they have the fewest opportunities available to them. I'd end up getting a letter from someone who'd just been released, but three months later was already back inside.

One of the pen pal friendships that's had the biggest effect on me is my friendship with Lacino. We started writing to each other in 2012. He was incarcerated in Michigan. I had started researching this book I was going to write, and I remember reaching out to him through someone who worked on a death penalty project, because Lacino had previously been on death row and was at that time incarcerated on a life without parole sentence.

He was taking a class on restorative justice. I remember in our first exchange, I reached out to him and was asking questions about that, and he said some things to me that completely changed my understanding of restorative justice and helped me to understand that restorative justice is a life practice, not just something you do to resolve conflicts. Basically, every exchange we had after that was something similar. He helped reorient my understanding of white supremacy and he helped me better understand what it means to be in solidarity with people inside.

But he also had this unshakeable insistence that he was going to be exonerated and get out of prison. To me, it didn't seem likely at first. He'd been incarcerated for almost 20 years when we started writing. Usually, exoneration projects don't take on many people – especially people in Lacino's situation. But he always said, "No, I'm going to get out and I'm going to be an activist on the outside." He spoke in his letters as if that's what was happening, even though at the time the parts weren't even in motion to bring that about.

continued on the next page



I was worried that it would never come to pass. I've corresponded with a lot of people who are incarcerated on life sentences, and nothing ever seems to happen to change their circumstances, no matter how much advocacy goes on.

But Lacino really pushed. We did an investigation in *Truthout* on his case a few years ago, and he published a few articles in *Truthout* about his situation and exposing conditions on the inside. Meanwhile, he developed a legal team and a bunch of people who were supporting him out here; more and more people got in touch. He really developed, from the inside, this huge freedom team.

He was exonerated and freed in the fall of 2020. Now he's out here and we're talking to each other; he's got all kinds of plans – he's out! To me, that's just been an incredible thing to watch, and also renews my faith in the power of organizing and the power of self-advocacy. And also the power of hope (not to be all sentimental). I consider myself an optimistic person, but when I met Lacino, I was like, "Wow, this is wild hope – to think that his situation is going to change." But it was organizing and it was self-advocacy on his part, and it was faith that things could change.

In that friendship, he's really taught me so much. I think a lot of people think of pen pal relationships, when it comes to the idea of education, as: "Well, out here we can send people books, help people learn about what's going on out here and subjects they're interested in." But really, on my end, a lot of that has been education for me – people helping me learn things. And Lacino is a really powerful example of that.

**Michael:** *Truthout* was recently accepting submissions from formerly incarcerated writers for the Keeley Schenwar Memorial Prize, named in honor and memory of your sister. *Truthout's* website, in announcing the prize, said that Keeley "was one of the inspirations for *Truthout's* early and sustained dedication to covering the injustices and violence of incarceration and policing." Could you say more about how *Truthout's* mission took shape, and in particular your sister's influence on that mission?

**Maya:** *Truthout* was founded in 2001, in the wake of the 2000 presidential election and the wars that were revving up at that time. I was hired in 2007, and over the subsequent years *Truthout* broadened and its mission shifted. As we started covering incarceration more, I was of course being impacted by my sister being incarcerated. She was locked up for the first time in 2005, in juvenile jail. Then a few years later, she started this cycle of being in and out of jail and prison, which continued for the rest of her life.

As I was witnessing what was going on with Keeley, I was realizing what a terrible job most journalism was doing at covering incarceration. So little of the coverage was actually lifting up the words of people who were currently or formerly incarcerated. There's no other subject in which people who are impacted are so thoroughly erased from the coverage, especially back then.

So we started a policy that if people were going to write a news story about incarceration, they needed to actually be interviewing people who were incarcerated – allowing people to be anonymous if they chose – and interviewing people who had previously experienced the system. And also publishing articles by people who are incarcerated. That became an integral part of *Truthout's* mission – and it also spread to other issues we were covering, such as immigration.

Previously, we hadn't looked at immigration detention as a form of incarceration – which of course now seems ridiculous. But we weren't covering it in that way. So we started changing the language around that, acknowledging it as a form of incarceration, and acknowledging those issues as connected. Also thinking about militarism and what's going on overseas – how all of these things are interconnected.

That included even changing the language in how we were talking about incarceration and talking about people who'd been impacted. We stopped just throwing around words like "felon" that are deployed constantly, even by well-meaning publications, when they're talking about voting rights and things like that.

So *Truthout's* mission was definitely impacted by my transformation and how I was thinking about these issues, which in turn was very much impacted by Keeley and the way that my sister was constantly experiencing these things. I couldn't just cut off that part of my life, as I was writing and talking to her on a daily basis, hearing about the things that were going on inside.

**Michael:** Can you tell us more about the prize itself?

**Maya:** The prize is in memory of Keeley. She was a big believer in writing your own story and communicating political issues through personal stories. The prize isn't necessarily for personal stories, but that's a possibility of what people can write about. Keeley definitely believed in that phrase "the personal is political," very strongly. Her politics were driven not only by her own personal story but by witnessing what was happening around her.

She was in and out of incarceration her entire adult life. I remember her saying that she hoped to eventually write down everything that had happened to her and share it in some way. And I told her, "Well, you should just start doing that right now." The last time she was out, a couple of weeks before her death (she died in February 2020), she told me that she was starting to write a memoir, which I was really supportive of. I thought she could do that. But then she died.

Part of what the memorial prize is trying to do is recognize that everyone has a story to share that is meaningful and powerful, and we want to lift those up. I feel like that's one of the most important vehicles of change.

**Michael:** The prize announcement also mentions that the prize "is in the spirit of Keeley's desire for the kind of world where everyone can live a good life." In the context of our social lives and our relationships, what does that good life look like?

**Maya:** When I think about Keeley, and her vision of that: she used to talk about how what she wanted, her dream... some of us talk about wanting to be president or something. Keeley would say, "My dream is to live with my daughter and go to the movies when I want to, have a job, be able to see my friends, have more friends, celebrate holidays with my family, and get pizza if I want some." I remember saying to her, "Well... but don't you want more than that?" And she'd say, "No. Life is about connection. Life is about the kind of fulfillment where you truly feel human." She wanted to feel human.

I think that humanity takes all kinds of forms. Of course everyone should have healthcare and enough to eat—those are elements of a good life. But one of the things that Keeley envisioned, and one of the reasons she was against incarceration, is that it shouldn't just be about survival. It shouldn't just be about getting your bare minimum, basic needs met. It should be about true fulfillment – feeling like you're not just surviving but thriving.

For Keeley, one of the things that was always preventing that, even when she was on the outside, was her separation from her daughter: this person whom she loved more than anyone else, which so often comes with incarceration. It's so hard to get your kids back after you're released. That basic desire to be with her child was part of a larger desire for connection – the idea that a good life is a life shared with other people.

Humans are social beings. A good life isn't just about checking the checkboxes: I have my food, healthcare, clothing, a place to live, etc. It's also about feeling like you're making meaning, in connection with other people. That's a basic human need as well, and I think there needs to be a broader recognition of that.

There are other elements of that too. I mentioned how Keeley always said, "I want to be able to go to the movies." So opportunities for enjoyment and laughter and recreation – things apart from work. People always talk about the need for jobs. And yes, of course. But beyond that, we also need to recognize the importance of leisure and the importance of rest, because those are elements of a good life too.

*Next year, Truthout hopes to expand the Keeley Schenwar Memorial Essay Prize to currently incarcerated writers.*

*If you'd like to write to Truthout or have an article you'd like to submit, you can send them mail at:*

Truthout  
PO Box 276414  
Sacramento,  
CA 95827



# THE WRITE WAY: FELLOWSHIP APPLICATIONS AND STATEMENTS OF PURPOSE

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

*By Michael*

Most fellowship applications will ask you to explain what exactly you would do with the fellowship and why you're the best candidate. This section of a fellowship application can go by a variety of names, but it's often called the "statement of purpose," "letter of intent," or "project proposal."

Regardless of how it's phrased, this section will often ask you to describe one or more of the following:

- Yourself and your work (with an emphasis on what makes you and your work unique)
- Your education and skills
- Your goals, aspirations, and influences

To take one fellowship as an example: the PEN America Writing for Justice Fellowship (which Araba highlighted on page 4!) strongly encourages applications from currently and formerly incarcerated writers. The project proposal section of the PEN application asks applicants to describe their proposed project, say how far along they are in the process of completing it, say why the project is relevant, and talk about what impact the applicant hopes their project will have on the world.

Crucially, it also asks applicants to share "what is new and significant about your project's approach and why it matters. What inspired your choices and interest?" This part is basically asking, "Why you? What makes you and your application unlike any other application we've seen so far?"

This can be an easy place to get tripped up. If I'm applying to this PEN fellowship, I might be tempted to respond by saying, "Well, I've been to prison! This isn't just an issue to me; I've lived it. That's what sets me apart." But that's not the full answer, is it? Like the old mantra says: "Know your audience."

For some fellowships, the fact that I've been to prison might very well set me apart from most applicants. But remember what I mentioned

before: this PEN fellowship in particular encourages and receives a lot of applications from system-impacted people, including the currently and formerly incarcerated. This means that my having been to prison *does not* make me stand out in this particular applicant pool. I've got to bring something more specific to the table.

For me, that might mean talking about how my mental health struggles and interest in environmental issues, combined with my experience of incarceration, have inspired me to take on a project that deals with all three of these topics at once. My application might say, "My project is going to interweave mental health, environmental concerns, and the afterlife of mass incarceration in a way that no PEN fellowship project to date has ever done." Everything I write in my application will be looking to make the same, consistent point: "Yes, you've seen what this person over here is doing and yes, you've seen what that person over there is doing – but have you ever seen me?"

So when you decide it's time to tackle an application of your own, don't forget: make sure you read the prompts carefully and provide exactly what they're asking for; think hard about how you're going to truly set yourself apart from everyone else; and then articulate your vision with an energy that makes people want to be a part of your future success. Because sure, they've probably seen some of this. And yes, they've maybe seen some of that. But they've never seen you.

## **A personal perspective By Shannon**

My approach to writing for a fellowship is somewhat indifferent in regards to my expectations, although I always begin with a winner's mentality. I am very confident in my ability to express myself and always try my best to fulfill the required criteria that's applicable to the subject matter. I understand that I could win, but know that losing is also a part of the process sometimes. I don't know anyone who likes losing, including me, but the optimist in me tries to view every situation as one I can learn and grow from, no matter the outcome.

## 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.*

### **Mastering the Pain by Jonas Gilham**

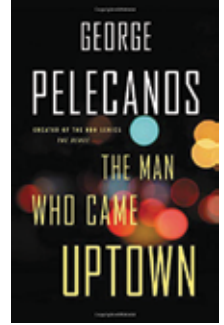
*In this unique and captivating collection of essays and poems, Jonas Gilham explores the devastating effects of racism, growing up in the inner city, and mass incarceration on young Black men in America. These writings embody his aspirations, his fears, his spirituality, and his confusion, while at the same time expressing his undying hope. You will experience the full range of human emotions as you join him in his journey of self-discovery and transformation.*



## BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES

*with Neely*

Thank you to everyone who has already shared their reflections on our current BAM book, *The Man Who Came Uptown* by George Pelecanos! We are including the discussion questions again in this issue just to make sure everyone has enough time to respond. This book follows the story of Michael Hudson, who spends his days in prison devouring books. When he is suddenly released, the Washington, DC he returns to is completely different than the one he remembers. Trying to balance his new job and love for reading, as well as the debt he owes to the man who helped release him, Michael struggles to figure out his place in this new world before he loses control. We've loved reading your thoughtful responses so far! TT wrote in, *"I read it in 3 days and it really took me back down memory lane. Once upon a time, I could closely relate to Michael's character - coming home and not wanting to fall again, but unfortunately being blown into negativity and feeling trapped. I wish I could return to the life of Michael and see where I would have gone. A lot of emotions with this book."*



1. Why do you think Michael Hudson's brother, Thomas, is so angry and hard on him? How do family relationships suffer when one person is incarcerated? Have you ever experienced this? How did you deal with it?
2. On p. 70, Michael reflects on his own journey with reading, remembering how he went from being a non-reader to a book lover. What is your own journey with reading?
3. On p. 90, Ornazian and Weitzman are discussing their own experiences with the "American story." What is the "American story" to you?

4. Michael reflects on how nobody understands who he is just by looking at him, that he appears to be "just another man who came uptown (p. 263)." What is something about you that people wouldn't realize just from looking at you? Do you prefer to keep that level of secrecy or do you wish more people understood you?

5. What is your opinion of Ornazian? Does your opinion about him change over the course of the novel? Why or why not?

6. Was reading this book **nostalgic** (a longing for home or long-gone moments in one's life) for you, if you are from DC? If you are not from DC, did anything about the book remind you of your own home?

## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ACCOUNTABILITY (VOLUME 10, ISSUE 3)

Hey family! The theme for the next issue of the *Connect* is Accountability. Here are some prompts to help you get started. And we want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 10, Issue 4 will be about Joy..

### (1)

Accountability is defined as "taking responsibility for one's actions."

As stated by Stephen R. Covey,  
"Accountability breeds response-ability,"  
such as honoring the commitments  
made to oneself and others.

Try writing a short story or poem about  
an action you take accountability for.  
For an extra challenge, write it in a third  
person point of view, which is where  
the author narrates the story, referring  
to other characters by name or by the  
pronouns "she," "he," or "they."

Remember, Free Minds advises against  
writing about any open legal cases for  
your own protection.

### (2)

This is a great comic that discusses accountability in leadership. Do you feel as though American leaders have been accountable for their actions? Imagine that you are running for office and have to give a speech. How would you direct other leaders to be more accountable?





### (3)

Procrastination affects everyone! When we procrastinate, we are not being accountable for our time or tasks. Write a list poem of five things/actions you have recently not held yourself accountable for. For every action you list, write how you can begin taking accountability for it. Keep in mind, list poems don't need to rhyme!

### (4)

William Ernest Henley's "Invictus" poem is one of the most famous accountability poems. In the last two lines he states, "I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul." Invictus means "unconquerable" or "undefeated" in Latin. Try writing your own "Invictus" poem about what accountability means to you!

#### Invictus William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.



# DC PHOTOS

## A REQUEST FROM DG

My request would be the old Martha's Table on 14th & West NW Washington DC. It's a landmark I believe and been around for years, and also is where I was raised. I lived on 14th & West all my life. They took down Martha's Table since I have been incarcerated. I did a lot of community service there. My great grandmother used to work there and my mother just retired from Martha's Table since they relocated.



## CHERRY BLOSSOM PORCH DECORATIONS

Instead of the annual Cherry Blossom Parade that happens every spring in DC, the city organized a different sort of parade. Like the "float houses" in New Orleans (remember the picture of those we sent last month?), DC residents decorated their porches with cherry blossom-themed decorations and invited people to walk around outside and take in the sights.



continued on page 35

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!

# MEMBERS CONNECT: FRIENDSHIP

## Friendship By JL

John Donne's phrase "no man is an island" has proven true in my current situation. I am very blessed to have people who support me, particularly my mother, siblings, my children, and the Free Minds family. Recently there have been other family members and friends from my childhood who have resurfaced to try assisting me. Without support I probably would not be motivated to keep pushing on like I do, nor would I be empathetic enough to help others the best I can. It's not always easy being a supportive friend, especially when having your own problems, but I have been fortunate thus far and wish to help others feel the same. Guess that is what makes a friend so special – they're willing to sacrifice some of their time and efforts to help others.

When one is in a struggle it is good to have supportive allies who can try understanding what you're going through. They can be there to help out, as much as they are able. One of the definitions of the word "friend" is "a person on the same side in a struggle; one who is not an enemy or a foe; ally." I think the best way my friends have assisted me throughout the years has come in the form of showing me a good example of what friends are by being there for me during my struggles. People need a pattern to follow in life and friendships can provide a positive pattern for us to follow; sometimes you have to experience true friendship to learn how to be a friend to others. So my friends have also proved to be my teachers.

No man wants to be an island. Thankfully I am not going through all this alone and can hopefully help others feel the same.

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## Friendship By AC

I honestly needed to pick up the dictionary to get an exact definition of what a "Friend" is. It's actually such a strange thing to think: we can live our whole lives experiencing something so important without stopping to think about its definition. But then the issue becomes, does the dictionary tell me all that a friendship can be? I personally believe that a friendship can mean so much more than the dictionary could ever tell us.

Friendship means having a safe place you can go to after you feel the world has begun crashing down on its own weight, like a Massive SuperNova creating a Super Massive Black Hole; or like that one time you had a fight with your brother and all you needed was someone you could talk to. And your friend was there to tell you it would all be fine, even though neither one of you knew if her statement was accurate, yet you couldn't help but to believe her. It would actually take about six months before the dust settled between your brother and you, and just like it does near a super Massive Black Hole, time seems to slow down when you are just a youngster. Those six months seemed to last forever and it was this one friend who helped you through it.

A friend can also be a person that walks around school with you, introducing you to everyone because you just got here from El Salvador and you know NO English at all. He helps you translate what you are trying to say but can only say in your native language, which apparently must sound funny because everyone seems to giggle at the sound. He then comes to you a few years later and tells you he really likes this one girl; so you woo her and eventually convince her to go out with him. And

they end up dating for like three years, even though you had secretly had a thing for her too before you handed her over to your friend. She found out years later and thought it was the sweetest thing that you'd make that sacrifice, especially because she had had a thing for you too.

Friendship means so much; it means to have anger on behalf of someone else, it means to feel their pain, to worry about their concerns, to dwell in their sorrows, to drown in their tears. But, it also means to bask in their triumphs, to laugh with their joy, to love those they love, to live a happy life vicariously; but not just that.

Friendship also means to give a word of advice to try to correct a path that may lead to a painful end, to show tough love which is love nonetheless. And above all, Friendship means to be understanding, to be accepting, to be welcoming, to be a good listener, to be caring, and most importantly, to know that friendship is a two way road so if it feels like a one way thing, you have to know when to get out.

I looked through like four dictionaries but none showed the definitions I had in mind – maybe I'm spelling it wrong. 😊

**About this writing:** I figured the writing may have an extra oomph if I placed the reader directly in my life experiences. They are just two personal examples of friendship. The first example was one that took me over a rough patch, and the other was an example of a two-way friendship. As always, I hope you guys enjoyed reading, as much as I enjoyed writing, this piece.

# MEMBERS CONNECT: FRIENDSHIP

## Friendship By MV

Prison has a way of reinforcing negative thoughts and beliefs about friendship, rather than helping us learn to trust one another and build relationships. The division that prison perpetuates – whether it be race, charges, positions in their programs, culture, or gangs – prevents and hinders a spirit of open-mindedness that could lead to unity.

Recently, I overheard a person whom I knew through his brother (my best friend) discussing how he wanted to encourage his daughter. He said his daughter wanted to participate in "Jump Rope for Heart" but needed a jump rope. I explained to him that I overheard his conversation and that I could have my family purchase it on Amazon with a personal note. He seemed willing, but was hesitant for some reason. For a week or two I reminded him, until finally I caught him right before I got on the phone. I had a pen and paper in hand and told him to write down his daughter's name, the address, and a note. With much enthusiasm, my family ordered a pink solar-powered jump rope that counts your jumps.

I gave my friend the paper with his information on it and informed him that it was ordered. I still was confused why he had been so hesitant to allow my family to help. He thanked me with a cheesy smile and as I walked away, he explained why. He said that prison had taught him to second guess people's motives for being nice, for offering help, and forgiving something. On top of that, I think me being Hispanic and him being African American played a role.

I told him I completely understood where he was coming from, but that we can't allow the system to dictate and decide how we interact with others. I told him that when friends (because I do consider him one) do something kind, it's unconditional: it's doing it just to do it, just to share with another person, to see the joy in someone's eyes or sometimes just to help. We embraced and he thanked me again, while I thanked him for allowing me to share. I told him that I hope his idea of friendship was improved by this and in turn his life experiences in the future.

If you're wondering what happened with the jump rope, it went even better than I imagined. I told my friend it would arrive on a certain day, and it ended up arriving early. Luckily, my friend had called that day. His daughter told him she had a package from Amazon and that she was going to open it after the phone call. He told her he was curious and that she should open it. She agreed and when she opened it, she was surprised and happy. She read the note from her father and thanked him. I have a feeling that she'll remember that for a long time.

I felt as if I won a small battle against the impacts of mass incarceration. The separation it causes for a short time was defeated by a friend's act of kindness. To me, that's what friendship is about, not an unhealthy dependence on others for your happiness, but rather a selfless giving of yourself. And it's funny how the human spirit works: the more you share and give, the more joy you find and the more space you have in your heart. Meanwhile, a heart full of itself has room for no one.

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## The Noble Sanctity of Friendship By MS

*"Take heed to the words. A confession of a soul that has nothing. Friendship is a gift that should be cherished like a child's heartbeat or sleeping breath for both are fragile and sacred."*

Myth

Hello Freeminders,

Dare I say that there is a kind of noble sanctity in friendship? At least that is the level of worth that I place on it. Who thinks to themselves, "Self, I'm going to go to prison amongst rapists, robbers, drug dealers, car thieves, killers, the downtrodden, voiceless & penally enslaved to make friends"? I came into this prison by myself... yadada, yadada, yadada, etc. It may not have been our intent, but we make them anyway. No matter our life experiences, we gravitate toward a select few that we call "friends." To some, friendship means more than the word implies.

It's that mentality "I got you no matter what, that I F--K with you win, lose, or draw, no matter your faults or blessing, and especially when you're having a bad day." True friendship isn't confined by what you can do for me. There is a certain level

of trust given away and received, respect and honor for these individuals, and an understanding that my speech, deepest emotional pains, and dreams will be/are respected and entrusted to my friends and vice versa.

Make no mistake: some friendships are disruptive, self-serving, need-based, selfish, bully-ish, hurtful and about me, me, me. But friendships can help you be a better version of yourself. They can give you encouragement needed to go after your dreams, no matter how unattainable they may seem. In some cases, they are the answer to loneliness felt. And some may be able to walk you back from the edge when life is taunting you to jump, and cushion the fall after various heartaches. We should strive never to take our friendships for granted.

This is what friendship means to me. What does it mean to you?

Until next mail call....

Love y'all  
M.S.

# FAMILY HISTORY WITH ANACOSTIA HS

*By Allen*

When my son Noah appeared on the high school quiz show "It's Academic," it was revealed that this was the first appearance of a grandchild of a previous contestant. My father competed on "It's Academic" in the 1960s, representing Anacostia High School. My father has a doctorate degree, so I'll call him "Doctor." He's a lifelong DC resident who has an extensive association with Anacostia High School. He was a student, teacher, football coach, and athletic director at the Southeast school. I spoke with him about his experiences growing up and working in DC.

**Allen:** Before we get to Anacostia High, what was DC like in the '50s and '60s?

**Dr.:** DC was a segregated town. We lived in a Black neighborhood close to Eastern High School. It was on the lower end of the middle class where people's jobs were of the custodial and service variety.

**Allen:** When did you move to the Anacostia area?

**Dr.:** We moved to Anacostia in 1964. I go from a predominantly Black neighborhood to an integrated neighborhood in Anacostia. The neighborhood was not bad at all; Good Hope Road was a robust commercial area and I had both Black and white friends.

**Allen:** What about Asians in the neighborhood?

**Dr.:** Not many. We were one of the few Asian families.

**Allen:** Tell me about your experiences as a student at Anacostia High School.

**Dr.:** The high school was majority white when I started in 1964. It was 60-40 white. And when I graduated in 1968, it was reversed: 40-60 white. It was considered a good school when I went. You had to go to your neighborhood school. There was no choice like there is now. To be honest, I really did not experience much racism. There may have been one or two individuals who made fun of our last name, but it was minor.

**Allen:** Were there racial tensions at the school?

**Dr.:** I did not see any with the students, but it could have been. Now the administration, I recall the assistant principal being quite prejudiced. She could not stand the Black students.

**Allen:** Was it that obvious?

**Dr.:** Oh yeah. They would get worse punishment. Now, I never got in trouble. I guess because I am in the middle. I am a minority, but I am not white.

**Allen:** After graduating from college at George Washington University, what made you decide to go back to Anacostia High as a teacher?

**Dr.:** I was working as a volunteer at Anacostia when I was going to college. I arranged my schedule in such a way that I could be there in the afternoon for football practice. I became kind of like Coach Colona's (head football coach at Anacostia) personal assistant by doing such things as typing his schedule and making sure practice stayed on schedule (blowing the whistle).

I knew from high school that I wanted to be a teacher. Coach Colona talked to Mr. Lombardy (assistant principal who eventually became principal at Anacostia) and put in a good word for me. I think it's because I was always there volunteering and helping out. I graduated a semester early from GW and was able to start out as a substitute teacher.

Not only that: Coach Colona recommended to Mr. Lombardy that I also serve as the athletic director. Mr. Lombardy agreed, and I became one of the youngest athletic directors in the city at 21.

**Allen:** What subjects did you teach?

**Dr.:** I taught social studies (history and government) for the 11th and 12th graders and DC history for the 10th graders.

**Allen:** When did you become head football coach?

**Dr.:** I was head coach in 1977 and 1978. What happened was Coach Powell, the head coach in 1975 and 1976, was not Coach Colona in terms of organization and Mr. Lombardy decided to release him of his duties.

The only reason I took the position was that the head coach had to be a teacher at the school. So Mr. Crawford, who worked security for DCPS, was my co-coach and he did most of the coaching. I worked with the defensive backs and special teams, which is what I worked on when I was an assistant coach for Coach Colona.

**Allen:** During your 20 years teaching and coaching at Anacostia, what changes did you notice about high school sports?

**Dr.:** Kids were still interested in sports, but the problem was the 2.0 GPA requirement to participate. But you could join a club or play in the band without a 2.0 GPA. Before, you only had to pass a certain number of classes. In theory, I thought the 2.0 GPA was a good thing only if the kids had a proper academic support system.

**Allen:** What made you decide to leave Anacostia in 1990 to become athletic director for the DC Public Schools?

**Dr.:** I was getting ready to turn 40 and wanted to make a difference. I knew I could do the job, since I had previously served as interim athletic director for two years. With a small staff, we were able to have a pretty good program for grades 4 through 12. Safety was the most important thing to me and I am proud that no student died on my watch during my 18 years on the job.

**Allen:** What do you hear about how Anacostia High School is doing now?

**Dr.:** I keep in touch because I am on the board of the alumni group. They have a new principal, Mr. Haith. He's a good guy; he used to be an administrator at Wilson High. He's trying to bring the school back, as the reputation of the school has gone down. There's competition now as you can go to any high school in the city. They have made some much-needed renovations to the building: new cafeteria, new library. There's a new football coach, Coach Lane, who is turning the program around. They went to the championship recently where they lost to Coolidge. So, it's looking like it's back on the upswing.

# REENTRY PROFILE: RAFAEL: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING VULNERABLE & GENUINE

I'm not like everybody else. I'm unique, and that extends to the way that I make friends. I don't have friends just to have them. I only want a friend if we're going to be real with each other. If we're friends, I won't just tell you what you want to hear. And I want the same from you.

The best friend I ever had was my uncle. His name was Regis and he was just a year older than me. We did everything together – I mean, we spent most of our waking hours together. We went to school together. I cooked food for him. He made food for me. We slept in the same bed as children. We got into trouble together. We got into fights, but no matter what, we were always there for each other. I was still in prison a year ago, when I found out Regis was killed. I was devastated. I have never, ever, experienced a hurt that deep.

I spent ten years in prison before being released this year. Everywhere I went, I met people. You can call them friends, associates, whatever. I think people in prison are more genuinely open. Coming out here has been crazy. It seems like instead of being open, people out here give the illusion of being open, but when it comes down to it, a lot of them are just being fake.

I think social media plays a part in that. The thing that surprised me most when I came home is how everyone is on social media all day, every day! It's like people can't experience anything without posting it. Instead of being in the moment, people are trying to create or pose the situation. You got people that post themselves with pics of money or whatever, but in real life, they can't even pay the bills at their house. Or they're not taking care of their child. But they're posting pics on social media that make their life look so different.

I think people have always branded themselves, but what's different with social media is the rate and frequency that it's being done. People are posting everything they do, even pictures of the food they eat! I'll be honest: I posted pics of a steak I ate in a restaurant. I don't even know why I did it. But I guess I was just falling in line, because that's what people are doing out here!

With social media, you just have to realize that what you're seeing isn't always the real person. I met a friend through Instagram that is helping me learn about investing, which is great. The

bottom line is that social media is helping people connect, but on an emotional level I don't know if you really truly get to know a person that way. For the most part, I am focusing on making friends the old-fashioned way, through people I already know – my mom, my sister, other family members.

The year before I was released, I was in a program called RDAP (Residential Drug Abuse Program). In the program, I learned that when you open up and let people know how you feel, that's being vulnerable. It helps you connect with others. It helps you feel empathy. For example, I was able to share with people that sometimes I felt awkward in relationships, stuff like that. And what I found out is that I wasn't the only one. But you don't just come up to someone and start telling them everything. That would just be weird! You have to be thoughtful about the people you open up to. But most of all, you just gotta be brave enough to do it.

Losing my uncle was a huge blow. Now, I'm realizing my little brother is like a best friend to me. We were always close, but we used to fight a lot. He was only 14 when I got locked up. Now he's almost 25. We started getting closer while I was in prison through the letters he sent me, and the things he shared. We opened up more. I was able to start giving him advice and be a true big brother to him. Now I realize how much I love my brother. We go bowling, go out to eat, just chill together.



Another thing that is different about me now is I understand you can be just as good a friend with a female as with a dude. I've been around just dudes since I was 16, so I am looking forward to the chance to have more female friends. I guess a lot of people don't have platonic friends because they're too focused on having sex. I don't have to be in a relationship with a female in order to be friends. Just a friendship? I'm cool with that.

I wish people understood that when it comes to friendship, it's really just about being able to be vulnerable and genuine.

# IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

## DEEP DIVE: DC STATEHOOD

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



The Compromise of 1790 is a famous agreement reached by Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison that gave a win to the North and a win to the South. The North scored a victory for Federalism by giving the federal government the power to take over and pay the debts of states. The South would be the home of a newly-established national capital, which would be built on land donated by Virginia and Maryland along the Potomac River and called the District of Columbia.

Eleven years later, in 1801, a law was passed to put Washington, DC under the full control of the federal government. And with that, its citizens lost representation in Congress.

The United States is the only democratic country in the world that denies full representation to the people who live in its capital. It is a situation that has grown increasingly harder to rationalize over time as the city's population grew to eclipse two states; the city's contributions to the federal tax base is currently higher than that of 22 respective states.

For decades, this has fueled the movement for DC statehood, whereby a 51st state would be established in DC's place. Various names have been suggested, with two of the most popular being "New Columbia" or "State of Washington, Douglass Commonwealth," the latter in honor of famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who made his home in Anacostia. The United States has not added a state since 1959, when Alaska and Hawaii joined the union.

After decades of advocacy, a bill to make DC a state came up for a vote in the House of Representatives in 1993, but it was defeated handily by a vote of 277 to 153. But former President Bill Clinton gave the bill prominence by lending his support to the movement, and Barack Obama became the second president to support DC statehood. The Biden administration has said it strongly supports making DC the 51st state.

There are plenty of arguments in favor of statehood: the right to govern (Congress controls the laws of DC), and the civil rights deprivation that comes with a failure to give American citizens access to elect representatives to the federal government.

The substantive argument against statehood is simply that it was the intention of the framers of the Constitution, and in laws agreed to by Congress, that there would be an independent capital distinct from the states. Statehood proponents have suggested a plan whereby the federal capital would remain as a tiny swath within the new state, encompassing only a small enclave of federal buildings. But this would likely require a repeal of the 23rd Amendment, which provides three electoral votes to the federal capitol.

But this is all to the side of the real barrier to DC statehood, and that is politics. The District of Columbia citizenry votes overwhelmingly Democratic, and its addition as a state would all but guarantee two more Democrats in the Senate and one in the House of Representatives. Unless there somehow was a new, solidly Republican state to add in tandem, there will never be support for DC statehood by the Republican party.

There are only two circumstances under which DC statehood could come to fruition. One would be if the Democrats controlled the White House, the House of Representatives, and had what is



# IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED)

By John, FM Friend

called a "supermajority" in the Senate. This would enable the passage of a House law, and a veto-proof law in the Senate, which presumably would be signed by the president. That is a longshot to happen in the near future.

The other circumstance is actually possible right now: a Democratic president, a Democrat-controlled House, and a Democrat-controlled Senate that is willing to end a Senate tradition called the "filibuster."

Under the filibuster rule, a supermajority is needed to pass a law. If the current Senate leadership were to get rid of the filibuster, which is within their power, DC and perhaps also Puerto Rico could become states.

## CORONAVIRUS

In America, the massive effort to vaccinate teens and adults against the coronavirus is starting to pay off. After a horrific third wave over the winter, and several states experiencing a fourth swell in cases and deaths in early spring, the number of daily cases is down below 30,000 and headed hopefully below 20,000 soon.

It is estimated that less than 300 people are dying of COVID-19 per day currently, compared with more than 3,000 at its peak. With numbers moving in the right direction, the CDC announced in May that people who are vaccinated are safe to go without masks inside and outside.

But the virus continues to rage in other parts of the world, especially in India and neighboring countries. After more than a year of surprisingly low case spread in a nation with more than a billion people, many living in cramped cities, India is now seeing more than 4,000 deaths every day and some fear the fatalities could pile up at an increasing pace for weeks.

In many parts of the world, there is extremely

limited access to vaccines, and many people may not be vaccinated before 2022 or 2023. The United States has begun to allocate some of its stock of coronavirus vaccines to countries still being ravaged by the virus, and sent 80 million doses abroad this month. Continued spread of the coronavirus in other countries is an ongoing threat to the U.S., as it creates the possibility of more and more deadly variants.

## SPORTS

After a truly bizarre 2020, big time sports is starting to inch back to normal, with sports arenas allowing several thousand fans in to watch, often with masks and separation policies in place. The NCAA was able to hold controlled settings for the men's and women's basketball tournaments: Baylor crushed Gonzaga to win the men's title, while Stanford edged out Arizona in an All-PAC-12 women's championship game.

The NHL and NBA playoffs are underway, and as we write this update, it's not a great year for DC's entrants into either. The Washington Capitals were eliminated in the first round, 4 games to 1, by the rival Boston Bruins. The Washington Wizards just began its series against the top seed in the Eastern Conference, the Philadelphia 76ers; it lost game one by 7 points, and will have a tough climb getting four wins against a team that dominated at home in Philly all year.





A photograph of two people sitting in a meditative lotus position on a sandy beach. They are facing away from the camera, looking out at a bright sunset over the ocean. The sun is a large, glowing orb on the horizon, casting a long, shimmering reflection on the water. The sky is a mix of warm orange and yellow tones. The silhouettes of the two people are clearly visible against the bright background.

# MEDITATION BEING A FRIEND

*By Kelli*

If there's anything we all need, it's friendship. I know we have all probably met people that say, "I don't need friends." But do you believe them? I don't. Whether we have one or 100, friends can enrich our lives. Sometimes it's hard to make friends though. My mom used to always tell my siblings and me, "If you want a friend, you have to be a friend." It's simple, but true. It's not always easy though. We may be in a new place where we don't know anyone, or in an environment (like, say, jail or prison!) that isn't always so "friendly."

If you ever have trouble making friends, remember: the best way to start is by being our own best friend—treating ourselves the way we deserve to be treated. From there, we can take baby steps. Maybe say, "Good morning" to someone you've never spoken to before. If you see someone reading a book you've read, you can ask them what they think so far. It can feel a little goofy at first, but it's definitely worth the effort. And what you put out into the world will always come back to you. It takes practice. This means being in the right frame of mind... Today, let's open our minds and hearts to meditate on friendship...

*Find a comfortable spot to sit. Relax your body. Roll your shoulders forward three times, and now backwards three times. Shake out your arms...*

*Now close your eyes. Take a big cleansing breath in through your nose...and exhale through your mouth.*

*Think of yourself as your own best friend; the one you can rely on to help you, to make you happy, to know what is best for you, the one who loves you. Feel yourself embraced by that friendship. You can even wrap your arms around yourself for a moment!*

*Take a breath in...and exhale...*

*Now think of yourself as the best friend of the person physically closest to you at this moment. It may be a friend or a stranger. Either way, in your mind, fill that person with your helpfulness, your care, your concern, be at that person's disposal. Fill them with the sincerity of your friendship...*

*Take a breath in...and exhale...*

*In your mind, embrace everyone who is in the same building where you are now with your friendship and love. Remind yourself that these are your fellow human beings. Fill them with your care and concern for their well-being. Feel friendship and visualize it flowing into each person's heart.*

*Take a breath in...and exhale...*

*Be the best friend of those who are nearest and dearest to you. Your family and loved ones. Fill them with your friendship. Surround them with your love...*

*Let all the people who are part of your daily life arise before your mind's eye. Every person you come into contact with... Be their best friend, caring and concerned, willing to help. Fill them from head to toe with your friendship. Surround and embrace them with your love.*

*Take a breath in...and exhale...*

*Now, think of any one person whom you may not like very much, have difficulties with, or towards whom you feel totally indifferent. Visualize yourself being a best friend for that person too. Take them into your heart and fill them with your friendship. Surround them with your love.*

*Now open your heart as WIDE as you can...and let friendship and love flow out of it to people near and far. First to those who may be in these buildings... then to the people in the houses around here...and then to people in the whole city of DC. Visualize your friendship flowing from you and covering the city! Let the wind of your breath carry friendship and love, togetherness, care and concern to as many people as possible, knowing that only then we can live together harmoniously. Let your own love and friendship roam as far as the strength of your heart and the strength of your friendship will reach, so that you can touch the hearts of others.*

*Take a breath in...and exhale...*

*Now put your attention back on yourself and recognize the beauty of your friendship – the warm thoughts and love that you just sent out to the world. Turn inward and fill yourself up with friendship for yourself. Embrace yourself with love, feeling clear and protected and at ease.*

*May each and every one of us be a good friend to others...and feel that friendship coming back to us!*

# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

*continued from page 23*

me. She is a wonderful person who was just blinded by love and trying to fill a void, something all people deal with at some point in their lives.

My granddaughter is now ten years old and loves my best friend like she always has. Although our bond is not as strong, my best friend and I remain close. If she ever needs anything, she knows that she can call on me and vice versa, and that has been demonstrated on both sides. So I know that although the bond isn't as strong, the love remains the same – and that is all that matters!

There are so many more elements to this story, but for the sake of space and time, I must stop right here. Thanks for indulging me; I appreciate you and am glad to call you all my friends!

Hey, friends: here is a wonderful resource that you can take advantage of when you return home!

**Merit America** is an online IT program that provides a path to skilled careers for adults without bachelor's



degrees. The programs are fast, flexible, and focused on what employers need most. They partner with major employers and use labor market data to understand the specific competencies required for skilled roles. Merit America focuses on high-demand fields with meaningful upward mobility, such as Information Technology, Advanced Manufacturing, and Healthcare. They recruit people with demonstrated potential to succeed in the program and the careers that follow. Most participants don't have the time or money to participate in bootcamps or go back to school, and Merit provides a flexible pathway for quickly advancing their careers – and best of all, it is of no cost to you! If you are interested, you can reach Merit America online at [meritamerica.org](http://meritamerica.org) or just ask one of the Reentry Coaches here at Free Minds and we can connect you!

Until we *Connect* again,  
Ms. Keela

## DID YOU KNOW?

### Healthy Friendships

By Araba,  
Free Minds Intern



*"Most of the time you don't know/Stickin' together like flour and water to make that slow dough."* – Big Boi, half of the Outkast duo

A volunteer at our weekly Letter Writers' Circle brought up the song lyric above in response to the question, "What does friendship mean to you?" As you can imagine, it was a question with many correct answers, but I love the imagery in this quote.

In thinking through what defines a healthy friendship, one of my own first examples was in the Frog and Toad picture book series by Arnold Lobel. For those who may be unfamiliar, in the series Frog and Toad are two amphibian friends whose bond is shown in each of their stories. My most memorable of the stories is one called "Alone." One day when Toad visits Frog's house, he sees a note informing him that Frog wants to spend the day alone. Toad doesn't understand why he would want to do such a thing, and becomes determined to visit Frog. Frog explains that being alone gives him time to appreciate their friendship, but he's happy to see Toad after a morning alone. "They were two close friends sitting alone together," Lobel writes.

A recent article in the *New York Times* shared the results of an experiment conducted by researchers at the University of Virginia. The researchers asked 34 students walking by a steep hill if the students would be interested in participating in an experience. Some students were walking by on their own, and other students were walking with a friend. The researchers asked study participants to carry a backpack filled with weights that equaled about 20% of the student's body weight up to the top of the hill.

The interesting part: students who were walking alone, when asked to participate in the experiment, estimated the hill as steeper than it actually was and the backpack as heavier than it was. However, the students who participated in the experiment while in the company of a friend perceived the task as much easier. At the end of the experiment, researchers noted that the longer the two friends had known each other, the less steep the hill appeared to them.

What does this experiment and these anecdotes tell us about the nature of a good friendship? Firstly, they tell us that across all conditions, we will always have heavy weights to carry and steep hills to climb (even if they're just metaphorical "hills"! ). Secondly, the experiment tells us that while we might be able to do some things alone, having others walking beside us will give us the confidence and motivation in our own abilities to see it through. Lastly, the results of the experiment show us that longevity and consistency are key ingredients to healthy friendships! Not only should a friend be someone who can share their load with you, but a good friendship will stay with you on the length of your journey, persistently sharing joys and sorrows, celebrations and griefs.

What are some of the key qualities that come to mind when you think of good and healthy friendships? What are the best examples of good friendships that you have seen? What books have you read that show a good friendship being built? Let us know – we love hearing from you!

# PAYING IT FORWARD: PEER SUPPORT

continued from page 7

So that's how it all started, the peer support group. If you think about it, for a lot of Black men, there's a stigma around mental health and they really don't articulate how they feel about certain things. They don't articulate how they had a bad day and what caused the bad day. So we started to pinpoint some of the bullet points on which we could help them. [In a big group] we're talking about all types of subjects.

## 2. What do you focus on in the peer support training?

How to be there for your peers who are navigating the challenges and obstacles of reentry. Mental and emotional support: how to share your own story and connect to another person undergoing a similar experience, so that they don't feel alone. We talk about what triggers them, we talk about emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, the definition of trauma. We talk about motivational interviewing, and how you wake up and whatever you feed your brain for today, that's how your mood is going to be. [For instance,] I'm a big Will Smith fan. If you wake up and listen to Will Smith or Wallo267, they are very innovative people who will basically gas up your car so you can ride for the day. That's what motivational interviewing is.

So we'll have one participant who might be the aggressor and then we'll have the peer support worker, and the peer support worker's number one responsibility is to listen. A lot of times people listen to respond but never just to listen.

## 3. If someone was in a dire situation, where they were helping a loved one who experienced a violent, traumatic experience, what techniques/resources should we say/give?

First of all, the caregiver has to understand that they experienced a traumatic experience as well, by their family member or partner being injured. In order for them to help, they have to acknowledge what they've been through. No one wants to get a phone call saying, "Hey, my son was just shot" or "My boyfriend was just shot." No one wants to get that phone call. That image will be stuck in their heads for the rest of their lives.

So how do you cope with *that*? I don't believe that hurt people can help people. I believe that hurt people need to be helped and once they've been healed, they can go back and help someone. Honestly, I think the caregiver should find the closest mental health specialist in their area and articulate how they feel about it, which makes them credible. So now that they're credible, since they've had their own lived experience, now they can do a 180 and help other people.

## 4. Can you describe a time you successfully helped a teen?

We had a young man by the name of Majhe. Majhe was in the criminal legal system. He had a couple of open cases and he was previously incarcerated, and his family members were incarcerated, so all he knew was incarceration. We got a hold of him, we enrolled him in a peer support group and next thing you know, he's going to Montgomery Community College in Maryland to take the exam for him to go to the school. He passed the exam. Next thing you know, maybe 3-4 months later, he was murdered. I actually took him to the University of Maryland campus so he could sit in a college classroom and get the feel for it.

I think that a lot of times, people want to change but because they have a past in the streets, sometimes the streets won't just allow them to change. That's what happened with that individual. We helped him graduate from high school, we sent Ubers and Lyft to his home so he can get to school safe for him to graduate. We were there when he graduated. Just to know he was on the path to becoming successful and then tragically he's murdered – that's a situation that'll always be close to my heart.

## 5. What would you tell teenage Che?

I would tell myself number one, "It's okay to ask for help." I would tell myself that it's okay to go talk to a mental health professional if I'm feeling some type of way, if I'm feeling depressed or anxious. That would be the first thing I'd tell myself, to ask for help, and that it's not wrong to ask for help. We have this black cloud over mental health, but ultimately it helps.

The second thing I'd tell myself is, "I can accomplish anything I set my mind to." Greatness is not this esoteric type of life form. It's within all of us. We just have to tap into it. I would also tell myself to enjoy the journey. I feel like when you enjoy the journey, it indoctrinates you into a mindset that, "Hey, I got to work for what I want," and don't get brushed off because it's a long process. I think Will Smith said it the best: "We don't build the Wall of China overnight. You focus on laying each brick as perfectly as a brick can be laid, and eventually you'll have your wall of success."

## 6. What is a resource you feel all youth should have access to?

Mentorship. Mentorship number one is "Reach one, teach one." I feel like us as people in general, humanity, we don't live in service to humanity. We're so focused on our everyday journey and no one else matters. I think it's very important to give back to the generation that's under us because they are going through similar situations, and they need help deciphering the right and wrong decisions.

# REAL WORLD OF WORK

Richard, FM Member



I always wanted to work for UPS (United Parcel Service). Back in 2006, I worked as a driver's helper during the holiday season and loved it. I was all set to learn to be a driver, but then I got locked up. I did 12 years and got out in May 2018.

At first, my job search when I got home was one hurdle after another. I have a cousin that works for the city and he promised me a job when I got home, but it fell through. I put in an application with UPS but didn't hear anything. So I went through Project Empowerment. They put me at a jobsite with the Department of Public Works and the staff kept saying, "We gonna hire you!" I'm working my butt off and then at the end of the six months I didn't get hired. I worked at a warehouse for more than six months, while also working a part-time job as a waiter at an old folks home. Then COVID came and I got laid off from both. I got unemployment for a while, and then I started temporary work. So I'm going to these little temp jobs for a couple of months, but then I was injured in a car accident and couldn't go to work. I was like, *Lordy, I can't keep nothing stable!*

Then the best thing happened: UPS called me and said come in for the driver test. I passed the test and they hired me! I had to pass a 30-day qualification period. You have to deliver all the packages they put on your truck in a certain amount of time and do it successfully at least three times in your first month. It was a little stressful, but I did it. Now I've got a career.

My job is to deliver all the packages on my route, every day. UPS is like a family; we look out for each other. The supervisors can't go home until everyone's route is done. So if I finish early, they might tell me, "Go help this guy. Take 20 stops for him." The company wants everyone staying safe, so if you are tired, you can send a message that you're fatigued and they'll get someone else to finish your route for you. It's just like that.

Honestly, I've learned a lot on this job. I've become a much better driver. They're constantly having us take little classes for driver education. The other thing I've learned is how to be more patient. I know some people would say, "You should have already been patient – you did 12 years in prison!" But it's not the same thing.

Now, I'm more patient with people. I try to look at the situation from their point of view. For example, some places I deliver are not in the best neighborhoods. They'll say they're not getting their packages. I know I'm delivering the packages to their door, but during COVID, we can't get signatures from the customers. So if you don't answer the door when I ring the bell, I'm still going to leave your package. And in this neighborhood, I can't control if your package is still going to be there. I understand their frustration.

One time, I reacted in my old way, before I learned patience. The

manager came out and said, "Listen, I understand they were rude, but the customer is always right!" At the time, I said "How is the customer right if they're rude to me?" I've gotten a lot better though. Now when people yell at me, or say rude things, I just let it roll off. People may be dealing with personal things and you just gotta let them say what they need to say. I respect everybody. I want respect myself too. But what I'm learning is that if you are only willing to respect people who respect you, then what are you really accomplishing?

My job can be entertaining. Yesterday, man, I'm in my truck somewhere in Beltsville, Maryland and I get out of my truck. I'm walking toward the house holding the package with my head down as I'm scanning the package. When I look up, it's a little Chihuahua-looking dog in the doorway of the house. The door is wide open. Me and the dog lock eyes. He gets to barking crazy, showing me his teeth... and then he just runs at me! So I run too! I'm running, trying to get behind someone's car to hide from this little, tiny dog!

The pay and the benefits at my job are great. It's proof that there are companies out here who take care of their employees. The beautiful thing is there are other career paths in the company. You can go into management if you want. I always wanted to work for UPS and now here I am.

As far as my future, I have so many goals and ideas. I want to open my own trucking company where we're moving stuff all over the United States. Another goal is to open my own little restaurant. I know several people that know how to cook really well, so I'm working on that. I'm learning about stocks and trading. My mind is just busy all the time thinking of ideas.

My advice to you is to prepare while you're still locked up. Study for your CDL, or get a trade like HVAC, whatever they offer. Get all the knowledge you can get. And if they don't have the courses you want, read a book on it. Step out of your comfort zone. That's a good thing in general. If you stay in your comfort zone all the time, you're going to stick to what you know. You're going to be around people who maybe don't want you to rise up; they just want you to stay down with them. There's just so much more to life than the streets. That's what I've learned. The world is so much bigger than your block!

Stepping out of your comfort zone is also good advice when it comes to friendship. I have old friends and I have people I thought were my best friends, but it turned out they weren't. These are people I went to elementary school with. We live in the same neighborhood. Our parents know each other. But certain situations happened when I got home, and I discovered I couldn't count on the people I thought were my best friends. I removed myself from them. It's okay though, because I'm making new friends—people who want the best for me. I met my girlfriend on social media and we've been seeing each other since October 2019. We can talk about anything and everything. We literally enjoy each other's company no matter what we are doing. She is my very best friend.



# DC PHOTOS

*continued from page 23*

## CRYSTALS - TEMPLE HILLS SKATING PALACE

DC residents probably remember Temple Hills Skate Palace, popularly known as Crystal's. Earlier this year, they announced that they were closing, and invited people to celebrate one last time at the roller skating rink. People lined up around the block to get in one more skate – but the rink hasn't closed yet, so many are still hopeful that they'll keep the business open!



A friendly message on the corner of 14th and Newton Street NW



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!



# AROUND THE WORLD: IRAQ

*By MH, Free Minds Member*

Iraq is a well-known country that for some time has been on the news a lot, because of the bad things that happened there. But Iraq is much more than the bad things we see happening on the news!

Iraq is part of the Middle East and the continent of Asia. It has a very rich history, and has been home to many great civilizations including Sumer, which developed one of the earliest known writing systems. Akkad and Babylon were also founded in this area, both of them centered around the two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, that flow through the country from North to South.

Iraq's capital and largest city is Baghdad. Its people are known for their hospitality and generosity, as well as their food.

The population of the country is really not known, because of the wars. Millions have been displaced within the country or outside of it, making it hard to do an accurate count.

I was born and grew up in the city of Bidi, which sits on the Tigris River. Outside the city, my family and others used to grow wheat and barley. People depended on the seasonal rain up until around 2001, when the drought became too severe that the rains rarely came.

Ramadan is a very special month, not just in Iraq, but throughout the Muslim world. People prepare for it about a month in advance, and people fast during the month of Ramadan from sunrise to sunset. They don't eat or drink anything during the day and must be on their best behavior.

In the afternoon, families start to prepare their evening meals, so



throughout the day you can smell the wonderful aroma of the food. Once the sun sets, people listen to the caller who calls from the loudspeakers in the mosques for the prayers called Adhan. Once people hear the caller, they start to break their fast.

Families gather together; there are usually many different types of dishes prepared, depending on the family's economic situation. People share their food with neighbors and other relatives and those who don't have much, and there is a true sense of family and community. And of course, there are sweet pastries later, after people have finished eating. Then afterwards, people start visiting each other, gathering together and enjoying each other's company until late at night: spending time talking, playing games, etc.

The day after the month of Ramadan is over, people wear their best clothes and go to the mosque early in the morning. They listen to the sermon and pray. Then they go home and people open their doors so that people can visit each other from throughout the whole city and beyond; kids get money from family members and visitors. There are also special pastries for this holiday, which have been prepared to serve to the guests with, of course, hot tea. While I am writing it, I am living it in my mind. I miss it a lot: the family, neighbors, and of course, my friends.

Every house has a big, long room specifically for entertaining guests. I remember there was a story that

took place in a city next ours: some people wanted to build a hotel. The citizens refused, saying that they didn't want guests in their city having to sleep in a hotel. Every tribe or branch leader has very large rooms where he entertains guests, whether he knows them or not.

Traditionally, when a guest comes to visit you in Iraq, they have three days during which the host does not ask them what they want or what the host can help them with. Also, the guest has complete immunity from harm, even if they are the host's enemy.

There are many traditions back home, but unfortunately a lot of things have changed too. I know that every generation creates its own destiny. I read an article a while ago, in an interview in a magazine. I liked these quotes by the young woman, who is from the Middle East. She said, "I belong to a community brought together by a collective life journey that in turn created a culture of its own. This generation can never be replicated. For me, this creates an impossible past to relate to but I want to relate.... In times of uncertainty, it becomes hard to predict the future. By creating an emotional bond to the past, I can place myself in the present and gain an understanding of the historical story I belong to... I want to own my future." I like these words a lot.

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

***"True friends are never apart. Maybe in distance, but never in heart."***

– Helen Keller (Deaf and blind author, activist, and disability rights advocate)

***"Good friends are like stars. You don't always see them, but you know they're always there."*** – Christy Evans (Author, *Sink Trap*)

***"There are friends, there is family, and then there are friends who become family."*** – Anonymous

***"Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down."*** – Oprah Winfrey



Helen Keller



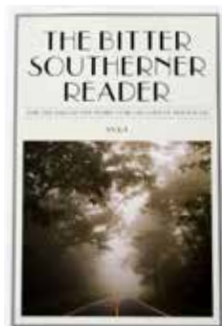
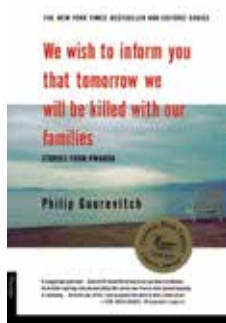
# WHAT WE'RE READING

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."

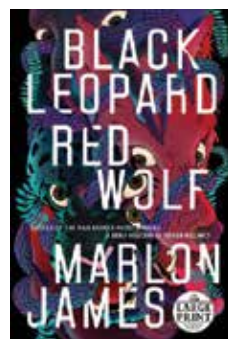
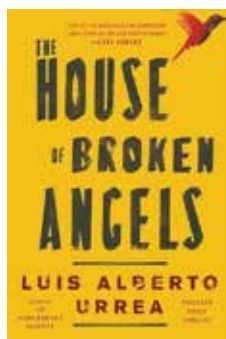
- **AW: *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda* by Philip Gourevitch**

I love how Gourevitch writes, how he tells the story as a reporter/journalist. Divide and rule based on class and physical characteristics based on racial features. Coupled with the socioeconomic and political factors imposed by Europe and America. I've gained a deeper insight into the machinations of international capital and white/African greed.



- **Neely: *The Bitter Southerner Reader: Volume I* by Various Authors**

A collection of work from writers and journalists across the American South, this book is a celebration of stories that are as eccentric as the people who inspired them. It is also a confrontation of the troubled legacy of the Deep South. Being from Mississippi, I've always experienced conflicting feelings: loving home, but hating its history. I'm excited to read these writings from people who not only capture my wrangling feelings, but also show a changing South, where we can openly talk about where we came from and where we need to go from here.



- **AC: *The House of Broken Angels* by Luis Alberto Urrea**

This book tells the story of a tough man, from a tough family, living through a tough life. The family ties described in this book feel real, candid, and true. There is this feeling throughout the book that results from the balancing between life and death, between sadness and joy, between living a fulfilling life and living a perceived disappointment. It's a great book that I personally feel should be read in order to witness the dynamics of millions of Mexican American (and other Latino) families.

- **Julia: *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* by Marlon James**

The story follows the adventures of a man named Tracker who is a gifted hunter. Tracker has been given a quest to find a missing boy, and he meets a ton of other strange and interesting characters, including a shape-shifting man named Leopard, who are also searching for the boy. Tracker doesn't know who the boy is, what happened to him, or why so many people are trying to find him... I'm about halfway through the book and the mystery is still growing. The book got a lot of attention when it came out too because the author is drawing on African history and mythology – a refreshing change of pace in the fantasy publishing world!

# FELLOWSHIPS FOR THE FORMERLY INCARCERATED

*continued from page 4*

applicants must submit a proposal of about 1,000 words describing a project they would like to complete to reduce the harms of mass incarceration. Fellows will receive an honorarium based on the scope of the project, and work with a mentor to develop their project over the course of eight months. The applications for this fellowship usually open in January.

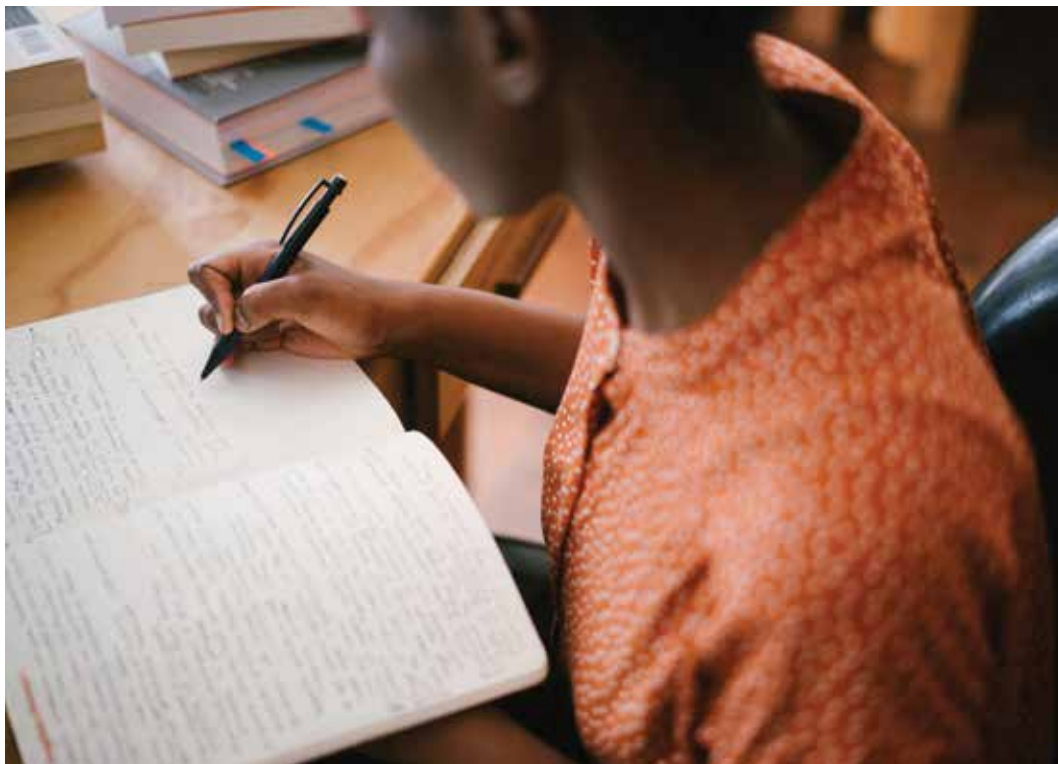


## **Education Trust Justice Fellows Policy Program:**

Ed Trust looks to invite six individuals who are formerly incarcerated to serve as Justice Fellows, who will use their experience and hard-earned expertise to inform, review, amplify, and reflect on Ed Trust's policy

recommendations for justice-impacted students. Individuals do not need to have a college education or have taken college courses. However, they must have a strong desire to gain and develop higher education policy skills, and a passion for providing directly impacted individuals with access to higher education.

Justice Fellows will need to commit to an estimated 100 total hours for the duration of the program, or ten hours per month. Justice Fellows are expected to engage in writing op-eds, presenting at Ed Trust convenings, reviewing and co-authoring publications, providing interviews, providing technical assistance, and attending monthly professional development meetings. Applications for this fellowship are usually available in the fall.



## **FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP**

1816 12th Street NW  
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### **NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ACCOUNTABILITY**

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Suggested by Free Minds member VC, we have chosen the theme "Accountability" for the next issue of the *Connect*. After Derek Chauvin was found guilty for the murder of George Floyd, many people referred to this verdict as accountability, but many people have different opinions about what accountability really means. For example, in the book *Until We Reckon* by Danielle Sered, 'accountability' differs from 'punishment' in that accountability means being responsible for understanding the impact your actions can have on others, whether that impact is positive or negative.

True accountability allows one to not only make amends for their mistakes but also adjust their behavior to ensure that those mistakes are not repeated. Sered also writes that true accountability can be a pathway towards dignity and away from shame.

What does accountability mean to you? Do you agree or disagree with the definition above? Have you ever held yourself accountable for your actions? Have you practiced accountability with someone else? What effect did this have on you or on others? Many people say that accountability is an act of self-responsibility; how do you think we as a society can be more responsible for our actions, and understanding of the impact they have on others? The definition of accountability varies from person to person, so we would love to hear your thoughts on what being accountable means to you!

Until then, take care and **KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!**



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